

blue cathedral (2000)

by Jennifer Higdon (b. Brooklyn, New York, 1962)

Jennifer Higdon, who received the 2010 Pulitzer Prize in music for her Violin Concerto, is one of the most-performed American symphonic composers today. A professor at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, she is an influential figure whose works have ushered in a new Romanticism. Higdon places traditional melody and tonality in the service of a contemporary sensibility, striking a deep chord with listeners.

blue cathedral, commissioned for the 75th anniversary of the Curtis Institute, commemorates the composer's younger brother, Andrew Blue, who died at the age of 33. Since Andrew was a clarinet player and Jennifer a flutist (they used to play in the same high school band), these two instruments play extensive solos throughout, and their interactions form the foundation of what one commentator perceived as "musical stories" in the work. The image of the cathedral, invoked in the title, is reinforced by the frequent use of the chimes, one of several means Higdon uses to transcend the tragic character one would associate with a funeral lament. As the composer explained in a program note:

When I began *blue cathedral*, it was the one-year anniversary of my (younger) brother's death, so I was pondering a lot of things about the journey we make after death...I was imagining a traveler on a journey through a glass cathedral in the sky (therefore making it a blue color)...I wanted the music to sound like it was progressing into this constantly opening space, feeling more and more celebratory...As the journey progresses, the individual would float higher and higher above the floor, soaring towards an expanding ceiling where the heart would feel free and joyful.

Carmina Burana (1935-36)

by Carl Orff (Munich, 1895 - Munich, 1982)

Carl Orff's objective, to create complex music built from the simplest possible elements, informs both his compositions and his pathbreaking work in music education. The Orff-*Schulwerk*, an innovative educational system integrating music and movement, is based on some of the same fundamental principles as *Carmina Burana*, the large-scale choral work that turned the German composer into an international celebrity.

Orff hit upon the subject of *Carmina Burana* almost by accident. As he later recollected:

"Fortuna" smiled upon me when she brought into my hands a second-hand book catalog from Würzburg, where I found a title that drew me in with an almost magical power: *Carmina Burana: Latin and German Songs and Poems from a 13th-Century Manuscript from Benediktbeuren, edited by J.A. Schmeller*. This manuscript had been kept in the Benediktbeuren Monastery until it was brought to the Royal Court Library in Munich, in the wake of the secularization of the Bavarian monasteries. It was given its name *Carmina Burana* – songs from Benediktbeuren – by its editor, the estimable archivist Johann Andreas Schmeller, who had first published it in 1847....

Picture and words seized hold of me. Although for the moment I was acquainted only along general lines with the contents of the collection of poems, a new work, a stage work with singing and dancing choruses, simply following the illustrations and texts, at once came into my mind. On the very same day I sketched out a partial draft of the opening "O Fortuna" chorus. After a sleepless night in

which I nearly lost myself in the poems, another chorus was born, "Fortune plango vulnera," and by Easter morning a third ("Ecce gratum") had been set down on paper.

It wasn't so easy to find one's way around this codex, with its 250 songs and poems. Most of the poems were in late Latin, but a large number of them were in Middle High German, and some were even in a mixture of Latin texts with Old French refrains...I was fully aware that some of the poems in the collections contained neumes...but I had neither the desire nor the ability to decipher this ancient musical notation.* So I interpreted them rather casually. The things that moved me most of all were the sweeping rhythmic drive, the picturesqueness of the poetry, and (not least of all) the unusually concise Latin text.

Orff divided his work in three sections, devoted, respectively, to a celebration of spring, the joys of the tavern, and "The Court of Love." The invocation of Fortune and her wheel, which so impressed Orff when he first saw the edition of the manuscript, serves as a frame, opening and closing the cantata. This chorus establishes the style of the entire work, with its brief melodic motifs progressing in relentless *ostinatos* (unchanging rhythmic patterns). While some sections could *almost* come from the Middle Ages, others evoke folk-music styles of more recent date, with some changing meters in a definitely 20th-century spirit. In the chorus "Floret silva," the words "meus amicus" ("my friend") are given special emphasis by a motif borrowed from Bavarian or Austrian folk dances – this turn, a bold ascending leap of a major ninth, takes on an unmistakable erotic connotation here as the subject matter turns from a description of spring flowers to the blossoming of youthful love. The dance becomes more and more boisterous, ending Part I with some ecstatic high C's (that are not often demanded of choral singers) at the thought of embracing, of all people, the Queen of England!

Part II – devoted to the joys of good food and copious drinks – begins with the "Wandering Scholar's Confession" by an author known only as the Archpoet of Cologne. This is followed by the Lament of the Roasting Swan, introduced by a high-pitched and tortuously chromatic bassoon solo that is intended to portray the wailing of the unfortunate bird. The tenor solo sings this most unusual "swan song" in a truly murderous high register with some decidedly un-medieval modulations. Meanwhile, the orchestral accompaniment gives us what commentator Michael Steinberg called "musical gooseflesh – or swanflesh." The baritone then continues with some mock-Gregorian chant in a satirical imitation of a church sermon. An universal paean to drinking, "In taberna quando sumus," concludes this section.

Part III ("The Courts of Love") picks up where Part I left off. The soprano soloist, singing here for the first time, expresses an undisguised sexual desire that will linger for the rest of the piece until, in a breathtaking coloratura passage for unaccompanied soprano, the act is finally consummated. All that remains is a solemn celebration of love and beauty ("Ave formosissima") before the return of Fortune and her wheel puts everything, once more, in a sobering perspective: our thoughts and our endeavors, our joys and our sorrows, are all transient and subject to the whims of this fickle goddess.

* They were later deciphered by scholars; the original medieval *Carmina Burana* has now been widely performed and recorded.