

# FATHER TIME AND ORPHEUS<sup>1</sup>

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## Meaningful coincidences

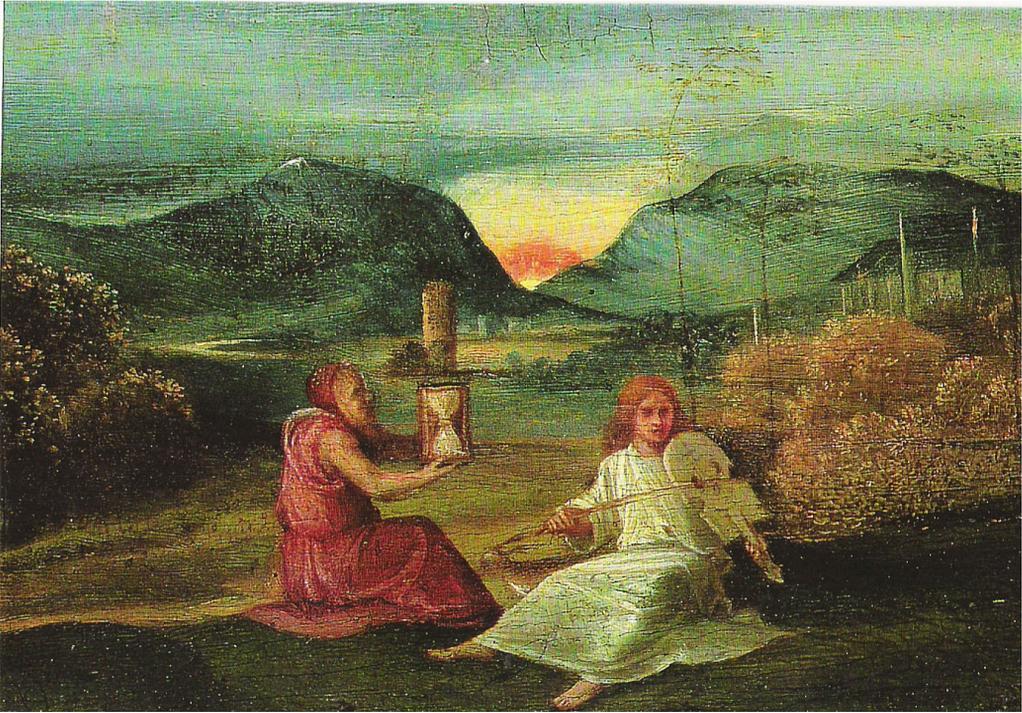
In September 1462, aged almost twenty-nine, Marsilio Ficino wrote to Cosimo de' Medici in gratitude for his generous patronage:

A few days ago I was celebrating [the hymn to the Cosmos] in an Orphic ritual, when my father brought me some letters, in which the wise Cosimo de' Medici, most health-giving doctor of my life, said he would reflect on my studies, kindly provide for me, generously favour me, and hospitably and piously welcome me into his sacred dwelling. So it happened that not only your magnificence, but also the ancient prophecy of Orpheus evoked in me the most immense wonder. For he seemed to be directing to you the hymn that he consecrated to the Cosmos, and indeed to be asking on my behalf that which he asked with the sure aim of the hymn. You, meanwhile, through a heavenly incitement seemed to have heard a certain divine breath at the very time that I was singing the hymn and asking for the same thing that the prayer earnestly requests.<sup>2</sup>

A playful pun on the name Cosimo (*Cosmus* in Latin), but also an illustration of Ficino's natural inclination to pay attention to, indeed emphasise, the meaningful coincidence of two orders of reality, the divine and the human. For it was through the simultaneous occurrence of singing the Orphic hymn and receiving the letter that Ficino understood, in practice, the Hermetic maxim 'that which is above is like that which is below'<sup>3</sup> — that actions and events may be linked in a way which reveals a more subtle principle at work than material causality. In the name of Orpheus, he prayed to the Cosmos to grant "a quiet life to a pious young man", and miraculously the heavens moved Cosimo, "through a heavenly incitement", to respond.

Is this a supernatural intervention, a fanciful story, or is it really the way the world works, if we have eyes to see it? I shall begin this essay with a personal anecdote which would seem to echo Ficino's synchronistic experience. The event I will relate preceded — and indeed signalled - the experimental re-creation of Ficino's Orphic singing which I was about to undertake in the form of a recording project.<sup>4</sup>

In the spring of 2000, my brother-in-law sent me a postcard of a small painting, for no other reason than my interest in Renaissance music and astrology. The painting was called *The Astrologer*, by an anonymous artist (see Figure 1). I was intrigued by this image, because I had not seen any other explicit examples of the connection between astrology and music in Renaissance iconography. A week or so before we were due to record *Secrets of the Heavens*, my friend and colleague Geoffrey Cornelius happened to pay a visit. I showed him the postcard, and was telling him about our singer Mark Tucker who was greatly interested in the magical properties of the vowels and tone-production in Renaissance vocal music. At that moment, the telephone rang. It was Mark, who was ringing me to tell me about a dream of a friend of his. In the dream, he, Mark, was a young man dressed in white sitting next to an old man who was an astrologer. In view of what we were about to record, this had struck Mark as highly significant. To his astonishment, I told him that I was at that very moment looking at an image of the dream.



*Figure 1. The Astrologer*  
*Anon./attr. Giorgione. Courtesy of The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.*

A ‘mere’ coincidence? Such an alignment of events cannot be explained rationally, yet it sends a shiver down the spine, imprinting on those who experience it a sense of meaningfulness and intentionality – Ficino’s phrase “immense wonder” puts it well. Geoffrey suggested that one interpretation could arise from the astrologer with his hour-glass: that just as he could be setting the planetary hours for the day from the moment of sunrise, so should we record our hymns at the appropriate hour for each planet; and this we did as far as was possible. In any event, the effect was to endow the project with a significance and purpose beyond the immediate context and I recognised, like Ficino, a sense of my life being in accord with a greater pattern, an intimation of lawful connection of self and world. I was also struck by a curious link between the two episodes: central to both we find a letter (or postcard); now, the agency behind such communication would be understood to be Mercury, the divine messenger who mediates between worlds, but who is also the means of alchemically transforming base matter into gold. The significance of this will, I hope, become apparent.

### **Father Time and Orpheus**

Let us look more closely at the painting. It is small, only 12 by 19.5 centimetres, oil on panel, perhaps once decorating an item of furniture. On the left is an elderly man holding an hourglass, on the right a young man in white playing a *lira da braccio*. The dreamlike landscape is subdued; behind them we can see a tower, a lake and beyond that the sun rising (or setting?) between two mountains. I speculated that here was an Orphic singer, invoking the Sun in a hymn to Apollo, while the astrologer symbolised the importance of timing, of the *kairos* or the ‘right’ moment, the knowledge that only when performed at the appropriate time will an invocation ‘work’, or hit its mark.

*The Astrologer* remained on my desk as a talismanic image for over a year. Then as I was about to embark on this paper, it came to life again. A friend pointed me in the direction of a source of information which indeed indicated an Orphic background to the painting.<sup>5</sup> Originally called *Father Time and Orpheus* (and more recently re-named *The Hourglass*), the painting has been attributed (erroneously) to Giorgione, but is now considered to be of his school (sixteenth century Venetian). X-rays have been taken of the painting, revealing an underdrawing which depicts two deer near Orpheus, one of which has been over-painted with the old man. So originally Orpheus was singing to the animals, a common theme of this period. Why then was the old man superimposed? Jaynie Anderson suggests that he is Chronos/Saturn, or Father Time, acting as a “harbinger of death”. She writes: “Apollo and Chronos may denote the opposition of time and music... Orpheus, the musician, is playing in defiance of the hourglass, indicating that by virtue of his music he will survive death and time”.<sup>6</sup> She sees the setting sun as symbolising the end of life. But we may imagine, too, that Orpheus’s music will be resurrected at sunrise, which can be seen as not only the dawn of a new day, but also the dawn of a new era. In Venetian art, this new era was ushered in by the influx of neo-platonic ideas from Florence; the 1490s saw publications there of works by Ficino, Pico della Mirandola and Poliziano.<sup>7</sup>

Wendy S. Sheard, in an essay on the Orpheus theme in early Renaissance art, has pointed out that from this time there emerged in artists such as Bellini and Giorgione “a new kind of invention in which, unlike allegory, the artist combined ideas with visual forms in ways that were not rigidly determined, allowing fantasy a greater role.”<sup>8</sup> This painting certainly demands an imaginative response, for its meaning is not to be found in specific allegorical or historical detail. It enchants, and intentionally, illustrating Sheard’s observation that “the pictorial forms and the intellectual forms of content combine to induce in the viewer a mood or state of mind which converges on what is depicted. The boundaries between art object and spectator are purposefully blurred, even denied.”<sup>9</sup> Orpheus holds his bow as a magic wand; he is Hermes the magician in the guise of the divinely-inspired artist, inviting the spectator to listen, now, in the present moment, to the harmonies of the cosmos. Sheard sees the Orphic painting of this period as approaching the “non-conceptual auditory immediacy of music” — subtly evident, here, in the underlying geometrical ground-plan and more obviously in the presence of the elemental world: the sky, sun, lake and earth. Through the sounding of Apollo’s lyre, Ficino tells us, the natural forces of the world were believed to become regulated and balanced, bringing the human soul into harmony with the physical elements:

Orpheus, in his book of hymns, asserts that Apollo, by his vital rays, bestows health and life on all and drives away disease. Furthermore, by the sounding strings, that is, their vibrations and power, he regulates everything... In addition the soul and body are in harmony with each other by natural proportion, as are the parts of the soul and the parts of the body. Indeed, the harmonious cycles of fevers and humours and the movement of the pulse itself also seem to imitate this harmony.<sup>10</sup>

How do we link *Father Time and Orpheus* with Ficino? Most obviously, Ficino the self-styled Orpheus believed that his music, as part of a Platonic programme to revitalise the soul-life of his contemporary society, would herald a Golden Age when Saturn and Phoebus, as philosophy and poetry, would unite. “What do we mean by modernising antiquity”, he asks, “if not restoring that auspicious golden age when Saturn ruled?”<sup>11</sup> It was Ficino’s conviction that he was chosen for this task by Divine Providence, in order to unite the religion and

philosophy of his age through infusing philosophical enquiry with spiritual practice, whether through ritual activity or contemplation.<sup>12</sup> What is more, he understood certain astrological factors in his own horoscope as signifying (not causing) his particular destiny, for all “celestial figures” were understood as “instruments of the divine minds” for the Platonist, indicating the purposeful and intelligent design of the Creator.<sup>13</sup>

We can also understand Saturn and Apollo as the principles of darkness and light, or the limitations of the material world and the heroic, solar consciousness which must counteract and transform them through the revelation of divine wisdom. In this, Ficino likened himself to Virgil’s Aeneas, “who as the heroic soul, is just about to descend into hell and then to reascend; in other words, he is about to penetrate the secret mysteries of the divine and to lead forth those that are darkest into the light.”<sup>14</sup> It was always Ficino’s explicit intention to bring the light of the ancient theology to illuminate the darkness of the moral and intellectual laxity of his time, and perhaps we could even attribute the Renaissance love of paradox to the desire to foster the growth of an inner strength derived from the mean of two extremes.<sup>15</sup> “If we wish to live happily, we should worship Phoebus and Saturnian Pan at the same time”<sup>16</sup> says Ficino, and it would seem that the juxtaposition of opposites within a symbolic image in some way encourages the viewer, or listener (for example, in the beauty of melancholy music) to find a ‘middle way’, a *discordia concors*<sup>17</sup> or inner equilibrium within the trials of earthly life.

It was understood, particularly in the alchemical tradition, that in externalising the conflicting elements within one’s own soul, they may be made conscious and reflected back, understood, and tempered: “the picture functions as a means to gain experience of the One, and is thus an instrument of self-exploration and self-knowledge. The act of viewing the painting now becomes an aid or inducement to meditation comparable to Ficino’s singing of the Orphic Hymns”<sup>18</sup> suggests Sheard. Just as in alchemy the opposites are brought together through the agency of Mercury, so for Ficino music is a Mercurial, airy spirit who unites the physical, ‘objective’ reality of the musician’s song in time with the ‘divine inspiration’ of prophetic utterance.<sup>19</sup> Note too the alchemical symbolism in the painting itself: the white of *albedo* for the spiritual work of the musician, the red of *rubedo* for the wisdom of the philosopher/astrologer, the tower, the four elements, the gold of the Sun.

That Ficino experienced the tension of extreme opposites within his own psyche we know from his testimony and from indications in his horoscope.<sup>20</sup> On one level, he played Apollonian music to alleviate his melancholic (Saturnian) temperament, to bring the fire and air of inspired song to the heavy earth-bound condition of over-abundant black bile.<sup>21</sup> But Saturn was also the highest, “most exalted” of all the planets. To know Saturn meant, Platonically, that the soul had attained knowledge of the intelligible realm of the Ideas. Through the music of Apollo Ficino discovered that it was possible to transform melancholy into deep contemplation of “the most secret things”, and this provided the impetus for his entire project of natural magic.<sup>22</sup> In the inmost recesses of the Platonic Academy, he writes, philosophers will “come to know their Saturn, contemplating the secrets of the heavens”.<sup>23</sup> And the way to contemplate these secrets, for Ficino and his circle, lay in imitating the music of Orpheus, whose divine power could control the very forces of nature, subdue wild beasts and heal human beings. So with *Father Time and Orpheus* as our talisman, let us begin to explore how Ficino rediscovered a lost knowledge through playing on his Orphic lyre, reviving a faculty of imaginal vision that, in the words of Plotinus, “all have but few use”<sup>24</sup> a way of seeing that was understood to reconnect the human soul to the soul of the world.

## The Orphic Hymns

Ficino translated the eighty-seven Hymns of Orpheus from Greek into Latin when still a youth, although his own translations were not published, and do not survive. He was wary of

circulating them too widely, in case he was accused of reviving an ancient cult of gods and daemons “so long and deservedly condemned”;<sup>25</sup> nor would he have been immune to the charge of polytheism, despite Orpheus’ recantatory palinode.<sup>26</sup> For not all contemporary readers would have agreed with Pico that “the names of the gods that Orpheus sings are not names of deceiving demons, from whom evil and not good comes, but of natural and divine powers, distributed in the world by the true God for the great utility of man – if he knows how to use them”.<sup>27</sup> But despite his reservations about publicising his translations, the Orphic Hymns remained for Ficino the most revered examples of the spiritual power of symbolic verse – the ultimate form of poetic theology.

To Ficino and his circle Orpheus was not just a mythological figure, but a great initiate and teacher who lived and taught in Thrace as the third in a chain of six ‘ancient theologians’ — beginning with Zoroaster and culminating with Plato — in whose writings both philosophical reflection and spiritual experience were integrated in a common concern for the nurturing of the essential divinity of the human soul, and who prepared the way for the supreme revelation of Christ.<sup>28</sup> The Persian *magus* Zoroaster was supposed by Ficino to be the author of the Chaldaean Oracles and the inventor of a sacred writing, a language of the stars. Ficino tells us that “he established letters in the characters of the celestial signs and constellations”<sup>29</sup> — a pure, astrological language which subsequently degenerated into the diversity of alphabets. Such a language was only legible to the initiate, as it spoke a pristine truth and disclosed the divine source of being. Pico’s Conclusion that “true astrology teaches us to read in the book of God”<sup>30</sup> evokes the cosmic understanding of the Zoroastrian priests who worked with the correspondences between heaven and earth through their astrological observations.

From this, the first golden age and pure source, three modes of articulating the perennial wisdom were understood to derive: language, astrology and magic. Flowing on through Egypt via the teaching of Hermes Trismegistus, they next found a voice in Orpheus’ hymns, addressed to the gods and the elements of the natural world. Although the texts of the Orphic Hymns were probably composed in the early centuries CE by followers of Orphic sects, for the Renaissance followers of this ‘golden chain’ they issued from the mouth of the master himself and took inspiration from the very roots of the ancient theology. Indeed, the Hymns were esteemed all the more highly by Ficino and his circle due to Plato’s insistence that hymns were ‘good’ poetry, to be given a prominent role in the life of the ideal city, as they led men towards a virtuous life.<sup>31</sup>

The Orphic Hymns, hexameters of epithets and attributes, convey their magical properties through poetic image, the rhythms of incantation, the resonances of the human voice and the aromas of incense, and Ficino gave their rediscovery and performance pride of place in his list of the significant achievements of the Florentine Renaissance:

For this age, like a golden age, has restored to the light the liberal disciplines that had become almost extinct, namely, grammar, poesy, oratory, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic Lyre. And all this in Florence.<sup>32</sup>

That the “ancient singing of songs” had a more arcane and mysterious purpose than the revival of an obsolete art-form is enigmatically suggested by Pico in his Orphic Conclusions:

Since it is not permitted to explain in public the secret magic first drawn out of by me from the Orphic hymns, so to have demonstrated it with certain aphoristic hints, as is done in the following conclusions, will be useful to excite the minds of contemplatives.

Nothing is more effective in natural magic than the Orphic hymns, if there is added the due music, intention of the soul, and other circumstances known to the wise.

Anyone who does not know how to intellectualise sensible properties perfectly through the method of secret analogising understands nothing sound from the Orphic hymns.<sup>33</sup>

So what exactly did Ficino and Pico consider to be the “due music”, and how were they to direct the “intention of the soul” in this ritual singing? What did they believe ‘happened’ when gods or powers were invoked in this way, and what was the special knowledge, the “other circumstances” to which only the initiate had access? As far as the practical circumstances were concerned, it would seem that performing the hymns was not reserved for elaborate ceremonial occasions, for we find numerous references in Ficino’s correspondence to his ‘Orphic Lyre’ and the effect of singing to it, either alone, or with friends as a congenial activity.<sup>34</sup> But even then, its power reached beyond the temporary relief of depression. To Sebastiano Salvini he wrote: “we play the lyre precisely to avoid becoming unstrung ... So may the well-tempered lyre always be our salvation when we apply ourselves to it rightly.”<sup>35</sup> And to Antonio Canigiani: “I often resort to the solemn sound of the lyre and to singing ... to banish vexations of both soul and body, and to raise the mind to the highest considerations and to God as much as I may.”<sup>36</sup>

### **Pythagorean *harmonia***

Despite Ficino’s unshakeable regard for the authority of Plato and of the Church Fathers, he found the precedent for his use of music as a ritual of transformation in the tradition established by the fifth of the ancient theologians, Pythagoras.<sup>37</sup> Here was a man “initiated into the rites of Orpheus”<sup>38</sup> who found practical application for his knowledge of cosmic harmony in music and healing. In Iamblichus’ *On the Pythagorean Life* Ficino would have read:

[Pythagoras] held that music made a great contribution to health, if properly used: he took this form of purification very seriously, calling it “healing by music”. In the spring he engaged in singing like this: a lyre-player was seated in the centre, and those who were good at singing sat round him in a circle and sang, to his accompaniment, paeans, which they thought raised their spirits and established inner harmony and rhythm. They also, at other times, used music as a kind of medicine. There were songs designed for afflictions of the soul, to counter depression and anguish of mind ... others to deal with anger and bursts of indignation and every disturbance of that kind of soul; and yet another kind of music devised to counter desires. They also used dancing. As a musical instrument, they used the lyre ... the entire school of Pythagoras practised what was called ‘arrangement’ or ‘composite’ or ‘treatment’, converting states of soul to their opposite by the beneficial use of appropriate songs ....<sup>39</sup>

Pythagoras knew how to do this through understanding the principles of harmony, and how they governed and united the three worlds of divinity, the human soul and matter. Music could reproduce in sound the numerical relationships embedded in the fabric of creation (as described by Plato in the *Timaeus*), determining the fundamental structure of both the world soul and the human soul. I shall not attempt here an analysis of Pythagorean harmonic science.<sup>40</sup>

Suffice it to say that his experiments with natural objects — wooden pipes, anvils, stones and string-lengths - revealed the relationship of weight and length to pitch, resulting in the discovery that the ‘perfect’ consonance we know as the octave (expressed as the ratio 2:1) could be divided into seven steps or intervals with the fourth (4:3) and fifth (3:2) as primary reference points, being next in harmonious proportion to the octave. But the audible tones contained within the octave are not the only dimension of sound. Each note embodies a series of overtones or harmonics, resonances which become more or less audible according to the pitch and timbre of the voice or instrument.<sup>41</sup> These harmonics characterise the quality of a note, and as Joscelyn Godwin has pointed out, different vowel-sounds will have stronger or weaker resonances. Normally, overtones are not consciously perceivable, but as Godwin observes, “the findings of acoustics compel us to admit the surprising fact that every time one hears language, whether sung or spoken, one is unconsciously perceiving an intricate melody of high harmonics, and that this is the very thing that carries meaning and enables us to understand one another”.<sup>42</sup> He concludes that we must have an “inborn familiarity” with the harmonic series. Moreover, since the numbers governing the harmonic series are those which — according to Pythagoras’s discoveries — underlie the whole universe, then through the ears human beings may reconnect or ‘tune in’ to the fundamental laws of creation. Which is exactly what Plato recommends in the *Timaeus*:

The motions in us that are akin to the divine are the thoughts and revolutions of the universe. We should each therefore attend to these motions and by learning about the harmonious circuits of the universe repair the damage done at birth to the circuits in our head, and so restore understanding and what is understood to their original likeness to each other. When that is done we shall have achieved the goal set us by the gods.<sup>43</sup>

There is nothing ‘supernatural’ about the overtones of a note, but they are occult, in that they are not readily audible. The ancient priests worked with this hidden dimension of music which they associated with the hidden or astral planes of existence, and they believed that the cultivation of harmonics through the use of particular sounds could be a powerful tool in the manipulation of the super-sensible energies of the human being.<sup>44</sup> Gregory Shaw draws our attention to the use of music in Egyptian theurgic ritual, to awaken the soul both ‘horizontally’ through audible melodies and ‘vertically’ through “their inaudible principles”.<sup>45</sup> Could Cicero be referring to this ‘secret’ knowledge in his *Dream of Scipio*, when he states that “Gifted men, imitating this harmony [of the spheres] on stringed instruments and in singing, have gained for themselves a return to this region, as have those of exceptional abilities who have studied divine matters even in earthly life”?<sup>46</sup> Certainly the Syrian Pythagorean Iamblichus in his treatise *On the mysteries* goes further to suggest that the sounding of particular notes will, by sympathetic vibration, allow the gods themselves to be fully present:

those things such as sounds and tunes are properly consecrated to each of the gods, and kinship is properly assigned to them in accord with their proper orders and powers, the motions in the universe itself and the harmonious sounds rushing from its motions. It is, then, in virtue of such connections of the tunes with the gods that their presence occurs (for nothing intervenes to stop them) so that whatever has a fortuitous likeness with them, immediately participates in them, and a total possession and filling with superior being and power takes place at once.<sup>47</sup>

## Sound as initiation

In focussing and regulating particular resonances the Egyptians understood that they were participating in, not merely imitating, divine life, and the late Hellenistic writer Demetrius tells us that they practised such invocations using the seven vowel-sounds: “In Egypt the priests, when singing hymns in praise of the gods, employ the seven vowels, which they utter in due succession; and the sound of these letters is so euphonious that men listen to it in place of aulos and cithara”.<sup>48</sup> Now it is the open vowel sounds which produce the strongest harmonics, and the vowels themselves have long been regarded in esoteric traditions as emanations of the original divine Word, manifesting on the spiritual level as the varying vibrations of the seven planets and on the material plane as the essence of human language. Ancient music theorists found correspondences between the four primary vowels *Epsilon*, *Alpha*, *Eta* and *Omega* and all elements of creation: gods, planets, elements, seasons, directions and genders, and assigned a particular pitch to each one.<sup>49</sup> The Pythagorean Nicomachus suggests that the vowel-sounds derive from “the tones of the seven spheres” but because the planets exist in ether, not air, these tones are inaudible.<sup>50</sup> In human speech or song, intelligible meaning arises due to the framing of vowels with the material quality of the consonants. It would follow that chants using vowels alone, of which there are many examples in the Greek Magical Papyri and Hermetic texts,<sup>51</sup> would free the participant to connect directly with supersensible worlds. Conversely, it would be understood that it was the occult properties of the vowels which truly animated human language with divine influences. It is no wonder that in ancient Egypt the ear was regarded as “the organ through which the mental faculty of attention was directed to the world, especially to its spiritual order ... the gift of hearing was the basis of the perception of spiritual truth ... the ear rather than the eye was the organ that opened the mind to the deepest levels of reality.”<sup>52</sup>

On hearing Tibetan overtone singing one can have some idea of the power of the human voice to resonate in this way. But instruments too could produce harmonics through various techniques; there is evidence that a sixth-century BCE lyre-player called Lysander of Sicyon invented a method of producing natural harmonics through finger-stopping the strings, and *auloi* and other wind instruments were capable of particular over-blowing techniques.<sup>53</sup> The combination of a sustained, bowed instrument such as the *lira da braccio* playing a drone of perfect fifths and octaves and a voice intoning pure vowel sounds is rich in harmonic resonance, and this may well be the reason for the popularity of this combination amongst the Renaissance revivalists of the healing properties of music and song.<sup>54</sup> String resonates sympathetically to voice, which in turn resonates to both the microcosm of the human soul and the macrocosm of the universe. I shall be exploring this idea in relation to Ficino’s own singing a little later, but we can certainly assume, as Godwin suggests, that allowing the harmonics to resonate internally would be considered to be therapeutic for the performer, and manifesting them externally for others would be both a restorative experience for the listener and a regulating function for the material world.<sup>55</sup> The uninitiated would just hear a musical pitch; the magus would be sensitive to the higher vibrations and know how to direct them. Is this perhaps what Pico was referring to when he suggested that the efficacy of the Orphic Hymns depended on “other circumstances known to the wise”? Or Ficino, when he speaks of a “harmony endowed with gifts from the stars” in which a “celestial power arises”?<sup>56</sup> Like Pythagoras, Ficino regarded himself as a healer, and all his practices of natural magic were to one end: to restore a harmony to body and soul which it once possessed, but which in the process of embodiment had become shaken up, confused and disrupted.<sup>57</sup>

Technically this was to be accomplished through influencing the *spiritus*, the “airy vapour of our blood and the link between body and soul”<sup>58</sup> with musical sound, whose airy nature is

akin to it. If the harmonies or sounds imitate or reproduce the perfect mathematical ratios inherent in the soul from its original creation, then via the spirit the soul may be restored to its original condition, and from there influence the physical body. Ficino writes to Francesco Musano:

Do not be surprised, Francesco, that we combine medicine and the lyre with the study of theology . . . Nature has bonded body and spirit with the soul. The body is indeed healed by the remedies of medicine; but spirit, which is the airy vapour of our blood and the link between body and soul, is tempered and nourished by airy smells, by sounds and by song. Finally, the soul as it is divine, is purified by the divine mysteries of theology. In nature a union is made from soul, body and spirit. To the Egyptian priests medicine, music and the mysteries were one and the same study. Would that we could master this natural and Egyptian art as successfully as we tenaciously and wholeheartedly apply ourselves to it!<sup>59</sup>

Ficino here explicitly links “the mysteries” to the practices of musical healing, implying that music has the power of direct spiritual initiation. His ‘tenacious application’ resulted in the *Three Books on Life* of 1489, ostensibly a medical/astrological treatise for the benefit of over-zealous scholars. However, if we are to take his words to Musano seriously, we must assume an intention of much greater significance in this work. Heavily influenced by the Hermetic *Asclepius*, Arabic astrology, the *Chaldaean Oracles* and the medieval *Picatrix*, Ficino also relied on the philosophical premises of Plotinus, Proclus and Iamblichus, whose *De mysteriis* he had translated as *On the mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldaeans and Assyrians* the previous year. The third book of the *Three Books on Life*, entitled *De vita coelitus comparanda* (‘How to fit one’s life to the heavens’) is a thinly-disguised introduction to theurgy, the divinatory rituals of the Egyptian priests described by Iamblichus, who sets out to explain and justify them as the necessary ‘work of the gods’ in the domain of human material existence.<sup>60</sup> In theurgy, through appropriate use of material or immaterial ritual, the human soul is purified to the extent that it ‘uncovers’ its true nature and resonates at the level of the divine principles or gods. This ritual action is not dependent on human will, but rather on the initiative of the gods themselves, and Iamblichus (following Plotinus) emphasises that its techniques and content can only be understood from the gods’ own perspective, that is, intelligibly, and not discursively, nor in terms of a purely human imagination.<sup>61</sup> Invocations and the use of sounds are therefore for the purpose of imitating the gods and elevating the human soul to their level of knowledge; they are not to intentionally conjure the presence of supernatural beings (although this may inadvertently occur in the course of the ritual).

We saw earlier how the Egyptian priests knew how to direct specific vowel sounds to resonate with higher levels of vibration; both Iamblichus and the author(s) of the *Corpus Hermeticum* confirm that their language was sacred, embodying a secret power unknown to the barbarous Greeks whose philosophy was considered to be mere “a noise of words”, constituted from “empty words which produce mere displays”.<sup>62</sup> As Gregory Shaw explains, “the incantation . . . was accomplished by the god, yet it freed the soul by allowing it to actively experience what it could never conceptually understand”.<sup>63</sup> Iamblichus, whose treatise is an attempt to convince the sceptical philosopher Porphyry of a deeper, more unified knowledge than the ‘intellectual energising’ which dominated Greek modes of philosophical discourse, insists that these mysteries cannot be grasped theoretically or conceptually. They have to be experienced through appealing to an innate knowledge which is “far removed from all

antithetical procedure” and which “from all eternity coexisted in the soul in complete uniformity”. Such a manner of knowing can only be gained through ritual activity:

Indeed, to tell the truth, the contact we have with the divinity is not to be taken as knowledge. Knowledge, after all, is separated (from its object) by some degree of otherness. But prior to that knowledge, which knows another as being itself other, there is the unitary connection with the gods that is natural and indivisible.<sup>64</sup>

We are talking here of a deeply intuitive realisation of unity, fostered by an opening of the human soul to the forces of the universe through imitating them in whatever way is appropriate to the individual’s capacity and inclination. For just as the power of the one God Helios, Iamblichus says, is received differently through each of the twelve signs of the zodiac, so men’s prayers must conform to and be presented through these varying ‘colours’, and the names, stones, plants, music or any other symbolic image function to elevate the soul through the world of difference to eventual union with the One contained within it.<sup>65</sup> But nothing could be accomplished in theurgic ritual without one vital ingredient – indeed all could be accomplished using this one thing alone – namely, knowledge of *kairos*. For ultimate union with the Creator God Himself may be attained “without calling in the aid of matter or bringing to bear anything other than the observation of the critical time for action.”<sup>66</sup> In short, through a knowledge of astronomy and astrology.

### **Astrological music in Ficino’s *De vita coelitus comparanda***

Ficino does not dare to aim so high in his *Three Books on Life*, where he reserves his magical preparations for the initial stages of awakening the soul to its cosmic (that is, planetary) correspondences and no further. He had to tread very carefully around the Christian orthodoxy of Augustine and Aquinas, who condemned all forms of magic and divination as the work of evil demons, and to insist (following Plotinus) that the efficacy of his images and invocations depended purely on the attraction of natural cosmic sympathies.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Iamblichus, he does not speak the language of the pagan priest, concerned with divine action in hieratic ritual, but that of the Christian physician-astrologer, suggesting the very practical efforts that human beings may make in their everyday lives, and continually emphasising his allegiance to the orthodox position on such dangerous topics as talismanic images.<sup>68</sup> But even though Ficino is clearly not advocating the use of Orphic Hymns in this work (he suggests that the performer should supply his or her own words for astrological invocations),<sup>69</sup> one can hardly deny that his ritual music-making is thinly-disguised theurgy for the beginner:

The Chaldeans, Egyptians, and Platonists think that by this method one can avoid the malice of fate. For since they believe the celestials are not empty bodies, but bodies divinely animated and ruled moreover by divine Intelligences, no wonder they believe that as many good things as possible come forth from thence for men, goods pertaining not only to our body and spirit but also overflowing somewhat into our soul. And not into our soul from their bodies but from their souls.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, preparing the human soul to participate in the “life and spirit of the cosmos” through contemplating and imitating the spirits of the planets was not an end in itself for the ancient magicians. Rather, it was the beginning of an ascent to the One who was beyond all

being, all image. If Ficino believed that he too was “avoiding the malice of fate” in the practice of his natural magic, then along with Iamblichus he was working to release the ‘lower’ part of the soul from the physical realm of determined effects and align it with the freedom of its autonomous and self-moving ‘divine’ part. Although he was careful to situate his sympathetic magic within the theoretical philosophical framework of Plotinus, Ficino’s actual practice owed a great deal more to the theurgists. Like the Egyptian priest, he directed the astrological techniques and theories which form the basis of his practical magic to one end: to know the right moment to act, for it is in this moment of action that a channel is opened to the life of the cosmos – and, by implication, beyond.

In the first chapter of *De vita coelitus comparanda* Ficino sets his magic in a neo-platonic universe of sympathetic resonance.<sup>71</sup> It is suffused by a vitalising principle, the *anima mundi*, which mediates between the Divine Intellect and the body of the world, fashioning matter by means of ‘seminal reasons’ which conform to the Platonic Ideas. Thus “every single species corresponds through its own seminal reason to its own Idea”.<sup>72</sup> All things in the world may act as baits, insofar as they can attract the world-soul through their own divine qualities endowed by her at the beginning. However, says Ficino, “let no one believe that absolutely all gifts are drawn from the Soul to any one particular species of matter at a specific time, but rather at the right moment only those gifts of that one seed from which such a species has grown, and of seeds that are similar to it”.<sup>73</sup> From her seminal reasons, the *anima mundi* also constructed stars, constellations and all the ‘universal images’ named by astrologers. “On these well-ordered forms the forms of lower things depend”, says Ficino, and they themselves originate in even higher and more unified intellectual Forms, which ultimately culminate in the One itself.

The endowments of individual human beings then depend on the positions and movements of the stars, but they are not actively *produced* by them; rather, through a mirroring or correspondence, their patterns and locations will be reflected in the soul of the individual. This is the theory: in practice, the person intent on strengthening such a psychic connection must study his own horoscope and understand how it relates to the current motions of the heavens: “a little additional preparation on our part suffices to capture the gifts of the celestials, provided each accommodates himself to that gift in particular to which he is particularly subject”<sup>74</sup> advises Ficino. Thus we might imagine the construction of a Venusian talisman, on the day and in the hour of Venus, with precise astrological significations, when one’s own natal Venus is well-aspected. Indeed, it is useless to expect a ritual action to ‘hit the mark’ unless it is astrologically centred: “a material action, motion or event does not obtain full or perfect efficacy”, asserts our magus, “except when the celestial harmony conduces to it from all sides”.<sup>75</sup> Here is another contender for Pico’s “circumstances known to the wise” – possibly the strongest of them all.

When a propitious time is chosen, the rite proceeds; indeed, the election of the time can be seen as part of the ritual itself. But, Iamblichus and Ficino agree, its efficacy cannot be measured or assessed in terms of sense-perception or empirical experiment. Using the metaphor of hidden rays, Ficino explains that our spirit receives these rays from the spirit of the world. They carry the “motion and power of the world”<sup>76</sup> and penetrate all things, but we can only perceive them through our corresponding faculty of innate intuition, not through “reasoning and proof” as Iamblichus puts it.<sup>77</sup> These occult properties, the ‘power points’ of spiritual energy in the material world, serve to animate it:

But who does not know that the occult virtues of things, which are called ‘specific virtues’ by natural philosophers, are made not by the

elemental nature, but by the celestial? And so the rays can (as they say) imprint in images forces occult and wonderful beyond those we know, just as they introduce them into all things....and they bring with them marvellous gifts from the imaginations and minds of the celestials, also a very intense force from their strong emotion [*affectu*] and from the very rapid motion of their bodies...<sup>78</sup>

Now Ficino's treatise is primarily concerned with image-making, whether material or audible. It is not possible, he maintains, to prepare the image to receive the celestial properties unless the operator too engages his imagination and emotion. "The Arabic writers prove", he says, "that by an application of our spirit to the spirit of the cosmos, achieved by *physical art and our emotion*, celestial goods pass to our soul and body"<sup>79</sup> (my italics). Furthermore, "The Arabs say that when we fashion images rightly, our spirit, if it has been intent upon the work and upon the stars through imagination and emotion, is joined together with the very spirit of the world and with the rays of the stars through which the world-spirit acts"<sup>80</sup>. The image maker must "yearn vehemently" to attract the influence he desires, and if it has been "properly fashioned", the image (or medicine) will prove the more effective. It follows that the *affectus* of the operator is itself a divine force, finding its celestial counterpart through an intensely directed desire which is contained and focussed by the 'external' structures of the image, whether material or immaterial.

In this way, the combination of technical skill and emotional force, external and internal, objective and subjective qualities combine to effect a chain of influence from the operator's spirit to the image to the world spirit, as a sympathetic resonance; and this is exactly what happens when singing to the gods. Music, says Ficino, is like celestial figures in motion, since both are governed by number and proportion; indeed astrological influences can be experienced as the hidden counterpart to audible sound:

You are not unaware that harmonious music through its numbers and proportions has a wonderful power to calm, move, and influence our spirit, mind, and body. Well, proportions constituted out of numbers are almost figures of a sort, made, as it were, out of points and lines, but in motion. And similarly celestial figures by their own motion dispose themselves for acting; for by their harmonious rays and motions penetrating everything, they daily influence our spirit secretly just as overpowering music generally does openly.<sup>81</sup>

It follows that music composed according to "the rule of the stars", that is, in accord with the current motions of the heavens and an individual's horoscope, will engender a particularly forceful "celestial power". In his instructions for doing this, Ficino admits that it is very difficult but that it can be achieved "partly through our own efforts, partly by some divine chance [*divina sorte*]"<sup>82</sup>. We play our part by learning and applying the techniques of lyre-playing, composition and astrology, but it is only after this preparation that the inspiration may descend from the gods; the exoteric formal structure (Saturn) creating the *temenos* for the inner enthusiasm of poetic frenzy (Dionysus-Apollo).<sup>83</sup>

Let us return to our painting. If the old astrologer is marking out the hours with his hourglass, he is apportioning time, setting its qualitative boundaries, whilst our musician, filled with a "powerful vital and animal spirit" and "Phoebian in nature"<sup>84</sup> becomes a vessel for the music-spirit, which also lives and breathes like an animal. This airy spirit, says Ficino, "influences both its own and the other body by a certain stellar property which it drew both from its own

form and from the election of a suitable astrological hour”.<sup>85</sup> Now we can see why Father Time has to be there.

“Timeliness, power and intention” then are the three ingredients which give rise to a song which may heal, as it appeals to the life-giving properties of the Sun and acts on the human spirit, the mean between body and soul. All Ficino’s music is ultimately solar; for the Christian Platonist, all heavenly powers must find their completion in the Sun as giver of life and image of God. But Apollo’s qualities can also be harnessed through the filters of Mercury, Venus and Jupiter. “When at the right astrological hour”, says Ficino, “you declaim aloud by singing and playing in the manners we have specified for the four gods, they seem to be just about to answer you like an echo or like a string in a lute trembling to the vibration of another which is similarly tuned”.<sup>86</sup> The universe responds to the impulse of our appeal, it does not inflict an immutable fate. The “natural power in speech, song and words” has the effect of strengthening the symbolic imagination so that it may perceive the archetypal realities to which the words point and work with them in a dynamic act of co-creation, not passive subjection.<sup>87</sup>

But, we may ask, what is the ultimate end all of this? Certainly Ficino’s explicit aims in the *Three Books on Life* are to promote physical and mental health, a tuning to natural rhythms and cycles, a cultivation of aesthetic sensitivity and imagination. He likens the work of natural magic to that of the farmer who “prepares the field and the seed for celestial gifts and by grafting prolongs the life of the shoot and refashions it into another and better species”.<sup>88</sup> But despite the homely metaphors, used to convince sceptical clerics that he is certainly not “worshipping divinities”, it is not the farmers or natural philosophers who really lend weight to Ficino’s astrological music. He may well insist that “the philosopher who knows about natural objects and stars, whom we rightly are accustomed to call a Magus ... seasonably introduces the celestial into the earthly by particular lures just as the farmer interested in grafting brings the fresh graft into the old stock”,<sup>89</sup> but he knows very well that the true work of the Magus was, in the words of Pico, “full of the deepest mysteries and the most profound and hidden contemplation of things” as it sought to “marry earth to heaven”,<sup>90</sup> to bring about a transfiguration of matter and a purification of the human soul which would eventually lead to its liberation, its immortality.

The tension between ‘natural’ and ‘spiritual’ can never be resolved in this work, as Ficino the orthodox priest would not dare to suggest that his natural magic could lead to the ultimate mystery of the Christian religion. Yet where is the dividing line between a planetary ‘divinity’ and a ‘natural’ cosmic power? At the end of *De vita coelitus comparanda* Ficino surely stretches the credulity of his critics in musing that “sometimes it can happen that when you bring seminal reasons to bear on forms, higher gifts too may descend”,<sup>91</sup> and quotes from Iamblichus:

The celestial and cosmic divinities include some powers higher than they are and some lower; through the latter, they bind us to the effects of fate, but through the former in turn they free us from fate ... Much more, therefore does a supercelestial divinity redeem us from fatal necessity.<sup>92</sup>

From the orthodox point of view, these supercelestial divinities might seem to be trespassing on the inviolable role of Divine Grace. Although Ficino as a Christian was constrained within the fixed ‘vertical’ hierarchy of God-cosmos-earth, as a Platonist he was able to ‘see through’ each level as a process of metaphorical perception, and understand that the deepest and furthest revelation of cosmic symbolism was divine, in the sense that it effected a union of the human soul with the object of its knowledge and thus re-connected it to the ground of its being.<sup>93</sup>

## The liberation of the soul

Ficino's mission to infuse Christian faith with pagan philosophy was a project inevitably fraught with difficulties, and he treads extremely carefully. But it would be a mistake — given his Platonic understanding of the interplay between imagination and intellect — to extricate the exercises in active imagination which comprise his natural magic from the overall spiritual objective of such a synthesis; namely, the *realisation* of the soul's immortality. Ficino's greatest original work, his *Platonic Theology* (1469-1473)<sup>94</sup> is subtitled 'On the Immortality of the Soul', and indeed the conviction that the human soul could realise its divinity to the extent of becoming 'divinised' itself was the central motivating force of Florentine Platonism. In the *Platonic Theology* we find the following remarkable passage:

Our soul by means of the intellect and will, as by those twin Platonic wings, flies towards God, since by means of them it flies towards all things. By means of the intellect it attaches all things to itself, by means of the will, it attaches itself to all things. Thus the soul desires, endeavours, and begins to become God, and makes progress every day. Every movement directed towards a definite end first begins, then proceeds, then gradually increases and makes progress, and is finally perfected. It is increased through the same power through which it was begun: it makes progress through the same power through which it was increased; and finally, it is perfected through the same power through which it made progress. Hence our soul will sometime be able to become in a sense all things, and even to become God.<sup>95</sup>

Would it be too bold to suggest that a meaningful coincidence, such as Ficino experienced with his letter to Cosimo, may become the starting point of such a process, in freeing the mind from the dominance of linear, cause and effect time, from the 'subject-object' divide, and allowing a recognition of the unifying action of the soul? It was certainly the starting point for Ficino's whole enterprise of natural magic, and for his conviction that Orphic song, through its subtle resonances and verbal power, could unlock the door to a psychic transformation. Through using his free will, the man who observes the heavens and elects the appropriate time to act is already ruling the stars. But he may go further: "with celestial virtue [man] ascends the heavens and measures them. With supercelestial intelligence he transcends the heavens",<sup>96</sup> says Ficino. Eventually, through leading a life of contemplation, he will align the highest part of his soul with the realm of Divine Providence itself, a realm "liberated from nature and free from the action of the cosmos" as Iamblichus puts it.<sup>97</sup> This may be a long journey, but one can begin by invoking the gods who will lead the soul up through the heavenly spheres; and in order to ascend, says one ancient source, "souls need the lyre".<sup>98</sup> This is why Orpheus' music has the power to overcome death.

From this perspective, *Father Time and Orpheus* can be seen to carry a message of far greater significance than the depiction of a popular myth. It is telling us that when Saturn and the Sun, metaphorically the two orders of earth and heaven, converge at the right moment, Saturn becomes transformed and reveals its hidden gold.<sup>99</sup> It is telling us that this moment can be captured by the 'diligence and desire' of the Mercurial Orphic singer, whose music can stir the wings of the soul from its earthly slumber and wake it to the powers of the cosmos; and finally, it is telling us that this awakening is the first step towards the full realisation of its divinity — not "in some other place",<sup>100</sup> but on earth.

<sup>1</sup> Original version first published by Abzu Press, Oxford, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> *Ad Cosmum Medicem*, in *Supplementum Ficinianum*, ed. P.O. Kristeller, vol. 2 (Florence: Olschki, 1937, repr.1999), 87-88 (translation by author); see also I. Klutstein, *Marsilio Ficino et la Théologie Ancienne* (Florence: Olschki, 1987), appendix 1, 35-37.

<sup>3</sup> From the *Tabula Smaragdina* of Hermes Trismegistus, quoted in F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), 150, n.2.

<sup>4</sup> *Secrets of the Heavens*, Riverrun Records (RVRCD 53, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Jaynie Anderson, *Giorgione, The Painter of Poetic Brevity* (Paris & New York: Flammarion, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>7</sup> For details of publications in Venice, see W.S. Sheard & J.T. Paoletti, eds., 'The Widener Orpheus: Attributes, Type, Invention', in *Collaboration in Italian Renaissance Art* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1978), 207-8, n.48.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 189-213, this quotation, 197. The essay specifically refers to 'The Widener Orpheus', School of Bellini, National Gallery of Art, Washington.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>10</sup> *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, eds. Members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, vol.1 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975), no. 92, 142.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, vol.6 (1999), no. 40, 52. On Saturn and the Golden Age, see Michael J.B. Allen, *Synoptic Art: Marsilio Ficino and the History of Platonic Interpretation* (Florence, Olschki, 1998), 12-19.

<sup>12</sup> Ficino explains this project more fully in a letter to Johannes Pannonius (*Epistolae, Opera omnia* [Basle, 1576], 871-72, trans. in Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 15-16.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

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

<sup>15</sup> See Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Italian Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 97-112: "The many conjunctions of opposites that Plato had favoured could be understood as emanations from their coincidence in the Supreme One" (107).

<sup>16</sup> *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol. 6, no. 7, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> The motto *harmonia est discordia concors* is found in the frontispiece to F. Gaffurius, *De harmonia musicorum instrumentorum opus* (Milan, 1518, written 1480-1500). For sources of the classical formulation *concordia discors*, see Wind, *Pagan Mysteries*, 86, n.15.

<sup>18</sup> Sheard & Paoletti, 'The Widener Orpheus', 198.

<sup>19</sup> See Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 3.XXI, trans. C. Kaske & J. Clark (Binghamton: Renaissance Society of America, 1989), 359.

<sup>20</sup> Ficino was born with the planet Saturn on the ascendant in Aquarius, opposing Jupiter in Leo. He wrote to the Archbishop of Amalfi: "You have divined, I think, how much I have long wanted to live my life with someone of a Jovial nature, so that something of a bitter, and as I might say, Saturnine element, which either my natal star has bestowed on me or which philosophy has added, might eventually be alleviated by the sweet fellowship of someone born under Jove." (*Letters*, vol. 4 [1988], no. 45, 60-61). Ficino tells us in a letter to Martinus Uranius of 1489 (Ficino, *Opera omnia*, vol. I [Basle 1576, 901] that he was born at 'unam supra vigesimam' on 19<sup>th</sup> October, 1433 in Figline, Florence. At this period in Italy the system of 'Italian hours' was kept, where the day was considered to begin at sunset on the previous day. Therefore 21.00 hours means 21 hours after sunset on 18<sup>th</sup> October, i.e. approximately mid-afternoon on 19<sup>th</sup>. The GMT of 13.45 gives the most accurate correspondence to Ficino's own description of his chart in this letter. See also A.Voss, 'Ficino and Astrology', *Astrology; the Astrologers' Quarterly*, vol. 60 (1986), no. 3, 126-38 and no. 4, 191-99.

<sup>21</sup> To Giovanni Cavalcanti Ficino wrote: "I accuse a certain melancholy disposition, a thing which seems to me to be very bitter unless, having been softened, it may in a measure be made sweet for us by frequent use of the lyre" (*Letters*, vol. 2 [1978], no. 24, 33). See also his physiological account of black bile as the cause of melancholy in *Three Books on Life*, I.III, Kaske & Clark, 113. On the relationship between the melancholy temperament and the gift of divination, see Angela Voss, 'The Power of Melancholy Humour: Divination and Divine Tears' in *Seeing with Different Eyes* (papers from the conference held at the University of Kent, April 2006, forthcoming).

<sup>22</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 3.XXI, Kaske & Clark, 367. In this chapter, Ficino associates the astrological Saturn with intellectual genius, opening a new dimension of 'psychological astrology' based on the Platonic understanding of the correspondence between an individual's level of being/perception and the way they will interpret a planetary principle; that is, either literally (and therefore as an externally determined 'fate') or symbolically (which allows for a movement of internalisation and self-understanding). Saturn then is harmful to those seeking worldly gains, but beneficial to those leading a life of contemplation and study. See Voss, 'The Power of a Melancholy Humour'; 'The Astrology of Marsilio Ficino, Divination or Science?', *Culture and Cosmos*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2000), 29-45.

<sup>23</sup> Ficino, *Proemium* to the Commentaries on Plato, *Opera omnia*, 1129-30. Unpublished translation by the School of Economic Science.

<sup>24</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, I.6.8, trans. A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> Ficino, letter to Martinus Uranius, *Opera omnia* 933, trans. in M. Allen, 'Summoning Plotinus: Ficino, Smoke and the Strangled Chickens', in *Plato's Third Eye* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1995), XIV, 77. On the dangers of invoking lower daemons in ritual hymn-singing, see *ibid.*, 73-78.

<sup>26</sup> The 'Palinode' is an Orphic fragment (considered to be a Jewish forgery) in which Orpheus announces to his disciple Museus that he is rejecting polytheism and embracing "the one Ruler of the Universe". See D.P. Walker, 'Orpheus the Theologian' in *The Ancient Theology* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 26-35.

- <sup>27</sup> G. Pico della Mirandola, 'Thirty-one conclusions according to my own opinion on understanding the Orphic Hymns according to magic, that is, the secret wisdom of divine and natural things first discovered in them by me', no. 3, trans. in S. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)* (Tempe, Arizona: Arizona State University, 1998), 505.
- <sup>28</sup> On the line of ancient theologians, see Allen, *Synoptic Art*, ch.1; Walker, *The Ancient Theology*. Ficino discusses the transmission of the perennial wisdom in his Preface to the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (*Opera omnia* 1836), trans. B. Copenhaver, *Hermetica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Introduction, xlvi. Copenhaver points out, "Ficino later modified the succession of ancient wisdom by moving Zoroaster ahead of Hermes and dropping Philolaus".
- <sup>29</sup> Ficino, *Philebus* Commentary, 1.29, quoted in Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 35.
- <sup>30</sup> Pico della Mirandola, 'Seventy-two Cabalistic conclusions according to my own opinion, strongly confirming the Christian religion using the Hebrew wisemen's own principles', no. 72, trans. in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 553. Michael Allen has suggested that the arrival of the Zoroastrian Magi (the three wise men) in Bethlehem signified the dawn of a new age, as Eastern wisdom came to the West. In discerning the meaning of the Star they rose to what he calls "the supreme interpretative challenge in the Book of Nature" (*Synoptic Art*, 38).
- <sup>31</sup> Plato, *Republic* 3, 387c; 10, 607a.
- <sup>32</sup> Ficino, letter to Paul of Middelburg, *Opera omnia*, 944, trans. in Allen, *Synoptic Art*, 12.
- <sup>33</sup> Pico della Mirandola, Orphic Conclusions nos. 1, 2 & 7, trans. in Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 505, 506.
- <sup>34</sup> Examples include *Letters*, vol. 1, nos.1, 32; 93, 144; 116, 179; 130, 198; vol. 2, no. 8, 14; vol. 5 (1994), no. 21, 28.
- <sup>35</sup> Ficino, *Letters*, vol. 4, no. 11, 16-17.
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 1, no. 93, 143.
- <sup>37</sup> Ficino understood Platonism to be firmly based on Pythagorean principles; to quote Michael Allen, as far as the Renaissance Platonists were concerned, "Plato had been a pupil of Pythagorean teachers and had been initiated into their highest secrets, had become in effect a Pythagorean" (*Synoptic Art*, 44).
- <sup>38</sup> Ficino, Preface to the *Corpus Hermeticum*, trans. Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, xlvi.
- <sup>39</sup> Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, trans. Gillian Clark (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1989), chs. 110-114, 49-50. Other sources on Pythagoreanism include K.S. Guthrie, trans., David Fideler, ed., *The Pythagorean Source Book and Library* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1987, 1988); John Strohmeyer & Peter Westbrook, eds., *Divine Harmony: The Life and Teachings of Pythagoras* (Berkeley, California: Berkeley Hills Books, 1999, 2003).
- <sup>40</sup> For Greek sources on the principles of Pythagorean *harmonia* see Aristides Quintilianus, *On Music*, trans. Andrew Barker in *Greek Musical Writings*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 392-535; Boethius, *De Institutione Musica* ('The Fundamentals of Music'), trans. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1.1.181; Iamblichus, *The Theology of Arithmetic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1988); Nicomachus of Gerasa, *The Manual of Harmonics*, trans. Flora R. Levin (Grand Rapids, Phanes Press, 1994); Claudius Ptolemy, *Harmonics*, trans. Andrew Barker in *Greek Musical Writings*, vol. 2, 275-891.
- <sup>41</sup> I am grateful to Andrew Green for pointing me towards the 'magical' use of harmonics. See also Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmonies of Heaven and Earth* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1987), 184-93; *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels* (Grand Rapids: Phanes Press, 1991), 11-17.
- <sup>42</sup> Godwin, *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels*, 16.
- <sup>43</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 88c.
- <sup>44</sup> See Godwin, *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels*, 69-75; Godwin quotes a passage (70) from Fidèle Amy-Sage, 'Le secret de la sépulture d'un Pharaon', *Le Voile d'Isis*, 1923, 317ff., in which the chanting priest uses particular resonances "at the propitious moment" to revitalise the astral body of the pharaoh after his death. Of interest too is the current revival of healing through music, with research into the particular properties of the harmonic overtones. See, for example, Alain Daniélou, *Music and the Power of Sound: The Influence of Tuning and Intervals on Consciousness* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1995) and Jonathan Goldman, *Healing Sounds: The Power of Harmonics* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992, repr. 1996).
- <sup>45</sup> Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 175; see also Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, trans. Emma C. Clarke, John M. Dillon & Jackson P. Hershbell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), III.9, 139.
- <sup>46</sup> Cicero, 'The Dream of Scipio', *De republica*, VI, in Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W.H. Stahl (New York, 1952, repr. Columbia University Press, 1990), 72-74, quoted in Godwin, *Music, Mysticism and Magic* (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 11.
- <sup>47</sup> Iamblichus, *On the mysteries* III.9, 139-41.
- <sup>48</sup> Demetrius, *On Style* 71, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1902), 104, quoted in Godwin, *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels*, 22. See also Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 183-84.
- <sup>49</sup> For example, Quintilianus, *On Music*, II.13, 479-81; III.21, 521-24; III.25, 531-35.
- <sup>50</sup> Nicomachus of Gerasa, *Harmonicum enchiridion*, trans. S. Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Erwigena* (Leiden: Brill, 1978), 295; quoted in Godwin, *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels*, 23-24.
- <sup>51</sup> See for example *The Greek Magical Papyri in translation*, ed. Hans Dieter Betz (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) 3, 9, 17, 29, 33, 48, 50, 57, 62, 81, 101, 102; the Hermetic 'Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth' in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. James M. Robinson (San Francisco, 1977; rev. ed. Leiden: Brill, 1996), 296.
- <sup>52</sup> Jeremy Naydler, *Temple of the Cosmos* (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 1996), 183-84.
- <sup>53</sup> See Helen Roberts, 'The technique of playing ancient Greek instruments of the lyre type' in *Music and Civilisation* (British Museum Yearbook 4, 1980), 43-76 (this ref. 47); M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 101-2.

- <sup>54</sup> The combination of voice and *lira* may be heard on the CD *Secrets of the Heavens* (see n.4 above), in particular, the ‘Invocation to Mercury’ and ‘Invocation to Saturn’.
- <sup>55</sup> Godwin, *The Mystery of the Seven Vowels*, 74.
- <sup>56</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.21, 357.
- <sup>57</sup> See Plato, *Timaeus*, 43b-44c.
- <sup>58</sup> Ficino, *Letters*, vol. 1, no. 5, 40.
- <sup>59</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 35b-36d.
- <sup>60</sup> See Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul* and ‘Containing Ecstasy; The Strategies of Iamblican Theurgy’, *Dionysius* XXI, Dec. 2003, 53-88, for further explorations of the epistemological and soteriological dimensions of Iamblichus’ theurgic rituals.
- <sup>61</sup> See Plotinus, *Ennead* V.8, 6, 8-9; discussed in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 171-72. On the fundamental ‘non-discursive’ basis of neoplatonic philosophy, see Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- <sup>62</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI.2, trans. Clement Salaman, Dorine van Oyen & William Wharton, *The Way of Hermes* (London: Duckworth, 1999), 74.
- <sup>63</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 187.
- <sup>64</sup> Iamblichus, *On the mysteries*, I.3, 13.
- <sup>65</sup> See Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 176; Iamblichus, *On the mysteries*, VII.3, 295.
- <sup>66</sup> Iamblichus, *On the mysteries*, VIII.4, 317; see Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 201.
- <sup>67</sup> Despite Ficino’s insistence on the ‘natural’ status of his magic, and his frequent assertions of allegiance to the Church, he was nevertheless accused of an offence against religion and was obliged to write an apology. See Ficino, ‘An Apologia dealing with Medicine, Astrology, the Life of the World, and the Magi Who Greeted the Christ Child at His Birth’, *Three Books on Life*, 394-401, also ‘Repercussions’, *ibid.*, 55-58.
- <sup>68</sup> It is interesting to note that whenever Ficino discusses the magical use of images in *De vita coelitus comparanda*, he is ambiguous and purposefully unclear about his own position in regard to the practices of ‘the Arabs’ or ‘the Platonists’ (see *Three Books on Life* III. 18, 20, 26). He is careful to stress the authority of Thomas Aquinas on such matters, but is clearly fascinated by theurgic astrological rituals involving statues (III.26) and talismanic images (III.18) which he describes in detail. Further on this, see Brian Copenhaver, ‘Scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De vita* of Marsilio Ficino’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, 523-54.
- <sup>69</sup> See Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.21, 343-49. In his three rules for composition, Ficino guides the performer to include the meanings of the astrological aspects into the text, together with words appropriate to the music of the region where the ‘client’ lives and to his particular horoscope, and words derived from the current positions of the planets and stars and how they generally influence human character and behaviour.
- <sup>70</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.22, 367.
- <sup>71</sup> Ficino originally intended *De vita coelitus comparanda* to form part of his Commentary on Plotinus, specifically on *Ennead* IV.3, 11. He also draws extensively on *Enneads* IV.4, 30-32 (see *Three Books on Life*, 25-27; B. Copenhaver, ‘Renaissance Magic and Neoplatonic Philosophy: *Ennead* 4.3-5 in Ficino’s *De vita coelitus comparanda*’, in *Marsilio Ficino e il Ritorno di Platone* (2 vols.), ed. G. Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1986), 351-69).
- <sup>72</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.1, 243.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, III.2, 251.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, III.12, 303-5.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, III.11, 291.
- <sup>77</sup> Iamblichus, *On the mysteries*, I.2, 11.
- <sup>78</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.16, 323; III.12, 299.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, III.3, 255.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, III.20, 353.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, III.17, 331.
- <sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, III.21, 357.
- <sup>83</sup> On the Platonic notion of poetic frenzy as one of the four madnesses of inspired utterance (the others being prophetic, hieratic and amatory), see *Phaedrus* 244d-45a; Ficino, letter to Peregrino Agli ‘On Divine Frenzy’ (*Letters*, vol. 1, no. 7, 42-48); Michael J.B. Allen, ‘The Soul as Rhapsode: Marsilio Ficino’s Interpretation of Plato’s *Ion*’, in *Plato’s Third Eye*: 125-48.
- <sup>84</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.21, 359.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 361.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.
- <sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, III.26, 387.
- <sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* See also ‘Apology’, 397-99.
- <sup>90</sup> Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. D. Carmichael, P.J.W. Miller & C.G. Wallis (New York & Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1965, repr. 1998), 28. See also Pico, *Magical Conclusion* no. 13, “to operate magic is nothing other than to marry the world” (Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, 499).
- <sup>91</sup> Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.26, 391.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., III.22, 369.

<sup>93</sup> See Ficino, *The Book of the Sun*, trans. G. Cornelius, D. Costello, G. Toby, A. Voss & V. Wells, *Sphinx, A Journal for Archetypal Psychology and the Arts*, no. 6 (The London Convivium for Archetypal Studies, 1994), 124-48. In this late work of 1494, Ficino achieves a remarkable synthesis of 'pagan' symbolism and Christian revelation in his interpretation of the significance of the Sun from literal, allegorical, symbolic and metaphysical standpoints. See also Angela Voss, *Marsilio Ficino* (Berkeley, California: North Atlantic Books, Western Esoteric Masters Series, 2007), Introduction, for further discussion on the problematics of integrating the Platonic understanding of astrological symbolism with Christian orthodoxy.

<sup>94</sup> English translation currently in progress: Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, eds. J. Hankins & J. Warden, 6 vols.: Books I-IV, V-VIII, IX-XI, XII-XIV, XV-XVI, XVII-XVIII, (Cambridge, Mass.: I Tatti Renaissance Library, Harvard University Press, 2001-2006).

<sup>95</sup> Ficino, *Theologia Platonica*, Book XIV, ch.3 (*Opera omnia*, 312), trans. J.L. Burroughs (private communication). On the contrast between the neoplatonic *henosis* and Christian *theosis* see Edward Moore, "'Likeness to God as Far as Possible': Deification Doctrine in Iamblichus and Three Eastern Christian Fathers", *Theandros*, vol. 3, no. 1 (at <http://www.theandros.com/iamblichus.html>). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the theological implications of deification in Ficino's thought. Moore summarises the essential differences between the pagan and Christian positions as follows: "the deified soul, for Iamblichus, is the soul that has come to experience the glorious satisfaction of maintaining the cosmic order – in other words, in sharing the activity of the One. For the orthodox Christian tradition, on the other hand, deification implies a state of being that was described, by the most gifted Church Fathers, as an endless, mystical yearning for divine fulfillment".

<sup>96</sup> Ficino, *Theologica Platonica*, Book XIII, ch. 3, trans. in C. Trinkaus, 'Humanist Themes in Marsilio Ficino's Philosophy', in *In our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 483.

<sup>97</sup> Iamblichus, Letter to Macedonius, trans. in Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 43 (source: Stobaeus, *Anthologium*, 4 vols., eds. C. Wachsmuth & O. Hense [Berlin: Weidmanns, 1958], II.173, 26-174, 27).

<sup>98</sup> Fragment from a scholiast on Virgil, quoting Varro: "Varro says there was an Orphic book about summoning the soul, called 'The Lyre'. It is said that the souls need the lyre [*cithara*] in order to ascend." Quoted in M. West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 29-30.

<sup>99</sup> See Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, III.2, 253: "Do not doubt that Saturn has quite a bit to do with gold. His weight leads people to believe so: furthermore, gold, being similar to the Sun, is by the same token in all metals in the way that the Sun is in all the planets and stars".

<sup>100</sup> See Ficino, Letter to Pierfrancesco de' Medici (*Letters*, vol.4, no. 46, 62): "these celestial bodies are not to be sought by us outside in some other place; for the heavens in their entirety are within us, in whom the light of life and the origin of heaven dwell."