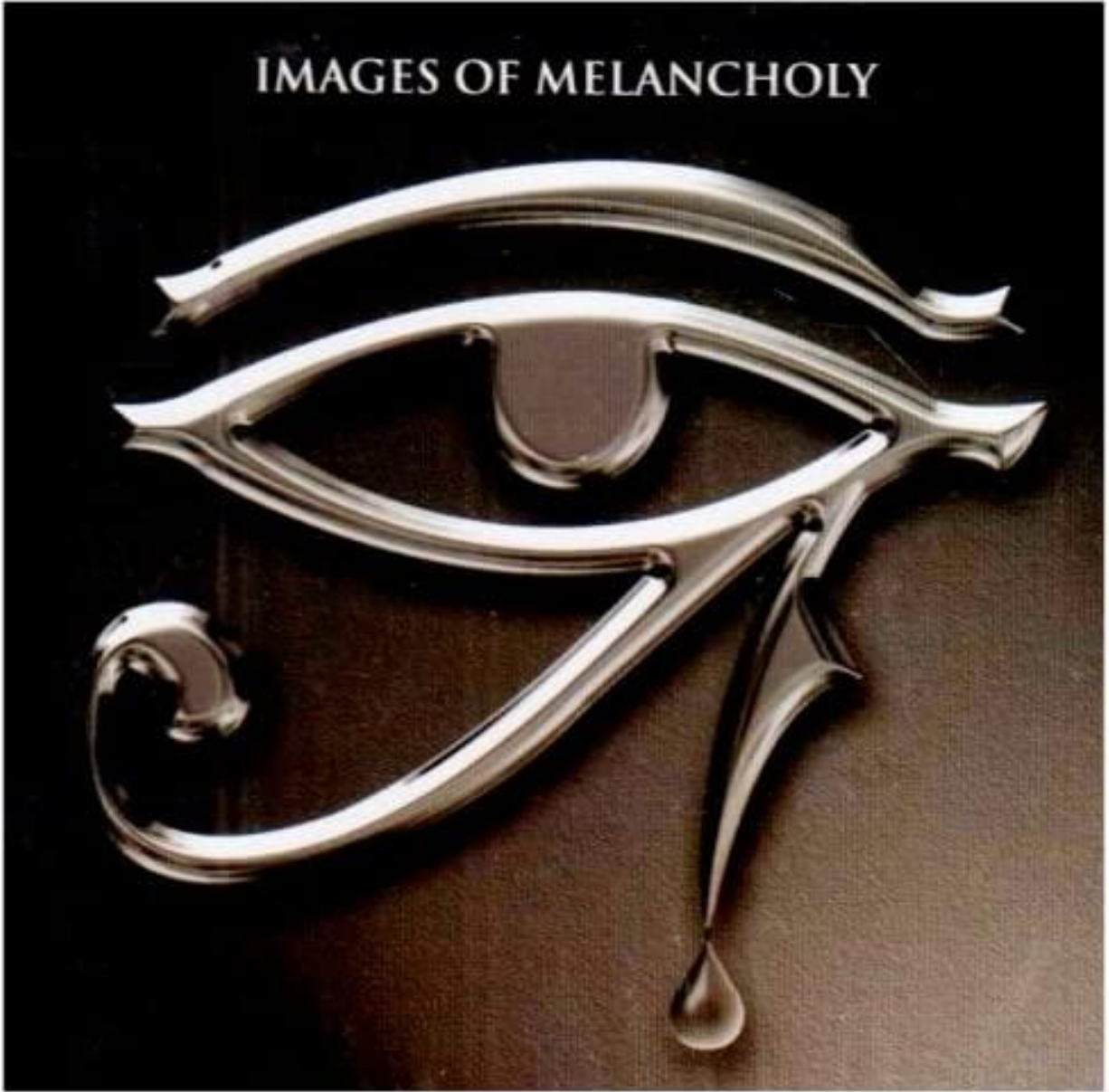


IMAGES OF MELANCHOLY



Music, Melancholy and Hermes Trismegistus

"Alas there are few that find the narrow way... and those few what are they? Not dancers but mourners, not laughers but weepers, whose tune is *Lachrimae*, whose musicke sighes for sin, who know no other cinquapace but this to heaven" (William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix* 1633).

We make no apologies for this total immersion in melancholy music - indeed, as the above quotation indicates, 17th century music-lovers associated John Dowland's famous *Lachrimae* theme with a more profound experience than unrelenting world-weariness. Other composers consciously paid tribute to Dowland's inspiration by weaving their own inventions around his theme; represented here are Giles Farnaby, Anthony Holborne, Thomas Weelkes and the contemporary composer Andrew Wilson-Dickson. Certainly Holborne's emblematic titles *The Teares of the Muses* and *The Image of Melancholy* from *Galliards, Pavans, Almains and other short Aeirs* of 1599 suggest his direct collaboration in the artistic enterprise of his colleague. In bringing together music of the Elizabethan, Jacobean and modern eras inspired by *Lachrimae*, with readings from the *Corpus Hermeticum*, the ancient text which so profoundly influenced the Renaissance understanding of human destiny we aim to recreate in words and sound the spirit of an age which regarded the melancholic condition as pre-requisite for the deepest kind of spiritual knowledge, and music as the most effective means of leading the human soul to it, and through it, to its eventual salvation.

The *Corpus Hermeticum*, attributed to the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, consists of a series of treatises in Greek compiled around the beginning of the Christian era, although the wisdom they teach is far more ancient. They were translated into Latin in 15th century Italy by Marsilio Ficino, and, along with Platonic and neo-Platonic writings, lay at the heart of the spiritual renewal of the Renaissance. The revival of Hermes and Plato in Elizabethan England, via the influential magus John Dee, the metaphysical poets and the works of Shakespeare permeated the artistic milieu and gave rise to a self-conscious 'cult' of melancholy among the intelligentsia. But what were these texts all about? Embodying a potent mix of ancient Egyptian wisdom and Platonic philosophy, they teach man about his true nature which is nothing less than divine, and how he is to attain realisation of it through personal revelation. In our selection of readings from Book I, Poimandres, the Divine Mind, instructs Hermes Trismegistus in self-knowledge, through invoking his faculty of intuitive intelligence or *nous*. The creation myth you will hear tells of the descent and ascent of the human soul from its original pristine condition - at one with God - to its fall to earth, embodiment, yearning for return, and eventual realisation of its own divinity. As the soul travels down through the cosmos to become mingled with Nature, it passes through the spheres of the planets and acquires attributes from them. When clothed in its earthly body, the soul is as if asleep, forgetful of its divine origin. It is heavy and withdrawn, immersed in material concerns, and needs to be awoken or reminded of its true nature. Plato would say that it is *eros*, or the experience of love aroused by beauty, which calls it back, and that this very experience is dependent on the *desire* to return. Now this vision can be perceived through the eyes or the ears, and, in the Platonic tradition, it is musical harmony combined with words which most powerfully reminds the soul of its pristine condition and fosters its desire. But, according to the Hermetic path of 'pessimist *gnosis*', the glimpse can only occur after man has fully realised the extent of his estrangement from God, and weeps with utter despair.

Thus the emblem of the tear becomes an exquisite transforming agent, containing within itself both heartfelt grief and the possibility of cleansing and renewal, as the soul experiences the intensity of simultaneous earthly limitation and sublime beauty. We have no way of knowing whether John Dowland himself merely adopted an 'artificial' persona of melancholy and used the tear emblem as simply a vehicle for his art, or whether he was deeply involved in pursuing a Hermetic path. But he certainly identified with the condition of weeping, as the title of his lute solo *Semper Dowland semper dolens* illustrates (a tear, of course, is also lute-shaped). It would also seem irrefutable that his *Lachrimae, or Seaven Teares figured in Seaven Passionate Pavans* of 1604 for five viols (or violins) and lute embody the Hermetic journey of the soul, as the Latin titles of the seven conditions of weeping indicate: *Lachrimae antiquae* - ancient tears, *antiquae novae* - ancient tears renewed, *gements* - groaning tears, *tristes* - sad tears, *coactae* - forced or striving tears, *amantis* - the tears of the lover, and *verae* - true tears. I can only briefly mention here the esoteric significance of the number seven - in ancient Egypt the seven vowel sounds were understood to resonate with the seven planets, through whose spheres the soul descended and ascended in seven stages of incarnation and exarnation.

The Dedication of *Lachrimae* to Queen Anne also suggests Dowland's understanding of the purifying effects of weeping: "though the title doth promise teares, unfit guests in these joyfull times, yet no doubt pleasant are the teares which Musicke weepes, neither are teares shed alwayes in sorrowe, but sometime in joy and gladnesse". By the time of its publication, Dowland's four-note *leitmotif* was already well-known via his lute solo *Lachrimae* and song *Flow my tears*, with its words of unrelenting sorrow: "Flow my tears, fall from your springs,/Exiled for ever, let me mourne/Where night's black bird her sad infamy sings,/There let me live forlorne." It is also quoted in many more of his pieces, in either descending or ascending form. But it is in the seven *Lachrimae* pavans that we find the most original, extensive and harmonically inventive working of the seed-theme, which itself encapsulates the welling-up and over-flowing of a tear in a potent image. We should note that Dowland calls these pavans 'passionate' - they warm the coldness of the melancholy humour with the fire of intense, sorrowful emotion conveyed via skilful use of the passing dissonance and false relation, a tension and resolution amplified by the sustained sonority of viols. Each pavan has a distinct character; no.4, *tristes*, being the central, most dense and rhythmically complex composition; no doubt alluding to lowest point in the human condition, man's furthest estrangement from God and immersion in matter, before he begins his ascent which culminates in the transcendent timelessness of *verae* via *amantis*, the active force of Love. In the last two pavans, the theme becomes inverted, and the rising 4th announces the transformation of melancholy into the bliss of spiritual union.

There is another, physiological dimension to the melancholic condition, transmitted via pseudo-Aristotle to Marsilio Ficino and the occult philosopher Cornelius Agrippa and thence to the Elizabethan Hermeticists, which bears direct relation to the popularity and influence of *Lachrimae* - and that is the cultivation of melancholy as the mark, or means, of intellectual genius. According to classical medical theory, man's physical body was regulated by four humours which corresponded to the elements and planets: Sanguine to air and Jupiter, Choleric to fire and Mars, Phlegmatic to water and the Moon, and Melancholic to earth and Saturn. The substance which brought about a melancholic temperament was black bile. Being dry and cold, like the earth, an excess of this (to which scholars were particularly prone) would weigh down the body, force the mind into the body and cause depression.

1. THE TEARES OF THE MUSES Anthony Holborne (1599)
2. READING *Corpus Hermeticum* Book I, 1-4
3. THE IMAGE OF MELANCHOLY Anthony Holborne (1599)
4. READING C.H.I, 4-5
5. FANTASIA 'LACHRIMAE' Andrew Wilson-Dickson (1975)
6. READING C.H.I, 6-7
7. LACHRIMAE PAVAN JOHN DOWLAND Giles Farnaby (d.1640)
8. READING C.H.I, 8-10
9. SEMPER DOWLAND, SEMPER DOLENS John Dowland (c.1604)
10. READING C.H.I, 11-12
11. PAVAN LACHRIMAE Thomas Weelkes (d.1623)
12. READING C.H.I, 13-14
13. LACHRIMAE ANTIQUAE John Dowland (1604)
14. READING C.H.I, 14-16
15. LACHRIMAE ANTIQUAE NOVAE John Dowland (1604)
16. READING C.H.I, 17-19
17. LACHRIMAE GEMENTES John Dowland (1604)
18. READING C.H.I, 20-23
19. LACHRIMAE TRISTES John Dowland (1604)
20. READING C.H.I, 24-25
21. LACHRIMAE COACTAE John Dowland (1604)
22. READING C.H.I, 26
23. LACHRIMAE AMANTIS John Dowland (1604)
24. READING C.H.I, 30
25. LACHRIMAE VERAЕ John Dowland (1604)

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