

## Music and Magic

Angela Voss

### Introduction: approaches and challenges

To write about music of any era as an operative magical power in the world poses an epistemological challenge, since it requires the use of discursive and descriptive language to convey intentions and experiences which, in their immediacy, are far removed from any attempts to theorise, categorise or observe from a distance. It follows that the question of how music may be therapeutic – in the sense of effecting psychological and spiritual transformation or wellbeing – is not just a historical one, but has ontological and phenomenological implications. What follows attempts to weave together the two strands, presenting some cultural contexts of musical magic in the sixteenth century, drawing those contexts into a broader framework of significance in order to engage the reader's own imagination.

Here is not the place to attempt a survey of the vast scholarship on the relationship between music, magic and esotericism in the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> This chapter explores the premises of the deeply held conviction of Renaissance magicians and musicians alike that music heals because of its profoundly *symbolic* function of revealing in sound connections, or sympathies, between the human soul and a hidden, underlying order of reality seen as 'divine'. In other words, they located music within what we would now call a grand metaphor of reality, a metaphor which originated in the Pythagorean and Platonic world view of the *Timaeus* and became integrated into Christian cosmology in the early centuries after Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Central to Plato's creation myth is the nature of soul, the primary, intelligent element of creation that informs and gives life to the cosmos and all its creatures. The world soul is created with perfect harmonies inherent in its structure, but when this becomes embodied in human beings, the process of infusion results in distortion and upheaval and therefore the human soul needs to be 'reminded' of the perfect harmonies it once enjoyed. It can then re-align itself with the cosmos, and ultimately with the divine mind itself, through a process of sympathetic resonance between it, an intermediary image, and the universal meanings to which the image points. Music and art could imitate the perfection of the divine realm, conveying images to the senses which would stir a memory in the soul, a longing to return, to restore a lost unity. Thus the arts were understood to play a vital role in the spiritual perfection of human beings.<sup>3</sup>

To trace the therapeutic role of music in the sixteenth century, it is necessary to focus on its symbolic function as intermediary, and to define it as a 'theurgic' symbol. Theurgy was a neoplatonic ritual practice which involved the use of symbolic objects such as statues, or sounds such as invocations as receptacles for divine power. The participants in such rituals would engage with the image as 'an ontological trace of the divine' which in a ritual or performance context might reveal its hidden meaning and elevate their consciousness.<sup>4</sup> The ultimate goal of the ritual was the divinisation or salvation of the human soul through its full

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Esotericism' here refers to Hermeticism, neoplatonism, and neopythagoreanism with their affiliated arts of alchemy, astrology, cabala, spiritual and natural magic. For an introduction to Western esoteric traditions, see Goodrick-Clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*.

<sup>2</sup> See Plato, *Timaeus*, 34b-38e. An example of early Platonic/Christian cosmological synthesis would be Pseudo-Dionysius, *Celestial Hierarchies* (5<sup>th</sup> c. CE).

<sup>3</sup> See *Timaeus*, 47b-e on the role of the senses in the perception of cosmic and musical harmony.

<sup>4</sup> Uždavinys, 'Metaphysical symbols', 37.

alignment with the gods.<sup>5</sup> It is easy to see parallels with the Catholic Mass, although Christianity firmly rejected one of the fundamental elements of Neoplatonism: the role of the *daimones* as spiritual intermediaries.<sup>6</sup> However, comprehending Renaissance understanding of the arts as spiritually operative requires an appreciation of the fact that practices of natural, astral and ceremonial magic in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are founded on the basis of symbolic insight as potentially transformative, and even soteriological.

Generally speaking, historians of Western culture take a stance of detached objectivity towards the pre-modern world view of a universal order governed by ‘active affinities’ in nature, assuming it to be a quaint and colourful precursor to the more sophisticated scientific empiricism which has developed since the early seventeenth century. One notable exception is Gary Tomlinson, who talks of the ‘tiresome play of power by which we habitually make others submit to our way of knowing.’<sup>7</sup> In *Music in Renaissance Magic*, Tomlinson aims to engage the reader in a more sympathetic approach to modes of thought which might seem so alien to our time:

Historical reality ... is not to be seen as opposed to the traditions in which we live ... our place in tradition involves us with the materials we seek to understand ... without this link we would not seek to understand them as meaningful in the first place, for we could not conceive them as meaningful.<sup>8</sup>

It is in this light that sixteenth-century musical magic can best be approached, engaging a ‘sympathetic empiricism’ that honours magical thinking as a particular stance towards reality that is as authentic now as it ever was, despite the paradigm shifts of the past four hundred years.<sup>9</sup>

Renaissance humanists, including philosophers, magicians and reformers of music, sought to revivify cultural life through poetry, music and art precisely because these forms linked sensual experience to moral and spiritual transformation. This was in stark contrast to the ‘absolute truth of knowledge gained through rigorous deductive logic’ which Tomlinson suggests characterised medieval Scholasticism.<sup>10</sup> Although this may be too crude a distinction, it is certainly true that with the revival of Hermetic philosophy in the fifteenth century, champions of the ‘ancient theology’ turned towards both the immanence of soul in the world, and the imagination as a faculty of perceiving it. This theophanic path did present an alternative to the direct apprehension of a higher order through a contemplative act of pure thought.<sup>11</sup> But at the same time, a new intellectual strand of scientific rationalism was taking root, which by the early seventeenth century was firmly rejecting the magical worldview as superstitious and inaccurate.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> The two most important champions of theurgy (‘gods’ work’) were Iamblichus (245-325) and Proclus (412-485). For further reading on theurgy see Clarke, Dillon and Herschbell, *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries*; Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*; Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*; Uždavinys, *Philosophy and Theurgy*.

<sup>6</sup> See for example St Augustine, ‘The false claims of theurgy’ in *City of God*, Book X.

<sup>7</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 248. On the widespread ‘cultural hegemony’ of contemporary academic attitudes towards magic, see *ibid.*, 9–20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, ‘Introduction’.

<sup>10</sup> Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance*, 4. For a more nuanced overview, see Page, *Discarding Images*.

<sup>11</sup> See Versluis, *Restoring Paradise*, ‘Introduction’ on the distinctions between transcendent and theophanic modes of spirituality.

<sup>12</sup> The opposing premises of magical and scientific discourses are demonstrated in the debate between the Hermetic philosopher Robert Fludd and the astronomer Johannes Kepler on the intellectual status of images. See Pauli ‘The Influence of Archetypal Ideas’ in Huffman, 212-131.

These currents are illustrative of a deep divide in human beings' quest to make sense of the world, the two sides of which are characterised in Western discourse by the functions of reason and revelation. The neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist has traced the history and implications of this divided reality. His starting point, that these two distinct and often antagonistic modes of knowing are mirrored physiologically in the functions of the two brain hemispheres, becomes the basis for an extensive investigation into the relationship between them at key points in Western cultural and religious history. Most importantly, McGilchrist's research reminds us that music as a sensual image of cosmic order is not simply a pre-modern 'magical world view', but a universal human experience.<sup>13</sup> He suggests that 'when a metaphor actually lives in the mind, it can generate new thoughts or understanding – it is cognitively real and active, not just a dead historical remnant of a once live metaphor'.<sup>14</sup> McGilchrist demonstrates that metaphorical meaning is in every sense 'prior to abstraction and explicitness' and in fact ontologically precedes such differentiation.<sup>15</sup> His extensive survey of the past two thousand years reveals the Renaissance to have been a period when rational and revelatory modes were held in a delicate balance,<sup>16</sup> for their love of metaphor, analogy, 'occult' sympathies and 'operative affinities' pointed to a hidden universal order which was divine yet also knowable through its sense-perceptible forms such as art and music. 'Natural philosophy' embraced both seen and unseen worlds.<sup>17</sup>

But such periods of synthesis are inevitably followed by counter-movements of dogmaticism, iconoclasm and puritanism which threaten to reduce the world to one of binary logic and literalist interpretation in an attempt to gain control and suppress what it cannot understand.

### **The theurgic symbol**

The Greek philosopher Pythagoras gained exalted status in the Renaissance as an 'ancient theologian' through whose teaching the (assumed) ancient Egyptian wisdom of Hermes Trismegistus had passed into Greece and the Platonic tradition.<sup>18</sup> As early as the third century, the philosopher Iamblichus has this to say about Pythagoras' followers in his Commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*:

The Pythagoreans had the habit, before giving scientific instruction, of revealing the subjects under enquiry through similitudes and images, and after this of introducing the secret revelation of the same subjects through symbols, and then in this way, after the reactivation of the soul's ability to comprehend the intelligible realm and the purging of

---

<sup>13</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 179; 209-256.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 'The Renaissance and Reformation', 298-329; see also Vickers on the distinctions between analogical and empirical modes of thought in 'On the Function of Analogy' in Merkel and Debus, *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, 265-292.

<sup>17</sup> One of the most influential treatises on universal harmony was Francesco Giorgi's *De harmonia mundi* of 1525: see Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 112-119; Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 33-42; other useful sources include Heninger, *Touche of Sweet Harmony*; Palisca, *Music and Ideas*, ch. 2; Vergo, *That Divine Order*.

<sup>18</sup> On the tradition of the ancient theology in the Renaissance, see Walker, *The Ancient Theology*. The genealogy quoted by Ficino in the Preface to his translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* comprises Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, Philolaus and Plato (see Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xlvi). Other sources place Zoroaster as the originator. It was only in the early seventeenth century that texts attributed to Hermes were discovered to be from the Hellenistic period, combining elements of both Egyptian piety and Greek philosophy (see Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*, xxii).

its vision, to bring on the complete knowledge of the subjects laid down for investigation.<sup>19</sup>

Here we find one of the earliest statements about symbolic meaning as prior to empirical knowledge because of the symbol's innate similitude with a realm *beyond* rational thought. But what makes this kind of image different from any other? Foundational to the neoplatonic thinking that informs the Renaissance we find a distinction between 'image as representation' and 'image as manifestation'. 'Representational' or mimetic art as defined by Plato in the *Republic* cannot re-connect the viewer or listener to any deeper meanings, as it merely imitates the appearances of things.<sup>20</sup> But the image which is created by an artist or poet who is filled with 'divine frenzy' will be of a different order altogether, and later Platonists developed the idea of a 'higher imagination' which the artist could call upon to infuse their images with divine Ideas. As a direct creative channel to the Divine Mind, this imagination could conceive sensible forms as vehicles for spiritual truth, thus rendering them symbolic.<sup>21</sup> As Peter Struck observes, 'the symbol makes the impossible happen; it becomes the node on which the transcendent can meet the mundane.'<sup>22</sup> In Renaissance cosmology the meeting place of the transcendent and the mundane is the realm of the stars, whose symbolic function as a key to unfolding universal meanings in the world is the domain of astrology.<sup>23</sup> Thus the primary metaphor of operative magic is one of three realms: divinity, cosmos and material world. All are informed by a continuum or 'spiritual circuit' of energy which originates with a supreme principle (God or the One), is revealed through the heavens, and sown in the world as 'occult properties' of nature.<sup>24</sup> The diviner, astrologer, alchemist or cabalist engages with the traces of divinity in the world through its images, whose meanings are gleaned not through reason but through the intuitive imagination, 'the star in man' as the alchemist Martin Ruland put it.<sup>25</sup>

So how did such symbols work in operative magic? If any kind of psychic change or transformation was to be achieved through the manipulation of the occult properties in matter or sound, a specific context and a particular human disposition towards enabling this change would be required. Hence in a religious or magical ritual, or in a musical performance, one could say that the role of the Renaissance magician, priest or performer was to 'give presence' to the symbol, to vivify what it pointed to, to bring it out of the world of mere 'representation' into lived experience.<sup>26</sup> This was not a question of 'belief' in supernatural powers (because we now know better), but of imaginatively entering into the metaphor and therefore experiencing it working, intuiting the 'bonds of similitude' in the world. The role of the *magus* in articulating these similitudes was eloquently articulated by the precocious young Giovanni Pico della Mirandola in the preface to his *Nine Hundred Theses* of 1486:

This beneficent magic, in calling forth, as it were, from their hiding places into the light the powers which the largess of God has sown and planted in the world, does not itself work miracles, so much as sedulously serve nature as she works her wonders. Scrutinizing, with greater penetration, that harmony of the universe which the Greeks

---

<sup>19</sup> Iamblichus, *In Timaeus* 1. Frag. 5, in Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 196.

<sup>20</sup> Plato, *Republic* X, 509a-608b.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g. Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 6.19 and Plotinus, *Ennead* V.8.1.

<sup>22</sup> Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 213.

<sup>23</sup> On the humanist revival of astrology in this period see Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance*; Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*. On the poetics of the medieval cosmos, see Lewis, *The Discarded Image*.

<sup>24</sup> This is beautifully expressed in the first chapter of Ficino's *De vita coelitus comparanda*, in Kaske and Clark, *Marsilio Ficino, Three Books on Life*, 242-393.

<sup>25</sup> Rulandus, *A Lexicon*, 182.

<sup>26</sup> See *ibid.* 191-194 on presence and representation.

with greater aptness of terms called *sympatheia* and grasping the mutual affinity of things, she applies to each thing those inducements (called the *iunges* of the magicians), most suited to its nature. Thus it draws forth into public notice the miracles which lie hidden in the recesses of the world, in the womb of nature, in the storehouses and secret vaults of God, as though she herself were their artificer. As the farmer wedds his elms to the vines, so the ‘magus’ unites earth to heaven, that is, the lower orders to the endowments and powers of the higher.<sup>27</sup>

Gary Tomlinson draws on Michel Foucault’s term ‘the magical episteme’ to refer to this kind of ‘knowledge by affinity’, and has convincingly shown how Renaissance composers and poets used specific musical and rhetorical language to convey emotional affects, states of mind, or even divine ideas for ethical or healing purposes.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in his discussion on music as the most effective mediator between the hemispheric domains, McGilchrist observes that ‘Music works through the body, but transports us beyond the world of the merely physical: it is highly particular, and yet seems to speak of things that are universal’.<sup>29</sup> He also draws attention to the Renaissance love of paradox, the constant juxtaposition of images of pleasure and pain, sweetness and bitterness, intense melancholy and ecstatic rapture, which seem deliberately intended to provoke a sense of a ‘third’, deeper condition which transcends their apparent opposition and induces a sense of inner cohesion.<sup>30</sup>

In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, all strands of operative, ‘philosophical’ magic were in some way or other inspired by the natural and astral magic of Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) in Florence, by way of his influential treatise, *De vita coelitus comparanda* (‘On harmonising your life with the heavens’), the third part of his *Three Books on Life* of 1489.<sup>31</sup> Ficino in turn was influenced by his reading of Hermetic, neoplatonic and Arabic texts on the principles underlying theurgic ritual, astrology, iatromathematics, and talismanic magic.<sup>32</sup> All this he sought to ally to a Christian metaphysics in order to reform both philosophy and religion through a cross-fertilisation of ‘faith and reason’.<sup>33</sup> Here again we find the desire to reconcile opposing ways of knowing, which was ultimately directed towards re-acquainting the fallen soul of man with his innate immortality.<sup>34</sup> Ficino recognised that Platonic philosophy was an initiatory path, not least because of its recognition that the soul progresses to its salvation via the visible beauty of this world.<sup>35</sup>

Renaissance humanism was characterised by a nurturing of both objective study and alchemical work on the self,<sup>36</sup> and Ficino’s quest was also intensely personal, as he struggled to overcome the heaviness of a melancholy temperament. In the language of astrology, he found the key to a metaphorical cosmology which became the basis of his astral magic, and which brought an entirely new humanistic understanding to the traditional practice of

---

<sup>27</sup> Pico della Mirandola, ‘Oration on the Dignity of Man’.

<sup>28</sup> On Foucault and the ‘magical episteme’ see Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 53-56.

<sup>29</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 77.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>31</sup> See Kaske and Clark. The role of music in Ficino’s natural magic has been explored by Ammann, ‘Music and melancholy’, 571-588; Couliano, *Eros and Magic*; Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 101-144; Voss, ‘Orpheus Redivivus’, ‘Father Time and Orpheus’, Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*; Warden, ‘Orpheus and Ficino’, Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 62-83.

<sup>32</sup> His chief sources being Plotinus, Iamblichus, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Proclus, Al-Kindi, Abu Mashar, Avicenna and the Picatrix; full details of works cited by Ficino in *De vita* are in Kaske and Clark, 461-467.

<sup>33</sup> See Ficino, Prologue to *De Christiana religione*, where he urges all philosophers to embrace religion and all priests to study philosophy (quoted in Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 289).

<sup>34</sup> Hence the title of Ficino’s major original work, the *Platonic Theology, on the Immortality of Souls* of 1482; see Hankins and Allen, *Marsilio Ficino: Platonic Theology*.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Plato, *Timaeus*, 47a-e; *Republic* X, 514a-520a; *Phaedrus* 246a-154e.

<sup>36</sup> Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism*, 45.

prognostication by horoscopes.<sup>37</sup> Following Plotinus, he re-envisioned the cosmos as an inner landscape in which the planetary powers became active powers of the soul, disposed by human free will and always in service to divine principles. In his *De vita*, Ficino advocates the use of the imagination as a tool for entering into the Plotinian ‘play of forces’ in the cosmos in order to align the soul with the harmonious order of the world soul, giving rise to the importance of imitating the ‘music of the spheres’, so widespread in musical discourse of the period.

Ficino, however, was not attracted by a purely contemplative path. At the time of writing *De vita* he had recently completed his epitome of Iamblichus’ treatise on theurgy and divination, *De mysteriis*, and he tells the reader that at a young age he translated, and sang to his ‘Orphic lyre’ the Hymns of Orpheus to the deities and *daimones* of the pagan cosmos.<sup>38</sup> Musical magic was central to his programme of psychic assimilation to the highest divine, or intellectual properties, as we see embodied in the commemorative bust in Florence Cathedral where Ficino is depicted holding his volume of Plato as a lyre (see fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Bust of Ficino by Andrea di Piero Ferrucci, 1522.

Ficino regards music, as the province of Apollo or the Sun, as holding central place in the ‘seven steps to celestial things’, correspondences between the seven planets, the natural world and the human psyche.<sup>39</sup> The performer of astral music should compose or improvise music whose ‘tones’ (*tonis*) embodied the qualities of astrological configurations in some way: ‘tones first chosen by the rule of the stars and then combined according to the congruity of these starts with each other make a sort of common form, and in it a celestial power arises’.<sup>40</sup> Ficino admits that this is not an easy task, but that it can be achieved through a combination

<sup>37</sup> Ficino clearly distinguished between deterministic astrologers who translated heavenly movements into a fixed fate, and Platonic astrologers for whom a symbolic cosmos pointed the way to self-knowledge. A selection of his relevant writings on astrology can be found in Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*.

<sup>38</sup> On Ficino and the Orphic Hymns, see Allen, ‘Summoning Plotinus’; Voss, ‘Orpheus Redivivus’; Walker, ‘Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists’; West, *The Orphic Poems*. On the significance of Orpheus in the Platonic tradition, see Uždavinys, *Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism*.

<sup>39</sup> Ficino, *De vita*, ch. XXI.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

of ‘diligence’ and ‘divine inspiration’ (*diligentia et divina sorte*), provided that the performer cultivates a strong solar disposition, elects a suitable astrological time, and focusses their imagination fully on the work.<sup>41</sup> As for the ‘magical’ property of the song itself, this arises through the natural power of words to imitate both the passions of the soul, and the qualities of the celestial bodies, arousing the human *spiritus* (the mediator between soul and body) upwards and attracting the heavenly influence downwards. Song is airy, like a living spirit, says Ficino, and when it corresponds to various constellations through the disposition of the imagination of the performer, it conveys the heavenly influence into the singer and from him into the listener.<sup>42</sup>

Here we find the two vital ingredients for efficacious ‘music therapy’ which would deeply inform musical reformers of the following century: that of the ‘divine inspiration’ or poetic *furor* of the performer, and the power of words and music to move the passions and thus produce ethical effects. But Ficino warns that no heavenly gifts will be forthcoming if the timing is not right, nor if the emotions and will are not focussed on the task, factors that he returns to time and again. It is only through the thorough alignment of human *diligentia* with a universal order that a new level of insight may be spontaneously revealed, forging a channel between human intention, the cosmos (and perhaps even further) via a musical and verbal image. Such an image is effective because it combines both emotional affect and intellectual meaning, a conjunction which took root in the Renaissance imagination as an artistic ideal.

In the *De vita*, Ficino, as a Christian, is careful not to suggest that this kind of deliberate appeal reaches higher than the ‘natural’ life-forces inherent in the cosmos (which he sometimes calls *daimons*) for fear of transgressing theological orthodoxy. Indeed, *magia naturalis* has been defined as ‘the knowledge and use of occult powers and properties that are considered ‘natural’ because they are objectively present in nature’.<sup>43</sup> But as a Platonist, he would know that such a distinction between natural and ‘supernatural’ is impossible to draw.<sup>44</sup> According to Iamblichus, there is nothing to stop the power of sound resonating sympathetically with the gods themselves:

Sounds and melodies are consecrated to each of the Gods in a proper way and a natural alliance has been suitably allotted to these [planetary] gods according to the particular orders and powers of each, the motions of the universe itself, and the harmonious whirring sounds emitted by their motions. Then, by means of such melodies adapted to the gods, their divinity becomes present (for there is nothing at all to stop it). So, whatever happens to possess a likeness to the gods directly participates in them; a perfect possession immediately takes place and the [experience of] being filled with the essence and power of a Higher Being.<sup>45</sup>

This is the crux of the dilemma for the Renaissance Christian magus, which also underlies all expressions of esoteric practice in the sixteenth century and beyond; for if symbolic forms possess the power to align the human soul with the gods, then it directly participates in them, and by so doing, becomes one with them. The theurgic intention is not to invoke deities into our world, but rather to raise the human soul to their level, utilising an unbroken chain of divine influence which embraces the whole of creation from the diversity of material forms to

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Faivre, *Access*, 66.

<sup>44</sup> In his *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, VI.4, Ficino conflates the two traditions (following Dionysius the Areopagite) by suggesting that good daemons, Platonic gods and the ‘souls of the spheres and the stars’ are in fact angels. See Jayne, 1985, 111.

<sup>45</sup> Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* III.9, quoted in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 175.

the One source of all creation. However, the Church claimed such rituals of unification as its own, legitimate only within its own ritual contexts, and rejected the use of material symbols such as talismans, whose influence might extend beyond their ‘natural’ properties and attract evil demons.<sup>46</sup> Despite taking great care not to overstep the mark, Ficino found himself obliged to defend his ‘natural magic’ against attack by ecclesiastical authorities.<sup>47</sup> The question remains however whether in practice, if a prayer or invocation achieved the desired effect, who could say whether this was through the agency of a cosmic daimon, god, Angelic spirit or God Himself?<sup>48</sup>

Ficino’s magic was carried forwards into the musical life of the sixteenth century particularly via the influential compendium of Renaissance magic, Cornelius Agrippa’s *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* of 1533.<sup>49</sup> Here *magia* is presented ‘as the sublime synthesis of religion and natural philosophy’<sup>50</sup> and divided into three categories: natural, celestial, and ceremonial, reflecting the operations of the three worlds of nature, the heavens, and divinity. In this Agrippa went further than Ficino in establishing that there is a form of magic that works on the highest level of the soul through cabala and theology, whereby the magician is also a ‘worker of miracles’.<sup>51</sup> Tomlinson has drawn attention to Agrippa’s insistence on the power of words as symbols, efficacious in magical operations because they embody the essence of their referent.<sup>52</sup> He also shows how Agrippa follows Ficino (who in turn follows Plotinus) in his understanding of the heavens as visible images of divine ideas which perform an intermediary role in the assimilation of musical sound to the higher principles which they reflect.<sup>53</sup> Thus a knowledge of astrology, of the movements, patterns, and ‘figures’ of stars and planets enables the magician to elect suitable times to perform music consonant with them and thus ‘tune in’ to capture their benefits: ‘no songs, sounds, and instrumental music are stronger in moving the emotions of man and inducing magical impressions than those composed in number, measure, and proportion as likenesses of the heavens’ says Agrippa.<sup>54</sup>

### Music as magic

What kind of musical language might be used for such purposes? Ficino had drawn attention to the different kinds of music associated with each planetary spirit in *De vita*, and it has been proposed that he could well be referring to the musical innovation of his contemporary, the Bolognese music theorist Bartolomé Ramos de Pareja.<sup>55</sup> Ramos, in his desire to recreate a kind of music which would embody the ancient Greek ideals of musical ethos, proposed correspondences between the nine Muses, the eight modes of medieval church music (to which he gave Greek names), the notes of the two-octave Greek scale, the seven planets and firmament, the ethical effects of the modes, and the humours of the human being (the earth having a Muse, but no mode). His *Musica practica* of 1484 established a system in which cosmos, music and moral character could interlink.<sup>56</sup> For the first time since antiquity, the ‘music of the spheres’

---

<sup>46</sup> On the question of the legitimacy of talismans, see Copenhaver, ‘Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic’.

<sup>47</sup> See Ficino, ‘An Apologia Dealing with Medicine, Astrology, the Life of the World, and the Magi Who Greeted the Christ Child at His Birth’, in Kaske and Clark, 395-401.

<sup>48</sup> See Hanegraaff, ‘Sympathy or the Devil’; Voss, ‘God or the Daemon?’

<sup>49</sup> See Tyson, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*.

<sup>50</sup> Hanegraaff, *Sympathy or the Devil*, 9.

<sup>51</sup> Agrippa III. 3, in Tyson, 448-9.

<sup>52</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 62; see Agrippa, II.2; Ficino, *Opera* vol. 1, 310.

<sup>53</sup> Ficino, *De vita*, ch.I.

<sup>54</sup> Agrippa, II.26; see Ficino, *De vita* ch.XXI; Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 63.

<sup>55</sup> Ficino, *De vita*, ch.21. See also Voss, ‘The Music of the Spheres’.

<sup>56</sup> B. Ramos de Pareja, *Musica Practica*.

was presented symbolically, and not as a result of planetary movements or calculated distances.<sup>57</sup> The modes, consisting of whole scalic patterns, were seen as the instruments of spiritual intelligences — the Muses — and so could operate as the ‘divine baits’ sown into the fabric of the world, audible signatures of the Platonic Ideas.<sup>58</sup> Ramos postulated an unprecedented scheme of correspondence between bodily humours, psychological temperaments, modes and planetary symbolism, offering his readers ‘nothing less than a new discursive context for the relations of music, medicine (including psychology), and astrology’.<sup>59</sup>

It is doubtful whether Ficino could have developed his therapeutic musical practice without such a scheme, which is implicitly referred to in *De vita*.<sup>60</sup> Ramos’ correspondences were transmitted into the musical currents of the following century through the synthesising work of the theorist Franchinus Gaffurius (1451–1522), whose famous frontispiece to his *Practica musicae* of 1496, repeated in his *Harmonia musicorum instrumentorum opus* of 1518, depicts a talismanic cosmos involving the interplay of planets and Muses with the eight church modes and their finals, given ancient Greek names but now reduced to one octave (see fig. 2).<sup>61</sup> Set above the proceedings we find the god Apollo, the power of whose mind arouses the Muses’ activity and sets the whole harmony in motion, symbolised by the ouroboros-like body of the three-headed Cerberus connecting heaven and earth like the string of a monochord. Gaffurius even composed a two-part song, ‘Gafuri tandem, modulis levata’, extolling the correspondences between planets and modes. The presence of the Muses in Ramos’ and Gaffurius’ schemes suggests the spiritually animated cosmos of Ficinian magic and the power of a poetic, mythic, emblematic and symbolic language to evoke these correspondences, which was an entirely new departure for music theory under the influence of the classical revival. The Muses were the instigators of the poetic *furor*, which as we will see became a primary motivation for musico-spiritual therapeutics of this period.

---

<sup>57</sup> For a comprehensive survey of ‘the music of the spheres’ and its various practical schemes and applications, see Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth*; James, *The Music of the Spheres*.

<sup>58</sup> Ficino, *De vita*, ch. I.

<sup>59</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 83–84.

<sup>60</sup> Ficino, *De vita*, ch. XXI.

<sup>61</sup> On the symbolic associations of the frontispiece, see Haar, ‘The Frontispiece of Gaffurius’s *Practica musicae* (1496)’. For Gaffurius’ accompanying text, see Tomlinson, *Strunk’s Source Readings*, 112–116.

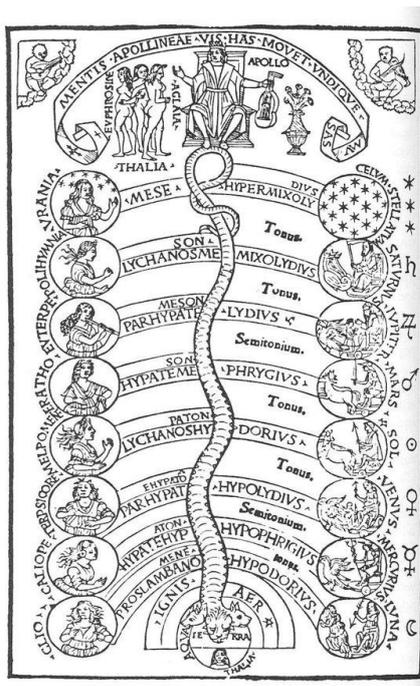


Fig 2: Frontispiece to F. Gaffurius, *Practica musicae*

Although Platonic-Pythagorean-Hermetic ideas deeply underlie many forms of music making in the sixteenth century, there is a lack of surviving examples of improvisatory musical invocations in specifically ritual contexts in the manner of Ficino. Rather, ideas about the transformatory power of music and words were expressed outside ‘magical’ contexts, becoming a hidden subtext to secular genres such as the lute-song, the *air de cour*, the chanson and madrigal. All musicians would be familiar with the Boethian division of music into *mundana*, *humana* and *instrumentalis*, whereby earthly music making, in imitating the harmonious order of creation, also regulated and tempered the human soul, even if they were not *au fait* with arcane ritual means of doing so.<sup>62</sup> Baldassare Castiglione, in his instruction manual for aspiring noblemen, *Il Cortegiano*, discusses the imitation of cosmic harmony for ethical and moral improvement, showing that these ideas were certainly promoted in aristocratic circles: ‘the wisest of philosophers held the opinion that the universe was made up of music, that the heavens make harmony as they move, and that as our own souls are formed on the same principle they are awakened and have their faculties, as it were, brought to life through music’.<sup>63</sup> Later in the century, some of the new French and Italian Academies, modelling themselves on Ficino’s original Platonic Academy, organised large-scale musical and theatrical events which aimed to combine extravagant visual and aural effects in service to the Platonic education of their audience.<sup>64</sup>

### Music and *ecstasis*

The poetic furor comes from the Muses ... and is a ravishment of the docile and insuperable soul in which it is awakened, moved, and incited by songs and other poems for the instruction of man. By ravishment of the soul I mean that the soul is occupied and

<sup>62</sup> Boethius, *De institutione musica* I.i, translated in Godwin, *Music, Mysticism and Magic*, 45–46.

<sup>63</sup> Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, 94–95.

<sup>64</sup> See Yates, *The Occult Philosophy*, 57–70, 157–171).

entirely directed toward and intent on the holy and sacred Muses, who have found it to be docile and ready to receive the form they impress on it.<sup>65</sup>

Thus speaks Pontus de Tyard (1521-1605), French philosopher and poet and member of the *Pléiade*, a circle of seven poets who strove to reform French literature in the light of Platonic ideals.<sup>66</sup> The musical reforms of the French and Italian academies of the sixteenth centuries have been well-documented by Frances Yates.<sup>67</sup> She shows how Ficino's and Pico della Mirandola's syncretic neoplatonism inspired both the *Pléiade*, led by Pierre de Ronsard, and Baïf's *Académie de Poésie et de Musique*, in their devotion to reviving the healing power of the ancients through the power of song. In Yates' words, 'These melodies in the antique manner [were] believed to have the power of refining and purifying the minds of the auditors, and, through this purification, of initiating them into higher states of knowledge'.<sup>68</sup>

How could such an initiation take place? De Tyard, in his *Solitaire Premier ou Discours des Muses et de la Fureur poétique* (1552) often paraphrases Ficino, who was partially responsible for the intense and passionate revival of 'soul-possession' through musical-poetic performance in European cultured circles of the sixteenth century.<sup>69</sup> The idea of the four frenzies, or enthusiasms, as states of altered consciousness in which the soul could receive revelation from the divine mind was a Platonic notion that gave immense authority to the affective force which lifted the poet/musician, priest, prophet and lover away from their attentions to this world by an irresistible 'other'.<sup>70</sup> Through the arts of poetry and music-making, hieratic rituals, divination and erotic love, it was thought possible to enter a state of rapture where the soul was seized by the Muses, Dionysus, Apollo, or Aphrodite.<sup>71</sup>

Ficino changes Plato's ordering of the frenzies to establish the union of poetry and music as the first of the enthusiasms: 'the soul receives the sweetest harmonies and numbers through the ears, and by these echoes is reminded and aroused to the divine music which may be heard by the more subtle and penetrating sense of mind'.<sup>72</sup> In his Commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*, Ficino suggests that in fact all the frenzies may rightly be called 'poetic' as they find expression through art: the manifestation of the *furor poeticus* in songs and poetry 'was an eruption of the divine in earthly life in which all the other *furores* revealed themselves'.<sup>73</sup> Elsewhere, Ficino gathers the *furores* together as a whole, but divided into four stages: 'The first *furor* tempers awkwardnesses and dissonance; the second makes one whole out of the tempered parts; the third makes one whole above the parts; and the fourth leads this whole to that one above essence and above all things'.<sup>74</sup> The poetic *furor* is thus established as the most potent and primary means of harmonising the soul, preparing it for its final impulse towards union with beauty. One of the reasons for the reverence of Orpheus as a role-model for the Renaissance musician was Ficino's attribution of all four frenzies to him, as poet, priest, prophet, and lover.<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Pontus de Tyard, *First Solitaire or Prose on the Muses and Poetic Furor*, ch.4, quoted in Tomlinson, *Source Readings*, 119.

<sup>66</sup> For a detailed study of Tyard, see Yates, *The French Academies*, ch.IV.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>69</sup> For a study of the Renaissance revival of the *furores* see Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 189-228; Tomlinson draws parallels with the experience of shamanic possession and soul-loss (148-157), and with the phenomenon of Tarantism, prevalent in this period (145-188). On Ficino and the Platonic frenzies, see Hanegraaff, 'The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino'.

<sup>70</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a-249dd; *Ion* 534a-d; *Symposium* 210e-211b. Plato gives the order of the frenzies as prophetic, telestic (hieratic), poetic and amatory.

<sup>71</sup> Ficino, *De amore*, VII.14, Jayne, 170.

<sup>72</sup> Ficino, *De divino furore*, 45.

<sup>73</sup> See Allen, *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer*, 84-85; Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 176.

<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.*, 174; Hanegraaff, *The Platonic Frenzies*, 561-2.

<sup>75</sup> Ficino, *De amore*, VII.14, Jayne, 171.

In each case, to attain the divine gift, Ficino tells us that both discipline and human effort are needed (the arrangement of the ritual, the learning of the craft, the perfection of technique) before the soul can surrender to another level of consciousness.<sup>76</sup> This takes us back to Iamblichus, for whom the *ecstasis* attained through divinatory practice was central to the path of operative Platonism. In fact, I would suggest that our sixteenth century musical Platonists owe far more to Iamblichus, via Ficino, in their desire to find ritual/performance contexts in which to achieve such a ‘soul rapture’ than to more contemplative neoplatonists such as Plotinus.<sup>77</sup> The final *furor*, that of the lover, then accomplishes the ultimate gnostic union, as de Tyard eloquently describes, paraphrasing Ficino:

Whoever is moved by the prophetic or divinatory *furor* is stolen away to interior contemplation and joins his soul and all his spirits together, rising high above all human apprehension and natural reason to draw from the most intimate, profound, and hidden secrets of divinity the prediction of things which must come to pass. Finally, when all that is in the essence and in the nature of soul is made one, it must (in order to return to its source) suddenly withdraw itself into the sovereign one, above all essences. This the great and celestial Venus accomplishes by love ...<sup>78</sup>

Eva Kushner has shown how Platonism lies at the very root of the thought of Pontus de Tyard,<sup>79</sup> and Plato has a good deal to say about Eros, for he was considered to be a ‘mighty daimon’, the force of attraction which enabled the soul to see its earthly loves as reflections of a greater, divine love and so begin its journey home.<sup>80</sup> He was also the archetypal magician, because ‘the whole power of magic consists in love. The work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature.’<sup>81</sup> It is significant that Ficino’s Commentary on Plato’s *Symposium* (*De amore*) was also published in the vernacular, and achieved immense popularity in Europe during the following two hundred years, establishing ‘Platonic love’ as a spiritual path amongst the educated elite and influencing thirty-three love treatises in the sixteenth century Italy alone.<sup>82</sup>

It is not surprising that this period has bequeathed us some of the most exquisite examples of erotic charge held in carefully crafted musical form, restraining, tempering and perhaps transmuting personal emotion into a deeper sense of existential longing. We can point to the perfection of this art in the vocal music of Claudio Monteverdi, where the marriage of words and music achieves an affective intensity that transcends and unites all categorisations of sacred and profane love.

### Magical rhetoric

In contrast to the style of Renaissance polyphony epitomised in the works of Josquin, Palestrina or Victoria, where harmonic movement governs the textual setting,<sup>83</sup> the classical reformers of music, followed Ficino’s Platonic precept that words reach higher than music because they carried meaning from the Divine Mind, and therefore they insisted that the music must follow the text to enhance its impact on the listener. Recall that in the magical worldview,

---

<sup>76</sup> Ficino, *De vita*, ch. 21.

<sup>77</sup> On the function of *ecstasis* in Iamblichean theurgy, see Shaw, ‘Containing Ecstasy’.

<sup>78</sup> Tyard, *First Solitaire* ch.3, in Tomlinson, *Source Readings*, 119.

<sup>79</sup> Kushner, ‘The Role of Platonic Symbols’.

<sup>80</sup> See Diotima’s speech in Plato’s *Symposium*, 201c-212b.

<sup>81</sup> Ficino, *De amore*, VI.10, Jayne, 167.

<sup>82</sup> On the *De amore*’s legacy in Renaissance Europe, see Jayne, 19–23. On Ficino’s philosophy of eros see Hanegraaff, ‘Under the Mantle of Love’.

<sup>83</sup> On the humanist reaction to polyphony, see Palisca, *Music and Ideas*, esp. ch. 6.

the ontological status of words is identical to the ‘things’ they denote; words ‘were at once the signs of similitudes and themselves further similitudes, as such they formed a part of the fabric of the world, pre-existing man’s attempt to interpret the world rather than arising in the process of the attempt.’<sup>84</sup> Thus names of things were powerful, they articulated the inherent magical correspondences of the world. This is why ‘devotional listening’ had the power to infuse the listener with the emotions of the song, and arouse the *furor amatorius* through music, which ravished and transported the soul and thus became a central means of its return to God. According to Yates, ‘The *musique mesurée* of Baïf’s academy was perhaps the most thoroughgoing attempt ever made to translate into practice the precepts of musical humanism, and so to produce in modern times songs which should be ‘spells for souls’.<sup>85</sup> But, as she points out, the perfect union of poetry and music was only achieved by poets such as Baïf and Ronsard after a long intellectual training, as it was in effect ‘a state of mind’ in which a marriage could be achieved between intellect and imagination.<sup>86</sup>

Such a marriage was envisioned mythologically, astrologically, and alchemically in the Renaissance as the union of Mercury and Venus, which in one version of the myth, resulted in the birth of the divine child Eros.<sup>87</sup> In both Botticelli’s ‘Primavera’ (c.1482) and Correggio’s ‘Venus and Mercury educating Cupid’ (1530–34), for example, we see the collaboration of beauty and intellect required for initiation through love; indeed we can interpret the desire of Venus for Mercury as the mutual interdependence of the idea of beauty and the ingenuity of human beings required to give it sensible form in the world. The product of their union — the erotic impulse — then becomes the very means by which the image may be viewed or heard ‘symbolically’, by referring its particular qualities back to a universal meaning; Eros is often depicted as blindfolded, as this ecstatic process is superior to intellect.<sup>88</sup> Neoplatonists refer to this as a spiritual circuit of love, for ‘what descends to the earth as the breath of passion returns to heaven in the spirit of contemplation.’<sup>89</sup>

The evocation of the *furors* in music of this period then can be seen as the expression of a need to loosen the shackles of the analytical mind and yet also to create perfect artistic forms in which to ‘present’ the revelatory insights back to the world for its edification. Tyard illustrates this in his description of a lute recital by the virtuoso Francesco da Milano, ‘Il Divino’, who seemed to put his audience in a trance, so that ‘they remained deprived of all senses save that of hearing, as if the spirit, having abandoned all the seats of the senses, had retired to the ears,’ after which he changed his style of playing and restored their spirits to their bodies, leaving them feeling as though they had been ‘elevated by an ecstatic transport of some divine frenzy.’<sup>90</sup>

In her study of the French alchemist and occult philosopher Jacques Gohory (1520-1576), Jeanice Brooks has shown how music and romance both ‘participate in therapeutic goals’ as

<sup>84</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 194.

<sup>85</sup> Yates, *The French Academies*, 42. See also Walker, ‘The aims of Baïf’s *Académie de Poésie et de Musique*’.

<sup>86</sup> Yates, *The French Academies*, 94. In practice, Baïf’s experiments were not taken up by mainstream musicians, unlike the experimental music of the Florentine Camerata.

<sup>87</sup> See Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol.1, 58, for reference to this version of the myth.

<sup>88</sup> For example, see Titian (1488-1576) ‘The Blinding of Amor’, (Galleria Borghese, Rome). On the relationship of Venus and Eros see Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, ch.4. On the cosmological aspect of Botticelli’s *Primavera*, see Dee, ‘Eclipsed: An Overshadowed Goddess’.

<sup>89</sup> See Wind, 124-5.

<sup>90</sup> From Tyard, ‘*Solitaire second*’ quoted in Smith, *The Performance of Sixteenth Century Music*, 3; see also Brooks, ‘Music as Erotic Magic’, 1216-1217.

he infuses magical episodes into the popular *Amadis de Gaule* novels.<sup>91</sup> In Book 11, Gohory inserts musical scenes which are designed to elaborate neoplatonic and alchemical principles through the incitement of the *furor amatorius*.<sup>92</sup> Gohory championed the healing techniques of both Ficino and Paracelsus (1493–1541), and was intimately connected with the poetic circle around the *Pléiade*. As well as writing and commenting on many alchemical works, he was a close friend of the music publisher Adrian Le Roy and wrote prefaces for several of Lasso's works, as well as establishing his own 'academy' near Baïf's.<sup>93</sup> Gohory knew many of the distinguished physicians of his day, prepared medicines and talismans, and performed alchemical experiments. It was rare for occult philosophers of the time to specify performance contexts for their musical ideas, but in Gohory's novelistic adaptations we find instructions for musical performances 'embedded in a rich web of astrological and alchemical symbol that harnesses [the literary romance tradition] to his broader intellectual program'.<sup>94</sup> This included a good deal of Ficinian natural magic, such as the construction of elaborate palaces as architectural talismans, receptacles for magical correspondences. He also evoked Ficino's 'music-spirit' theory, which linked the affective power of song to astral principles. Brooks concludes that for Gohory, 'musical performances inflame desire, but music also potentially transforms desire's most damaging effects by channelling it towards spiritual goals' and this places him within the long tradition of Platonic educators for whom the legitimate role of the arts is to cultivate consciousness of universal ideas through the civilising of human passions.<sup>95</sup> It is interesting to note that parallel to these more esoteric expressions of piety, the humanist endeavour to intensify the meaning of the text through harmony and rhythm also had an influence upon counter-reformation debates about the appropriate style of Church music, as articulated by the Council of Trent in 1562: 'The whole plan of singing in musical modes should be constituted not to give empty pleasure to the ear, but in such a way that the words may be clearly understood by all, and thus the hearts of listeners be drawn to the desire of heavenly harmonies, in the contemplation of the joys of the blessed.'<sup>96</sup>

In major court spectacles produced through the collaboration of Academies with composers, designers, artists and choreographers, humanist musical reformers took the opportunity to create large-scale evocations of the Platonic universal order through mythic and allegorical scenes, with the aim of transporting the viewer. Often staged as part of marriage celebrations, the earthly event would be celebrated as a union of heaven and earth with implicit moral and spiritual meanings. In the *Ballet Comique de la Reine* of 1581, for example, the marriage of the Duc de Joyeuse and Marguerite de Valois provided the occasion for a lavish spectacle depicting the harmony and order of the soul and the taming of the beasts of passion.<sup>97</sup> The 'syllabic homophony' of the *musique mesurée* – a marriage of harmony and antique speech rhythms – was perfected by Claude Le Jeune, who was said to have produced dramatic effects in the listeners due to his skilful use of the modes.<sup>98</sup> However, according to Tyard, it was *monodic* singing in the appropriate mode that '[had the] power to ravish you away with it',<sup>99</sup> and it was monody which swiftly surpassed the

<sup>91</sup> Brooks, 1207-1256. The *Amadis de Gaule* novels were a series of two dozen books, based on Spanish and Italian models, published between 1540 and 1615; according to Brooks they consisted of 'racy tales of sex, magic, and adventure' (1207).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 1224.

<sup>93</sup> For more details of Gohory's life and work see Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 96-106.

<sup>94</sup> Brooks, 1210.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 1210, 1230-1, 1238, 1232.

<sup>96</sup> See Weiss and Taruskin, *Music in the Western World*, 135-137.

<sup>97</sup> See Yates, *The French Academies*, ch. 11.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>99</sup> Pontus de Tyard, *Solitaire second*, 214.

measured harmonies as a vehicle for a new emotionalism in music, as the century came to an end.

In Italy, classical ideals of linguistic purity were promoted by the reform movement which began around 1540 at the *Accademia degli Infiammati* in Padua and the *Accademia Fiorentina* in Florence. Although these academies were primarily interested in restoring an authentic Italian language, and not specifically concerned with music,<sup>100</sup> they gave rise to the most influential of the Platonic academies, the *camerata Fiorentina*, founded by Count Giovanni de' Bardi and active in Florence in the 1570s and 80s, whose development of the vernacular monodic recitative led indirectly to the birth of opera.<sup>101</sup> Bardi and leading members of the *camerata* played a leading role in devising the *intermedii* for the play *La Pelegrina*, staged as part of the celebrations of the wedding of Ferdinando de' Medici and Christine of Lorraine in 1589. In the opening *intermedio*, the Harmony of the Spheres is depicted through Plato's 'Myth of Er' in order to illustrate the Platonic conviction that heavenly harmony is perceived through its images in this world.<sup>102</sup> The Goddess of Harmony herself (played by the soprano Vittoria Archilei) descends from paradise with a virtuosic display of coloratura and lavish vocal embellishment, announcing her own arrival into the world of mortals in a rupture of everyday reality.<sup>103</sup> We could say that with such spectacle, designed to arouse the *meraviglia* of the audience, art is no longer in service to revealing the divine order already here, inherent in the fabric of the world; rather, it is seeking to 'recapture' it through elaborate allegorical symbolism directed to both political and spiritual ends.

Can we regard these developments as theurgic on a grand scale? Not according to Daniel Chua, who argues that 'A hundred years earlier, magic was a musical practice for a musician like Ficino; by the time of the Camerata, it could only be proposed as a *theory* for the re-enchantment of empirical reality'.<sup>104</sup> In other words, the world where musical symbol 'naturally' resonates directly with its universal archetype becomes lost in the self-conscious desire to re-create such a unity in the face of a world which is rapidly becoming 'disenchanted.' But as Chua points out, this could never be achieved through the artificial imitation of speech, for such wilful imitation 'is not a condition of the universe but a coercion of the ego' with the inevitable consequence that 'the harmony of the spheres collapses into song of the self'.<sup>105</sup> Gary Tomlinson shares this view, that with the advent of the monodic *stile rappresentativo* the bonds between music, text and cosmic order are sundered; music, then, instead of invoking the presence of a 'golden age' of universal order, can only 're-present' it with nostalgia. In my own view, the 1589 *Intermedii* and early Italian operas still manage to uphold the 'magical episteme' precisely because they preserve a sense of the symbolic, the power of mythic 'resemblance' in the face of its immanent disappearance, despite the innovative expressivity of their new musical language.<sup>106</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the musical dramas of Peri and Rinuccini, and Monteverdi and Striggio, take Orpheus as their theme, in a last attempt to give voice to the magical power of his music. But Euridice, the divine feminine so celebrated by Ficino's Orphic lyre, was not to return from

<sup>100</sup> See Nosow, 'The Debate on Song in the Accademia Fiorentina'.

<sup>101</sup> On the Florentine Camerata, see Palisca, *The Florentine Camerata*. On the new theories of monody and dramatic music, see Palisca, *Music and Ideas*, ch. 7.

<sup>102</sup> On the elaborate visual and musical effects involved in the Florentine *Intermedii*, see Fenlon, 'Preparations for a Princess'.

<sup>103</sup> *Dalle piu alte sfere*, music attributed to Vittoria's husband, Antonio Archilei.

<sup>104</sup> Chua, 'Vincenzo Galilei', 16.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>106</sup> For example, Peri's *Euridice* of 1600, and Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* of 1607. See Gerbino, *Music and the Myth of Arcadia*, esp. 356-9.

the underworld.<sup>107</sup> As opera developed during the following centuries, the delicate balance achieved at the end of the Renaissance between universal ideals and human values was upset by the onset of a brave new world, a world in which humans no longer knew themselves to be part of a divine fabric of creation. In such a world they could only long for a golden age of unity with infinite nostalgia, through the excesses of personal emotion and pathos. Perhaps then, these operas are among the last examples of a true musical theurgy.

## Bibliography

- Allen, M. J. B., *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer* (University of California Press, 1981).
- Allen, M. J. B., 'Summoning Plotinus: Ficino, Smoke and the Strangled Chickens' in *Plato's Third Eye: Studies in the Metaphysics of Marsilio Ficino*, ed. M. J. B. Allen, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), XIV, 63-88.
- Ammann, P., 'Music and melancholy: Marsilio Ficino's archetypal music therapy', *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, vol. 43, issue 4 (1998), 571-588.
- Castiglione, B., *The Book of the Courtier*, Book I, trans. G. Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967).
- Chua, D., 'Vincenzo Galilei, Modernity and the Division of Nature' in S. Clark and A. Rehding, (eds), *Music Theory and Natural Order from the Renaissance to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1-17.
- Clarke, E. C., Dillon, J. M., and Herschbell, J. P., *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).
- Copenhaver, B., 'Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De vita* of Marsilio Ficino', *Renaissance Quarterly* 37 (1984), 523-554.
- Cornelius, G., 'Field of Omens: A Study on Inductive Divination' (PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 2010).
- Couliano, I., *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 1997).
- Dee, J., 'Eclipsed: An Overshadowed Goddess' in *Journal of Renaissance Studies*, vol. 27, issue 1 (2010), 4-33.
- Faivre, A., *Access to Western Esotericism*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).
- Fenlon, I., 'Preparations for a Princess, Florence 1588-89' in *Music and Culture in Late Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 162-179.
- Ficino, M., *Opera Omnia*, 2 vols (Paris: Phénix Reprint, 2000).
- Ficino, M., *Liber de Sole*, in A. Voss, *Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books), 189-214.
- Fowden, G., *The Egyptian Hermes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- Garin, E., *Astrology in the Renaissance: the Zodiac of Life* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983).
- Gerbino, G., *Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

---

<sup>107</sup> The poet Angelo Poliziano pointed to this archetypal theme in connecting Euridice with Platonic wisdom: 'Ficino's lyre, far more blessed with good fortune than the lyre of Thracian Orpheus, has brought back from the underworld what is, if I am not mistaken, the true Eurydice, that is Platonic Wisdom with its broadest understanding'; Poliziano, *Opera*, 310, quoted in Warden, *Orpheus*, 86. On Tomlinson's hypothesis of a loss of the magical episteme in the work of Monteverdi, see Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 229-46.

- Godwin, J., *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth: from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987).
- Goodrick-Clarke, N., *The Western Esoteric Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Graves, R., *The Greek Myths*, vol.1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997).
- Godwin, J., *Music, Mysticism and Magic, A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).
- Haar, J., 'The Frontispiece of Gafori's *Practica musicae* (1496)', *Renaissance Quarterly* 27 (1974), 7–22.
- Hanegraaff, W., 'Under the Mantle of Love: The Mystical Eroticism of Marsilio Ficino and Giordano Bruno' in *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism*, eds W. J. Hanegraaff and J. J. Kripal (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 175–207.
- Hanegraaff, W., 'The Platonic Frenzies in Marsilio Ficino' in *Myths, Martyrs and Modernity*, eds J. Dijkstra, J. Kroesen and Y. Kuiper (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 553-568.
- Hanegraaff, W., 'Sympathy or the Devil: Renaissance Magic and the Ambivalence of Idols', *Esoterica* 2, 1-44 (2000) ([www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/Sympdevil.html](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/Sympdevil.html)) accessed 15/04/2014).
- Hankins, J., *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1991).
- Hankins, J. and Allen, M. J. B., (eds), *Marsilio Ficino: Platonic Theology*, 6 vols (Harvard University Press, 2001-2006).
- Heninger, S. K., *Touche of Sweet Harmony, Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino: Angelico Press, repr. 2013).
- James, J., *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science and the Natural Order of the Universe* (London: Little and Brown, 1995).
- Jayne, S., (ed.), *Plato on Love: Marsilio Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985).
- Johnston, S. I., *Ancient Greek Divination* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008).
- Kaske, C. and Clark, J. (eds), *Marsilio Ficino, Three Books on Life* (Binghamton, New York: Society of Renaissance Studies, 1989).
- Kingsley, P., 'Poimandres': The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica' in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* no.56 (1983), 1-24.
- Lewis, C. S., *The Discarded Image: an introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964).
- McGilchrist, I., *The Master and his Emissary: the Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (Yale University Press, 2009).
- Nosow, R., 'The Debate on Song in the Accademia Fiorentina', in *Early Music History* vol. 21 (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 175-221.
- Page, C., *Discarding Images: Reflections on Music and Culture in Medieval France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).
- Palisca, C. V., *Music and Ideas in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2006).
- Palisca, C., *The Florentine Camerata* (Yale University Press, 1989).
- Pauli, W., 'The Influence of Archetypal Ideas on the Scientific Theories of Kepler' in W. Huffman (ed.) *Robert Fludd: Essential Readings* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2001), 121-145.
- Pico della Mirandola, G. *Oration on the Dignity of Man, A New Translation and*

- Commentary*, eds F. Borghesi, M. Papio and M. Riva (Cambridge University Press, 2012).
- Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, ed. C. P. Jones (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2005).
- Plotinus, *The Enneads* trans. S. MacKenna (New York: Larsen, 1993).
- Poliziano, A., *Angeli Politiani opera*, 1553, ed. I. Maier, 3 vols (repr. Turin: Bottega d'Erasmus, 1970).
- Pontus de Tyard, *Solitaire second*, eds C. M. Yandell (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1980).
- Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, in *The Pythagorean Source Book and Library*, ed. D. Fideler (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987), 123-136.
- Ramos de Pareja, B., *Musica Practica* (Bologna 1482) ed. J. Wolf (Leipzig, 1901).
- Rulandus, M., *A Lexicon of Alchemy or Alchemical Dictionary* (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1984).
- Shaw, G., *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).
- Shaw, G., 'Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblichean Theurgy' in *Dionysius* vol. XXI (Dec. 2003), 53-88.
- Smith, A., *The Performance of Sixteenth Century Music* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
- St Augustine, 'The false claims of theurgy' in *City of God*, X.10, trans. H. Bettenson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984, 385-6.
- Struck, P., *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of their Texts* (Princeton University Press, 2004)
- Tomlinson, G., *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1990).
- Tomlinson, G., *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others* (Chicago University Press, 1993)
- Tomlinson, G. (ed.), *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History: vol. 3, The Renaissance* (New York and London: Norton., 1998).
- Tyson, D. (ed.), *Three Books of Occult Philosophy written by Henry Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Llewellyn Publications, 1997).
- Uzdavynys, A., 'Metaphysical symbols and their function in theurgy', *Eye of the Heart Journal* (Bendigo, Vic.: La Trobe University), vol. 2 (2008), 37-59.
- Uzdavynys, A., *Philosophy and Theurgy in Late Antiquity* (San Rafael: Sophia Perennis, 2010).
- Uzdavynys, A., *Orpheus and the Roots of Platonism* (London: The Matheson Trust, 2011).
- Vickers, B., 'On the Function of Analogy in the Occult' in *Hermeticism and the Renaissance* eds. I. Merkel & A. G. Debus, (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1988).
- Vergo, P., *That Divine Order: Music and the Visual Arts from Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Phaidon Press, 2005).
- Versluis, A., (ed.), *Restoring Paradise: Western Esotericism, Literature, Art, and Consciousness* (New York: New York Press, 2004).
- Voss, A., 'The Music of the Spheres: Ficino and Renaissance *Harmonia*', *Culture and Cosmos*, vol. 2, no. 2 (1998), 16-38.
- Voss, A., 'Orpheus Redivivus: The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino' in *Marsilio Ficino: His Theology, His Philosophy, His Legacy* eds M. J. B. Allen and V. Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 227-241.
- Voss, A., *Marsilio Ficino, writings on astrology* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2006).

- Voss, A., 'Father Time and Orpheus' in *The Imaginal Cosmos: Astrology, Divination and the Sacred* eds. A. Voss and J. Hinson Lall (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007).
- Voss, A., 'God or the Daemon? Platonic Astrology in a Christian Cosmos', *Temenos Review* 14 (2011), 96-114.
- Walker, D. P., 'Orpheus the Theologian and Renaissance Platonists', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 16 (1963), 100-120.
- Walker, D. P., *The Ancient Theology* (London: Duckworth, 1972).
- Walker, D. P., *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing, repr. 2000).
- Warden, J., *Orpheus, A Metamorphosis of a Myth*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).
- Weiss, P. and Taruskin, R. (eds), *Music in the Western World, A History in Documents*, (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Schirmer, 2007).
- West, M. L., *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford University Press, 1983).
- Wind, E., *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, 1980).
- Yates, F., *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 1946).
- Yates, F., *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, repr. 2002).

## CASE STUDY

Orlando di Lasso, *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*

From a magical perspective, the Renaissance polyphonic setting of a sacred text could be seen as a perfect vehicle for aligning human and divine worlds through its ritual performance context, the meaning of its words, and the reflection of universal harmony in its tonal structure. An excellent example of this is Orlando di Lasso's motet cycle *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*, where image, prophetic verse and chromatic inflections combine to produce an effect that is simultaneously sensual and spiritual.<sup>108</sup> Indeed Gohory, an admirer of Lasso, likened the composer to a *magus* of the highest order, able to ravish spirits through extraordinary musical effects in the manner of Orpheus himself.<sup>109</sup> In the Preface to a lute tutor by Adrian Le Roy, Gohory praises Lasso as

esteemed the most excellent musitian of his time ... a thing given from above to fewe other, in the which he hath attayned not only the perfection of melodie but also a certaine grace of sound beyond all other, such as Appelles did accompt of Venus portrature ... I do protest unto you, that if the songes of other Musitians do delight me, those of Orland do ravish me.<sup>110</sup>

The *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* consists of one three-line prologue and twelve six-line motets, set in dactylic hexameter verse (the form in which the sibyls were said to have uttered their oracles), and was most probably a gift for Lasso's employer at the time, Albrecht V of Bavaria. We do not know the exact date of composition (although the manuscript illustrations of Lasso at the age of 28 suggest 1558/1560) but the work was not printed until 1600, after Lasso's death. As Jonathan Harvey has pointed out, the larger historical context for this work fixes it in

---

<sup>108</sup> The *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* were probably composed between 1555 and 1560, but not published until 1600, after Lasso's death in 1594. For a modern edition of the work, see *Orlando di Lasso, Complete Works*, vol. 21.

<sup>109</sup> See Brooks, 1218.

<sup>110</sup> See Gohory, Preface to Adrian Le Roy, *Instruction du Luth*, 1557, quoted in Haar, 'Orlando di Lasso', 138. See also Brooks, 1218.

‘a web of cultural traditions far wider than Lasso’s personal biography’,<sup>111</sup> and these traditions converge on the nature and function of prophecy. It is this aspect, rather than that of musicological analysis, that I wish to highlight here, by placing the composition within the context of a fusion of ancient pagan wisdom and Counter-Reformation Catholic piety.<sup>112</sup> The intention is to show how the symbolic features of the verse settings point the listener or performer beyond explicit (or implicit) contextualisations through engaging an imaginative response that transcends such dualisms. It is this which allows us to consider Lasso’s cycle as theurgic.

The Sibyls were oracular prophetesses of the Greek and Roman worlds, each of whom was identified with a particular location.<sup>113</sup> By Lasso’s day they were already well known as spokeswomen for the pagan ancient theology via Lactantius’ *Divine Institutions*, and in the early sixteenth century a scholarly debate was caused by the discovery of a manuscript dating from the sixth century containing a collection of their supposed utterances.<sup>114</sup> Prominent figures in Renaissance iconography, they line the marble floor of the great Cathedral of Siena, adorn both the Borgia Apartments and the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, and are the subject of a Raphael fresco in Santa Maria della Pace in Rome, where they are depicted as receiving their wisdom from angelic beings.<sup>115</sup>

The Sibylline verses set by Lasso appear to date from the mid-sixteenth century, additions to an edition of the newly discovered pseudo-*Oracula sibyllina*, and all foretell Christ’s birth and mission.<sup>116</sup> We cannot doubt that Lasso’s musical treatment of these texts ‘aims to reflect their nature as prophecy, and to communicate the idea of spontaneous, inspired utterance’.<sup>117</sup> Marjorie Roth has offered a detailed analysis of the provenance, texts, performance practice and above all esoteric significance of Lasso’s enigmatic cycle, concluding that it embodies the alchemical aim of transmutation of the soul from the ‘lead’ of its fallen state to the ‘gold’ of its redemption.<sup>118</sup> How is this achieved? Its most striking feature is Lasso’s use of intense chromatic effects, which go far beyond the conventionality of ‘word-painting’, as they are not

---

<sup>111</sup> See Harvey, ‘A Beginner’s Guide to Prophecy’, 11.

<sup>112</sup> For examples of tonal analyses of this work, see Berger, ‘Tonality and Atonality’; Burnett and Nitzberg, *Composition, Chromaticism and the Developmental Process*, 69-77; Harvey, 13-14.

<sup>113</sup> The classic ten Sibyls specified by Lactantius (*Divine Institutions*, I.6, 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE) are the Persian, Libyan, Delphic, Cimmerian, Erythraean, Samian, Cumaean, Hellespontine, Phrygian, and Tiburtine. Lasso includes two more, the Europaean and Agrippan.

<sup>114</sup> On Lactantius, Hermes Trismegistus and the Sibyls, see Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 6-9. The ancient Hebrew and Christian pseudo-*Oracula sibyllina*, a Greek ms. dating from around the 6<sup>th</sup> c., was discovered in the 16<sup>th</sup> c. and printed in Basle in 1545. See Bergquist, ‘The Poems of Orlando di Lasso’s *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*’, 516-538.

<sup>115</sup> The Siena Cathedral mosaics were completed in 1481-3, Pinturicchio was commissioned by Pope Alexander VI to paint the Borgia Apartments in 1492, Michelangelo completed the Sistine Chapel ceiling in 1512, Raphael’s fresco was executed in 1514. There is much speculation about the ‘hidden’ esoteric agenda of Michelangelo’s fresco, see for example Blech and Doliner, *The Sistine Secrets*.

<sup>116</sup> On the textual history of Lasso’s verses, see Roth, ‘Prophecy, Harmony and the Alchemical Transformation of the Soul’ in Wuidar, *Music and Esotericism*, 8-9 and Bergquist, ‘The Poems of Orlando di Lasso’s *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*’, 529-531. These new texts had appeared in an early 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian edition of the *Discordantiae sanctorum doctorum Hieronymi et Augustini*, Rome, 1481, by Philippus de Barberiis. Roth has discovered the source for Barberiis’ texts in a series of engravings from the 1470s attributed to Baccio Baldini, depicting 12 Italian sibyls which correspond in their imagery to the Venetian version. It has been agreed that these engravings commemorate the costumes and speeches of a theatrical production (Roth, 9). Bergquist suggests that Lasso was using the verses from Barbieri’s treatise which was reprinted in 1545 and 1555 in Basel as *Sibyllarum de Christo vaticinia* (Bergquist, ‘The Poems of Orlando di Lasso’s *Prophetiae Sibyllarum*’ 529).

<sup>117</sup> Weller, ‘Notre Divin Orlande’, 496.

<sup>118</sup> Roth, 45-76.

always tied to specific words or phrases.<sup>119</sup> Jonathan Harvey has referred to ‘unusual syntactical constructions, incomplete thoughts, parenthetical insertions and cut-off sentences’<sup>120</sup> in the verses which suggest the ecstatic incoherence of the utterances, and Roth proposes that the harmonic shifts ‘were intended to imitate the actual experience promised by all Sybilline prophecy’<sup>121</sup> which was the elevation of the soul to the state of gnosis.

Before considering Hermetic connotations in this work, it should be situated firmly within Lasso’s social and religious milieu of the Catholic sacramental discourse of Counter-Reformation Bavaria. Fisher has discussed the influence of the spiritual exercises of Spanish Jesuits on the court of Albrecht V and his heirs, which called on the emotional, imaginative and intellectual capacities of the practitioner.<sup>122</sup> Fisher suggests that Lasso would have been exposed to such contemporary currents in Catholic meditation through his employment at court,<sup>123</sup> and although Fisher is explicitly referring to Lasso’s late work *Lagrime di San Pietro* of 1594, it is relevant to view the *Prophetiae* in this light. As they were a gift to Albrecht, they could well be serving his contemplative practice in the context of a private performance. It is significant that the part books given to Albrecht contain miniature illustrations of all twelve sibyls,<sup>124</sup> so that art, music and poetry combine in a visual, aural and intellectual evocation of prophetic wisdom. The chromatic shifts would also create a visceral, emotional reaction to the text, and if the cycle was performed in a ritual, or even theatrical situation, a multi-sensory experience that could incite a sense of *ecstasis* through cultivating passionate devotional fervour could easily be imagined.

However, there is an important subtext here. The sibyls originate in the pagan world of divine oracles, which they receive directly from gods such as Apollo or Zeus. As such, they link a polytheistic religious sensibility to what Christians understood as the ultimate revelation of the one God in Christ. The idea that the many gods of the pagan world are in fact various facets of the One was implied in the Palindrome to the Orphic Hymns, and was crucial to the project of reconciling Platonism and Christianity.<sup>125</sup> The sibyls are not alone in this function, for the early Christian world linked them firmly with the great Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, who was also seen as a prophet of the incarnate word.<sup>126</sup> Roth has convincingly suggested that the unnamed presenter of the Prologue to the *Prophetiae*, the *Carmen chromatico*, is none other than Hermes himself, who we find on the very threshold of Siena Cathedral, surrounded by the ten sibyls of Lactantius. He greets all visitors with a Hermetic text which announces the birth of the Holy Word.<sup>127</sup>

---

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 63. Lasso would have been familiar with the growing use of chromatic experimentation of the early 1550s, and the debates around its use involving the theorists Nicola Vicentino and Vicente Lusitano. See McKinney, ‘Point/counterpoint’. Vicentino (*L’antica musica ridotta all’moderna prattica*, 1576) describes the practice of moving between the diatonic and chromatic genus as *tramutatio*, or transmutation (Roth, ‘Prophecy, Harmony and the Alchemical Transformation of the Soul’ 65).

<sup>120</sup> Harvey, *A Beginner’s Guide to Prophecy*, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>122</sup> See Fisher, ‘Per mia particoloare devotione’.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 183

<sup>124</sup> Reproduced in Bergquist, 517-519. The part-books were a collaboration between the illustrator Hans Mielich and the scribe Johannes Pollet, both in Albrecht’s service (see Owens, ‘Orlando di Lasso’, 1441).

<sup>125</sup> See fn. 62.

<sup>126</sup> See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 1-20.

<sup>127</sup> The inscription reads ‘*Deus omnium creator/secum Deum fecit/visibilem et hunc/fecit primum et solum/quo oblectatus est/valde amavit proprium/filium qui appellatur/sanctum verbum*’ See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 42-43.

Roth remarks on an ‘absence of curiosity’ in modern scholarship regarding the inclusion of such a prologue in a motet cycle and its purpose.<sup>128</sup> She suggests that if the unknown speaker is Hermes, then we can strongly suspect that he is there to assume the role of spiritual teacher, as he does in the *Asclepius*.<sup>129</sup> The teachings of Hermes brought an authentic Egyptian, *initiatory* wisdom to the Renaissance via Marsilio Ficino’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*,<sup>130</sup> and he was regarded as the source of Pythagorean, Orphic and Platonic wisdom which constituted the ‘ancient theology’.<sup>131</sup> But most significantly, not only did Hermetic wisdom appear to foretell Christian truths, it was also the wisdom that informed ritual practices such as alchemy and astrology. These Hermetic arts were ‘esoteric’ or gnostic in the sense that they were concerned with the alignment of the human soul with *nous* or the divine mind.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, neo-Pythagorean interests in number symbolism were intimately connected with the Hermetic arts in the Renaissance imagination, and we note that the number of sibyls was extended in some medieval sources to the significant number of twelve from the ten stipulated by Lactantius in the fourth century. Astrologically, twelve was the number of the cosmos, ‘the geometrical figure with twelve equal pentagonal faces taken as a symbol of the universe in its entirety’.<sup>132</sup> The number twelve then would have been viewed as a complete unit, a whole cycle or the universal monad which divides into twelve parts as it proceeds into manifestation. It may also be divided into two complementary halves, which would have been understood as symbolising the fundamental duality of existence such as male and female, odd and even, summer and winter, and divine and human.<sup>133</sup> The union of the opposites, the *coniunctio oppositorum* is also the central image of the alchemical process, depicted as the marriage of King and Queen.<sup>134</sup> I am not suggesting that Lasso would necessarily have viewed his music as alchemical in a spiritual sense, but given the Platonic concerns of the European musical elite discussed previously, neither can we assume his disinterest.

There are other hints too, in Lasso’s cycle, of symbolism which would have appealed to an educated elite, concerned with spiritual reform and the reconciliation of Christianity with pagan sources.<sup>135</sup> In his prologue, ‘Hermes’ refers to the ‘twice-six Sibyls’ who sing of ‘the secrets (*arcana*) of salvation,’ and each Sibylline verse contains six lines. Why not refer to ‘twelve Sibyls’? There seems to be a deliberate intent to evoke the ‘two in one’ here; and why does the speaker’s identity remain secret? We may find a clue in the pronouncement by

<sup>128</sup> Roth, ‘Prophecy, Harmony and the Alchemical Transformation of the Soul’, 63. The text of the prologue is ‘Polyphonic songs which you hear with a chromatic tenor, these are they in which our twice-six sibyls once sang with fearless mouth the secrets of salvation’. (trans. Harvey, 13).

<sup>129</sup> See *Asclepius*, I, (Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 67).

<sup>130</sup> Ficino’s translation was entitled *a Book on the Power and Wisdom of God, Whose title is Pimander*, published in Venice, 1469, in *Opera omnia*, vol. II, 1836-57. See Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 1-43.

<sup>131</sup> See fn. 36.

<sup>132</sup> See Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, 156. On the 12 spheres (the fixed stars, 7 planets and 4 elements) see Ficino, *De amore* VI.3, in Jayne, *Plato on Love*, 109-111.

<sup>133</sup> See illustration from Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ *De proprietatibus rerum* Lyons, 1485 (in Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony*, 157). On the Pythagorean principle of the transition from unity to duality, Theon of Smyrna (fl. 100 CE) writes: ‘The first increase, the first change from unity is made by the doubling of unity which becomes 2, in which are seen matter and all that is perceptible, the generation of motion, multiplicity and addition, composition and the relationship of one thing to another’ quoted in Luchte, *Pythagoras and the Doctrine of Reincarnation*, 111.

<sup>134</sup> As for example in the *Rosarium philosophorum*, 1550. See Greene, ‘Love, Alchemy and Planetary Attractions’. Karen-Claire Voss defines spiritual alchemy as ‘a form of illumination, a means of transmutation, a method for experiencing levels of reality that are not ordinarily accessible.’ (Voss, ‘Spiritual Alchemy’, 151).

<sup>135</sup> See for example the painting of ‘Isis with Hermes Trismegistus and Moses’ by Pinturicchio (Vatican, Borgia Apartments, Room of the Saints), where Isis as Sophia is instructing the founders of both Christianity and the Platonic tradition; discussed by Yates, *Giordano Bruno*, 115-16.

the Delphic Sibyl, in reference to Christ: ‘Behold: He comes. Be silent, that it may remain a secret. Remember that He whom the Prophets awaited with great joy resides in the heart’. It was commonly understood that the initiatory wisdom pointed to by Hermes had to remain shrouded in secrecy, ‘for’, says Hermes, it is the mark of an irreligious mind to bring to the notice of a crowd of people a discourse that is totally filled with the whole majesty of the divine spirit’.<sup>136</sup> Furthermore, the Delphic Oracle was considered to be the teacher of Pythagoras by Aristoxenus and Porphyry.<sup>137</sup> We should also note that the ‘wisdom of the heart’ resonates with the translation of the name of Hermes’ own teacher, Poimandres, as ‘Heart of Ra’, thus establishing an authentic connection with the Egyptian god Thoth, scribe of the gods and inventor of hieroglyphs.<sup>138</sup> Christ is also described by the Delphic Sibyl as ‘conquering all of Nature’s works’ (*Omnia vincit/Hoc naturae opera*) a phrase with clear alchemical overtones.

Reference to the ‘eternal Word’ sent by Divine Will from ‘starry Olympus’, a clear conflation of cosmology, pagan religion and St John’s Gospel, is also to be found. The Europaeen Sibyl also draws our attention to the ‘great silence’ with which Christ will reign, and the Erythraean sibyl refers to Him as ‘the Son of a virgin Mother, truly the fruit of a wise heart’. Do we not hear echoes here of the inscription on the Temple of Isis at Sais, referred to by Ficino in his *Book of the Sun* (1494): ‘I am all things which are, which will be and which have been. No one has ever turned back my veil. The fruit I have borne is the Sun.’<sup>139</sup>

There are no doubt many more associations that could be found in these enigmatic prophecies, but the most important aspect of these texts is precisely that they are prophetic utterances, emanating from women who have attained a state of consciousness which transcends time, place, and the differences of religious traditions. The sibyls would be in a condition of ‘prophetic frenzy’, requiring an interpreter to clarify the divine message.<sup>140</sup> We can speculate that Lasso may have intended his music to perform this function, as the carefully chosen modal and harmonic structure provide a sensible form for the inspired wisdom—an exquisite symbolic image.

The didactic purpose of Sibylline imagery at this time, both iconographic and musical, would surely be to work in terms of sympathetic magic: to function as ‘baits’ or ‘lures’ in the theurgic sense, reflecting back to the viewer or listener the possibility of attaining such a wisdom not at some future time, but at the very moment of engagement. Whether Lasso intended harmonic shifts to evoke prophetic consciousness or simply used them as ingenious music devices, we will never know. But the effect on the listener is disturbing, dislocating and immediate. These are not abstract allegories of some past event, but moments of the soul’s turning, stirred to long-lost memories of a primordial consubstantiality with a deep and mysterious ground of being from whence it came, and to which it will return.<sup>141</sup> It was a common Renaissance understanding that symbolic ‘truths’ were not to be explicitly spelled out, but kept veiled and mysterious so as not to lose their potency (nor overtly challenge orthodox religious interpretations).<sup>142</sup> According to Proclus, ‘The poet’s [we might add

---

<sup>136</sup> *Asclepius*, 54.

<sup>137</sup> See Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 41.

<sup>138</sup> See Kingsley, ‘Poimandres’, 1-24.

<sup>139</sup> Ficino, *Liber de Sole*, ch.6, in Voss, *Marsilio Ficino*, 197. It is interesting that Lasso’s textual source appears to derive from the 1470s, at the height of the Hermetic revival in Italy which inspired the Siena cathedral floor marbles and Pinturicchio’s frescoes.

<sup>140</sup> See Plato, *Phaedrus* 244b on prophetic frenzy. On the role of the interpreter in divinatory practice, see Cornelius, ‘Field of Omens: A Study in Inductive Divination’, 106-129. On Ancient Greek oracles and divination in general, see Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination*.

<sup>141</sup> See Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* I.3 on non-discursive knowing, ‘a unitary connection with the gods that is natural and indivisible’ (Clark, Dillon and Herschbell, *Iamblichus, On the Mysteries*, 13).

<sup>142</sup> See Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 1-16.

artist's and musician's] mythic symbols operate on that part of the soul that carries a trace of the divine and [which] reawakens the symbol to the divinity with which it is linked ... symbolic myths reveal a holy mystery and constitute an anagogic [i.e. mystical] initiation for the listener'.<sup>143</sup>

We do not need Lasso to reveal his intentions. In the end, we can only decide on the theurgic potential of such music for ourselves. Like the living statues of ancient ritual,<sup>144</sup> the sibyls pronounce the great mystery of the birth of a holy child to a virgin mother, a mystery that Christianity has taken up for its own but whose meaning ultimately cannot be bound to any one of its many mythic variants.<sup>145</sup>

### Bibliography for Case Study

- Brooks, J., 'Music as Erotic Magic in a Renaissance Romance', *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 4 (2007), 1216-1217.
- Berger, K., 'Tonality and Atonality in the Prologue to Orlando di Lasso's "Prophetiae Sibyllarum": Some Methodological Problems in Analysis of Sixteenth-Century Music', *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 66, no. 4 (Oct. 1980), 484-504.
- Bergquist, P., 'The Poems of Orlando di Lasso's *Prophetiae Sibyllarum* and Their Sources', *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, vol. 32, no. 3 (Autumn, 1979), 516-538.
- Blech, B. and Doliner, R., *The Sistine Secrets: Michelangelo's Hidden Messages in the Heart of the Vatican*, (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009).
- Burnett, H. and Nitzberg, R., *Composition, Chromaticism and the Developmental Process* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007).
- Copenhaver, B., *Hermetica* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- Fisher, A., "'Per mia particolare dovotione": Orlando di Lasso's *Lagrima di San Pietro* and Catholic Spirituality in Counter-Reformation Munich', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 132: 2 (2007), 167-220.
- Greene, L., 'Love, Alchemy and Planetary Attractions' in A. Voss and J. Hinson Lall, eds, *The Imaginal Cosmos* (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007), 127-138.
- Haar, J., 'Orlando di Lasso, Composer and Print Entrepreneur' in K. Van Orden, ed., *Music and the Cultures of Print* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 2000), 125-162.
- Harvey, J., 'A Beginner's Guide to Prophecy: Orlande de Lassus's "Prophetiae Sibyllarum"', *The Choral Journal*, vol. 50, no. 11 (June/July 2010), 8-17.
- Kushner, E., 'The Role of Platonic Symbols in the Poetry of Pontus de Tyard', *Yale French Studies*, no. 47, 'Image and Symbol in the Renaissance' (Yale: Yale University Press, 1972).
- Lasso, O., *Complete Works*, eds Académie Royale de Belgique and the Bavarian Academy of Sciences (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1990).
- Luchte, J., *Pythagoras and the Doctrine of Reincarnation* (London and New York: Continuum (2009).
- McKinney, T., 'Point/counterpoint: Vicentino's musical rebuttal to Lusitano', *Early Music* (August 2005) 33 (3): 393-412.
- Owens, J. A., 'Orlando di Lasso, "Prophetiae Sibyllarum"', ed. Reinhold Scholetter', *Notes*, (June 1, 1992) vol. 48, 1441-1444.
- Rigoglioso, M., *The Cult of Divine Birth in the Ancient Greece* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

---

<sup>143</sup> Proclus, *In rempublicam* 1.180-21-23, quoted in Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 246.

<sup>144</sup> In the *Asclepius* Hermes mentions living statues which 'foreknow the future and predict it by lots, by prophecy, by dreams and by many other means' (*Asclepius* 24, in Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 81).

<sup>145</sup> See Rigoglioso, *The Cult of Divine Birth*.

Roth, M., 'Prophecy, Harmony and the Alchemical Transformation of the Soul: the Key to Lasso's Chromatic Sibyls' in L. Wuidar, ed. *Music and Esotericism* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 45-76.

Voss, K.-C., 'Spiritual Alchemy: Interpreting Representative Texts and Images' in R. van den Broek and W. J. Hanegraaff, eds, *Gnosis and Hermeticism from Antiquity to Modern Times* (State University of New York Press, 1998), 148-182.

Walker, D. P., 'The aims of Baïf's *Académie de Poésie et de Musique*', *Journal of Renaissance and Baroque Musi*, vol. I (1946), 91–100.

Weller, P., "'Notre Divin Orlande": Lassus in His Time and in Ours', *Early Music*, (1999), XXVII (3), 493-99.

Yates, F., *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).