

# Mythologising Monteverdi: the Marriage of Venus and Mercury

Angela Voss

*All teems with symbol: the wise man is he who  
in any one thing can read another.*<sup>1</sup>

## Prologue

I will begin on a personal note. Monteverdi's music has been a catalyst in my life, awakening me to a 'spiritual eros', as the Platonists would describe the intimation of, and yearning for, an experience of union with an ineffable, and undefinable, 'other'.<sup>2</sup> I have also been an astrologer for nearly forty years, and a central focus of my academic life has been the challenge of addressing the revelatory function of the *symbolic* in a world which no longer values poetic metaphor as a primary mode of knowledge. Instead, such knowing is assumed to be 'merely subjective', incompatible with the sharp scalpel of the rational mind. But this was not the case for philosophers of the Pythagorean and Platonic schools. Pythagoras (c.570-c.490 BCE), Plato (427-347 BCE), Plotinus (204/5-270 CE), Iamblichus (250-325 CE) and Proclus (412-485 CE), all upheld symbolic or mythic discourse to be an essential element of the philosophical path to *gnosis* (knowledge of the divine), as it is also for Jung's project of individuation through accessing the wisdom of the personal and collective unconscious.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the importance of symbol and metaphor for healthy human cognition has been affirmed by the contemporary neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist,<sup>4</sup> and it is with great debt to all these advocates for 'another way of seeing'<sup>5</sup> that I will attempt to navigate my way between two frames of reference—the language of symbol, and what might be loosely called the history of ideas—in order to *evoke* a hidden level of meaning at work in Monteverdi's life and work. In the end, I hope to show that his music can be seen as 'theurgic'—capable of lifting the listener's soul beyond personal emotional response to a sense of participation in a sacred cosmos, and perhaps even further, to a glimpse of still

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<sup>1</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.3.7.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c-250d. For an evocative analysis of Platonic eros see Stephen Clark, 'On Becoming Love' in *Plotinus, Myth, Metaphor and Philosophical Practice* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2016), 64-82.

<sup>3</sup> See C. G. Jung, "Two Kinds of Thinking" in *Symbols of Transformation, Collected Works* vol. 5, (Bollingen: Princeton University Press, 1956/1990) ch. II, 7-33; J. Chodorow, *Jung on Active Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> I. McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* I.6.8.

deeper mysteries.<sup>6</sup> This, according to neoplatonic and Jungian thought, is the fulfilment of the symbolic function.<sup>7</sup>

As an introduction to the theme of this paper, I will relate an experience of synchronicity:<sup>8</sup>

*On 21<sup>st</sup> May 2014, I happened to turn on BBC Radio 3, and was greeted by a performance of Monteverdi's Il Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda, a dramatic setting of Torquato Tasso's poem about a Christian knight inadvertently slaying the Muslim woman he loves.<sup>9</sup> Spellbound, I listened to the rest of the programme, which featured Monteverdi as 'composer of the week', and my passion for his music was reignited after a long period of neglect. Struck by my particularly strong reaction, I later consulted the ephemeris (the table of planetary positions) and was astounded to see that during that very week the planet Mercury, the psychopomp who mediates between heaven and earth (and who takes a year or so to complete his cycle of the zodiac), was moving through the same zodiacal degrees in the sign of Gemini as the conjunction of Mercury and Venus in Monteverdi's own horoscope (at 22-23 degrees), which also happens to be a significant degree of my own chart, the descendant (at 22 degrees).<sup>10</sup> In other words, this was the only couple of days in the whole year that Mercury's position would be aligned exactly with the Mercury-Venus-Descendant conjunction of Monteverdi and myself.*

In such a moment of symbolic 'realisation' one has a choice: either to dismiss it as mere coincidence, a quirk of fate, an amusing anecdote only meaningful to astrologers, or, to take up the story as pointing to a hermeneutic question of profound importance—but one which is rarely asked. What is at play in these mysterious 'acausal' events, where despite all rational explanations, the experiencer *knows* there is a message for them, a meaning to be unlocked?<sup>11</sup> I wondered what this co-incidence of Mercury, Monteverdi and myself (facilitated by that

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<sup>6</sup> On the function of the theurgic symbol, see Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 162-253.

<sup>7</sup> I am not the only scholar to draw parallels between neoplatonic theurgy and Jungian active imagination. See Liz Greene, *Jung's Studies in Astrology: Prophecy, Magic and the Qualities of Time*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2018) 73-97 and Gregory Shaw, 'Archetypal Psychology, Dreamwork and Neoplatonism' in *Octagon: The Quest for Wholeness*, Volume 2, ed, Hans Thomas Hakl (Gaggenau, Germany: H. Frietsch Verlag, 2016), 327-359.

<sup>8</sup> I use the term synchronicity in the Jungian sense of 'meaningful coincidence'. See C.G. Jung, *Synchronicity, an Acausal Connecting Principle* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Torquato Tasso, *Gerusalemme Liberata*, 1581, in Monteverdi, *Eighth Book of Madrigals*, 1638.

<sup>10</sup> The descendant is the degree of the zodiacal sign on the Western horizon at birth, signifying important relationships (i.e. the marriage or business partner). My descendant falls at 22 degrees 50 Gemini, exactly between Monteverdi's Venus/Mercury conjunction. Astrologically this signifies a strong attraction.

<sup>11</sup> Further on synchronicity see Roderick Main, *Revelations of Chance: Synchronicity as Spiritual Experience* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007).

Mercurial organisation, the BBC) might be asking of me, and the answer seemed clear—to write about it. I was implicated in the symbolism of the Mercury-Venus conjunction, and felt called to *interpret* its meaning (Mercury/Hermes, the hermeneut) in relation to its expression through Monteverdi’s music (Venus, the planet of love, beauty, harmony and the arts). To do this, I have to call on both the powers of language (Mercury) and intuitive imagination (Venus), to weave a fabric in which metaphor and fact intertwine and somehow create new insights. As McGilchrist remarks, “Metaphoric thinking is fundamental to our understanding of the world, for it is the *only way* in which understanding can reach outside the system of signs to life itself. It is what links language to life.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, it is what links language to *embodied meaning* rather than abstract concept, and this is what Plotinus refers to in my opening quotation. The problem is that in most academic contexts, as Timothy Scott has observed, “symbolic interpretation has become a practice to be studied rather than a mode of study itself”.<sup>13</sup> This is because post-Enlightenment discourse has ‘cut the telephone wires’ as it were between what can be termed ‘positive knowledge’ in the Kantian sense,<sup>14</sup> and knowledge that is inner, transformative, sacred or even soteriological. One writer who is concerned with healing this split is Rice University professor Jeffrey Kripal, who calls for a new breed of academic, a ‘gnostic scholar’ who can bring to bear on research “types of understanding that are at once passionate and critical, personal and objective, religious and academic”.<sup>15</sup> This is my call too, because I believe that scholarship should be a holistic process, reflecting what it means to be fully human.<sup>16</sup>

## Claudio Monteverdi

A brief introduction is needed to Monteverdi’s life and work.<sup>17</sup> He was born on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1567 at 9.30 am,<sup>18</sup> in the northern Italian town of Cremona, and died in Venice in 1643. He

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<sup>12</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 115.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Scott, “Symbolic Exegesis, Cosmology and Soteriology” (paper presented to the 3rd Annual *Alternative Expressions of the Numinous* conference, University of Queensland, 15<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> August 2008), 2.

<sup>14</sup> See I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), “according to which the understanding (like sensibility) supplies forms that structure our experience of the sensible world, to which human knowledge is limited, while the intelligible (or noumenal) world is strictly unknowable to us” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kant/>).

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, *Roads of Excess, Palaces of Wisdom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press 2001), 5. See also Angela Voss, “*Docere, Delectare, Movere*: Soul-learning, Reflexivity and the Third Classroom” in *Re-enchanting the Academy*, eds Angela Voss & Simon Wilson (Auckland/Seattle: Rubedo Press, 2017), 113-138.

<sup>16</sup> Kripal also urges the humanities to extend their enquiries to the nature of consciousness itself, asking “how can a conventional historicist method capture an order of experience that erupts from a dimension of the real that is not in time?” (Kripal, *Secret Body*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2017, 415).

<sup>17</sup> For a full biography see Leo Shrade, *Monteverdi, The Creator of Modern Music* (Littlehampton: Littlehampton Book Services Ltd., 1972), and for a chronology, John Whenham & Richard Wistreich, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xv-xxi.

worked in Mantua and Venice, and was ordained in 1632. He married the singer Claudia Cattanea in 1599, with whom he had two sons and a daughter, but lost both his wife and his beloved protégée Caterina Martinelli in 1607 and 1608 respectively.<sup>19</sup> Monteverdi's extant musical output comprised the youthful *Canzonette* (1584), eight books of madrigals,<sup>20</sup> the *Scherzi Musicali* (1607) four operas,<sup>21</sup> the *Vespro della Beata Virgine* (1610), the *Messa a Quattro Voci* (1640) and the *Selva Morale et Spirituale* (1641).

Straddling the late Renaissance and early Baroque eras, Monteverdi is widely regarded as “the creator of modern music”,<sup>22</sup> his vocal works—both sacred and secular—demonstrating an extraordinary capacity for intense affective arousal through dramatic musical effects.<sup>23</sup> His innovative style, originally named by Vincenzo Galilei in 1581 as the *seconda prattica*, was a deliberate attempt on Monteverdi's part to find the perfect union of words and music (*melodia*) with which to imitate emotional states and deeply affect the listener.<sup>24</sup> His efforts led to the birth of the new operatic genre of accompanied recitative, called the *stile*

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<sup>18</sup> The birth time is calculated according to the Julian calendar and was sourced from [http://www.astrotheme.com/astrology/Claudio\\_Monteverdi](http://www.astrotheme.com/astrology/Claudio_Monteverdi) (accessed 20/04/18). I cannot find further confirmation of the time, however it produces an astrological profile that clearly fits with Monteverdi's personality and with the unfolding of his life events. In my view, astrological symbolism lives and becomes meaningful through engagement and intention, therefore I am taking this birth chart as a ‘likely story’. It should be noted however that the Venus-Mercury conjunction is not affected by a possible difference in birth time.

<sup>19</sup> Astrologers would regard Monteverdi's sorrow in personal relationships to be symbolised by his Moon/Saturn conjunction in Virgo, for the Moon is associated with women in the native's life, and Saturn with death, hardship and restriction. In the second house of resources, this combination also reflects his financial anxieties. See Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune, eds, *The New Monteverdi Companion* (London/Boston: Faber & Faber, 1985) 16-18.

<sup>20</sup> Monteverdi's collections of madrigals were published in 1587, 1590, 1592, 1603, 1605, 1614, 1619 and 1638.

<sup>21</sup> *L'Orfeo* (1604), *L'Arianna* (1608), *Il Ritorno d'Ulysse in Patria* (1640) and *Il Coronazione di Poppea* (1642).

<sup>22</sup> Term coined by Shrade, *Monteverdi*.

<sup>23</sup> See Tim Carter, “Possente Spirto: On Taming the Power of Music”, *Early Music* vol. 221, no. 4 (1993), 517-523. Monteverdi developed the ideals of the Florentine Camerata who wanted to revive the ethical power of music in accordance with ancient teachings by developing a new style of monodic singing. The Camerata considered polyphony to be a “confusion of affections” (Daniel Chua, “Vincenzo Galilei, Modernity and the Division of Nature”, in Susannah Clark & Alexander Rehding, eds, *Music Theory and Natural order from the Renaissance to the early twentieth century* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 26).

<sup>24</sup> See Massimo Ossi, *Divining the Oracle: Monteverdi's Seconda Prattica* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) for a comprehensive study of Monteverdi and the *seconda prattica*. Vincenzo Galilei (1520-1591) in his *Dialogo della musica antica*, 1581, upheld an ideal of solo song where the emotional affect was fully expressed by the union of text and music, critiquing the over-flamboyant style of contemporary polyphonic madrigals. See Chua, and Galilei, “From Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music” in Gary Tomlinson, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Vol. 3, The Renaissance* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), 184-188. The language of the *seconda prattica* was laid out in Monteverdi's *Fifth Book of Madrigals* (1605) and described by his brother Giulio Cesare in his *Dichiaratione della lettera stampata nel Quinto Libro de suoi madrigali* in Claudio's *Scherzi Musicali* of 1607 (see Margaret Murata, ed., *Source Readings in Music History: Vol. 4, The Baroque Era* [New York/London: W. W Norton & Co., 1998], 27-36). Monteverdi called this style the *via naturale ad immitatione* (see Carter, ‘Possente Spirto’, 522), his *Lamento d'Arianna* of 1608 being one of the first operatic examples. Giulio Cesare points out that his brother was more interested in the immediate, audible effects of his music than in theorising about it.

*rappresentativo*.<sup>25</sup> Monteverdi was directly inspired by the Platonic notion of *affect*—the relationship of particular musical modes with human emotions—and above all by Plato’s injunction that “rhythm and harmony are regulated by the words, and not the words by them”.<sup>26</sup> The emotional charge of vocal music lifted it beyond the pleasing harmonies of instruments alone, allowing it to touch the quick of the listener’s own inner conflicts: “It is contraries which greatly move our mind, and this is the purpose all good music should have,” Monteverdi insists in the Preface to his *Eighth Book of Madrigals*,<sup>27</sup> and indeed he blends the sensual and the spiritual, the worldly and the devotional, the playful and profound, the human and the transcendent through a new musical language of extreme contrasts. One of the chief features of this language is the juxtaposition of textual oppositions through the tension of what Tim Carter has called “the erotic rub of dissonance”.<sup>28</sup> Through creating a continual play of tension and resolution in music, this technique keeps the listener poised on a knife-edge of pain and pleasure.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of the sixteenth century, a new artistic world was emerging of individual, self-conscious emotional expression, which, writes Daniel Chua, “collapsed the music of the spheres into the rhetorical will of the human ego, shifting the magic of the cosmos to the voice of human nature”.<sup>30</sup> Chua points to opera as the embodiment of “nostalgia for an ancient age enchanted by music”<sup>31</sup> which we can detect as early as Monteverdi’s *L’Orfeo* of 1604, where *La Musica* appears on stage at the beginning to remind the audience of her

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<sup>25</sup> This term first appeared in print on the title page of Giulio Caccini’s *Euridice* of 1600.

<sup>26</sup> See Plato, *Republic* III, 398-403 (trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato, volume four, The Republic* [Sphere Books, 1970]) 165-171.

<sup>27</sup> Claudio Monteverdi, “Preface to *Madrigali guerrieri, et amorosi*” (1638) in Murata, *Source Readings vol. 4*, 158. This work demonstrates the opposing forces of love and war through contrasting musical styles in two symmetrical parts. The Preface contains Monteverdi’s longest theoretical explanation of classical sources, in order to justify his new *stile concitato*, a musical ‘emblem’ of fast repeated notes to express action, anger and disdain (see Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, ch. 6; Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance*, [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990], 203). He follows ancient and medieval ethical theory in dividing emotional states into fury (war) and despair (love), with moderation (temperance) seeking a balance between the two. Monteverdi quotes Plato who in his *Republic* describes how the ideal state should be purged of unhealthy elements by preferring stringed over wind instruments, specific rhythms, and Dorian and Phrygian modes in its music-making, rules which Monteverdi follows in Book Eight (see fn. 20 and Geoffrey Chew, “The Platonic Agenda of Monteverdi’s *seconda prattica*: a case study from the eighth book of madrigals”, *Music Analysis* vol. 12, no.2. [1993], 155-157).

<sup>28</sup> Tim Carter, “The Venetian Secular Music”, in Whenham and Wistreich, *The Cambridge Companion*, 187.

<sup>29</sup> This technique is used to great effect in Monteverdi’s Fourth and Fifth books of madrigals.

<sup>30</sup> Chua, *Vincenzo Galilei*, 18.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Gary Tomlinson also suggests that the “disenchanted world” of the later baroque period could no longer trust in the “marvellous truths” of the magical world view, calling the new representational style “a virtuosic construction of resonant but impermanent links in a world where connections of resemblance once real had lost their force” (Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993], 246). McGilchrist points to the Renaissance as a period when the relationship of parts to the whole” predominated in art, whereas in the Baroque period a new interest emerges in textual analysis for its own sake (McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 298, 305).

forgotten powers to enchant.<sup>32</sup> Yet Monteverdi still sustains an identity with the ‘magical’ world view of the Renaissance, where sympathy and resemblance between nature, human, cosmos and divinity were powerfully evoked through the polyphonic style of composition—the *prima prattica*. Here, harmonic movement governed textual meaning, the singers participating in a greater whole rather than expressing their individuality.<sup>33</sup> Thus Monteverdi’s music speaks in two languages, which are sometimes distinct, and sometimes fused, and which give rise to an *affect* which is simultaneously intimate and impersonal.<sup>34</sup>

Monteverdi’s extant correspondence<sup>35</sup> reveals a powerful man whose “outspoken and bristly interactions with his superiors betrays his strong sense of self, his acute sensitivity to perceived slights and his sardonic and sometimes dark humour.”<sup>36</sup> Devoted to the perfection of his *seconda prattica* and its defence, he was plagued by lack of recognition and respect in his early years, but finally achieved respectability and security in Venice at the age of forty-one. I have touched on Monteverdi’s allegiance to Platonic ideas, but he was first and foremost a devout Catholic, living in a period of Counter-Reformation fideism and devoted to the Virgin Mary.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the philosopher, astrologer and musician Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) a century earlier, or his contemporary polymath Robert Fludd (1574-1637), he was not a Hermetic philosopher nor a magus, and did not situate his performance practice within the context of esoteric or neoplatonic ritual. His Platonism was ethical and contemplative, demonstrated by his conviction that one’s state of mind could be deeply affected by “the combination of words commanding with rhythm and harmony obedient to them”,<sup>38</sup> with the

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<sup>32</sup> *L’Orfeo*, Prologue. See Chua, *Vincenzo Galilei*, 25-6.

<sup>33</sup> The *prima prattica* was upheld by the contemporary theorist Gioseffo Zarlino (1517-1590) and fiercely defended by Monteverdi’s critic Giovanni Artusi (1540-1613), who insisted that the intellect, not the emotions, should be the measure of music’s effects. On the debate between Monteverdi and Artusi, see Murata, *Source Readings vol. 4*, 18-26; Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, ch. 1; Whenham and Wistreich, *The Cambridge Companion*, 127-158. On the Renaissance ‘magical episteme’ in music, see Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, ch.2. It is interesting to note that the principles of conservatism and radicalism are symbolised in astrology by Saturn and Uranus respectively, and at the height of the controversy with Artusi (1 July 1600), we find transiting Saturn (at 21 degrees 51 Libra) opposing Monteverdi’s pioneering and volatile Mars (at 21 degrees 56 Aries).

<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to compare Monteverdi’s setting of *Lasciatemi Morire* as a five part madrigal (in *The Sixth Book of Madrigals*) with his setting for solo voice (the *Lamento d’Arianna*). In my view, the polyphonic setting evokes a more powerful spiritual desolation than the solo song, perhaps because it ‘imitates’ the pure, universal emotion itself, rather than attempting to ‘realistically’ portray the grief of a specific character. Although, according to contemporary accounts, there was not a dry eye in the house at the first performance of *Arianna* (see Tim Carter, “Lamenting Ariadne”, *Early Music* vol. 27, no.3 (1999), 395-405).

<sup>35</sup> See Denis Stevens, ed. *The Letters of Claudio Monteverdi* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 233.

<sup>37</sup> For example, see Arnold and Fortune, *The New Monteverdi Companion*, 87, where Monteverdi mentions receiving a “special favour” from “the Most Holy Virgin’s consummate goodness”.

<sup>38</sup> “Giulio Cesare Monteverdi’s Explanation of the Letter Printed in the Fifth Book of Madrigals”, in Murata, *Source Readings* vol. 4, 33.

objective that the mind would become “reduced to itself” by the resulting *melodia*.<sup>39</sup> In a letter to G.B. Doni he speaks admiringly of “the best philosophers to have investigated nature”<sup>40</sup> and states “my intention is to show by means of our practice what I have been able to extract from the mind of those philosophers for the benefit of good art”.<sup>41</sup>

Certainly too the aim “to induce in another the passion that one feels”<sup>42</sup> is very different from Ficino’s art of imitating celestial patterns to raise the soul, yet both men fervently upheld the spiritually attractive power of song for therapeutic means, and I will return to this shared aim at the end of my essay. Unlike Ficino however, Monteverdi does not explain why his music has spiritual benefits, simply telling us that he wants to move the mind in order to “ennoble the character”, following Boethius’ instructions.<sup>43</sup> But interestingly, we do find one concealed suggestion that he was attracted by Ficino’s sympathetic musical magic, for in *L’Orfeo* he includes what appears to be a deliberate reference to Ficino’s Orphic Hymn performance. In the final stanza of *Possente Spirto* (Act 3), when Orpheus is charming Charon to sleep through the incantatory power of his song, Monteverdi puns on the word ‘Sol’ (meaning both ‘alone’ and ‘sun’) with a hidden allusion to Apollo, the Sun god, and accompanies this verse alone with a homophonic string texture strongly reminiscent of a *lira da braccio*. This instrument was often depicted in the hands of Apollo,<sup>44</sup> and was possibly used by Ficino for his astrological invocations.<sup>45</sup>

Monteverdi’s search for the most effective and natural way of imitating emotion in music (his *via naturale ad immitatione*)<sup>46</sup> may have been governed by the intensity of human passions, yet he was able to infuse these passions with a spiritual fervour through the perfect musical rhetoric. One could say that whilst Ficino appealed directly to the planetary intelligences in

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid. Melody is the combination of oration, harmony and rhythm, considered by Plato to induce contemplation. See Plato, *Republic* 398d. This remark is also illustrative of McGilchrist’s depiction of the two brain hemispheric functions and their ideal relationship: the *techniques* of composition (left hemisphere) being in service to the *meaning* of the text (right hemisphere). He also observes that “though speech is principally a left-hemisphere function, the production of words in song is associated with wide activation of the right hemisphere” (*The Master and his Emissary*, 74).

<sup>40</sup> Denis Stevens, “Selected Letters of Monteverdi” in Arnold & Fortune, *The New Monteverdi Companion*, 86.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>42</sup> Galilei, “Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music”, in Tomlinson, *Source Readings vol. 3*, 188.

<sup>43</sup> Monteverdi, “Preface to *Madrigali guerrieri*”, 158. Boethius, *De institutione musica* Book 1.

<sup>44</sup> See for example, Raphael’s fresco *Parnassus* (1509) in the Vatican.

<sup>45</sup> See Philip Pickett, *Behind the Mask* (London: Pickett, 1992). On Ficino’s performance practice, see Voss, “Orpheus Redivivus” in *Marsilio Ficino, his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy* eds M. J. B. Allen & V. Rees (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 227-241 and “Father Time and Orpheus” in *The Imaginal Cosmos* (Canterbury: University of Kent, 2007), 139-156. At least one commentator has called *Possente Spirto* a ‘prayer and incantation aria’ (Iain Fenlon, “The Mantuan Stage Works” in *The New Monteverdi Companion*, 275). For a contemporary evocation of Ficino’s Orphic Hymn singing, see The Marini Consort’s recording, *Secrets of the Heavens* (Riverrun Records, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> See Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, 37-41.

order to *know* divine harmony in the depths of the soul, Monteverdi appealed to the power of human emotion to *feel* it.

### **Astrological Hermeneutics**

Let us now step sideways, and give some thought to a neoplatonic perspective on astrological symbolism. For the neoplatonist the arts are the most effective metaphoric mirrors of the soul. Certainly for Plotinus, a true artist can produce images which embody divine intelligence through engaging their higher imagination with the all-pervading *anima mundi*, the soul of the world and so infusing their work with divine ideas.<sup>47</sup> These images are then perceived through the senses and may lift the viewer's or listener's soul similarly to engage with its own noetic capacity—ultimately leading to its salvation as it returns to the One. This is a powerful metaphor which also provides the rationale for a neoplatonic understanding of astrology, for planets and stars are seen as symbols which reveal divine principles of creation to those who are able to interpret their meaning.<sup>48</sup> As such, astrology is an allegorical and hermeneutic tool in which signification through correspondence and analogy brings meaning and order to the world. For Plotinus, viewing the cosmos as symbol is simply a matter of seeing with different eyes, “which everyone has but few use”.<sup>49</sup> Situated between heaven and earth in the cosmic realm, stars are seen by Plotinus as forming a web of interweaving patterns that reflect in the world of time a higher, immutable reality or intelligence, *but only for those who can read the patterns*.<sup>50</sup> We are therefore talking about meaning-making with reference to a tradition which has an established language of interpretation, an act which is essentially divinatory and dependent on the symbolic attitude of the observer.<sup>51</sup>

It is important to point out that the language of astrological symbolism, far from yielding merely arbitrary or fantastical ‘subjective’ fictions, has its own rationale, one which is entirely distinct from the causal thinking of the rational mind. It is a language which penetrates beyond the world of empirical objectivity through its ‘myth-making’ capacity, pointing to a further layer of discourse than the established facts of history or musical analysis. Such

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<sup>47</sup> On Plotinian theory of imagination, see Plotinus, *Enneads* IV.31, V.8; John Dillon, “Plotinus and the Transcendental Imagination” in *Religious Imagination* ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986) 55-64.

<sup>48</sup> See Plotinus, “On Fate” (*Ennead* 3.1) and “Whether the Stars are Causes?” (*Ennead* 2.3); For Ficino’s Renaissance interpretation of Plotinian cosmology, see Marsilio Ficino, “*De vita coelitus comparanda*” in *Three Books on Life*, Book 3, eds Carol Kaske & John Clarke (Binghamton, New York: Society of Renaissance Studies 1989), 242-249.

<sup>49</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* 1.6.8.

<sup>50</sup> Plotinus, *Ennead* 2.3.7; 3.1.6

<sup>51</sup> On astrology as divination, see Geoffrey Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, Bournemouth: Wessex Astrologer, 2003.

insights, guided by the symbols themselves, may subvert the assumptions of conventional academic discourse and illuminate the matter in hand from a different angle.<sup>52</sup> The allegorical meanings may be multifarious, yet they point to essential ‘core’ or archetypal principles, and arise in the engagement of the astrologer’s imagination (and only then), in a co-creative interplay of symbolic meaning and life event. Neoplatonically speaking, universal qualities (such as love, strife, contraction or expansion) find expression in an outflow of ‘being’ from a dynamic source which is transmitted through the world soul to the cosmos and thence to the human soul, which is composed of the same substance.<sup>53</sup> In other words, interpretation can be seen as a ‘top down’ process which reads life circumstances through the imaginative lens of mythic stories, the stories themselves being ‘filters’ of some other, mysterious dimension of reality that cannot be expressed in any other way. Jeffrey Kripal has suggested that we view all of our rich traditions of sacred mythology as many beautiful but infinitely varied stained glass windows, through which light streams in various shapes and colours, but which we should regard as portals to the deep mystery of consciousness itself.<sup>54</sup> Astrology can be one such window.

Astrological symbolism may also be seen in the light of Gary Tomlinson’s analysis of Michel Foucault’s ‘archaeological’ layers,<sup>55</sup> which he applies to his study of both Ficino’s magical singing and Monteverdi’s madrigals in *Music in Renaissance Magic*.<sup>56</sup> These layers are necessarily hidden to the subjects under investigation, but can be seen to inform and illuminate their lives and work.<sup>57</sup> Like a form of ‘celestial archaeology’, astrology re-enchants a prosaic world with a mythological ‘super-stratum’ that lies beyond its surface events, “taking us beneath the question of authorial intent to the grid of meaningfulness that constrains and conditions a discourse or social practice”,<sup>58</sup> allowing us access to “hidden

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<sup>52</sup> As far as I am aware, there has been no previous study of this kind in relation to Monteverdi. Tomlinson in *Music in Renaissance Magic* perhaps comes nearest in his reference to Foucauldian ‘archaeological’ levels underpinning historical narratives.

<sup>53</sup> As set out by Plato in the creation myth in *Timaeus*, 34b-38e. Plotinus describes the human soul as the *anima mundi* “particularised for the space of the mortal life of man” (*Ennead* I.2).

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Kripal, *Comparing Religions* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 391-392.

<sup>55</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1969).

<sup>56</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, chapters 4 and 7.

<sup>57</sup> Tomlinson suggests “... archaeology in its broadest aims—its aims to uncover, by means of a metasubjective historical emphasis, patterns invisibly dispersed through past discourses and practices—seems to me a much-needed addition to the music historian’s resources. With it we might begin to understand in nontranscendental ways the forces beyond individual agency that have conspired in shaping music histories.” (246). I would view an astrological perspective in this light, with the proviso that astrological symbolism is not an objective ‘force’ but a language to be interpreted, producing meanings from ‘above’ rather than ‘below’ the “horizon of subjective consciousness” (*Music in Renaissance Magic*, 36).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* x.

levels of significance”, and “unseen cultural continuities”.<sup>59</sup> Chua too refers to the archaeological process as “digging out huge epistemological layers in which the details are symbolic forms embedded within a stratum of knowledge”.<sup>60</sup>

However, Tomlinson remains sceptical that the modern mind can take on the power of the symbol to lead beyond its rational trajectories. He asks, “Where might we find a space in our world for a real, efficacious Renaissance musical magic?”<sup>61</sup> He doubts the possibility of moving to “the place where magic works”, speaking of an “unresolvable alienation” separating us from practitioners such as Ficino.<sup>62</sup> Tomlinson has erected a metaphorical fence between rational understanding *of* and *participation in* the workings of ‘magic’, and from his side cannot imaginatively engage with “the unknowable function of our knowledge”, which is the logic of symbol, the logic of resemblances.<sup>63</sup> However, I would suggest that it is *only* by means of such engagement that the ‘truth’ of astrology will emerge, in a hermeneutic move that is simply not compatible with an objectivist stance to reality.<sup>64</sup> Music and image may both cut through any interference by the discursive mind in a direct appeal to the emotions, but a symbolic *language* such as astrology requires a prior intellectual grasp of its allegorical meanings. One understands the erotic power of Monteverdi’s madrigals through *being moved*, but one understands where symbolic language points through travelling with it, allowing the associations to intuitively unfold from the initial interpretative engagement. Once learned, however, a language like astrology can lead to a revelation of meaning equally as immediate and visceral as music.<sup>65</sup>

Proclus describes the movement from literal to symbolic interpretation in relation to *telestike* (the animation of statues in ancient theurgic ritual) as a fourfold process of increasing perceptual depth: firstly, seeing the statue as simply matter, secondly as a representation,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. xii.

<sup>60</sup> Chua, *Vincenzo Galilei*, 17.

<sup>61</sup> Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 247.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 248. This problematic is best illustrated by McGilchrist, who points to the impossibility of accessing ‘right hemisphere’ insight if one is only using the powers of the left hemisphere’s rational function (*The Master and his Emissary*, 228-229). Therefore, Tomlinson can only look back with nostalgia at the syncretic abilities of the Renaissance mind whilst seeing it as alien to the project of modernism.

<sup>64</sup> For a discussion on the limitations of an objectivist position, see George Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 163-166.

<sup>65</sup> See Maggie Hyde, “The Judder Effect”, *The Astrological Journal*, vol. 3, no. 5 (2001), 48-53.

thirdly as an imitation and finally as a full embodiment of the presence of the deity.<sup>66</sup> As Peter Struck has discussed, the function of the symbolic object, act or invocation in theurgic and divinatory practice was to “make the impossible to happen” by connecting two radically different orders of being, matter and spirit.<sup>67</sup> The material or musical symbol, when engaged with ritually, stirred the viewer’s or listener’s imagination to not only *know*, but *unite with* sacred reality, culminating in their divinisation, their *becoming* divine.<sup>68</sup> In my view, the astrological birthchart can be seen as analogous to such a theurgic symbol, when it is ‘read’ in ways which lead to the realisation of the symbolic meanings in a lived experience. This meeting of universal symbol and particular instance may then point to an even more profound sense of participation in ‘one world’ where the subject-object divide is seen as illusory.<sup>69</sup> Viewed in this way, Monteverdi’s own search for the perfect marriage of words and music can be seen as part of a much bigger picture in which he is fulfilling the destiny *signified* by horoscopic symbolism, but in no way *caused* by it, a theme often reiterated by Ficino.<sup>70</sup>

Another clarifying metaphorical framework is the four senses hermeneutic of early medieval Judaism and Christianity, where meanings of sacred images or texts are revealed in four different ways: literally, allegorically, tropologically and mystically.<sup>71</sup> The ‘tropological’ turn of the soul occurs when an active realisation of symbolic meaning is induced by which inevitably leads to new insight and action.<sup>72</sup> At this point, a more abstract understanding of intellectual allegory gives way to embodied ‘tasting’ or sensing, an affirmation of truth in which something is at stake for the reader. Henry Corbin puts it as follows:

The difference between ‘symbol’ and what nowadays is commonly called ‘allegory’ is simple to grasp. An allegory remains on the same level of evidence and perception, whereas a symbol guarantees the correspondence between two universes belonging to

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<sup>66</sup> Proclus, *In Parmenidem* 847, See Peter Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 237. On statue animation, see also Voss, “The Secret Life of Statues” in *Sky and Psyche*, eds N. Campion & P. Curry (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2006) 201-234.

<sup>67</sup> Struck, *Birth of the Symbol*, 213.

<sup>68</sup> See Gregory Shaw, “Living Light; an exploration of Divine Embodiment” in Voss, A. & Curry, P. eds (2008) *Seeing with Different Eyes; Essays in Astrology and Divination* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 57-81.

<sup>69</sup> On the realisation of the symbol in astrology and its fourfold interpretation, see Cornelius, *The Moment of Astrology*, chs 14 & 15.

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. Ficino, Letter “Divine Law cannot be made by the heavens” in *Marsilio Ficino*, ed. Angela Voss (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 2006), 83-94.

<sup>71</sup> For a clear summary of the four senses and chief sources, See Helen Flanders Dunbar, ‘The Fourfold Method’ in *Symbolism in Medieval Thought and its Consummation in the Divine Comedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1929) 263-282.

<sup>72</sup> See Voss, “A Methodology of the Imagination”, *Eye of the Heart Journal*, Issue 3 (2009), 37-52.

different ontological levels. It is the means, and the only one, of penetrating into the invisible, into the world of mystery, into the esoteric dimension.<sup>73</sup>

In the tropological sense the symbol ‘speaks’, addresses the interpreter personally, stimulates insight, self-understanding and purpose. It may arise in the unique experience of the omen, oracle or divinatory utterance ‘hitting home’; the astonishing synchronicity, the meaningful revelation. It may often have moral implications, such as a call to action or to change one’s life in some way, and has the potential to instil a sense of wholeness, oneness or unity between symbol, self and world. The soul ‘turns’ when it realises, sometimes in a flash, its own implication in the symbolic meaning—in Jungian terms, something hitherto ‘unconscious’ may suddenly become apparent.<sup>74</sup> At this point, the astrologer or diviner might see how a speculative interpretation becomes fully embodied in an actual event or person in the world. Where the symbol ultimately points is impossible to say, only that its meanings will unfold in relation to the capacity of the reader or viewer to see them. As Adrian Snodgrass tells us, the ultimate referent of the symbol “is not to be known by the senses or the cognitive mind, but only by the immediate and intuitive knowledge, a non-differentiated state of awareness in which the knower, the known and the act of knowing are inseparably fused and non-distinct”.<sup>75</sup>

There is so much more that could be said about the symbolic function, particularly regarding the difference between mere fantasy and the kind of ‘active imagination’ that unlocks the door to productive meaning.<sup>76</sup> I would invite the reader, however, to engage with the neoplatonic understanding of the symbol as *intermediary* between two distinct modes of cognition, the concrete and the noetic, for the image, text or music as symbol points to something unknown, something mysterious yet unitive about the nature of consciousness.

### **Allegorising Mercury and Venus**

Monteverdi’s Mercury-Venus conjunction is in the zodiacal sign of Gemini, the twins, and these planets would have been visible as evening stars in the days around his birth. Gemini is also his Sun sign, and an astrologer would say that Gemini is a strong ‘signature’ of his

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<sup>73</sup> Henry Corbin, “Mysticism and Humour” in *Spring Journal*, 1993, 27.

<sup>74</sup> See Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* (Collected Works vol. 5, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 192 on the ethical function of the ‘realised’ image.

<sup>75</sup> Adrian Snodgrass, “Architecture, Time and Eternity”, vol. 1, (Columbia, Missouri: South Asia Books, 1990), 2.

<sup>76</sup> On the difference between the ‘imaginary’ and ‘the imaginal’ Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis*, (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1976); see also Joan Chodorow, *Jung on Active Imagination* (Routledge: London, 1997).

personality, creativity and imagination. Duality and contrast, ingenuity and invention are inherent to this airy sign, which is balanced and tempered by the many other factors at play including the irascibility and passion of a Leo ascendant, and the piety and perfectionism of his Virgo Moon. I am not going to attempt a full analysis here of Monteverdi's horoscope, as I want to focus on the Mercury-Venus conjunction and its aspects.<sup>77</sup> I hope to demonstrate how 'returning' his marriage of words and music to its archetypal referents as a 'hermeneutic of the world'<sup>78</sup> means opening the imagination to layers of meaning beyond both history and text.

Let us travel back to the Florentine studio of Sandro Botticelli, where the great artist embarked on a series of mythological paintings under the guidance of Ficino. In the painting known to us as *Primavera*, painted in the 1480s, we see depicted a woodland grove where nine figures are arranged in various postures, the central female figure clearly leading their dance and directing a flow of energy from her left to her right.<sup>79</sup> Space prevents a detailed analysis of this enchanting scene, but I refer the reader to John Dee's recent study in which he convincingly demonstrates that the central figure is not (only) Venus, as is commonly assumed, but also can be identified as Luna, the Goddess of the Moon, who is leading the viewer's gaze towards three dancing nymphs.<sup>80</sup> Dee identifies these as Sol (Sun), Venus and Jupiter, the "three Graces" as specified in Ficino's treatise of astral magic, *De vita coelitus comparanda*.<sup>81</sup> Venus is struck by Cupid's arrow, as she gazes longingly at Mercury who turns his back on her and points his caduceus up through the clouds. We can imagine these two figures engaged in the process of erotic initiation described by Plato in his *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, where the power of love incites in the soul a remembrance of its true home, and

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<sup>77</sup> In Monteverdi's birth chart, which depicts which the planetary positions at the time and place of his birth, we find the Sun in Gemini (using the tropical zodiac), with the planets Venus and Mercury in the same sign, situated at 22 degrees 2 minutes and 23 degrees 46 minutes respectively.<sup>77</sup> This means that they form a 'conjunction'. They also form a square (90 degree) aspect to Pluto at 19 degrees 10 minutes of Pisces, a sextile (60 degree) aspect to Mars at 21 degrees 56 minutes of Aries, and an opposition (180 degrees) to Uranus at 19 degrees 43 minutes of Sagittarius. But of course they are continually in motion, following their individual cycles, and as they 'return' or make aspects to natal positions throughout the life, they can be mapped on to specific events with accuracy, which then conveys a cosmic symbolism and meaning to these events.

<sup>78</sup> For an informative essay on the intrinsic semantic nature of the world, see Bernardo Kastrup, "Not Its Own Meaning: A Hermeneutic of the World", *Humanities*, 6, 55 (2017), 1-11.

<sup>79</sup> The associations with McGilchrist's neurological observations are obvious here: the central forest alcove even takes the shape of the brain, with the divine feminine as the 'rational soul', mediating between the hemispheres as she directs the 'particulars' gathered by the left hemisphere towards the unifying function of the right, in which Venus and Mercury preside as carriers of Eros.

<sup>80</sup> John Dee, "Eclipsed: An Overshadowed Goddess" in *Journal of Renaissance Studies* vol. 27, issue 1 (2010), 4-33.

<sup>81</sup> Ficino (1989) 262-265.

it longs to return there.<sup>82</sup> According to Plato, unrequited passion is necessary to fuel the desire, to keep it alive, until eventually the lovers may unite on a level beyond that of physical consummation. But why is the flame kindled between Venus and Mercury?

Astrologically, Venus symbolises love and desire, the power of creativity and harmony. She is the knowledge of the heart, the beauty of form. Yet without Mercury's gifts of reason, intelligence and interpretation, she cannot express her knowledge. She longs for union with him so that the head and the heart may mutually inform each other and create offspring which are not only beautiful, but communicate meaning to the intellect. Venus and Mercury unite in art which moves the soul *because* it has a message. In McGilchrist's terms, Venus could be seen to represent the deep insight gained through the emotional or intuitive engagement of the right hemisphere, which needs to be articulated and reflexively assimilated by the left before being 'offered back' to the 'higher mind' in the full light of consciousness.<sup>83</sup> In one version of the Greek myth, Aphrodite and Hermes unite and their child is Eros, the *daimon* of love; in another tale their child is Hermaphroditus.<sup>84</sup> In both cases, their conjunction appears to generate a 'third' principle which infuses beauty with meaning, creating a symbol which embodies the highest potentialities for psychic integration.<sup>85</sup> Daniel Chua sees music as "the rational agent of enchantment itself,"<sup>86</sup> which is perfectly allegorised in Mercury's relationship with Venus.

Returning to Monteverdi, how perfectly this conjunction of Mercury and Venus in Gemini reflects his desire to communicate the power of love, for the sign of Gemini is also 'ruled' by Mercury – that is, Mercury's qualities are affiliated to Gemini and it is particularly powerful when located there. Mercury is naturally stronger than Venus in this zodiac sign, so it is perhaps no surprise that the words must always command, the meaning of the text must always govern the choice of musical phrase. The beauty of the harmony (Venus) is acted upon, like an alchemical agent of transformation, by the eloquence of Mercury who brings all his powers of invention to bear on creating the perfect vehicle to mirror his words. With no text to incite the mind, instrumental music for Plato would be just superficial entertainment

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<sup>82</sup> See fn. 3, and Plato, *Symposium*, 210a-212a.

<sup>83</sup> See McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 206.

<sup>84</sup> See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, vol.1 (Harmondsworth 1997), 58.

<sup>85</sup> The Annunciation and birth of the 'divine child' can be read as an expression of the same archetype in Christian mythology.

<sup>86</sup> Chua, *Vincenzo Galilei*, 22.

and lead the soul nowhere, a conviction so elegantly conveyed by Ficino in his letter on ‘Divine Frenzy’.<sup>87</sup>

Over a century before Monteverdi’s *seconda prattica*, it is Ficino who introduces the Platonic idea that “solemn music and poetry” imitates celestial harmony far more powerfully than vocal harmony or instrumental music, because “it expresses with fire the most profound and, as a poet would say, prophetic meanings, in the numbers of voice and movement.”<sup>88</sup> For Plato, Venus and Mercury both incite divine frenzy – the frenzy of erotic desire through the eyes, and the frenzy of poetry and music through the ears.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, according to Plato, “the manner of the diction and the words [should] follow and conform to the disposition of the soul”,<sup>90</sup> so both text and music are then ‘returned’ to the emotional affect which they seek to evoke, but an affect now emancipated from a personal, earthly desire and transformed into a sense of divine *meraviglia*. In this way, the song becomes no less than a theurgic symbol, fusing sacred and profane love into one.

A beautiful illustration of this is the madrigal *Con che soavità*,<sup>91</sup> where Guarini’s text speaks of the lover wanting words to kiss (Venus), and kisses to speak (Mercury), lamenting that they can’t both be enjoyed simultaneously. But of course they can in song, as Monteverdi supports the text (Mercury) with rich, sensuous harmonies (Venus) in the instrumental accompaniment, and thus ‘fulfils’ the conjunction.<sup>92</sup> The offspring of this marriage, for the listener, is indeed deeply erotic. Monteverdi, in giving expression to his own innate ‘union of opposites’ through his artistic genius, thus creates a vehicle in which the listener may also experience an inner conjunction, an intimation of the transcendent potential of earthly love.

Yet, perhaps we can also find a paradox here. Sound and music (Venus) are primary phenomena, requiring no interpretation, and reaching directly to an emotional centre. In this sense, Venus is the mistress, as she provides the matrix for the meaning of the words (Mercury) to be fully experienced, as if *they* somehow confirm what is already there, as if

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<sup>87</sup> Ficino, “On Divine Frenzy” in *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 1, 42-48.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>89</sup> On the Platonic frenzies, see Plato, *Phaedrus*, 244; Ficino, *Commentary on Plato’s Symposium on Love* ed. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985), 170171.

<sup>90</sup> Tomlinson, *Monteverdi and the End of the Renaissance*, 25.

<sup>91</sup> In Monteverdi’s Seventh Book of Madrigals: *Con che soavità, labbra odorate e vi bacio e v’ascolto: ma se godo un piacer, l’altro m’è tolto. Come i vostri diletti s’ancidono fra lor, se dolcemente vive per ambedue l’anima mia? Che soave armonia fareste, o dolci baci, o cari detti, se foste unitamente d’ambedue le dolcezze ambo capaci, baciando i detti e ragionando i baci.*

<sup>92</sup> For an analysis of this piece, see Ossi, *Divining the Oracle*, 153-173.

they are in service to the music. Plato and Monteverdi may insist that the text must rule, but in experience it is the music itself which moves the listener and, I would argue, mysteriously conveys the meaning of the words even if one does not understand the language being sung. Venus in the sign of Gemini loves harmonious speech, she wants “words to kiss and kisses to speak”, and for this, Mercury must obey *her* command. As implied by both Platonic philosophy and McGilchrist’s neuroscientific thesis, the final turn of the soul must be an act of love, reinforced by longing and empowered by understanding.<sup>93</sup>

Gemini is a playful sign, not known for passionate depths, and indeed the lighter side of Monteverdi is expressed in his *Scherzi Musicali* of 1607. But, I would argue, Monteverdi is not so successful in this mode; a far more profound quality is evident in the *Vespers*, later madrigals, and *Selva Morale e Spirituale*. I mentioned earlier his artful use of musical techniques such as the ‘suspension of the dissonance’, creating a charge which is at times visceral in its intensity, and evoking a synthesis of emotional and spiritual passion which is at once painful and cathartic.<sup>94</sup> Can we find this mirrored astrologically? Perhaps so, in the square (90 degree) aspect from Venus/Mercury to Pluto in the eighth house of the horoscope. Square aspects between planets denote areas of tension, and here Monteverdi’s creative impulse taps into the underworld and communes directly with its king. Discovered in 1930, Pluto has assumed the meaning of deep transformation through encounter with the mysteries of death and rebirth, which is also characteristic of the eighth house in a horoscope.<sup>95</sup> Monteverdi’s music certainly carries an awe and majesty, capable of evoking an experience of annihilation, or mystical transcendence, or both. It is highly significant that at the time he was writing his most radical and spiritually intense *Vespers of the Blessed Virgin*, Pluto was being animated by his progressed Moon, which we can read allegorically as the marriage of Persephone (a Moon goddess) and Hades.<sup>96</sup> Astrologers might say that Monteverdi underwent an awakening into the mysteries of the divine feminine under such an aspect, and we may speculate that on some level redemption was offered in the wake of his loss of the two earthly women who were closest to him.

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<sup>93</sup> As in Plato, *Phaedrus; Symposium*; McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 308.

<sup>94</sup> A striking example of this technique is found in the madrigal *Hor che’l ciel e la terra* in the Eighth Book of Madrigals.

<sup>95</sup> Further on the astrological Pluto, see Liz Greene, *The Astrology of Fate* (New York: Weiser, 1986).

<sup>96</sup> The myth of Demeter and Persephone was enacted in the ancient Greek mystery rituals at Eleusis. The progressed Moon takes just over 2 months to travel through a zodiac sign and would have been exactly conjunct Monteverdi’s Pluto on 18 June 1610.

But that is not all. Monteverdi's Venus-Mercury is also opposed by Uranus in the fifth house, and for modern astrologers Uranus (discovered in 1781) signifies radical innovation, change, renewal, independence, originality and, significantly, the intellectual radicalism of the Enlightenment. Monteverdi's revival of the ancient Greek ideal of 'ethos' was achieved through innovative vocal techniques, instrumentation and performance practice. His music is bold, daring and makes a complete break with the *prima prattica* of the Renaissance polyphonists. As we have seen, his use of dissonance (a very 'Uranian', shocking effect) is the chief characteristic of his style, aimed to produce glimpses of transcendence. Mercury-Uranus would also signify a sharp tongue and an outspoken mind, and this aspect of Monteverdi's character is well-documented, particularly in relation to his lack of remuneration and ill-treatment by his employer.<sup>97</sup>

How apt that on the very *day* of publication of his Eighth Book of Madrigals, the consummation of his *seconda prattica*, (1<sup>st</sup> September, 1638), we find transiting Mercury conjunct Monteverdi's progressed Venus—as if a cosmic confirmation of the sacred marriage for which he strived, brought to fruition in the most sophisticated and innovative statement of the madrigal form.<sup>98</sup>

### **Musical symbolism in Monteverdi's Vespers**

The fourfold hermeneutic processes of both Christianity and Neoplatonism recognise that beyond both allegorical and tropological interpretations of a symbolic text or image lies a possible ineffable, mystical sense in which can be described as revelation.<sup>99</sup> How is it possible to demonstrate this in words? In the final realisation of the symbol, the allegorical or metaphorical form is no longer separate from what it points to—it embodies an absolute synthesis of form and meaning, the representation of the form folding back into the presentation of meaning as a seamless whole. It simply IS. With that caveat in mind, all I can do to demonstrate a deeper stratum of the Venus/Mercury hermeneutic is to highlight two specific examples of musical symbolism where in my view Monteverdi achieves an unsurpassed synthesis of textual meaning, musical innovation and emotional depth. These both come from his *Vespro della Beata Virgine* of 1610, a dramatic collection of liturgical

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<sup>97</sup> See for instance Monteverdi's letter to Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga of December 1608, discussed in Whenham and Wistreich, *The Cambridge Companion to Monteverdi*, 68.

<sup>98</sup> That is, Mercury at 17 degrees Virgo, conjunct progressed Venus at 17 degrees 52 Virgo. See fn. 103 on secondary progressions.

<sup>99</sup> On this mystical sense, see Robert J. Dobie, *Logos & Revelation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 19-24.

settings composed as a show piece for his application for the post of Maestro di Capella at St Marks, Venice. Perhaps, just perhaps, I can convey how the marriage of words and music in these pieces may induce a mystical sense for the listener.<sup>100</sup> The composition of the *Vespers* followed a period of illness, exhaustion and sorrow in Monteverdi's life; he had recently lost the two most important women in his life, and was tired of the Mantuan court where he suffered endless hardship and poverty.

One of the most startling and dramatic compositions in the *Vespers* is *Duo Seraphim* for three tenors and *basso continuo*. The text of this declamatory motet (taken from Isaiah and John)<sup>101</sup> certainly lends itself to specific musical symbolism, but I also hope to show how we can find all four senses embodied here, as we move from Biblical text to musical evocation, from astrological symbolism to universal principles. Monteverdi's genius finds full expression in this piece, using extravagant vocal techniques to deliver the text with passionate intensity. Jeffrey Kurtzman has pointed out that here Monteverdi "makes more extensive use of virtuosic ornamental devices than any other few-voiced motet of the early seventeenth century I have yet observed".<sup>102</sup>

On the literal level, the text depicts two Seraphim<sup>103</sup> calling to one another, praising God. They are then joined by a third singer to affirm the power of the three in one, the Holy Trinity.<sup>104</sup> To move to the musical allegory, Monteverdi uses number symbolism to great effect; he creates a vocal 'competition' between the two Seraphim who vie with each other in displays of building intensity, emphasising the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>105</sup> of the word *sanctus* (holy) with the innovative vocal *trillo* ornament. At the words *tres sunt* (there are three), a third voice joins in, and Monteverdi creates his most stunning effect at the words *et hi tres* where a perfect root position triad 'collapses' into a unison for a musical demonstration of the 'three in one'. I would suggest that the effect on the listener goes far

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<sup>100</sup> I recommend the performance by John Eliot Gardiner and the Monteverdi Choir at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S99FCAFNgA>

<sup>101</sup> Isaiah 6:2-3; 1 John 5:7.

<sup>102</sup> Jeffrey Kurtzman, *The Monteverdi Vespers of 1610: Music, Context, Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 147-8.

<sup>103</sup> Seraphim are the highest of the Christian ranking of angels, often depicted as the most important of the choirs, taught to sing by the Holy Spirit. See Ivan Moody, "The Seraphim Above: some Perspectives on the Theology of Orthodox Church Music" in *Religions*, 6 (2015), 355.

<sup>104</sup> *Duo Seraphim clamabant alter ad alterum: sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth; Plenum terra est Gloria eius. Tres sunt qui testimonium dant in coelo: Pater, Verbum, et Spiritus Sanctus: et hi tres sunt.* (Two angels called to one another, Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Sabaoth! The earth is full of your glory. There are three who give testimony in heaven, Father, Word and Holy Spirit, and Three are One).

<sup>105</sup> "tremendous and fascinating mystery" in Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950.

beyond an intellectual appreciation of Christian dogma, because the ‘three in one’ symbolism is recognised in Pythagorean terms as evoking the foundational principles of creation as reflected in the human soul.<sup>106</sup> This profound mystery is thus enacted and ‘realised’ each time the music is heard; it feels sublime, because the listener too gathers their opposing inner voices into one, stable centre through a kind of sympathetic resonance.

My second example is the *Gloria Patri* at the conclusion of the *Vespers*. Here, we find two orders of reality, divine and human, brought into a single focus in a way which does not merely ‘represent’ them musically, but *performs* the conjunction as one listens. Monteverdi uses a tripartite texture—two tenor voices, one echoing the other, and a third element, a single, slow moving cantus firmus sung by a boys’ choir to the doxology, *Gloria Patri et Filio, et spiritui sancto*. It is as if the choir embodies the holy spirit as ‘binding element’, a timeless, suspended, ethereal backdrop to the vocal pyrotechnics of the two tenors, as Father and Son, the ‘Son’ echoing the extraordinary intensity, virtuosity and drama of the ‘Father’ at each word (or is the Father echoing the Son?)<sup>107</sup> At a spine-tingling moment, both tenors stop and we are left with the choir, exposed, at the words *et spiritui sancto*, as if to emphasise its role as the eternal, heavenly spirit that pervades all. The choir acts as the musical embodiment of the ‘three in one’ which resolves the tension of the Father-Son duality as an act of extension or creation, by allowing the listener to return to the unchanging, transcendent realm which was ‘at the beginning’ of all things. Here is ‘symbol as sacrament’ in its purest expression, embodying deep underlying cosmic principles through a Christian lens which emphasises both the immanence and transcendence of divinity. The ‘three in one’ is similarly expressed in Plato’s *Timaeus*, where the world-soul is constituted of the same, the different and the essence made of both; or McGilchrist’s metaphor of right, left and imagination, or Jung’s transcendent function, which arises to harmonise the opposites of the conscious and unconscious aspects of mind.<sup>108</sup> These are all ways in which a fundamental distinction is recognised between two orders of reality, two ways of knowing, two inner polarities, which always seek the resolution of ‘the third thing’. I will come back to this.

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<sup>106</sup> On Pythagorean number symbolism see Keith Critchlow, *The Soul as Sphere and Androgyne* (Frankfort, KY: Gnomon Press, 1980).

<sup>107</sup> Algis Uzdavinys has pointed to the ancient Egyptian initiatory rites of father and son, as “symbol”, literally two halves of the same entity, in “Metaphysical Symbols and their Function in Theurgy”, *Eye of the Heart Journal*, vol. 2, (2008), 2.

<sup>108</sup> See Jung, “The Transcendent Function” in *Collected Works*, vol 8, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969, 67-91. It would be interesting but beyond the scope of this chapter to explore Monteverdi’s “contraries that move the mind” from a Jungian perspective.

I mentioned earlier Ficino's celebration of Platonic 'divine frenzy', incited by music and poetry, to enable the soul to "fly back to its rightful home":<sup>109</sup> "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>110</sup> Monteverdi unites the frenzies of the poet and the lover in his desire to imitate the passionate devotion of his texts in music, and we must not forget that the performers themselves also must become 'frenzied', they must achieve super-human heights of vocal prowess and emotional fervour in praise of the sacred. One could say that they themselves become living symbols. In this way archetypal ideas are not simply *represented*, but in the same way as Proclus' statue-magic, they become embodied in the physical world and live in the moment of performance.

But there is more. We know that this piece was composed when there was a significant astrological event occurring in relation to Monteverdi's horoscope. Progressed Mercury was conjunct, therefore 'activating', Monteverdi's Venus/Mercury conjunction between December 1608 and August 1610.<sup>111</sup> The *Vespers* was published in July 1610, therefore the very period of Monteverdi's composition and publication of his most innovative, ingenious and flamboyantly extravagant composition is characterised symbolically by an intellectual and creative focus on beauty of form (the composition) in honour of the divine feminine (Venus). The movement of progressed Mercury from natal Venus to natal Mercury can also be seen as Mercury taking inspiration from the heart and creating embodied, sensual meaning, fulfilling his role as the walker between worlds. We also find a progression of Venus during this period, sextile to natal Neptune, the significator of spirituality, enchantment and imagination.<sup>112</sup> This harmonious aspect is a perfect symbolic expression for a work celebrating the divine feminine, reflecting Monteverdi's desire to be in service to

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<sup>109</sup> Ficino, "On Divine Frenzy", 45.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Secondary progressions are calculated by moving the natal planetary positions forward one day for each year of the individual's life. If we take the birth time as 9.30 am, Monteverdi's progressed Mercury was conjunct natal Venus 18 December 1608 (22 Gemini 02), and conjunct natal Mercury 18 August 1610 (23 Gemini 46), and as we know he was writing the *Vespers* during the summer of 1610, this provides fitting symbolism. It should be noted however that the limits of the Mercury progression within a possible 24 hour period are as follows: 1) for a 15 May 12.00am birth time, progressed Mercury conjunct natal Venus on 7 November 1608, progressed Mercury conjunct natal Mercury 11 November 1610; 2) for a 16 May 12.00 am birth time, progressed Mercury conjunct natal Venus on 6 February 1609, progressed Mercury conjunct natal Mercury 2 April 1610. This still provides a 'window' of progressed Mercury conjunct natal Mercury for the entire period of writing and publishing the *Vespers*. It should also be noted that astrologers generally take one degree of a zodiacal sign as an 'orb' in which progressions have effect, which justifies the significance of these progressions irrespective of exact timings. (I gratefully acknowledge the help of Geoffrey Cornelius in providing technical data).

<sup>112</sup> Progressed Venus at 14 degrees 22 Leo on 26 July 1610.

higher powers, and drawing inspiration from his devotion to the Virgin Mary. How apt too that Venus and Mercury were *Vespertine* (evening stars) at the time of his birth!

The ‘realisation’ of this symbolic interplay between cosmos, creativity and composition can only be in the immediacy of ‘tasting’ the meaning of the symbolism, and on listening to *Duo Seraphim*, the ‘two Seraphim’ and the ‘three in one’ cease to be limited to Biblical tropes or musicological allegories and resonate as lived realities. The listeners’ own divided souls are mirrored back to them in impassioned declamation; they *feel* the duality, *feel* the subsequent shift to the harmony of the triad, and *feel* a final merging into unison. In this way, the meaning of the text becomes lifted to a new level, as the sacred ‘truth’ expressed in Biblical terms begins to reveal something further. Through the exquisite stained glass window of Monteverdi’s composition, Christian mythos fuses with an even deeper mystery, an intelligence beyond all things, all images, all creeds, as Mercury’s caduceus pierces the clouds. The symbolism opens to many interpretations; the two Seraphim point to the duality of the sign of Gemini, but also to the inner polarity humans experience between head and heart, in this sense they are angels of reason and revelation—Mercurial messengers of God. They could also be seen as music and words, longing to unite to produce the alchemical ‘third thing’, the *lapis philosophorum*. In alchemy it is Mercury as quicksilver who brings about the transmutation of base matter into gold; for Ficino, Mercury is the airy spirit who when brought to bear on the melancholy humour through music, transforms it into genius.<sup>113</sup> I would also go so far to say that great art *is* that third thing, giving rise to the Eros that is born of the union of Mercury and Venus, who of course are none other than the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary in another guise. For Plato, Eros is the *daimon* or divine child who mediates between heaven and earth, being the facilitator of all magic, divination and sacrifice.<sup>114</sup>

One keeps returning to Ficino, for in so many ways Monteverdi’s own kind of magic can be seen as the culminating octave of Ficino’s Orphic invocations. Is there really any difference between Monteverdi’s imitation of Seraphim and Ficino’s imitation of the *daimones* of the stars? In practice, can anyone distinguish between “celestial” and “angelic” influences? In the end, is not Monteverdi also a magus of the highest order, leading the soul up through the celestial sphere through the incitement of intense emotion? In Ficino’s magical treatise, *De vita coelitus comparanda*, we read:

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<sup>113</sup> See Ficino, “*De vita sana*” in *Three Books on Life*, Book One, 116-123.

<sup>114</sup> Plato, *Symposium* 202e-203a.

But remember that song is a most powerful imitator of all things. It imitates the intentions and passions of the soul as well as words; it represents also people's physical gestures, motions, and actions as well as their characters and imitates all these and acts them out so forcibly that it immediately provokes both the singer and the audience to imitate and act out the same things. By the same power, when it imitates the celestials, it also wonderfully arouses our spirit upwards to the celestial influence and the celestial influence downwards to our spirit.<sup>115</sup>

Such music “which is full of spirit and meaning”, casts its power into the performer and from there by sympathetic resonance to the listener and directly influences it, thus returning it back to the cosmic harmonies it once enjoyed.<sup>116</sup> In a fourfold process, such music also has a physical affect on the body through the movement of air, an emotional affect through the meaning of the words, and it “floods us with a wonderful pleasure; by its nature, both spiritual and material, it at once seizes, and claims as its own, man in his entirety”.<sup>117</sup>

In this sense then, Monteverdi is surely no less than a high priest of theurgic ritual, inviting the Eros daimon to be born from the divine union of Mercury and Venus, and instilling the longing of the soul to return to its heavenly home.<sup>118</sup> McGilchrist writes of the desire for ‘re-union’ which can be seen to reside at the heart of the music of the high Renaissance, through the evocation of awe, wonder, piety and transcendence. He observes that the evocation of longing “suggests ... a distance, but a never-interrupted connection or union over that distance with whatever it is that is longed for, however remote the object of longing may be.”<sup>119</sup> I would suggest that the melancholic longing of the lover stirred by this music opens the channel to a deep knowing, a tropological insight resulting from a process of cooperation between head (Mercury) and heart (Venus) which leads to a synthesis, a new awareness, even a mystical sense. As McGilchrist puts it, in the rightful relationship between our two ways of knowing,

What is offered by the right hemisphere to the left hemisphere is offered back again and taken up into a synthesis involving both hemispheres. This must be true of the processes of creativity, of the understanding of works of art, of the development of the religious sense. In each there is a progress from an intuitive apprehension of whatever it may be, via a more formal process of enrichment through conscious, detailed analytic understanding, to a new, enhanced intuitive

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<sup>115</sup> Ficino, “*De vita coelitus comparanda*”, 359.

<sup>116</sup> See Ficino, *De vita coelitus comparanda* ch. XXI.

<sup>117</sup> From Ficino, Commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, quoted in D.P Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 9.

<sup>118</sup> On the power of longing in neoplatonic theurgy, see Shaw, “Containing Ecstasy: The Strategies of Iamblichean Theurgy”, *Dionysus*, vol 21 (2003), 53-88.

<sup>119</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 308.

understanding of this whole, now transformed by the process that it has undergone.<sup>120</sup>

It has been the humble intention of this essay to dance with Mercury and Venus as metaphors for McGilchrist's hemispheres (or vice versa), and to view Monteverdi's unique genius in the light of a neoplatonic approach to symbolic exegesis. In the end, of course, such an intention can only fall hopelessly short, for the final synthesis can only be fully realised in the living presence of the music itself, and a willingness to go where it leads.

If one accepts the symbol, it is as if a door opens leading into a new room whose existence one previously did not know. But if one does not accept the symbol, it is as if one carelessly went past this door, and since this was the only door leading to the inner chambers, one must pass outside into the streets again, exposed to everything external ... Salvation is a long road that leads through many gates. These gates are symbols.<sup>121</sup>

We have a choice—to look at the door or go through it. If we accept the invitation of Plotinus, of Jung, of McGilchrist to 'see one thing as another', to enter into a hermeneutic relationship with the world as symbol, then the music of such a creative genius as Monteverdi could lead us to our own salvation, whatever that great mystery might be.

## Appendix

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<sup>120</sup> McGilchrist, *The Master and his Emissary*, 206.

<sup>121</sup> Jung, *Liber Novus*, 136-7, quoted in Liz Greene, *Jung's Studies in Astrology*, Routledge 2018, 82.

## Monteverdi

Natal

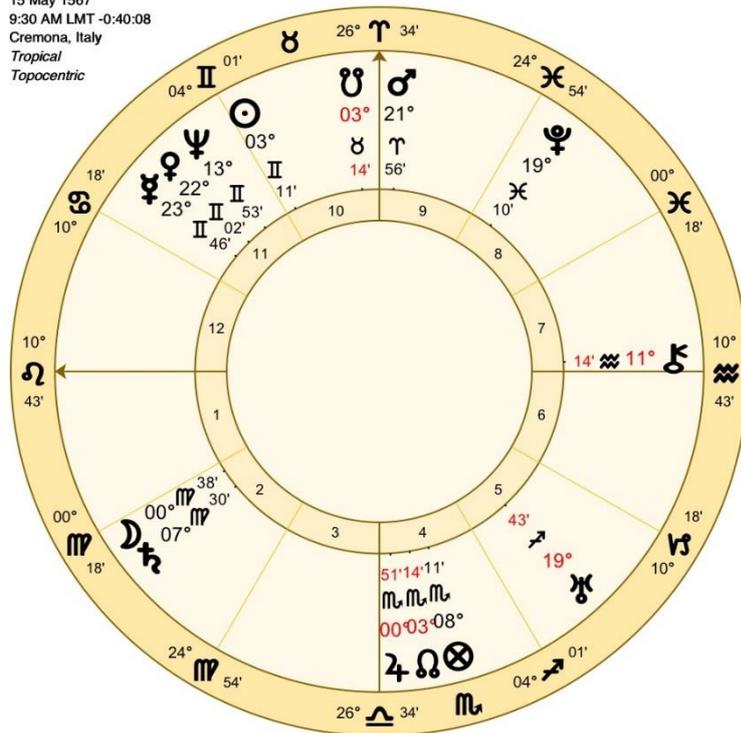
15 May 1567

9:30 AM LMT -0:40:08

Cremona, Italy

Tropical

Topocentric



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