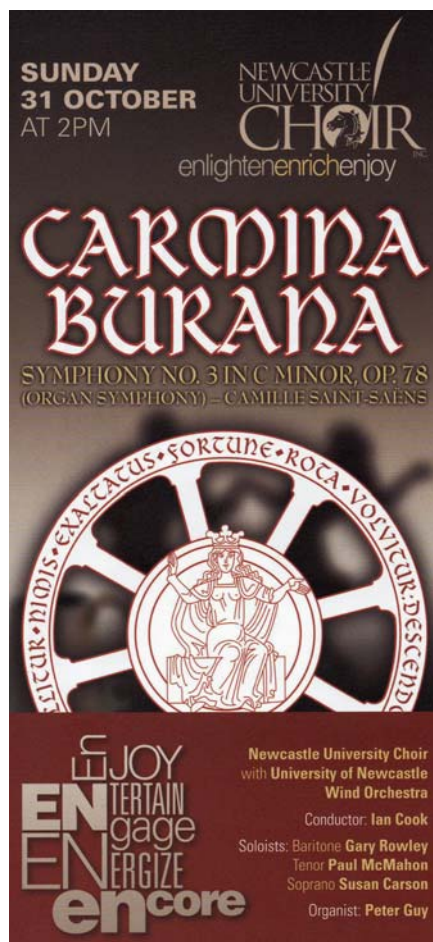


A melange of interesting notes and the promise of things to come



Getting our act together...

For a chorister, it's always an exciting moment when the choir and the orchestra come together for the first time in the many rehearsals that precede a performance. It was certainly so for the members of our choir when we rehearsed with the Newcastle University Wind Orchestra for the first time recently.

For many years the Wind Orchestra has been conducted by Ian Cook, who will conduct us in *Carmina Burana*. We all have to work together to do justice to this spectacular composition – we being some 53 musicians in the orchestra and nearly 100 choristers – and it's Ian's task to oversee and direct our efforts. Add our three soloists – soprano, tenor and bass and we can (and do!) produce quite a big and exciting sound!

Until now, the choir has been rehearsing under the baton of our Music Director, Jennifer Barnes. Orff's score requires that, at times, the choir divide into two choirs, and there are sometimes three separate parts for each voice (soprano, alto, tenor bass). That's quite a challenge, but Jenny has handed us over to Ian well able to handle the task. It's nice to know, now that we have all worked together, that we can and will do justice to *Carmina Burana*.

The Wind Orchestra will be well known to Novocastrians. It began in 1979 as the City of Newcastle Concert Band, and in 1981 Ian Cook was appointed Director of Music. In 1994 the band became part of the Faculty of Music and Conservatorium, and was renamed appropriately.

In 2006 the orchestra toured China, performing to capacity audiences in Beijing, Hangzhou and Shanghai. In 2009 they celebrated their 30th anniversary with a performance of the *Queen Symphony* for violin, cello and piano solos, wind orchestra and choir. This year they have toured the South Island of New Zealand, performing in Christchurch and Queenstown.

Ian Cook is a graduate of the Newcastle Conservatorium, and is currently a senior lecturer in the university's School of Drama, Fine Art and Music and Conservatorium. He gained his Master of Music in 2000, majoring in conducting, and was recently awarded his PhD from the University with his research topic of the Tempo Indications of Mozart.

He is, I believe, a major force behind the Newcastle Festival Opera, whose excellent production of *La Boheme* I had the pleasure of attending recently. I'm now enjoying his direction in one of the most popular and exciting choral works of the 20th century.

Come along and share the joy!

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It is cruel, you know, that music should be so beautiful. It has the beauty of loneliness and of pain... the beauty of disappointment and never-satisfied love.

– Benjamin Britten

Debussy's music is the dreariest kind of rubbish. Does anybody for a moment doubt that Debussy would not write such chaotic, meaningless, cacophonous, ungrammatical stuff, if he could invent a melody?

– New York Post, March 22, 1907.

Carmina Burana - A Synopsis

"Familiarity breeds contempt" is certainly not a sentiment appropriate to good music. The opposite applies – the more I learn about a particular work, the more I enjoy it.

I first sang *Carmina Burana* in the Sydney Opera House in a choir of more than 1,000 voices. Unforgettable! I was familiar with some of the music – surely we have all heard the opening, *O Fortuna*. You might associate it with big beers, and wild hordes charging across the plains of New Zealand. It is certainly rousing music, and worthy of the advertising industry's attention.

Now I'm learning more about this remarkable work, and the more I learn about it, the more I like it. John Burrows says "Striving for a musical language that would engage the listener's primitive impulses, Orff's sound-world is filled with pulsing rhythms, percussion, and direct vocal expression, achieving a powerfully visceral and sensual appeal." That's how I like my music! It's an erotically charged piece... quite scary and exhilarating.

You will be able to follow the score in your programme on the day, but just to increase your enjoyment, here's a brief walk through the plot.

Oh fortuna sets the scene, as the choir laments the vicissitudes of life - *...hateful life first oppresses and then soothes as fancy takes it... you are malevolent... everyone weep with me!*

It gets worse! *Fortune plango vulnera* (*I bemoan the wounds of Fortune*)... it's so gloomy! How can we recover from this awfully depressing start?

Fortunately it's springtime (*Primo Vere*), and life stirs! *Let us rush to compete for love's prize... the chorus of maidens already promises a thousand joys. Ah!*

Ah! Indeed. *...now spring sucks at summer's breast: a wretched soul is he who does not live or lust under summer's rule. Ah! Time for action!*

In the meadow (*Uf dem anger*) the young men and women of the village are dancing. But alas, cry the women – *Where is the lover I*

knew? Ah! He has ridden off! Oh! Who will love me? Ah! Fortunately, there will be other lovers, but not yet. Whatever - the young maidens (our sopranos) believe in being prepared. Shopkeeper, give me colour to make my cheeks red, so that I can make the young men love me, against their will. Look at me, young men! Let me please you!

Unfortunately the young men seem to be down at the pub (*In taberna*), gambling and having a drink. They are being led astray by the Abbot, who tells them *I give myself to vice, unmindful of virtue,*



I am eager for the pleasures of the flesh more than for salvation, my soul is dead, so I shall look after the flesh.

There's roast swan on the menu, on the spit. *Misery me! Now black and roasting fiercely!* it complains: *...dentes frendentes video* – one of my favourite lines – *I see bared teeth.*

The Abbot has another go (*Ego sum abbas*), preaching, no doubt, the evils of gambling: *...whoever searches me out... he will leave naked.* Will the evil Abbot succeed in stealing the shirts off their backs?

It's the turn of the young men to explain their outlook on life (*In taberna quando sumus*). When we're down the pub, they sing, we gamble and drink. Just like everyone else, but *we are the ones whom everyone scolds... may those who slander us be cursed, and may their names not be written in the book of the righteous.*

Note: This difficult part is sung by our very talented tenors and basses. *Decies pro navigantibus, un decies pro discortantibus* is not a phrase that trips lightly from the tongue, especially after a few drinks and

delivered at the breakneck speed demanded. It is exhausting work. It is considered acceptable to applaud at the end of this piece.

Time for Part III: *The Court of Love. Ah!*

Cupid flies everywhere sing the boys; *The girl without a lover misses out on all pleasures* sings the soprano; and the boys agree: *It is a most bitter fate... Vellet deus, valent dei quod mente proposui; ut eius virginea reserasset vincula. Ah!* (May the gods grant what I have in mind...)

The girls agree: *My virginity makes me frisky*, they sing. *Oh! Oh! Oh!* replies the baritone, *I am bursting out all over!* At first his attempts at seduction are mocked by the other boys and girls – *Niet, niet, niet* – they mock him – "it's just not working!"

But faint heart never won fair lady, and he perseveres. And, at last, triumphs. The soprano is his! *Sweetest one! Ah! I give myself to you totally!*

So everyone is happy, and they sing the praises of noble Venus.

Then, just to remind us of the fickleness of fate, the choir returns to *O Fortuna* – *like the moon you are changeable...you whirling wheel.*

We've come full circle. Nine hundred years ago a group of wandering performers, the goliards, wrote about fate and fortune, love and sex, drinking and gambling, quite irreverently. Orff set some of these poems to music in his work, which premiered in 1937. *Carmina Burana* is one of the most performed and successful works of our time. Enjoy!

The outpourings of randy and dipsomaniacal medieval monks...

- Christopher Lawrence

Cacophony is edited by Peter McCloy on behalf of the Newcastle University Choir, who do not necessarily share the views of the editor. To contribute or to communicate, email us at newsletter@newcastleuniversitychoir.com For more about Newcastle University Choir, go to

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