

# The Magic of Music Making: A Story of Destiny, Puppetry, and the Folk Spirit

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**DALRYMPLE MacALPIN** is a diviner of folkloric traditions and a singer of stories and visions. He makes a home for himself on the theater stage, the concert hall, and in the library of mythology. MacAlpin's artistic aim is to keep alive the hearth flame of folk memory, fairy tale, tradition, and myth, with branches culled from the collective tree of knowledge.

**ABSTRACT**

*How does one create a landscape where the inanimate becomes animate and belief in the truth of magic shines? In this article, the author describes the life-changing influence of Carl Orff's stage works and elemental music upon his own development from folk artist to playwright, composer, storyteller, and puppeteer.*

**By Dalrymple MacAlpin**

If the power of the human soul continues to affect change in this world after the body has shed its mortal coil, then surely Carl Orff would be a compelling example of this spiritual virtue, at least for this humble modern-day composer. Like most people who steer their inner compass by the guiding star of music, I, too, came across the sonic splendor of Orff's creative output upon hearing his well-known and most often performed work, the scenic cantata, *Carmina Burana* (1937). I was then in my early 20s and while I watched that infectious record spinning hypnotically on the turntable, I had no idea just how much this Bavarian composer would forever alter the course of my destiny, both as a composer and a human being.

**The Early Years**

My love for music began to develop at an early age in the Great Lakes State of Michigan, first with studying classical guitar during my elementary years, then progressing into songwriting and recording my first album at age 17. I moved to the Sierra Foothills of northern California shortly thereafter and established my first music ensemble, Lasher Keen (see Figure 1, p. 31). Under the Lasher Keen moniker I recorded six more albums, ranging broadly in stylistic approach, flirting with medieval and early music modes as well as psychedelia, folk ballads, experimental forms, and even the spirit of Detroit's Motown sound. It was toward the end of Lasher Keen's reign that I became deeply immersed in classical and

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**Figure 1.** Lasher Keen in Shadow Silhouette.



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choral music, particularly the elemental offerings composed by Carl Orff (see Figure 2).

This interest in Orff began to manifest itself in the creation of my first stage work in 2015, *The Middle Kingdom* (see Figure 3, p. 32). I had gradually been exploring theater elements in the onstage performances of Lasher Keen, but now that vision compelled me to take it further than ever before. Using the 12th-century Irish myth, *Tochmarc Etaine*, or the *Wooing of Etain* (n.a., n.d.), as my initial theatrical template, my intent was to unite the theater with music in a similar fashion to how Orff envisaged his own stage works. The musicians were not sidelined in the musty orchestra pit; they performed on stage alongside the actors. Often musicians traded in their instrument for a stage prop, shapeshifting into actors in a seamless theatrical tango. It was a concert and a play, a dance and a story, a poem and a song.

The success of *The Middle Kingdom* led me to a monumental decision. As Orff's music kept creeping closer and closer to the center stage of my consciousness, I felt the time was nigh to disband Lasher Keen and begin composing, writing, and performing under my own name (see Figure 4, p. 32).

**Figure 2.** The Author in Medieval Garb.



PHOTOGRAPHER: WAKING CROW. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Figure 3. On Stage for *The Middle Kingdom*.



PHOTOGRAPHER JOHN TABER. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Figure 4. Composer at Work.



PHOTOGRAPHER: ANGELA HOLM. USED WITH PERMISSION.

The desire to explore new forms, new possibilities, and new dimensions of music that hitherto had only tempted fancy in my musical daydreams beckoned. It was time to begin again.

### The Influence of Orff

I had been slowly collecting Orff's entire recorded catalog and relishing his fairy tale operas, Greek tragedies, Bavarian world theater musical plays, his triumph trilogy, and his pedagogic *Schulwerk* material, *Music For Children* (1950–1954; 1957–1966), which greatly appealed to my musical

senses. Yet it was not until seeing the 2008 Orff documentary, *O Fortuna*, by celebrated filmmaker, Tony Palmer (2009), that I was catapulted into a brave new world of writing and performing music on a completely different scale. At that time, I had no formal music education, writing and singing my compositions purely by raw instinct, unaffected by knowledge of even the most rudimentary fundamentals. My childhood classical guitar training was still somewhere buried in my consciousness; yet I purposely ignored this training because in my youthful naiveté, I wanted to write songs that were uninfluenced by anyone else's concept of what music was and should be. Therefore, I chose to forget all I knew and create from a page devoid of others' dominion. From the beginning, while engaged in the process of writing music, my efforts have focused on arriving at the root of the message, both musically and poetically. This was also true of Orff (as cited in Liess, 1966), whose personal credo has inspired me: "The nearer one comes to the essence of the statement, the near to absolute simplicity, the more immediate and powerful is the effect" (p. 40).

It was not until Orff came along, tapping upon the drum of my inner ear and steeping in my musical tea cup, that I realized it was time to return to the classroom. His music affected me so strongly, so

absolutely, so genuinely, that I enrolled in college with a single unified purpose: to learn everything possible about music composition. For the next 5 years I was immersed in ear training, music theory, choir, music history, improv jazz, composition, piano, and vocal training. An extreme sense of fervent dedication underpinned my studies, for the Orff-ian torch that guided this monumental effort had never wavered; it shone ever brighter the more I continued to learn and grow.

I then contacted Tony Palmer, the director of *O Fortuna*, to share with him just how much his film meant to me and how it changed the direction of my life's compass. After sending Tony several of my albums, he was kind enough to share the backstory that went into the making of his Orff documentary. I was eager to learn where he had filmed the marionettes that acted out a scene from Orff's fairy tale opera, *Der Mond (The Moon)*. This scene in particular awakened within me the fascinating potential that lies betwixt classical music and the art of puppetry. Tony said the location for this set was the *Dusseldorfer Marionetten-Theater* in Dusseldorf, Germany. Led by puppeteer/puppet maker Anton Bachleitner, this theater, I was thrilled to find out, still had *Der Mond* (1938) in their live performance repertoire. There was nothing left to do at this point but climb aboard the first plane I could find bound for Germany.

### The Muse and the Marionettes

The puppetry arts have always enchanted me, from the childhood dream worlds of Jim Henson's (1982) *Dark Crystal*, to teenage years spent fantasizing about the puppet masters of old, then into my 20s touring Europe with Lasher Keen and being exposed to puppetry traditions in the Czech Republic. The art of the puppet has always been there, at times as quiet and subtle as a stringed shadowy specter dancing in the corner of my eye. At other times I look straight into that nebulous corner and find my senses were not playing tricks on me after all. Now, puppetry had taken over the foreground of my passions due to a 3-minute scene in a Carl Orff documentary. I had been witness to a miracle. How could this be?

Firstly, the marionettes depicted in the film were truly one-of-a-kind, awe-inspiring works of art unto themselves. Secondly, the music of Orff's *Der Mond* sent a sparkling shiver of a spine-tingling, ghost-like

quality straight through the marrow of my spirit, and I wept for sheer joy that such music exists in the world at all.

Written in 1938 with both music and libretto by Orff himself, *Der Mond* has all the charm of a Bavarian fairy tale wrapped up in a spellbound quilt of stars newly born. Here, a perennial freshness of sound that refuses to diminish, though time rears its ugly head, *Der Mond* reflects back only the awesome beauty and majestic power at the heart of all Orff's music. *Der Mond* so moved me that I studied the score in order to sing the opening aria of the *Erzähler*, or storyteller, "*Vorzeiten, vorzeiten gab es ein land ...*" ("Once upon a time ...")

It is my life's work to tell the lost tales and to let them ring out, to find the real reason why we are here in the first place, to remind the soul of laughter and magic, and to celebrate the existence of humanity in all its myriad facets.

The moon was a familiar source of comfort and guidance while I looked out the window on that plane headed for Deutschland, which landed in Dusseldorf on a sunny day in June 2016. With nothing but a satchel full of songs and pack full of poems, I strode through the streets of Dusseldorf and took in the city with all the eager anticipation of someone on the brink of discovering the secrets of the universe. Quite by accident I stumbled across a street festival and, lo and behold, I found myself being ushered inside a sprawling tent with a sign that read, *Dusseldorfen Marionetten-Theater*. The puppeteers warmly welcomed me into their wooden world as if it had been a clandestine reunion, and in no time I was manipulating the actual puppets from Orff's *Der Mond* and holding them close to my body as if they were sacred relics of some animistic prediluvian civilization. Later that evening the performance of *Der Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)* mesmerized and enchanted those assembled, and after the show the puppeteers graciously extended their generosity by allowing me to tour their theater and discover all the tricks of the trade that go into the highly sophisticated art form of puppetry.

From Dusseldorf to the Bavarian puppet village of Augsburg, I drank and ate nothing but wooden joints and moving mouths, briefly replacing the strings on the piano and harp for the strings on the puppet

**Figure 5.** With a Few Cast Members of the Rumpelstilzchen Marionette Opera.



PHOTOGRAPHER. WAKING CROW. USED WITH PERMISSION.

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controller. I attended a Puppets in Prague workshop in the Czech Republic for the greater duration of my stay and learned how to carve my first marionette in the traditional Czech style (see Figure 5). The marionette carving techniques, taught by Czech

**Figure 6.** On the Set for *Make Believe*.



PHOTOGRAPHER DOUGLAS HOOPER. USED WITH PERMISSION.

puppet master Mirek Trejtnar, gave me all the tools and knowledge needed to return home and begin work on my most ambitious and impassioned project to date, *The Rumpelstilzchen Marionette Opera*.

As I contemplate writing this opera, my wish is to carry forward Orff's *Ein Kleines Welttheater*, his little world theater, with a new set of characters whose story reflects the inherent magical quality of the natural world, expressed in elemental musical forms, performed by a cast comprised entirely of wooden marionettes. It will be a landscape where the inanimate becomes animate and belief in the truth of magic shines through the heart's open window, leaving its fairy footprint on every fiber of our forms. As Orff himself said, "In all my work my final concern is not with musical, but with spiritual exposition" (as cited in Liess, 1966, p. 31).

### Make Believe

Before this marionette opera could become manifest, though, another musical card up my sleeve needed to be played. Traveling back to the states, I returned to my studies in the lecture dome and finished writing my second stage work, the archetypal cantata, *Make Believe* (see *Make Believe Trailer*). As an ode to the Schulwerk, *Make Believe* is a forgotten fairy tale for the unfettered imagination of childhood (see Figures 6 and 7, and Figure 8, p. 35). My wish with this work is to remind the listener that magic not only exists, it also contains an inescapable soul that has never left us. As the storyteller declares to the audience in the final scene of Act 2:

**Figure 7.** On the Set for *Make Believe*.



PHOTOGRAPHER: ANGELA HOLM. USED WITH PERMISSION.

Those who do not believe are afraid that by believing, they will become open to intrusive experiences and seductive sensations not of the visible reality and, therefore, considered disruptive to ordinary comfortable existence. Yet without consciously knowing, they in fact do believe, for we do not fear what we do not believe in. Therefore, let us commingle and conjoin with the shadowy contortionist of our nightmares and the imaginary friend who is our guide. They are there for a reason.

I also took a cue from Orff when writing the story for *Make Believe*. As *Der Mond* had been adapted from a Brother's Grimm fairy tale, I, too, decided to look to the Grimm brothers for the inspiration of my libretto. When researching these fairy tale brothers, however, it was their next-door neighbors, the six sisters Wild, that came

**Figure 8.** *Make Believe* Album Cover.



PHOTOGRAPHER BENJAMIN A. VIERLING. USED WITH PERMISSION.

**Figure 9.** The Blessings of Pan on the Set for *Make Believe*.



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## A Carl Orff Discography

Lamenti (Orff's reworking of Monteverdi's operas)

- *Orpheus* (1924, reworked 1939)
- *Klage der Ariadne* (1925, reworked 1940)
- *Tanz der Spröden* (1925, reworked 1940)

Orff Schulwerk

- *Musik für Kinder* (with Gunild Keetman) (1930–35, reworked 1950–54)
- *Tanzstück* (1933)

Trionfi (Triumph Trilogy)

- *Carmina Burana* (1937)
- *Catulli Carmina* (1943)
- *Trionfo di Afrodite* (1953)

Märchenstücke (Fairy tales)

- *Der Mond* (1939)
- *Die Kluge* (1943)
- *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (1952, reworked 1962)

Bairisches Welttheater (Bavarian world theatre)

- *Die Bernauerin* (1947)
- *Astutuli* (1953)
- *Comœdia de Christi Resurrectione* (1956) – Easter Play
- *Ludus de Nato Infante Mirificus* (1961) – Nativity play

Theatrum Mundi (World Theater)

- *Antigonae* (1949)
- *Oedipus der Tyrann* (1959)
- *Prometheus* (1968)
- *De temporum fine comoedia* (1973, reworked 1977)

## Dalrymple MacAlpin Discography

*March To The Sun* (2001)

*Y KILL K* (2005)

*Lasher Keen* (2006)

Lasher Keen, *Wither* (2009)

Lasher Keen, *Possessed by the Forest Queen* (2010)

Lasher Keen, *Berserker* (2012)

Lasher Keen, *Mantic Poetry, Oracular Prophecy* (2014)

Lasher Keen, *The Middle Kingdom* (2015)

*Make Believe* (2020)

**Forthcoming Releases**

\**Illumination Tales*

\**The Rumpelstilzchen Marionette Opera*

COMPILED BY DALRYMPLE MACALPIN.

to my attention and who ended up becoming the peripeteia of my plot. These six sisters were the ones responsible for many of the well-known fairy tales in the Grimm collection (Paradiz, 2005). They were full of old-world knowledge, riddles, folk songs and yes, stories. If you have heard of *Hansel and Gretel*, *Rumpelstilzchen*, *The Singing Bone*, and *The Six Swans*, then you have the sisters Wild to thank for it. *Make Believe* is dedicated to their lasting memory.

Again, for this musical theater work, the musicians were situated on stage to be a centralized focal point to the tale just as much as the actors. It was my version of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total universal artwork. One thing leads to another on the stage; the storyteller's last line is taken up by the graceful steps of dancing children (see Figure 9, p. 35), who in turn yield their attention to the live orchestra, where the bassoon heralds the entrance of a giant, and a poignant aria heads over into the poetry of word play. It is the artifice of art in full swing without the barriers of limitation to hinder its evolution.

### Conclusion

In all of my works, the stories and spirits of the past draw me to them (see Figure 10, p. 37 and video clips *Illumination Tales*, *Supernal Maytime*, and *Illumination Tales, The Son of Swift*). They are, to me, *more* alive with potential and the endless possibilities of interpretation, for they have had the subtle benefit of adding age to their wisdom. This was also true of Carl Orff who said, "Sometimes I am asked why in the main I chose old material for my stage works. I do not feel it to be old, but only valid. The dated elements are lost and the spiritual strength remains" (as cited in Ward, 1992, p. 33).

When I had gone to school to study music formally, certain friends told me my edge would be lost, that the creation of music without *knowledge* of music was something special and to be treated with respect and care—for in this spirit it is said that we can craft something wholly original and truly our own. In reality, the opposite proved true. My previous compositional efforts sound to me as if they were painted with only primary colors. By embracing the study and discipline of music, I am able to mix the colors and create new hues of sound; all things became possible and the wall my

songwriting had hit finally crumbled into alchemical dust, leaving infinite trails leading into a virgin wilderness resplendent with wildflowers. I never looked back and have the music of Carl Orff to thank for it.

Like Orff, I walk the path between myth and music and read from the fabled storybook of folk memory and visionary saga. It is my life's work to tell the lost tales and to let them ring out, to find the real reason why we are here in the first place, to remind the soul of laughter and magic, and to celebrate the existence of humanity in all its myriad facets. Nothing but the lost chord will do!

Once upon a time there lived a man by the name of Carl Orff and, though he no longer walks upon this earthly plane, I can feel the whisper of his hand guiding my own. I am listening. ■

### Links to Video Clips Referenced in this Article

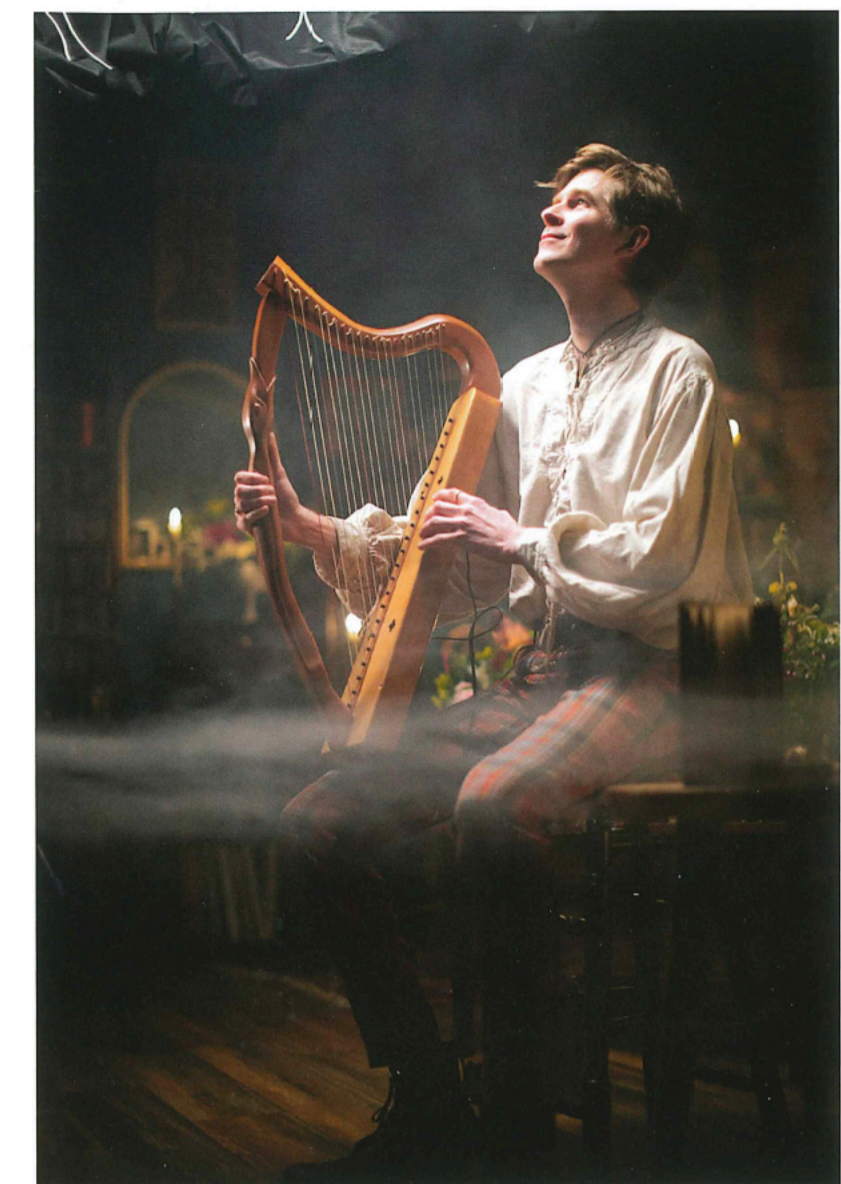
**Illumination Tales, Supernal Maytime**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doW8ZR1\\_gac](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=doW8ZR1_gac)

**Illumination Tales, The Son of Swift**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOoytv-v2Gc>

Figure 10. On the Set for *Illumination Tales*.



PHOTOGRAPHER: ANGELA HOLM. USED WITH PERMISSION.

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