

The lovely music of the wheeling stars

Duncan Macmillan

Aristotle ... imputed this symphony of the heavens ... this music of the spheres to Pythagoras. ... Pythagoras alone of mortals is said to have heard this harmony ... If our hearts were as pure, as chaste, as snowy as Pythagoras's was, our ears would resound and be filled with that supremely lovely music of the wheeling stars.

John Milton 'On the Music of the Spheres', Second Prolusion.

In his recent paintings, Eugenio Carmi follows Milton in his admiration for Pythagoras and his grasp of the fundamental harmony, 'the lovely music of the wheeling stars', with which he is identified. Carmi finds too its reflection in the forms of Euclidian geometry. How good it is to be reminded of such things and so eloquently, for living in cities as we do, our nights are filled with the blaze of artificial light and we scarcely see the stars. We have lost a vital connection. Carmi now restores it.

For our ancestors it was very different. From times long before history, men and women looked up at the stars and saw there a world that was not subject to change and decay as our mortal world is here, as Shakespeare put it, 'beneath the visiting moon.' Thus we can see from this world to a better one that is transcendent. Perhaps it was in that vision that our earliest ideas of the divine were born. The stars seemed to move in a perpetual dance of perfect harmony. Our remotest ancestors built huge stone monuments to trace the geometry of their movements and understand its rhythm.

In ancient Greece, Pythagoras, who is credited with formulating some of the fundamental principles of geometry, above all the theorem that bears his name that Carmi brings to life so beautifully, was also the central figure in a mystic cult. There is no inconsistency there, for in numbers and in the perfect order of the geometry that, after Pythagoras, was codified by Euclid, heavenly perfection seems to be reflected here on earth. That too is Carmi's point.

Pythagoras and after him Plato also saw a direct correlation between geometrical ratios and the harmony of music in the relationship between the proportions of the subdivisions of the strings of a lyre and the harmony of the notes that it produced. It was an idea that produced some of the greatest art of the Renaissance, the paintings of Piero della Francesca, for instance, and the architecture of Palladio, music in stone. Within their art, too, we see how of all geometrical figures, it is the visual harmony of the golden section that presents this mystery most directly. There we see directly the link between pure geometric form and the mystery of visual delight. This has for a long time been the province of Carmi's art: geometric form, properly understood and in the right relationships is not something cold and abstract but a source of poetry. As we see in these pictures, it is there that Carmi meets Pythagoras.

In "*Eugenio Carmi. Pythagoras's Theorem*", Casa dei Carraresi, Treviso, 2012