



Busto di Marsilio Ficino, Andrea di Piero Ferrucci (1522). Firenze, Santa Maria del Fiore.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is structured in four substantial chapters with subsections. The first two cover the background to Ficino's thought, the second two present his own attitudes towards magic, astrology and music.

Chapter one is concerned with aspects of *musica mundana* as represented by Ficino's three main authorities, Plato, Hermes Trismegistus and Plotinus. Firstly I present the fundamental ideas underlying Ficino's mode of thought and musical practice: the structure of the cosmos, Pythagorean *harmonia* and the human soul as microcosm, concluding with the nature of Platonic wisdom. Secondly I consider the role of Hermes and the Hermetic texts with their emphasis on intuitive revelation, alchemical transformation and the imagination. From this synthesis of the intellectual and the intuitive emerges Plotinus, whose understanding of cosmic sympathy and resonance has profound implications for a significatory attitude towards astrology.

Chapter two moves on to *musica humana*, and the magical means by which the Pythagorean and Platonic traditions aspired to bring the human soul into harmony with the cosmos. I discuss the nature of magic and mysticism, of occult ritual and the value of a symbolic mode of perception. The first half deals with Platonic and Plotinian attitudes towards magic, which were predominantly spiritual; the second half considers the practical magical rituals of theurgy, as revealed through the writings of the neo-platonists Iamblichus and Proclus and the Chaldaean Oracles. The central notion, that of time and its two orders, leads to a consideration of astrology as divination and a conclusion on the way of being and perception on which the efficacy of 'magic' depends.

The second half of the thesis is directly concerned with Ficino's own synthesis of this material. Chapter three firstly presents his formulation of ways of knowing as found in the Iamblichus Commentary, then considers the implications of this for his attitude towards astrology. The 'scientific' astrology of Ptolemy and the syncretic tradition of the Arabs leads to a presentation of the dilemma between the scientific and divinatory approaches. I then discuss Ficino's reaction to astrological determinism and his own views in relation to his *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum* and Commentary on Plotinus.

Finally, chapter four brings both astrology and music into focus as the ingredients of Ficino's practices of natural magic. I discuss his ideas concerning the nature of hearing, the function of the musician and the concepts of *spiritus* and *anima mundi* in connection with the sympathetic magic of *De vita coelitus comparanda*. Ficino's attitude towards the power of words and song and his rules for composing astrological music lead us to the final section on *musica instrumentalis* - Ficino's role as the 'second Orpheus'. Contemporary anecdotes, the importance of Orpheus as a model and the rediscovery of the Orphic hymns precede a more historical discussion of Ficino as a music theorist and improviser within the context of 15th century Italian musical culture. I speculate on his instrument, Renaissance performance practice and musical repertoire, concluding with examples of relevant musical forms.

INTRODUCTION

In the *Prooemium* to his great *Theologia Platonica*, Ficino tells the reader how he has felt called upon to explain his synthesis of Platonism and Christianity to those who "separate the study of philosophy from holy religion".(1) Ficino's vocation was to bring theory and practice, intellect and will, knowledge and experience into a harmony which transcended all opposition, and he sought to achieve this through a ritual, symbolic use of both astrology and music in a therapeutic context of 'natural magic'.

The writing of this thesis has, in many ways, been a personal journey of deepening experience and psychological integration. Over the past seven years (a cycle of Saturn) Marsilio Ficino has assumed the role of a *daimon*, leading me to confront the most difficult and complex issues in my life and somehow asking to be put to rest. I embarked on this task without knowing exactly what he was asking of me - I now realise that the process has been an alchemical one of unification, with both internal and external purposes. As a practising astrologer I had always felt very strongly that Ficino's attitude towards astrology had been, on the whole, misrepresented by scholars, and that an attempt should be made to bridge the seemingly irreconcilable gulf between the practising astrologers and the academic historians who write about it. In the course of translating Ficino's *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum*, *Liber de Sole* and excerpts from his *Commentaries on Plotinus and Iamblichus*, I became aware that the essential problem was not one of wilful antagonism, but of the misapprehension of the mode of perception required to enter into Ficino's way of understanding the world. For Ficino, there had to be a way of combining, as in astrological practice itself, the fluid, subjective 'irrational' content of qualitative experience within the the firm outer framework of an objective structure. In this sense, I humbly attempt to imitate Ficino himself, who constantly sought to lead his readers to a participatory awareness of the dimension of life commonly regarded as 'occult', and to a valuation of that dimension as equally essential to psychological and physical health as that of rational objectivity.

In Plato and Hermes Trismegistus, Ficino found supreme representatives of the ways of being he strove to integrate: intellectual rigour and clarity and intuitive, mystical revelation. In the writings of Plotinus, thirty years later, he found a synthesis of the two and a supreme justification for astrology as a divinatory, not a 'pseudo-scientific', art. Out of this emerged his extraordinary feat of the imagination, the *Liber de vita*, in which the reader is encouraged towards health of mind, soul and body through a diet of philosophical contemplation, magical practices and rituals, astrological awareness and musical activity. It is here that Ficino formulates his unique astrological music-therapy, a consideration of which will form the culmination of this thesis.

The theme of the three musics, *mundana*, *humana* and *instrumentalis*(2) is a constant unifying motif throughout my work. For the Platonist, life itself is music - instrumental and vocal music merely imitating the true music of the cosmos, which finds its counterpart in the motions of the human soul. True music is harmony of thought, word and deed, and this may be fostered through the right use of audible music and song, if it is performed with a ritual attitude of religious intent. Ficino's 'new' therapeutic combination of music and astrology recovers a lost dimension - that of the divinatory 'moment' which allows the individual "a free participation in destiny".(3) This was of course a hall-mark of the Renaissance - a re-birth of faith in man's capacity to overcome the limitations of a fate-bound existence and be master of himself, in celebration of his own 'divine' potential. Ficino's vocation was to lead men to this realisation through exhorting them to "see with different eyes", to develop what we might term a symbolic attitude towards life, to understand that to see astrology and audible music as metaphors for reality is to facilitate a harmonising of the soul which can only lead to true happiness. Bearing this in mind, I make no apology for frequent reference to the work of C.G. Jung, who has perhaps been the greatest twentieth-century spokesman for the very union of mind and soul to which Ficino dedicated his life. In Jung's writings I have found a constant source of inspiration, clarifying and illuminating - in psychological terms - Ficino's alchemical quest.

To illustrate the imbalance this thesis seeks to redress, I shall consider, for the remainder of the Introduction, some modern interpretations and criticisms of Ficino's attitude towards astrology; in particular, the impressive new translation of Ficino's *Liber de vita* edited by Carol Kaske and John Clark. This will, I hope, help to clarify the issue and set a perspective for the reading of the rest of the work.

Despite Marsilius Ficinus florentinus heading Luca Gaurico's list of late 15th century Florentine astrologers,(4) Ficino's integrity and authority as an astrologer are by no means affirmed by modern scholarship. We find bewildered criticisms, condemnations and misrepresentations of his views by scholars who refer to his "oscillations", "inconsistent views", (5), "self-contradiction", (6), "somewhat double-faced attitude", (7) "vacillation on the subject of judicial astrology", (8) "peculiar adaptations of astrology" and even his "relapse into superstition". (9) Such remarks stem mainly from the seeming contradiction in the sequence of his writings concerning his evident enthusiasm for astrology in the everyday life of himself and his friends, and his apparently wholesale rejection of astrological practices in the *Disputatio contra iudicium astrologum* of 1477 and the Commentary on Plotinus' *Enneads* II of ten years later. The *Disputatio* appears to be a polemical attack on astrological determinism, but Ficino's attack goes deeper than that; for he understood such determinism to be the result of a naive, unself-critical complacency on the part of certain astrologers. In particular, he attacked their wilful, short-sighted use of the faculty of judgement (*iudicium*) when making astrological predictions or observations. He does not take issue with the very possibility of making astrological interpretations and judgements - never denying the 'mirroring' of the heavens by the material world - but with the lack of subtlety and imagination - a 'symbolic attitude' - in a literal, 'scientific' approach towards the prediction of particulars. It is not the astrologer who acts responsibly, exercising mature clarity of insight and maintaining a religious awareness of cosmic law, nor judicial astrology in itself, who Ficino criticises, although he suspects it is not within the limits of human capacity to develop the technique required for a comprehensive awareness of all the factors involved. (10) One does not have to try to prove the consistency of Ficino's thought, or assume that we can or should be able to fathom the

undoubtedly paradoxical twists and turns of his expression of it. But its misinterpretation is another matter, and in recent times modern scholarship has shown itself to be sadly unreceptive to the importance of Ficino's reformation of astrological practice.

One such culprit is Carol Kaske, who in her Introduction to the translation of Ficino's *Liber de vita*, mistranslates the very title of the *Disputatio* as *Disputation against judicial astrology* (which would be *astrologia iudiciaria*).⁽¹¹⁾ Together with other Ficinian scholars such as Eugenio Garin, P.O. Kristeller and D.P. Walker, she has certainly pointed to the need for a re-appraisal and consideration of Ficino's astrological thought in his own terms,⁽¹²⁾ but remains curiously unable to enter into the implications of those terms. Garin admits that "with regard to astrology [the work of Marsilio Ficino] has never been adequately looked at in all its fluctuations and variations"⁽¹³⁾, and on the whole scholars have paid insufficient attention to an area which is indispensable for an all-embracing understanding of Ficino's philosophical position. It is very difficult to broach such an area from a perspective of detached historical analysis (what Ficino was to call *notitia*)⁽¹⁴⁾ and a continual danger that personal prejudices or willy-nilly rejection of 'occult' practices will result in an unwillingness to credit Ficino with an understanding of the subject which is more comprehensive than theirs. We find Carol Kaske searching for "plausible patterns"⁽¹⁵⁾ in Ficino's attitude which will help to clarify what she sees as his "self-contradiction". She assumes that Ficino shows "two outright denials of astrology" in the *Disputatio* and in a letter to Poliziano of 1494, where Ficino wrote to his friend in praise of Pico's massive condemnation of astrology, rejoicing that the "superstitious vanity" of the astrologers had been quashed.⁽¹⁶⁾ She supposes that he "turned back to specific predictive astrology" (demonstrated in numerous letters, the *Consiglio contra la pestilenza*⁽¹⁷⁾ and the *Liber de vita* Book 3) in the Apology to the Cardinals against Savonarola, written a year before his death in 1498,⁽¹⁸⁾ and suggests simplistically, and not a little naively, that Ficino's "faith in Savonarola motivated his rejection of astrology", and that as he withdrew his support he "resumed his more habitual attitude to astrology" and that finally after Pico and Poliziano were dead they could not dispute his "relapse into superstition".

It must be pointed out at the outset that we cannot, and should not, attempt to interpret Ficino's various astrological writings in the same way. So much depends on the personal, social and political context and his intended readership. His relationships with both Pico and Poliziano were complex and uneasy, and the involvement of the trio with Savonarola in the 1490s is by no means straightforward or indeed without ominous implications. Ficino's letter to Poliziano can hardly be regarded as a clear-cut statement of astrological belief unconnected to the circumstances in which it was written - in fact it may well have been conceived as a hidden warning to his friend who died mysteriously soon afterwards.(19) It is, I feel, misguided to attempt to define a linear strand of development and/or regression in the chameleon-like, ever changing hues of Ficino's chosen vehicles of expression and angles of vision.

For Ficino, intuitive vision must be a complement to rational thought-processes if any marrying of mind and soul is to be achieved. One cannot approach Ficinian astrology, or hope to enter the flux of his imaginative understanding, with the detachment of purely logical analysis. Carol Kaske's investigation seems to be geared to the idea that the motions of the heavens and their unseen operation on the sublunar world (if any) function as a purely natural-scientific process, and that any results of that process must be measurable by rationalistic norms. Any subjective or occult effects are to be reduced to mere "superstition". She sadly misrepresents Ficino's innovative, personal attitude by an insistence on restricting 'astrology' into a small pigeon-hole of determinism, even denying altogether its possible validity in the world of scholarship: in her introduction to a philologically thorough translation of Ficino's *Liber de vita*, she laments that, in an ideal world, "to do justice to a work so encyclopaedic as *De vita* would ideally require the services of a committee embracing historians of science, of the medical profession, of philosophy, and of religion"(20) - that she evidently would not feel the need to consult practising astrologers is a sad reflection of academic attitudes. Her evident difficulty in incorporating the neo-platonic model of sympathetic cosmic resonance into a broader concept of astrological experience, leads her to attempt restrictive categorisations which purport to delimit Ficino's far-reaching syncretism into "a preference for more-or-less over either/or thinking".(21).

Carol Kaske talks of Ficino's "ominous horoscope", "peculiar adaptations of astrology" and "wholesale rejections of astrology"; she even says "a person with a bad horoscope could hardly be casual and lukewarm towards astrology; he would have to either reinterpret it to give him some hope or else deny it outright".(22). Ficino is continually at pains to point out that crude good/bad distinctions play no part in subtle psychological tempering,(23) and one simply cannot allow Carol Kaske's assumption that Ficino's "very bad horoscope" accounts partly for his "rejection of astrology" in the *Disputatio*(24) - for such a statement totally denies the very freedom of will and voluntary 'negotiation with fate' preserved by Ficino's 'divinatory' attitude. Far from leading him to "reject astrology", Ficino's struggle for self-knowledge, to use profitably the tensions symbolised in his horoscope, encouraged him to explore the meaningfulness of symbols and to throw out the deadwood of a deterministic system. The tests of Saturn are hard, and the recognition that his gifts, offered through the inner power of contemplation, might lead to inspired creative activity was a profound discovery indeed. Certainly for the man who does not exercise his free-will to know his innermost self and align with a higher will, planetary influences may be perceived as harmful; but the difficult and often painful process of such tempering may yield inner strengths which have no other means of development. To call Ficino's concern with his own horoscope an "obsession"(25) sadly makes a mockery of his deep intuitive perception of the benefits of intensely-focussed perseverance as a path towards inner transformation. It seems unimportant to me if Ficino "vacillated" as to whether Saturn "caused" or "prophesied", in any exact technical sense, his own philosophical career(26) - he understood a personal horoscope as potentially revealing innate resources for life and development, and for a greater understanding of personal purpose. To compare this process to an I.Q. test(27) at best misses the point, and at worst degrades the nobility, and sublimity, of the endeavour.

I have illustrated at some length Carol Kaske's critical attitude because it reflects the very cut-and-dried literalism which Ficino himself saw as such an enemy to the creative possibilities which emerge when the imagination is truly valued, when qualitative correspondences and affinities, non-linear kinds of connection are applied. The psychological unity Ficino strives for is not a simple uniformity - clarity of insight is

not able to reduce the complexities of the sublunar world to convenient, simple propositions. Rather, a unified faculty of intuitive perception reveals the corresponding unity behind the complexity of experience, the polytheistic universe, where elements may be tempered and attuned but not reduced in scope to suit the needs of an explanatory system.

Following Plotinus, Ficino intuitively grasped that semiological astrology, regarding heavenly configurations as signs rather than causes, provided a more philosophically coherent foundation for his practice of natural magic, where synchronistic observations and correlations were connected with an *occultus influxus* from the planets and stars. Carol Kaske's definitive statement that Plotinus "was not very interested in either astrology or magic"(28) hardly does justice to the subtle, discriminating appraisal to which he subjects both arts in *Enneads* IV. She appears to consider semiotic astrology as a somewhat poor cousin of the causal variety, whereas if we learn anything from Ficino's attitude, it surely must be quite the opposite; that it is precisely a deterministic astrology which leaves much to be desired in terms of preserving human dignity, and that the neo-platonic/hermetic imaginative, symbolic and essentially magical attitude holds the key to unlocking the door of fate. To read that "Ficino occasionally retreats to it when defending Saturn"(29) or that "the semiological survived such condemnations (of predictive astrology) in Plotinus' thought"(30) surely belittles the very attitude Ficino strove to advocate. What Carol Kaske sees as "generalising" from a single or scanty data(31) Ficino (as indeed Jung) would have advocated as the free-ranging elaboration of the imagination. The limits of determinism, for the Renaissance humanist, can play no useful part in man's striving to know himself, and know God.

Considering all this, is there in fact an "astrological problem" which "comes to a head in *De vita*" and which was "festering" earlier in Ficino's life?(32) D.P. Walker, in an attempt to impose a more "coherent line of development"(33) on Ficino's "varied, inconsistent and usually evasively expressed" views even wishes to re-date the *Disputatio* (with no reliable evidence) to coincide with the letter to Poliziano. D.P. Walker admits at the outset of his paper "I am remarkably ill qualified to speak on astrology. I know nothing of the details of astrological procedures of any

period"(34) and demonstrates his lack of understanding by a bewildered incomprehension at how Ficino, Pico and Poliziano could possibly have laughed at the "vanity of the astrologers"(35): "If only I could find astrology funny, I would read it eagerly, and this would be a much better paper."(36) Such an inability to discriminate between the 'petty ogres' (*nefarios gigantulos*)(37) whose arrogance and folly, in true Democritan spirit, so amused Ficino and the discriminating wisdom of the philosopher/astrologers for whom astrology as a symbolic system became a tool for self-knowledge, is unfortunately a hallmark of recent attempts to clarify Ficino's position. The issue at stake is surely not whether or not Ficino 'believed' in astrology at different times of his life - he clearly takes its phenomena as self-evident. It is rather to appraise his intellectual and intuitive capacities within a specific philosophical/religious framework, from which position he was able to enter into the play of forces implicit in an animated cosmos, and thus use astrological symbolism as a vehicle for his musical psychological therapy.

Abbreviations and Information for References

Letters - The Letters of Marsilio Ficino, 4 volumes, translated by the School of Economic Science.
 Op.om. - Marsilii Ficini, Opera omnia, 2 volumes (continuous pagination)
 Supp.Fic. - Supplementum Ficinianum, 2 volumes, ed. P.O. Kristeller

References are re-numbered for each Part of a chapter. All publication details of articles and books are to be found in the Bibliography. Line references to Ficino's *Liber de vita* are taken from *Marsilio Ficino, Three Books on Life* edited by C. Kaske and J. Clark. Plato's works are generally given by name only, translations from the *Collected Dialogues*. For the Hermetic *Pimander* and *Asclepius I* have used the translation by Walter Scott; for Iamblichus' *De mysteriis* translations by both Alexander Wilder and Thomas Taylor; for Plotinus' *Enneads*, by both Stephen MacKenna and A.H. Armstrong. All translations of original Latin in the body of the thesis are by me unless a modern edition is stated in the references.

REFERENCES to Introduction

1. Ficino, *Prooemium to the Theologia Platonica*, *Op.om.* p.78:
 ... et quicumque Philosophiae studium impie nimium a
 sancta religione seIungunt, agnoscant aliquando se non
 aliter aberrare ...
2. As specified by Boethius, *De institutione musica* I.2: "The first

[music] is cosmic, whereas the second is human; the third is that which rests in certain instruments." (trans. C.M. Bower)

3. G. Cornelius, 'The Moment of Astrology' part IV p.87
4. L. Gauricus *De inventoribus et laudibus astronomiae* 1507. See *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* p.651
5. D.P.Walker, 'Marsilio Ficino and Astrology' pp.341-2
6. Carol Kaske, 'Ficino's shifting attitude towards astrology in the *De vita coelitus comparanda*, the letter to Poliziano, and the *Apologia* to the Cardinals' p.372 ref. 2
7. L.Thorndike, 'Ficino the Philosophaster' in *History of Magic and Experimental Science* vol.IV, p.572
8. J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* p.282
9. Carol Kaske, 'Ficino's Shifting Attitude' pp.372, 376
10. See G. Zanier, *La Medicina astrologica e la sua teoria* p.45
11. Carol Kaske and John Clark, eds. *Ficino, Three Books on Life* p.31
12. *ibid.* p.6
13. E. Garin, *Astrology in the Renaissance* pp.61-2
14. See chapter three, part one
15. Kaske, 'Ficino's shifting attitude' p.372
16. Ficino, letter to Poliziano, *Op.om.* p.958
17. *Consiglio contra la Pestilenza* in *Supp.Fic.I* p.14
18. Kaske, 'Ficino's shifting attitude' pp.371-3
19. See chapter three part one, ref.39
20. Kaske and Clark, *Three Books on Life* p.6
21. *ibid.* pp.44,62
22. *ibid.* p.19
23. See for example, *Liber de vita* 2.XVI.215; 3.XI.254
24. Kaske and Clark, *Three Books on Life* p.19
25. *ibid.* p.22
26. *ibid.* p.58
27. *ibid.*

28. *ibid.* p.64
29. *ibid.* p.58
30. *ibid.* p.88
31. *ibid.* pp.39,44
32. *ibid.* p.55
33. D.P. Walker, 'Marsilio Ficino and Astrology' p.342
34. *ibid.* p.341
35. See *Supp.Fic.II* p.274:
Nec quoties una facetiamur uberior nobis occasio
sequesque ridendi quam de vanitate astrologorum,
praesertim si tertius veniat Politianus, intervenit
vero semper omnium superstitionum mirus exsibilator.
36. D.P. Walker, 'Marsilio Ficino and Astrology' p.342
37. *Letters* vol.3 p.76, *Op.om.* p.781

CHAPTER ONE: MUSICA MUNDANA

Prisca Theologia - Ficino's Ancient Authorities

PART ONE: PLATO

1.1. Prologue

"let us rather say that the cause and purpose of god's invention and gift to us of sight was that we should see the revolutions of intelligence in the heavens and use their untroubled course to guide the troubled revolutions in our own understanding, which are akin to them and so, by learning what they are and how to calculate them accurately according to their nature, correct the disorder of our own revolutions by the standard of invariability of those of god ... all audible musical sound is given us for the sake of harmony, which has motions akin to the orbits in our soul, and which, as anyone who makes intelligent use of the arts knows, is not to be used, as is commonly thought, to give irrational pleasure, but as a heaven-sent ally in reducing to order and harmony any disharmony in the revolutions within us."(1)

This passage from Plato's *Timaeus* encapsulates concisely the very theme of this thesis, and is perhaps the earliest explicit testimony we have to the connection between symbolic astrology, and the practical use of music-making as a therapy. Plato understood that the arts of astrology and music, at their highest potential, are both means by which human beings can achieve inner equilibrium of soul and self-knowledge. For they can be seen as a reflection and echo - a "heaven-sent ally" - of the perfect and immutably decreed pattern of motion and harmony established in the cosmos by the divine creator, and deeply imprinted within the human soul. In this chapter I shall be exploring the common sources and roots of such a hypothesis as revealed in the 'ancient theology' of Ficino's most revered authorities in the Pythagorean-Hermetic tradition, who not only provided his own practice of 'natural magic' with sound philosophical precedents, but were also his constant, living sources of inspiration. In the teachings and writings of Pythagoras, Plato, Hermes Trismegistus and Orpheus (continued in the neo-platonic schools of Plotinus, Porphyry,

Iamblichus and Proclus) Ficino found kindred spirits, whose religious philosophy he could interpret as being entirely in sympathy with Christian teaching. Ficino's conviction that a thread of truth could be discerned, to a greater or lesser extent, at all periods of history, woven through religion and philosophy - particularly via the Platonic tradition - led him to dedicate his life to the reconciliation of this 'religious' philosophy with Christian revelation. He produced, to this end, his main philosophical and theological works, the *Theologia Platonica*(2) and *De Christiana religione*.(3) In the words of Hankins:

"For Ficino, Platonism, instead of being the nemesis of Christendom, is part of God's providential design for the human race, a *philosophia perennis*, springing intertwined with Christianity from the same soil of religious experience; each of them lends support to the other in their growth towards perfection and truth."(4)

Ficino saw the scholastic Aristotelianism of the previous centuries as having failed to achieve the goals of moral and religious training due to an over-insistence on dogmatic, formulaic methods of teaching at the expense of inner reflection. He maintained that true knowledge must first and foremost be an intuition of the divine which is by its very nature prophetic, and which draws everything back to the subjective, qualitative experience of the individual. In this way, it could not be argued that Plato's religious experience was qualitatively different from or inferior to that of Moses or other Hebrew prophets. Ficino recognised the need to fertilise the traditional, orthodox religious values of his time with the water of the soul - a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter (signifying formal tradition and inspired revelation) such as was actually witnessed in the heavens in 1484, the year that his complete translation of Plato appeared. Ficino would also understand Saturn with Jupiter to represent the Platonic unity of wisdom and worldly power, and would have seen such an ideal embodied in his patron and close friend Lorenzo de' Medici.(5)

The syncretic tendency was of course well represented in the Christian apologetic tradition initiated by Philo, the Alexandrian Church Fathers Clement and Origen and handed down to the Middle Ages via Lactantius and St. Augustine to St. Thomas Aquinas,(6) and in such Christian Platonists as Dionysius Areopagitus(7) and John Scotus Eriugena.(8) The interpenetration

of Aristotelian and Platonic ideas in the Medieval period and the influence of the scholastics on Ficino's philosophy has been discussed by P.O. Kristeller.(9) It is my intention to consider the chief representatives of the perennial wisdom called 'ancient theologians': those great pagan visionaries of the Western esoteric tradition whose religious philosophy most directly fertilised Ficino's particular practice of therapeutic astrology and music-making. Zoroaster, Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras and Plato(10) - Ficino was deeply attracted by these quasi-'divine' representatives of a tradition, which far from being based exclusively on scholastic verbal definitions of intelligible doctrines, incorporated metaphorical and visionary symbolism together with all kinds of theurgic practices involving natural magic, astrology and music. Above all, it preserved inviolate a secret that was only accessible to those who were worthy of comprehending it, and to this end these initiates "held the assumption that deep truths must be veiled in fable and allegory".(11) Ficino was firmly convinced "that the best pagan minds had been far above polytheistic superstitions, and had adhered to an esoteric philosophico-religious wisdom which they concealed from the uninitiated to avoid persecution and vulgarisation of thought."(12)

The quantity of Greek and Latin texts of which Ficino had first-hand knowledge is formidable, but it is the 'divine Plato' who is most frequently summoned as the advocate of 'right thinking' and as such Ficino's ultimate authority. For the first time in Western history, his complete dialogues, along with the *Corpus Hermeticum* (believed by Renaissance scholars to stem from the hand of Hermes Trismegistus himself), were translated and commented on - by Ficino at the very beginning of his career. In his Preface to the Commentaries on Plato, dedicated to Lorenzo de' Medici(13) Ficino tells us how Lorenzo's grandfather Cosimo entrusted him with the task, establishing him as the leader of the Academy at Careggi which was to become the focal intellectual and artistic centre of the Florentine Renaissance. For Ficino, Plato was no less than a prophet of eternal wisdom:

"... Almighty God, at an appointed time, sent down the divine spirit of Plato from on high to shed the light of holy religion upon all peoples, through his life, genius and marvellous teaching."(14)

Although Ficino claims that the style of his master could never be reproduced, being "more like that of a divine oracle than any human eloquence, now resounding on high, now flowing with the sweetness of nectar, ever encompassing the secrets of heaven"(15) nevertheless in many of his own writings (particularly his correspondence) we may glimpse the qualities he admires so much - the veiling of truth with humour and jest, the "sweetening" of profound thought with "some sweet and useful matter", (16)) the very use of language itself to rhetorically captivate and seduce the minds of worldly men into contemplating more enduring spiritual realities:

" ... indeed Plato's style appears to be more poetical than philosophical; now his words thunder and reverberate like those of a seer, now they flow gently, and all the while they obey no human power but one that is prophetic and divine; he does not play the part of a teacher so much as a priest or prophet, now enrapturing some whilst expiating others, and seizing them with divine frenzy in the same way."(17)

Hankins has observed(18) that in his literary style Ficino was not content to reproduce the "rhetorical fervour and elegant style" of his contemporary humanists, but cultivated his own rich, pithy and "mystagogic" language, full of irony, puns and allegorical excursions. Following his master Plato, Ficino knew how to use appropriate language as a bait or 'divine lure', to entice the reader to exercise his imaginative faculty and develop an ability to find the hidden meaning in myth and symbol - always encouraging the light of the intellect to be turned inwards towards the *imago Dei* in the human soul.

Through the miracle of Divine Providence which has "restored to the light" Platonic wisdom, Ficino sees Philosophy, the daughter of Minerva, extending encouragement to Lorenzo to enter the Platonic Academy. On one level this is an invitation to join the elite at Careggi, where the gods themselves inspire and instruct: Apollo sings in the garden, Mercury declaims at the entrance, Jupiter pronounces justice, and, most importantly, "within the innermost sanctuary, philosophers will come to know their Saturn contemplating the secrets of the heavens" (my italics).(19) Already we have an indication of the elevated and noble function of the symbolic imagery of astrology in Ficino's quest for self-

knowledge, as also of the central role of musical performance, for as we shall see in chapter four, Ficino's contemplation of "the secrets of the heavens" involved specially composed musical settings of Orphic hymns addressed to planetary deities. Certainly the task of knowing his own Saturn by such a means was to prove life-long, and was to carry profound consequences for astrology - namely, the re-interpretation of the traditional 'malefic' view of the planet. On another level, Ficino's invitation can be understood as a universal and timeless exhortation to mankind to join an esoteric 'Platonic Academy' and embark on the difficult but infinitely rewarding journey to true happiness through philosophical speculation and religious contemplation.

Ficino's fervent conviction that true religion would find in the Platonic teachings its surest defence against profanity initiated a revival of ancient wisdom and pagan spirituality which places him at the forefront of a new era - most especially through the philanthropic incorporation of Hermetic and neo-platonic 'licit' magic into his every-day practice as a healer of soul and body. It must not be forgotten that Ficino was both a priest and a physician, and that his wide range of activities included interaction and communication with the ordinary Florentine citizen, whether in Church or at their bedside. Ultimately, it was the application of his religious philosophy to compassionate therapeutic ends, via sermons and public lectures, herbal remedies and astrological music, which superseded any mere theorising, and which singled him out amongst his contemporaries in the Academy, such as his particular friends the philologist and poet Angelo Poliziano and the brilliant but wayward young Giovanni Pico. For Ficino, the practice of sympathetic magic was a means by which *gnosis* could be attained, in the same way that the alchemist's art was directed towards the union of heaven and earth. Both the magician and the alchemist were striving for psychological unity through the strengthening of consciousness, or knowledge of the 'divine' essence of man and matter. But this will be considered further in chapter four.

I shall now look at several of the key texts which set in perspective Ficino's practice as a Renaissance *magus* - those which reveal the particular cosmological framework on which his 'natural magic' depends.

1.2. The *Timaeus* and Pythagorean *harmonia*

Pythagoras, the father of the concept of *musica mundana*, the harmony of the spheres, is a figure shrouded in legend, and we know little of the life of the man himself. However, to the Renaissance Platonist he was the most revered representative of the highest spiritual and intellectual attainment.(20) It is probable that he travelled in Egypt and Babylon, perhaps becoming initiated into the spiritual wisdom of the Egyptians, and almost certainly becoming a spokesman for the long-established Eastern religious tradition. Ernest McClain(21) has emphasised the 'totally unhistorical' basis of many traditional stories of Pythagorean discoveries, suggesting that their origin may be traced to ancient Babylon. He shows that Sumer and Babylon were mathematically highly advanced, incorporating music, mathematics and religion in a system of knowledge which was bequeathed to the Western world via the teachings of Pythagoras and Plato.(22)

It is generally held that it was Pythagoras who discovered that musical intervals may be reduced to numerical ratios,(23) thus providing a mathematical basis for audible harmony. The perfect intervals of the octave, fifth and fourth all contain as their numerical basis the numbers one to four, and so the *tetraktys* became equated with the notion of *harmonia*, the 'fitting of things together' or adjustment of parts in a complex whole.(24) In the words of Guthrie,

"The discovery of Pythagoras, that the basic intervals of Greek music could be represented by the ratios 1:2, 3:2 and 4:3, made it appear that *kosmos* - order and beauty - was imposed on the chaotic range of sound by means of the first four integers, 1,2,3 and 4."(25)

In his *Commentary on Cicero's Dream of Scipio* which became the chief authority on neo-platonism in the Middle Ages, Macrobius deals extensively with number in creation.(26) Here we learn that odd numbers are associated with the male principle, and even numbers with the female. The two are united in the substance of the world soul of the *Timaeus*. The number one, the monad or creative principle, is bisexual and both odd and even in nature. Understood, in a musical metaphor, as the generating 'fundamental' of the scale of creation, the unfolding of the consonant octave in the

ratio of 1:2 can be seen as the emergence of the female principle out of the original unity - astrologically, this can be further illustrated by the symbols of the Sun and Moon. Macrobius affirms(27) that the Pythagoreans "revere [the tetraktys] among their secrets as pertaining to the perfection of the soul" and for Iamblichus its secrets are connected with the oracle at Delphi, the seat of the highest and most sacred wisdom.(28) Connected with the tetraktys we find its sum, the sacred Decad or number ten, a symbol of perfection and completion. Not only does it contain the numbers which constitute the ratios of 'perfect' musical intervals but also encompasses all four dimensions of experience, being the sum of the geometrical progressions of point (one), line (two), triangle (three) and pyramid (four).(29)

The Pythagorean concept of the harmonious structure of a universe founded on numerical ratio was transmitted via the creation myth of Plato's *Timaeus*.(30) In *Psychology and Western Religion* Jung shows that pre-Christian parallels to the three-fold symbolism of the Trinity are to be found in Babylonian and Egyptian traditions, and that such ideas were assimilated into Christianity through Philo and Plutarch.(31) He refers to Porphyry's statement(32) that the symbol of a cross within a circle signified the world-soul for the Egyptians, and considers the psychological implications of the triad and quaternary as symbols of completion. In this section I can but summarise his conclusions, which provide an interpretation of the *Timaeus* as an allegory of fundamental psychological experience.

According to Macrobius, two is the first number, as with its separation from the undivided One multiplication may begin: "As soon as the number two appears, a unit is produced out of the original unity, and this unit is none other than that same unity split into two and turned into a 'number'".(33) From this duality of the 'one' and the 'other' a tension arises, as the one holds on to the other and the other pushes away from the one. Here we find the essential duality represented by archetypal oppositions such as light and dark, good and evil, male and female. It is a condition of unresolvable antagonism which must eventually give rise to a third unifying principle: "every tension of opposites culminates in a release, out of which comes the 'third'. In the third, the tension is

resolved and the lost unity is restored."(34) Whereas the emergence of two from one is prerequisite for the act of 'knowing' or differentiation of consciousness from an unconscious, primordial chaos, three appears as a synonym for the process of development in time and is expressed by the perfect symmetry of the equilateral triangle.(35) Three is perfect as it is the beginning, middle and end;(36) in religious experience the absolute Deity unfolded into three aspects.

In the *Timaeus* we read:

"god, when he began to put together the body of the universe, made it of fire and earth. But it is not possible to combine two things properly without a third to act as a bond to hold them together. And the best bond is one that effects the closest unity between itself and the terms it is combining ..."(37)

The mean holding the two opposites together will be a geometrical proportion "such that, as the first is to it, so is it to the last" as in the progression $2:1 = 4:2 = 8:4 = 2$. This, continues Plato, would suffice if the world were a plane surface. But solids require two means to connect them: "So god placed water and air between fire and earth, and made them so far as possible proportional to each other.. and in this way he bound the world into a visible and tangible whole."(38) Thus, the unit of the triad is produced from the union of one pair of opposites only, a two-dimensional construct whose reality is not physical, but remains on the plane of abstract thought. To encompass physical reality in its fourfold aspect, two pairs of opposites need to unite. Here, suggests Jung, is the dilemma of the 'three' and the 'four' found reflected psychic experience:

"Plato begins by representing the union of opposites two-dimensionally, as an intellectual problem to be solved by thinking, but then come to see that its solution does not add up to reality. In the former case we have to do with a self-subsistent triad, and in the latter with a quaternary. This was the dilemma which perplexed the alchemists for more than a thousand years ... and is also found in psychology as the opposition between the functions of consciousness, three of which are fairly well differentiated, while the fourth, undifferentiated, 'inferior' function is undomesticated, unadapted, uncontrolled, and primitive."(39)

Jung draws our attention to the opening words of the dialogue, where Socrates notices that a guest is missing: "One, two, three - but where, my dear Timaeus, is the fourth of my guests of yesterday ..?", (40) suggesting that, read symbolically, the implication is that either air or water is missing from the equation of reality. If it is air, then there is no connecting link with fire; if water, then no link with earth - and we must agree with Jung's conclusion that "Plato certainly did not lack spirit; the missing element he so much desired was the concrete realisation of ideas." (41) The dichotomy between the perfection of the Ideal world and the imperfection of earthly reality was not easily breached by Plato, who struggled and failed to put his political theories into action. His vision of the world was as a 'blessed god' - whole, perfect and uncorrupted; (42) without the fluid, fertilising bonding of water, air has no means of integration with the realm of mother earth, which then can only be regarded as anathema to spiritual aspiration, hostile and full of painful limitation:

"The step from three to four brought him sharply up against something unexpected and alien to his thought, something heavy, inert, and limited, which no *me on* [not being] and no 'privatio boni' can conjure away or diminish." (43)

The Platonic/Christian legacy of a triadic, 'masculine' spirituality has of course been continually underpinned by the complementary 'shadow' of pagan religions. Ficino's re-discovery and promotion of Hermes Trismegistus and neo-platonic magic heralded a breakthrough of the 'feminine' imaginative aspect of religious experience which promised a potential healing of the elemental split - indeed this is the hallmark of the Renaissance. As a Christian priest, his embracing of Lady Minerva can be seen as a symbolic marriage of spirit and soul in the alchemical alembic of Philosophy, where will and desire are one.

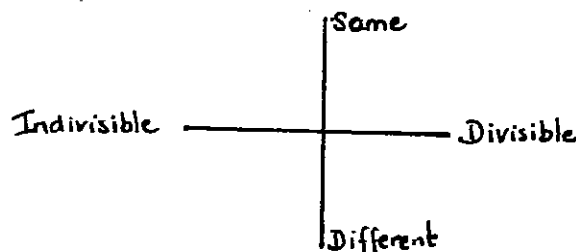
1.3. The World-soul

In the *Phaedrus* Plato presents us with a succinct description of the nature of soul as an all-pervading cosmic life-force:

"Soul taken as a whole is in charge of all that is animate, and traverses the entire universe, appearing at different

times in different forms. When it is perfect and winged it moves on high and governs all creation, but the soul that has shed its wings falls until it encounters solid matter. There it settles and puts on an earthly body, which appears to be self-moving because of the power of soul that is in it, and this combination of soul and body is given the name of a living being and is termed mortal."(44)

In the *Timaeus* Plato tells us that the Demiurge fashioned this soul of the living god of the world, its governing principle, from a mixture of the 'indivisible existence' and the 'divisible existence', and the 'same' and the 'different', thus producing a third kind of independent compound.(45) He then mixed them into a single unity, "forcing the Different, which was by nature allergic to mixture, into union with the Same, and mixing both with Existence." The world-soul is thus three in one, "a revelation or unfolding of the God-image."(46) Jung points out that Plato makes a subtle difference between the two oppositions of indivisible/divisible and same/different, for there is no suggestion that the divisible has to be united forcibly in the same manner as the different. Rather, we are presented with a quaternio composed of two oppositions, whose middle term coincides:



Jung suggests that the triad of the indivisible and the divisible with their mean corresponds to the condition of abstract thought, which needs the addition of the second mixture, the same and different, to become 'reality'. This added dimension necessarily involves the incorporation of that most recalcitrant element, the different:

"The 'Other' is therefore the 'fourth' element, whose nature it is to be the adversary and to resist harmony. But the fourth, as the text says, is intimately connected with Plato's desire for 'being'. One thinks, not unnaturally, of the impatience the philosopher must have felt when reality proved so intractable to his ideas."(47)

The common mean between all four opposites, or elements, could also be seen as the fifth part - the unifying substance of soul which unites the

four elements of the body of the world. We could also see the two mixtures as representing the means of air and water needed to unite the outer extremes of fire and earth, or in psychological terms the 'masculine' and 'feminine' aspects of the soul, the latter being most deeply buried therefore more inaccessible to male consciousness. Whatever archetypal process is being represented in this myth, it is important to realise that Plato would not have been aware of the 'fourth' as a 'problem':

"However extraordinary his genius may have been, it by no means follows that his thoughts were all conscious ones. The problem of the fourth, for instance, which is an absolutely essential ingredient of totality, can hardly have reached his consciousness in complete form. If it had, he would have been repelled by the violence with which the elements were to be forced into a harmonious system. Nor would he have been so illogical as to insist on the threefoldness of his world-soul. Again, I would not venture to assert that the opening words of the *Timaeus* are a conscious reference to the underlying problem of the recalcitrant fourth. Everything suggests that the same unconscious *spiritus rector* was at work which twice impelled the master to try to write a tetralogy, the fourth part remaining unfinished on both occasions. This factor also ensured that Plato would remain a bachelor to the end of his life, as if affirming the masculinity of his triadic God-image."(48)

In relation to the *Timaeus*, it remains to consider the harmonious structure of the world-soul in terms of *musica mundana* and *humana*. The Demiurge divides up the soul-stuff according to the ratios of the three consonant intervals and then fills it out to complete a musical scale.(49) It is then cut into two strips which are bent around each other, forming the circles of the Same and the Different, which contain the spheres of the fixed stars and the orbiting planets. This strip of the Different is itself divided into narrower strips which form the basis of the movements of the individual planets, and are arranged according to the seven numbers which constitute the two geometrical progressions of 1,2,4,8 and 1,3,9,27. The corporeal world, that is, the physical bodies of the spheres, is created within the world-soul:

"and the soul was woven right through from the centre to the outermost heaven, which it enveloped from the outside and, revolving on itself, provided a divine source of unending and rational life for all time. The body of the heaven is visible, but the soul invisible and endowed with reason and

harmony, being the best creation of the best of intelligible and eternal things."(50)

The planets and the fixed stars move in contrary motion; the planets move according to the strip of the Different which moves against that of the Same. Here also we learn that the physical world is a unique copy of the eternal:

"[The Demiurge] made in that which we call time an eternal moving image of the eternity which remains for ever at one."(51)

Time and movement, in the realm of change, lead to decay, death and rebirth; the planets, or 'instruments of time', are, according to Plato, created in order to define and preserve our sub-celestial realm and it is from their movements that man on earth understands 'time'. The Demiurge constructs the zodiacal sphere of the fixed stars like "a kind of universal cosmic embroidery"(52) around the heavens, and gives them the two motions of individual rotation and forward movement within the band as a whole. Beyond this realm, 'time' is of quite another order; eternal and immutable.

The Demiurge divides the soul-stuff into "as many souls as there are stars" and allots each soul to a star.(53) Plato says that each soul would be sown in its "appropriate instrument of time", that is, planet, and that it would return to its native star if it lived a good life:

"And mounting them on their stars, as if on chariots, he showed them the nature of the universe and told them the laws of their destiny. To ensure fair treatment for each at his hands, the first incarnation would be one and the same for all and each would be sown in its appropriate instrument of time and be born as the most god-fearing of living things."(54)

However, the soul which did not refrain from wrong-doing

"would have no respite from change and suffering until he allowed the motion of the Same and uniform in himself to subdue all that multitude of riotous and irrational feelings which have clung to it since its association with fire, water, air and earth ... To avoid being responsible for their subsequent wickednesses he sowed some of them in the earth, some in the moon and some in all the other instruments of time ..."(55)

and the rest, he left to newly-created gods who fashioned mortal bodies, and into them, the orbits of the immortal soul. The violent conflict which ensued when the stream of incorruptibility plunged into the earthly body caused the motions of the whole being to become "irregular, fortuitous and irrational". This is the perpetual state of man, caught in a conflict between the pull of his irrational, mortal part and the awareness of his essential divine nature. The implication is that the element of the 'same' retained by each incarnating soul is a particular quality of the fixed star under which it is born, that is, of the zodiac. It is also allotted a quality of the 'different', that is from a particular planet, and it is not difficult to see here the origins of a speculative astrology where the planetary configurations at the moment of birth mirror the inherent characteristics of an individual.

In this myth Plato is describing symbolically the very beginning of Time, when the seeds of all future generations are sown. It would seem that here we have an esoteric explanation of the fundamental astrological tenet of the twelve psychological and physical types, and the suggestion that there is a higher law which determines the time of birth of each individual so that he may embody the appropriate characteristics for his unique destiny. In natal horoscopy, not only is each person born under a particular constellation, but he has a personal 'ruling planet' determined by his time of birth.(56) According to Plato, this is understood to be the particular 'instrument of time' to which he is allotted before birth, and often referred to as his 'guardian spirit'.(57)

In chapter two I shall be exploring in more detail the implications of the two 'orders' of time, temporal (the realm of change) and eternal (unchanging) in the context of neo-platonic magic. The framework set out by Plato in the *Timaeus* provides a powerful image and reference point for the paradoxical experiences of man as microcosm, who has a foot in both worlds.

1.4. Musica mundana

If number is responsible for perfect harmony, then number must assume a mystical significance, since audible music founded on the particular intervallic ratios underlying the cosmic soul will inevitably cause a sympathetic reaction in the human soul, which is fashioned from the same substance. This is vividly expressed by Cornford:

"The living creature (soul and body) is the individual unit or microcosm; the world, macrocosm, is likewise a living creature with a body and soul. Individuals reproduce the whole in miniature; they are not mere fractions, but analogous parts of the whole which includes them."(58)

That the Pythagoreans equated this *harmonia* with audible music is attested by Plato in the *Republic*, where he criticises those who "prefer to use their ears instead of their minds" to judge intervals:

"for [the Pythagoreans] do just what the astronomers do; they look for numerical relationships in audible concords, and never get as far as formulating problems and examining which numerical relations are concordant, which not, and why."(59)

As we would expect, for Plato the autonomous theoretical speculation of the mind was of a superior order to the observations gained from the 'unreliable' senses of vision or hearing, which was not the case for the Pythagoreans, who evidently in their practical philosophy did not share his difficulty in attributing value to the sensory realm.(60) Music-making (as indeed all forms of art) was ideally to be in service to philosophical insight, a means of reducing the chaos of the human condition by participating in, not just imitating, the divine pattern - a view shared by Iris Murdoch:

"The proper activity of the human artist is in simple ways to discern and emphasize and extend the harmonious rhythms of divine creation: to produce good design rather than rival objects ... The decent artist patiently sorts order out of disorder."(61)

These 'harmonious rhythms', for the musician, are the harmonies of the spheres themselves. The origins of such a concept are obscure; although the idea of planetary motion producing harmony must originate in pre-

Pythagorean times, it is from Aristotle, in his lost book on the Pythagoreans(62) that we learn of their notion that the distances between planets formed harmonic ratios, and that those furthest from the earth moved the most rapidly.(63) In *On the Heavens*(64) Aristotle refutes the idea that the planets' revolutions give forth real musical harmony, although he concedes that the idea is "ingeniously and brilliantly formulated". He states the size and speed of the moving bodies as the Pythagoreans' evidence that sound is produced, and says:

"Taking this as their hypothesis, and also that the speeds of the stars, judged by their distances, are in the ratios of the musical consonances, they affirm that the sound of the stars as they revolve is concordant."

Aristotle's criticism is purely empirical, based on natural scientific observation of moving objects in a medium which is itself in motion - he was not concerned with the need for a metaphorical interpretation. In the *Timaeus*, Plato does not imply a system of audible cosmic harmony in the world soul - it is in the 'Myth of Er'(65) where he suggests the origin of *harmonia* as pitches sounded by sirens positioned on the rims (representing the planetary orbits) on the spindle of Necessity:

"And on the top of each circle stands a siren, which is carried round with it and utters a note of constant pitch, and the eight notes together make up a single scale."(66)

In *The Pythagorean Plato*(67) Ernest McClain suggests a detailed musical allegory underlying the myth as a whole, the ratios of the musical tetraktys being represented by specific periods of time based on the number ten and seven. He ingeniously presents the idea of a tempered tuning system in relation to the three Fates, for since they are seated "at equal distance from one another", this would suggest positions of equally-tempered major thirds which are not possible in the Pythagorean system, hence the adjustment required of Lachesis.(68) The psychological implications of 'tempering' a scale according to a particular tuning system in order to preserve certain 'perfect' intervals or avoid discordant ones are evident if we imagine that the pattern established in the heavens is that which is deeply embedded in the human soul. McClain suggests(69) that Plato understood the necessity for such temperament and how it would be reflected in society. In the *Republic*(70) Plato uses a musical analogy to