



The Birth of Taliesin

for Flute, Piano, and Percussion

by Bob Zawalich

- I. Ceridwen's Soliloquy
- II. Ceridwen Bends Gwion Bach to her Will
- III. Gwion Bach Stirs the Potion of Inspiration
- IV. Chase, Transformation, Labyrinth, Vortex
- V. Ceridwen's Farewell

The Birth of Taliesin: Instrumentation

Ceridwen's Soliloquy

- Flute solo

Ceridwen Bends Gwion Bach To Her Will

- Flute
- Piano (includes playing inside piano)
- Vibraphone (bowed and hammered)
- Wind Chimes
- Water Gong

Gwion Bach Stirs The Potion Of Inspiration

- Flute
- Piano
- Marimba (soft and hard mallets)

Chase, Transformation, Labyrinth, Vortex

- Flute
- Piano
- Tam tam/gong
- Shaker (maracas)
- Vibraphone (bowed and hammered)
- Bird whistles
- Crotales

Ceridwen's Farewell

- Flute
- Piano
- Vibraphone (bowed and hammered)
- Water gong

Notes on narrative elements of *The Birth of Taliesin*
by Bob Zawalich April 21, 2002

There are five movements in *The Birth of Taliesin*, a musical telling of a Welsh myth. All the musical elements have narrative purposes, and represent the personalities of the characters.

In *Ceridwen's Soliloquy*, the sorceress Ceridwen introduces herself and explains her plan to find a young boy to stir a magic potion for a year and a day.

Ceridwen Bends Gwion Bach to her Will takes place underwater, as Ceridwen swims to the bottom of a lake where Gwion Bach lives, trying to convince him to come with her. Gwion Bach, represented by the Welsh tune *The Ash Grove*, refuses and tries to escape, breaking into millions of fragments to escape her net. Ceridwen reassembles the fragments, adding in some of her own musical devices. She then "deconstructs" the melody, throwing out the fragments of *The Ash Grove*, leaving behind a melody that is suitable for the long task of stirring.

In *Gwion Bach Stirs the Potion of Inspiration*, Ceridwen, in order to brew a potion of Inspiration to help her son, has forced Gwion Bach to stir the potion in a cauldron for a year and a day. Every season Ceridwen adds herbs to the potion. At the end of the year, three drops of potion leap out of the cauldron, landing on and burning Gwion Bach's hand. He puts his hand in his mouth, acquiring wisdom from the potion. He runs in fear of Ceridwen, who returns to find her year's labor wasted.

This movement is structured in sections that correspond to seasons. At the start of each season, Ceridwen, the flute, adds a rhythmic element that gets incorporated into the rhythm of the Potion of Inspiration (the marimba part). Gwion Bach (piano right hand) stirs in a circle, changing little. His stirring paddle (piano left hand) hits the cauldron occasionally. When the potion is complete, the marimba cadenza marks the three drops of escaping potion, and the forearm clusters on piano show the cauldron splitting apart. We hear the entire completed potion, then the potion's rhythm is assimilated into Gwion Bach, who runs. Ceridwen is not far behind. She takes on Gwion Bach's new form, foreshadowing future transformations.

The percussion part evolves throughout the piece; this is the central element of this movement. Rhythmic elements move through the part organically, breaking off and combining in different ways.

Chase, Transformation, Labyrinth, Vortex is a complex piece working on many levels simultaneously. In the narrative, Gwion Bach runs toward his own land, but Ceridwen returns and gives chase. Seeing her, he turns himself into a hare and runs, but she turns herself into a greyhound. Approaching a stream, he becomes a fish and swims away, but she becomes an otter and chases him under the water. So he becomes a bird and flies into the air. Now a hawk, she chases after him. Nearly caught, he spies a pile of wheat in a farmyard below, and turns himself into one of the grains. She, a high-crested black hen, finds him among the grains and swallows him.

But her victory is short, for as she returns to human form, she finds that she bears him as a child within her.

In addition of elements representing the story, the piece is structured in the form of a Cretan labyrinth that gets tighter and more intense as the movement progresses. There is a moment, a singularity, where the music "falls through and comes out the other side", grabbing up pieces of whatever it can find. The ancient elements of earth, water, air and fire are mapped to the various transformations, and a number of the sections are based on mathematical models. The concept of a chase is also examined from several perspectives.

In *Ceridwen's Farewell*, a recapitulation of the music from *Ceridwen's Soliloquy*, we see a changed Ceridwen. For nine months she had carried Gwion Bach within her body, and when he is born as Taliesin, his beauty prevents her from killing him. Instead she places him in a leather bag and floats him on the sea...