

Three Love Songs from *Carmina Burana*

Commentary and translation

by Mark Herman and Ronnie Apter

Carmina Burana (with the accent on *Car*) is a collection of more than 200 lyric poems and 6 plays discovered in 1803. The collection, also known as the Codex Buranus, was written mainly in medieval Latin, with some German, French, Italian, and even English thrown in. It had been stored, uncatalogued, together with Protestant and other forbidden works, for over 500 years in a cabinet at the Benediktbeuern monastery in Bavaria. When the monastic libraries of Bavaria were secularized, their contents were sent to the Hof-Bibliothek in nearby Munich and *Carmina Burana* came to light. It is the largest single extant collection of medieval secular verse, and includes many poems also found in other medieval sources (each, of course, with its own minor textual variations).

Among the anonymous authors of *Carmina Burana* were frocked and defrocked priests and monks, reverent and irreverent students, and wanderers. Variousy called Vagabond Poets, Goliards (for their mythical leader Goliath, who may have represented Goliath and/or gluttony), and Gleemen, they formed several overlapping groups. While their verses included religious poems, they frequently delighted in standing Christian ideas and images on their heads. They also wrote ferocious satires in the service of morality, describing lust, gluttony, and drunkenness in such excessive terms as to arouse disgust in the reader. And they wrote verses about physical love, such as the three poems included and translated here.

Despite translations of many of the poems into several languages, *Carmina Burana* languished on scholars' shelves until Carl Orff set some of the poems to music in 1936. The poems of *Carmina Burana* were indeed meant to be sung. The original manuscript includes some musical notation for 43 of the songs.

En face: Poem 174

*Veni, veni, venias,
ne me mori facias!
hyrca, hyrce,
nazaza, trillirivos!
Pulchra tibi facies,
oculorum acies,
capillorum series –
o quam clara species!
Rosa rubicundior,
lilio candidior,
omnibus formosior,
semper in te glorior!*

*Let me, let me, let me come!
If you make me wait I'll die!
Billy! Nanny!
La la la! Ixtralicious!
Beautiful beyond compare,
your complexion is so fair,
eyes so knowingly aware,
golden waves of silken hair!
Roses have no red so bright,
lilies never seemed so white,
all else pales before your
light,
glory is in you tonight!*

Attempts have been made at turning the imprecise medieval markings into modern musical notation, and several recordings of the poems in their “original” settings are available, most notably in the reconstructions of René Clemencic. However, Carl Orff was inspired, not by the original musical settings, but by the words. Though not medieval, his music employs a few pseudo-medieval touches, such as parodies of ecclesiastical chanting. Throughout, a primitive effect is achieved by means of strong rhythms (produced by a battery of percussion), simple harmonies, and frequent repetition. From beginning to end, the exuberance and force of the original poems come through.

Our own translations were written to be singable to Orff’s music, though the Latin-English syllable correspondence is not one-to-one, and repeats required by the music but not by the poetry have been omitted here. Our aim was not literality or excellent spoken poetry, but good lyrics. The numbering of the three poems is taken not from Orff’s setting but from the now-standard critical edition of *Carmina Burana* by Alfons Hilka and Otto Schumann, published 1930-70 by Carl Winter Universitätsverlag in Heidelberg.



Sleep and Love

This woodcut originally appeared in the first Latin edition of the *Navis Stultifera* of Sebastian Brandt in 1497. It next appeared in *Wine, Women and Song* by John Addington Symonds (1840- 1893) in 1884. This was the first book to have some of the *Carmina Burana* poems in English translation.

174a. (Original German)

Chume, chume, geselle min,
ih enbite harte din!
Ih enbite harte din,
chume, chume, geselle min.
Suzer roserverwer munt,
chum unde mache mich gesunt!
Chum unde mache mich gesunt,
suzer roserverwer munt.

183. (Original Latin)

Si puer cum puellula
moraretur in cellula,
Felix coniunctio.
Amore suscescente,
pariter e medio
avulso procul tedio!
Fit ludus ineffabilis
membris, lacertis, labiis,
Felix coniunctio.

Come, come keep me company,
I beg you, please be kind to me.
I beg you, please be kind to me,
come, come keep me company.
Red lips have me under a spell.
Come, kiss me and make me well.
Come, kiss me and make me well.
Red lips have me under a spell.

When boy and girl play bride and groom
together in a little room:
great their ecstasy!
Their love increases steadily,
rising up between them both;
it courses through them readily.
They fondle with their fingertips,
their arms and legs and tongues and lips:
great their ecstasy!