

# Zodiac



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*Write Up on the Creative Project*

*Master of Arts program in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred*

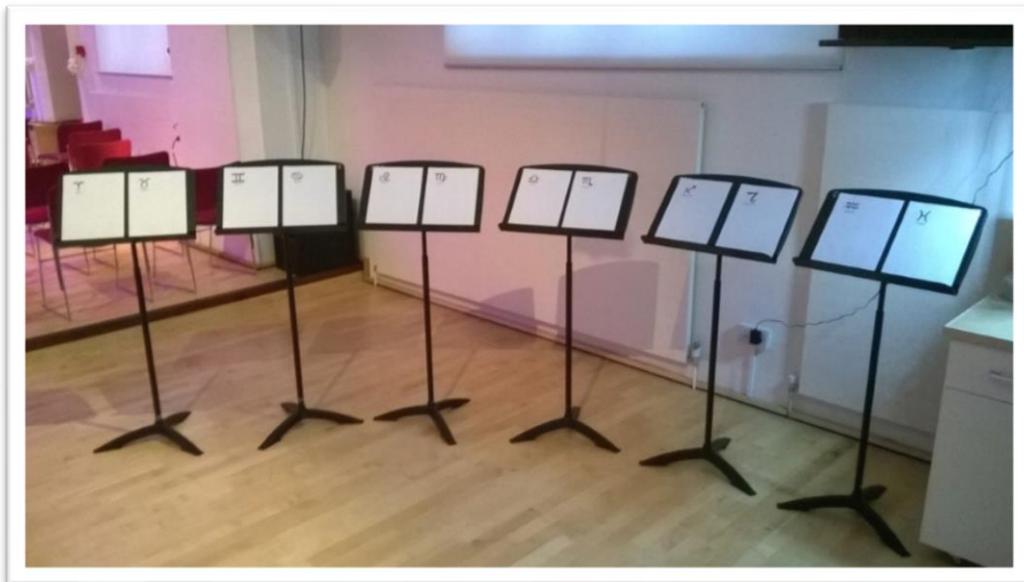
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*October 2014*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is a reflection on my creative project called *Zodiac*, music composed and performed with additional poetry on the twelve star signs, presented on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2014 in St. Gregory's church in Canterbury, as part of the Master of Arts program of Canterbury Christ Church University on 'Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred'.

*Zodiac* was performed live to an audience as part of the presentation by the 2014 MA fulltime students Frances Basham, Tegan Gigante and me. *Zodiac* was recorded and has been posted on *Vimeo* at <http://vimeo.com/107578720>. The poetry was read out by Victoria Field and I played four different saxes and clarinets, three-star signs to each. The audience consisted of 26 people, who were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their perception of the strength of resonance between the music and the expressed star sign. In creating *Zodiac* I made use of my artistic and intellectual skills to create inspired by research and to explore the options of further research. It has been a very rewarding experience and I would like to thank all who contributed in any way for helping me find this path.



*(Eduard Heyning, Tegan Gigante, Frances Basham)*

## 2. Music and the stars

When I was in my twenties I studied at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, graduating on the Latin poetry of the 12<sup>th</sup> century astrologer Bernardus Silvestris, who belonged to the School of Chartres. His *Cosmographia* tells the story of the creation of the world and the *homo novus*, modelled on the *Timaeus* of Plato. I loved the Platonic cosmos and clearly saw its relevance for art and science. After graduating I studied classical music for saxophone at the Groningen Conservatoire. It was very soothing to be absorbed in music for years. I always felt that both subjects were closely connected, both involving an inner image of moving beauty, but at the time I did not find much respect among academics for artists and vice versa.

When later in life I aspired to study again I applied for a doctoral program for musicians. My aim was to connect the cosmos of the *Timaeus* with the practice of music making. On writing a research proposal, I was at loss to define my practice based artistic research project. How on earth does one express the Platonic cosmos in music? Just at that time there landed a copy of Stockhausen's composition *TIERKREIS* on my desk, and it so to speak smiled at me with an inner light, saying: here is your connection. The cover showed a circle with the signs of the Zodiac and the characteristics of twelve melodies by Stockhausen. There was the Platonic heaven, directly connected to music for saxophone. So I made *TIERKREIS* the heart of my research proposal.

Eventually, I didn't enter the doctoral program, but I was accepted at the Canterbury MA on 'Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred'. I proposed to use the *TIERKREIS* research as my creative project, which was accepted. The project would comprise doing library research, making a website, creating several musical arrangements of *TIERKREIS*, performing at least one, and reflecting on the project. I started working on *TIERKREIS* right away and posted all my findings and arrangements on a special website I had created: [www.tierkreis.nu](http://www.tierkreis.nu) . From this website I have taken some information for the next chapter.

### 3. *TIERKREIS*

The twelve short melodies of Stockhausen's *TIERKREIS* are character pieces, representing the twelve signs of the Zodiac. Originally the music was composed for music boxes, but was later made available for any instrument, to be adapted by the performer. A complete performance begins with the melody corresponding to the Zodiac sign within which the day of the performance falls, and proceeds through the twelve melodies of the cycle, ending with a return to the starting melody. Each melody is to be played at least three times through, with variations or improvisations. The *TIERKREIS* melodies are constructed on several series that rule pitch and duration. The *Zentraltöne* of the melodies form a chromatic scale. The tempos of the melodies are ordered like a chromatic scale. On top of that, the technicalities of writing for music boxes demand further organisation of the musical material. The simple tunes are the outcome of an extremely complicated process of ordering sound.

The connection between the orbits of the stars and the tones of the musical scale comes from their mathematical proportions. The human brain can by nature recognize the consonances by their ratios, which is an amazing fact by itself. Based on the harmonic series the ear knows proportional perfection in sound. The mathematical ordering of music and its correspondence with the soul of man has been an object of research since Pythagoras, who introduced the concept of the Music of the Spheres, the regular movements of the stars perceived as harmonious music. As Joscelyn Godwin puts it:

"For those who are open to the possibility of cosmic harmony, their cosmos will be demonstrably harmonious. The number of different ways in which this has happened is simply an indication that the essential harmony of the solar system - the thing-in-itself, as it were - is of a scope and a harmonic complexity that no single approach can exhaust. The nearest one can come to understanding it as a whole is to consider some great musical work and think of the variety of analytical approaches that could be made to it, none of them embracing anything like the whole."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Godwin, J. (1987) *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth*, Rochester Vermont: ITI, p. 118.

In bringing music and the stars together Stockhausen stands in a long tradition of West-European cosmology starting from Pythagoras and Plato, inspiring philosophers, poets, designers and composers with the idea of a universe ordered on the proportions of the musical scale. Mankind, says Plato, has to look up to the heavens, where the stars and planets produce a harmony, the Music of the Spheres. It was a well-known cosmological theory in antiquity and survived the middle ages. In the Renaissance Marsilio Ficino and his Platonic Academy infused the Christian universe with this musical cosmos. Angela Voss writes: "Ficino not only translated into Latin for the first time the complete works of Plato, Plotinus and others, but combined his vocation as a Christian priest with active work as an astrologer and musician. The beneficial effects he himself experienced when playing his lyre and singing led him to formulate a therapeutic system in which music was played in accordance with an individual's horoscope"<sup>2</sup>.

For modern man the harmony of the cosmos has become a concept of the inner world. That doesn't make the idea less powerful, but it needs to be discovered through introspection and contemplation. And to look inside is just what Stockhausen is asking us to do. Stockhausen says he composed the *TIERKREIS* melodies 'with all its measures and proportions in keeping with the characteristics of its respective star sign, and one will discover many legitimacies when one hears a melody often, and exactly contemplates its construction ... '. The Music of the Spheres has been the inspiration of many composers, for instance Josef Strauss, Paul Hindemith, Gustav Holst, Rued Langgaard, Joep Franssen and Mike Oldfield. I made links to any composition inspired by the Music of the Spheres or the Zodiac I could find on the internet on the *TIERKREIS* website.

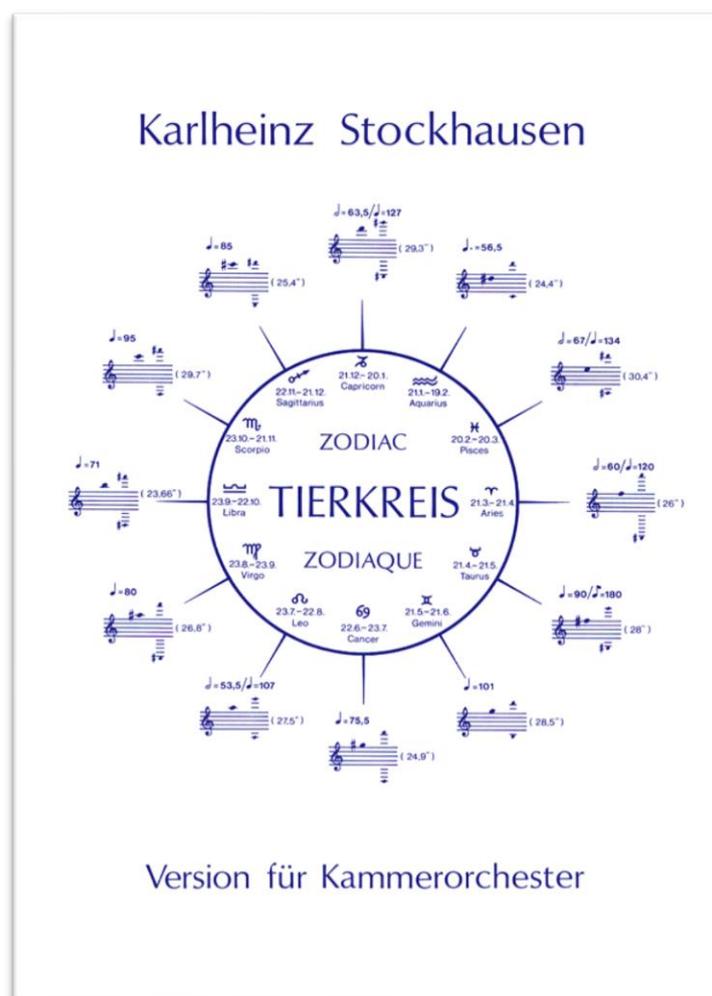
Why did Stockhausen base his composition on the twelve-star signs? Perhaps the sound of music boxes inspired celestial music; perhaps writing for a child made Stockhausen sentimental or perhaps he had heard Mort Garsons 1967 album *The Zodiac*, rock music 'to be played in the dark'. Michael Kurtz<sup>3</sup> says Stockhausen based his ideas for this project on two books, *Durchbruch Zur Zukunft - Der Mensch im Wassermannzeitalter* by Alfons Rosenberg and *Die Menschentypen - Die Psychologie der Tierkreiszeichen* by V.M. von Winter. Alfons Rosenberg (1902–1985) being Jewish fled the Nazis in 1935 to Switzerland,

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<sup>2</sup> Voss, A. 'Ficino and Renaissance Harmonia'(1998), *Culture and Cosmos* vol. 2 no. 2, 16-38.

<sup>3</sup> Kurtz, M. (1988) *Stockhausen-Eine Biographie*, Kassel/Basel: Bärenreiter, footnote 202

where he joined the *Eranos* circle of C. G. Jung and other renowned thinkers. In the appendix (p. 248-249) of Rosenberg's prophetic book on the Aquarius Age there is a Zodiac circle with planetary gods which Stockhausen obviously copied (though reversed) and a description of the star sign characters that very much matches his poetry to the *TIERKREIS* melodies. The planetary gods are dutifully presented in the *TIERKREIS* score above each melody, but I have found no trace of a musical expression of gods or planets in *TIERKREIS*. Did Stockhausen read the whole book or just the appendix? The book by dr. von Winter is a popular description of star sign characters with examples of famous people. It probably inspired Stockhausen to study the signs and characters of his family and friends to whom *TIERKREIS* is dedicated. I began to doubt the extent to which *TIERKREIS* expressed more than Stockhausen's personal life and the usefulness of the piece for the creative project of the MA, which asked for universal knowledge contextualised as personal creativity ...



#### 4. Myth, Cosmology, the Sacred and Creativity

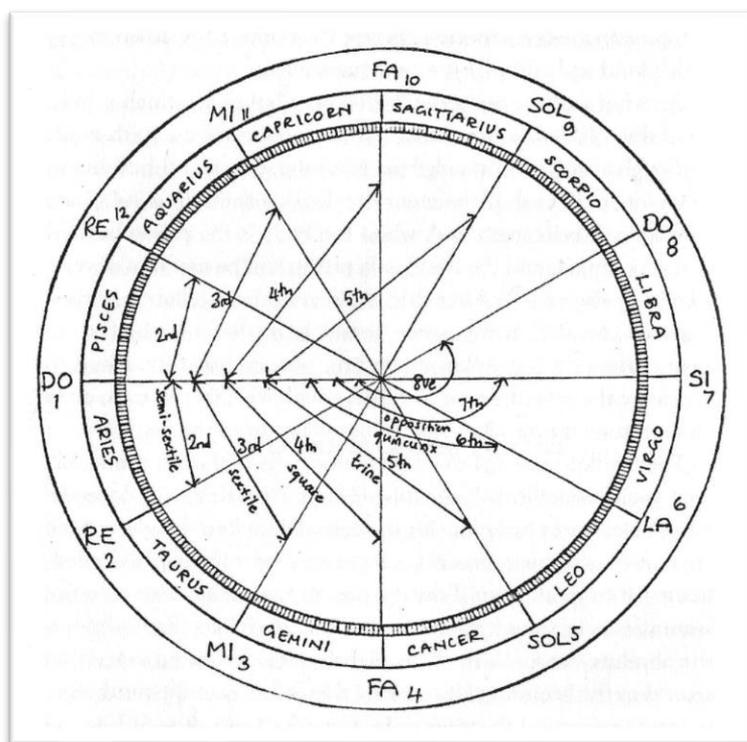
On the MA the students are introduced to non-rational modes of acquiring knowledge, which is exactly what music can do, especially if it has some sort of meaning to it. Music can sometimes say more than words as it evokes not only thoughts but movement as well. But the course material went well beyond that, introducing the Platonic concept of the yearning of the soul for eternal beauty and truth. As the course unfolded, I began to think of the creative project as a way of expressing ideas as well evoking them; music could depict the star signs but it could also reveal them, as in a ritual.

There is something magic about going on stage and performing music. It's not just handling the instrument, it's in a way a transforming experience, involving more than your normal day-consciousness. Performing you need all your resources, body and soul, embracing action, intuition, emotion, clear thinking, inspiration. The more you put the totality of your being into the performance, the better you can access your audience. Perhaps on stage one can communicate beyond words. Could music evoke the timeless image of the star signs? To measure this in a more or less objective way I planned to have the audience to my performance fill in a questionnaire regarding the resonance of music and star sign. But with *TIERKREIS* as music I sensed this was not going to work; I could often not feel the connection between the music and the star sign myself, so how could I expect the audience perceiving it?

At this point I was lucky to have a teacher who shared my doubts and suggested I put Stockhausen aside and compose or improvise my own musical material. I was shocked. *TIERKREIS* had been my focus for over a year; besides I would never be able to equal Stockhausen. But after some reflection I concluded this was really a marvellous opportunity to unlock my own creativity, to turn something so universal as the star signs into a set of simple melodies and perform them. And so, *Zodiac* was born. Stepping so to say out of the shoes of Stockhausen onto the floor *Zodiac* the project not only unlocked my own creativity, it also unlocked the world of astrology and the role of music connecting heaven and earth. Needless to say, I felt very unsure about my abilities to do so and postponed the actual composing as long as I could.

## 5. Zodiac

*Zodiac* was going to be my own music. Before actually composing something, I needed a musical framework, connecting music with astrology. What I liked about *TIERKREIS* was the structure Stockhausen had brought to the set of melodies. I took over his concept of the *Zentraltöne* but used the order that Ficino had introduced in his *Principles of Music*<sup>4</sup>. To Ficino the secret all-pervading influence of the stars matches the overpowering influence of music, which is why he considers musical incantation to be the most effective form of ‘imitating’ the heavens, through giving audible images to the ‘secret’ properties of the planets<sup>5</sup>.

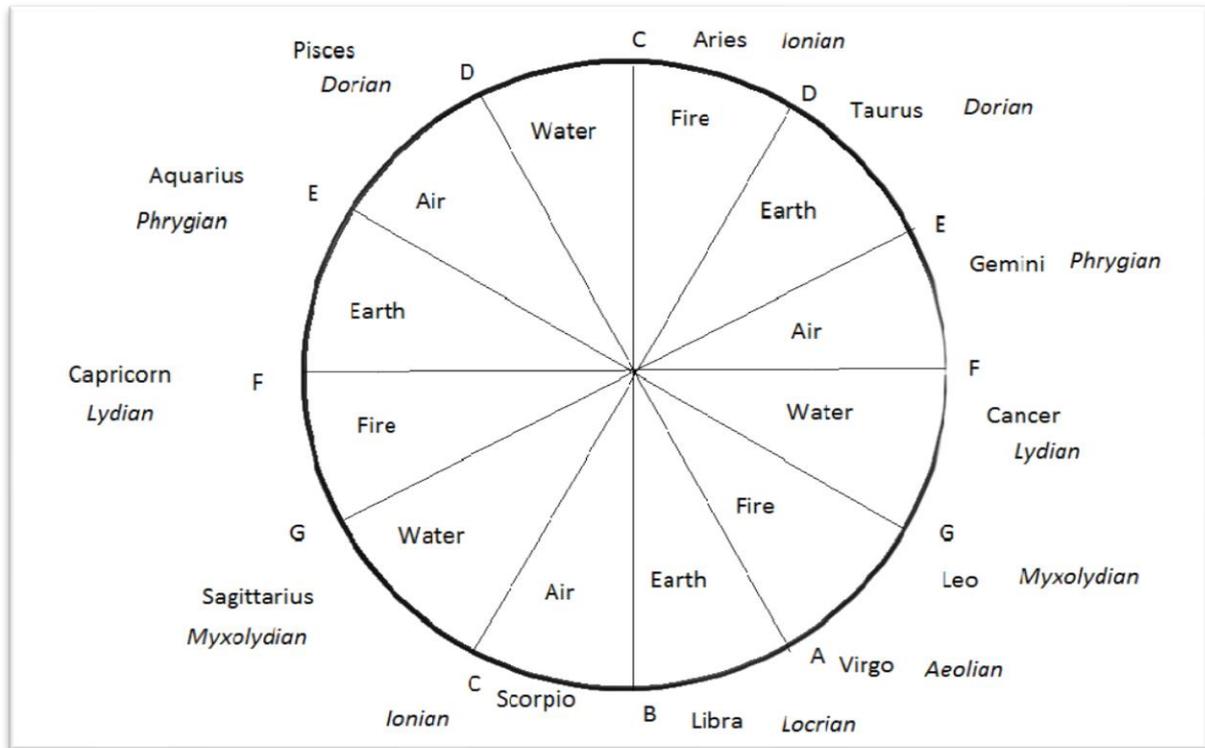


As an homage to Pythagoras I kept all melodies within the key of C major, connecting the so-called church modes to the star signs following Ficino's steps. Since there are only seven modes the first five have two signs to them. I distributed the instruments according to the triplicities (fire signs are played on soprano sax, air signs on tenor sax, water signs on

<sup>4</sup> Voss, A. (2006) *Marsilio Ficino*, Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, 186.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, 31.

clarinet and earth signs on the bass clarinet) and choose to express the polarities by playing positive signs in quadruple time and the rest in odd meters like  $\frac{3}{4}$ ,  $\frac{5}{8}$ ,  $\frac{7}{8}$ , etc. The result was:



In addition to consulting the books Stockhausen had used on astrology I read *Signs of the Zodiac. A Reference Guide to Historical, Mythological, and Cultural Associations* by Mary Ellen Snodgrass (Westport & London: Greenwood Press, 1997) and *The Secret Language of Astrology* by Roy Gillett (London: Watkins Publishing, 2011).

The actual composing didn't start until one week before the presentation; it comprised of reading and meditating about the star sign, improvising on the assigned instrument within the musical structure until my 'hands' would come up with a melody, write it down and check it the next day. I mixed jazzy tunes with romantic, 'classical' melodies and put in one folk-like tune as well. I transposed the sheet music to D major to make the B flat instruments sound as C major. When I finally had all twelve melodies ready, I played them in the following order and introduced some musical refinement (dynamics, articulation, tempo) to maximize distinction. One of the main challenges was diversity; here I definitely

wanted to do better than Stockhausen, so the audience would recognize the tune as characteristic.

During this process I woke up in the middle of the night with a small poem on the Aries star sign in my mind. Soon more lines followed, and I sat down to complete the cycle within a couple of hours. The poetry expressed the way I had provided the music with the characteristics of the star signs or the mood I had wanted to portray. Its value as art may be doubtful, but they certainly added something to the project as it supported the attempt at communicating inner images to an audience.

*Aries running up the hill, If not at once, finally it will.*

*Taurus trusted child of Mother Earth, Bouncing back like spring's rebirth.*

*Gemini brother, in tune with the other, Together apart but whole in one heart.*

*Cancer, dreaming of the Moon; Back and forth, a lovely tune.*

*Leo is shining bright, Proud, mighty, upright.*

*Virgin smiling from above, Her secret revealed: eternal love.*

*Libra: sweetness fills the air, Balanced mind has peace to share.*

*Scorpio: Get out of my way! I know how to fight but I prefer to play!*

*Sagittarius aims at the sky; Advancing in gallop, releasing on high.*

*Capricorn: the light shines inside; Pray to my star in the eternal night.*

*Aquarius: wisdom flowing from beyond, The piper who calls to the gates of dawn.*

*Pisces quivering overall, but Faith in love that conquers all.*

So there was the material; now it needed an audience.

## 6. Presentation

The presentation of *Zodiac* took place on the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2014 in St. Gregory’s church in Canterbury. After an introductory talk I played the melodies. As I would be busy changing instruments between the melodies, I asked a friend, Victoria Field, to read out the poetry. We performed the cycle two times to give the audience a good opportunity to let the music sink in. The audience, 26 people, were asked to take a program sheet with their star sign on the front and to fill in its questionnaire on the back, asking for their perception of the strength of resonance between the music and the star signs. The text of the program was:

*“Zodiac is a cycle of twelve melodies on the star signs of the Zodiac, played and improvised on saxes and clarinets. It is my first try at expressing my ideas through music and poetry. I’d like to ask your help in giving me feedback.*

For Pythagoras, Plato and their followers, music was a way to connect man with the eternal and the divine through his soul; the stars form a moving image of eternity and produce a harmonious sound. Creating and performing *Zodiac* is my first attempt at evoking this circle of strange animal-like forces and their characteristics. I’ve borrowed some ideas from Stockhausen and Ficino, but the music and poetry is mine, with some jazzy improvisation. The cycle starts with Aries; fire signs are played on soprano sax, air signs on tenor sax, water on clarinet and earth on the bass clarinet. The harmony is modal in the key of C major. Positive signs are in quadruple time. But that’s not really important; all I want to know is

*how much your intuition says the music resonate with the star sign:*

resonates	little bit	partly	sufficient	clearly	strongly
♈ Aries					
♉ Taurus					
♊ Gemini					
♋ Cancer					
♌ Leo					
♍ Virgo					

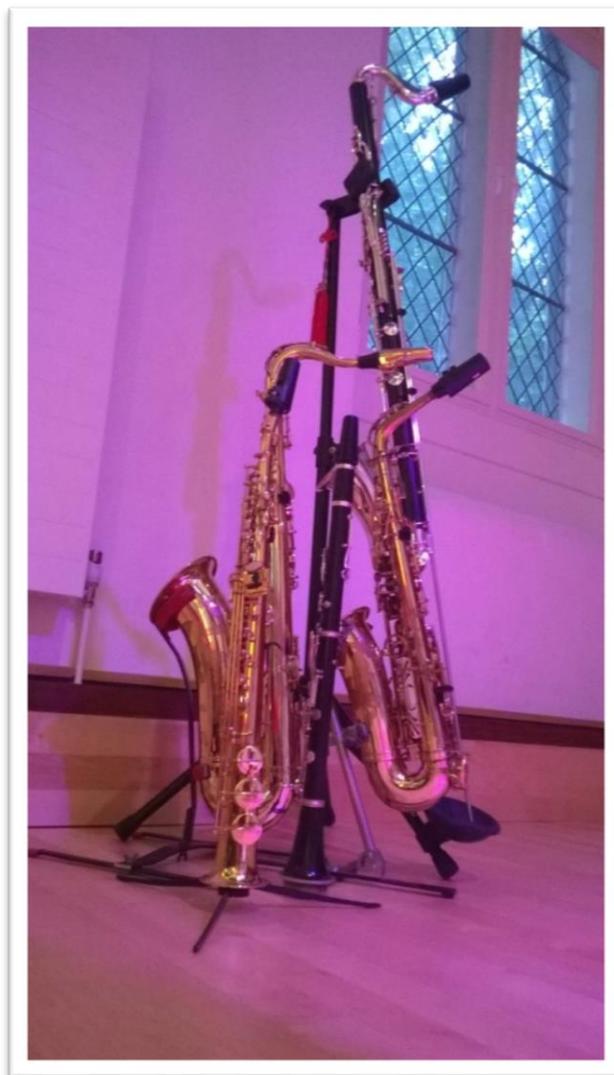
♎ Libra					
♏ Scorpio					
♐ Sagittarius					
♑ Capricorn					
♒ Aquarius					
♓ Pisces					

The performance went really well. Afterwards the questionnaires were collected, and the results were definitely encouraging. The audience said that they found the music reverberate on average for 74, 4 % with the star signs. The listeners rated the melodies of their own star sign most of the time reverberating much better than other signs. Perhaps this signifies a better knowledge of the listener of the characteristics of the star sign rather than better characteristics of the music.

	TOTAL	score 1-5	in %	own star sign
♈ Aries	104	4.0	80	5.0
♉ Taurus	101	3.9	78	5.0
♊ Gemini	104	4.0	80	4.5
♋ Cancer	104	4.0	80	5.0
♌ Leo	97	3.7	75	3.4
♍ Virgo	102	3.9	78	4.7
♎ Libra	91,5	3.5	70	4.0
♏ Scorpio	76	2.9	58	2.0
♐ Sagittarius	92	3.5	71	3.0
♑ Capricorn	100	3.8	77	4.5
♒ Aquarius	93	3.6	72	4.0
♓ Pisces	106	4.1	82	2.0

Scorpio did receive the lowest score; remarkable that exactly this melody is the only one somewhat reminiscent of Stockhausen's *TIERKREIS* melody. Many people came to me after the performance to express their enthusiasm; one person said to have been moved to tears. From the recording I selected the best tracks for an on-line publication on *Vimeo*, together with the poetry, where it was also well received.

On reflection I see the presentation of *Zodiac* as a successful first try but certainly not covering all aspects that music to the star signs could entail. There are endless possibilities to refine the music in terms of scales, patterns, rhythms and instruments; more research on astrology will no doubt provide better inspiration. But as a first try it did well. However, I now see that this project has taught me an important point I didn't understand until after the performance.



## 7. Star Music

My first essay for the MA had as its subject the role of music in Platonic philosophy and its relevance for music performance today. One of the teachers formulated my quest as “how musicians may use their ideas more consciously” by “composing music with a specific cosmic or spiritual agenda, and the performer is aware of this”. Did I do that with *Zodiac*? On reflection I think I was aware of an inner vision of some aspects of the star signs as I was improvising to find the melodic forms, but I lost that direct contact once I wrote the melodies down. In the performance my main concerns were almost exclusively with the execution, the technicalities of rendering all the details, and not with the inner images. Something was lost because the music was quite fixed. Could it have been otherwise if I had improvised on stage?

Improvisation can be an artistic process involving the unconscious mind to take over the process of music making and to limit the interference of the conscious mind to the minimum. In that way a direct contact may be established between performer, audience, locality, surroundings, mood, situation, expectations and so on. It requires more than the usual practice of jazz improvisation; there imitation and tradition require a lot of conscious control. But truly free improvisation coupled with meditation could provide the setting out of which divinely inspired music may arise. I did so to a little extent when improvising, creating *Zodiac*, and I tried to recreate that moment on stage, but the moment had passed! This insight opens a perspective on future performances: would it be possible to create *Star Music* on stage, reacting to the influences of the stars of THAT MOMENT?

Choosing *Zodiac* as my creative project was not only connected to my first essay, it was also an essential step towards my MA dissertation and hopefully to a PhD. In my MA dissertation I intend to question the application of Pythagorean-Platonic cosmology on music from antiquity to the Italian Renaissance in Western Europe; in a subsequent PhD I would like to extend that question to the present, researching how the idea of universal harmony has emerged and evolved since Antiquity, in what ways this idea brings the stars and music together and how musical sound can evoke the idea of universal harmony. For Pythagoras, Plato and their followers, music was a way to connect man with the eternal and the divine through his soul, partaking in a universal harmony; the stars form a moving image of

eternity and produce a harmonious sound. The research aims at connecting the Pythagorean - Platonic esoteric imagination with the practice of music performance, exploring the tension between rational and non-rational modes of perception and knowledge.

The creative project has provided me with a very interesting new angle to focus on, namely the possibility of establishing direct contact between the astrological moment and the generation of music. The first image that comes to my mind is a Iamblichean-Theurgical setting, where music seeks to invoke the presence of the planetary gods; this fits in well with my intended MA dissertation which covers antiquity to the Renaissance, from Pythagoras to Ficino. Making music was a process of improvisation long before the invention of musical notation fixed melodies; did the ancients practice musical improvisation as a form of divine possession? In extending these questions to actual music making a PhD research could develop a matrix for making star music; as the performer keeps his mental focus on the movements of the heavens the generated music brings the image to the audience IN THE MOMENT, imitating the creation process of the Platonic Demiurge.

There may be a long way to go, but in a sense the presentation of *Zodiac* in St. Gregory's pointed in that direction. Along with poetry and sacred geometry, which my fellow students presented in such a convincing way, ritual music may provide a special avenue to sacred knowledge. And so, I am very much looking forward to giving *Zodiac* a sequel as part of my studies at Canterbury.

