

Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum (1977) –  
Harrison Birtwistle (1934 -)

*Carmen Arcadiae Mechanicae Perpetuum* ('The Perpetual Song of Mechanical Arcady') was composed in 1977 in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the London Sinfonietta (the score is prefaced with the dedication "To my friends the London Sinfonietta on the occasion of their tenth birthday). It would be the second, in a trilogy of works Birtwistle would compose for the Sinfonietta between 1976 – 1984 (the others being *Silbury Air* [1977] and *Secret Theatre* [1984]).

The main inspiration for the piece comes from the artist Paul Klee, of whose influence on Birtwistle has been paramount. This is no surprise when we consider Klee was himself a musician, and he would often use musical terminology (melody, rhythm etc) to describe different aspects of his work. The piece is based on Klee's 1922 painting, *The Twittering Machine* which is in turn based on the imaginary song of a mechanical bird (Birtwistle himself suggests of *Carmen Arcadiae*; "the title is a title he [Klee] could have invented"). Instead of Klee's four mechanical birds, Birtwistle juxtaposes six different musical mechanisms without any form of transition, each obeying its pre-ordained set of rules.

These juxtapositions create a rough, heavily rhythmic texture much more clockwork and pulse dominated than the melody focussed *Silbury Air*; though in *Carmen Arcadiae* Birtwistle chooses not to carry on with the 'pulse labyrinth' workings that characterise the earlier work. At its most basic level the work can be seen as consisting of two differing types of material; one the jagged musical mechanisms, the other relative stasis with long held notes. These stasis sections become increasingly important as the work progresses.

Birtwistle has also said of the work "The dynamics of the piece have a time-scale independent of that of the mechanisms, creating an independent dynamic life of their own. This process is also applied to the registers of the piece." The differing time-scales between mechanisms and dynamics/register mean that each repetition of material has a distinct feel and flavour to it. They also act as a type of disturbance to the formal scheme, similar to the composer's use of random numbers to disturb numerical patterns in his later works. The sustained music reaches the zenith of its importance shortly before the final crescendo; here held notes are passed between the registral extremes of the ensemble, creating one of the most dramatic sections of *Carmen Arcadiae*. The final crescendo is equally dramatic with the final appearance of a musical mechanism, constructing slowly without interruption, ultimately building the tension which dissipated with each stasis. In true Birtwistle style, this climax point occurs with the extremes of register and dynamics, pitted against each other in a dramatic fashion.