

THE UNIFYING POWER OF MUSIC IN MARSILIO FICINO'S VISIO

STELA DRĂGULIN¹

SUMMARY. This paper emphasizes the most significant moments of Marsilio Ficino's life and work. Due to his many talents and his expertise in various areas (Philosophy, religion, sciences) his creation greatly influenced the works of important Renaissance figures. The most important ideas and concepts in Ficino's writings and their relationship with the values and achievements of his time are described herein. Ficino's translations of important Platonic writings as well as other classical Greek authors contributed to a change in the concepts of the Catholic church officials. Ficino's interpretations and comments about the classical ancient works opened a new perspective on how human reason relates to religious belief. He outlined a new interpretation of the concept of „human being” as seen by the religious and secular authorities.

Keywords: power of music, philosophy, cosmic harmony, Ficino.

1. Introduction

The revival of interest regarding Classical Antiquity, also known as the Renaissance, occurred at different times and in different forms in painting, literature, philosophy, music and medicine (Perkins, 1999).

As regards music therapy, there was a crucial period; it is about the 15th, 16th and the beginning of the seventeenth century, when therapy through music was centred on philosophy, when it gained cultural value and, unlike before, was reconsidered and appreciated by the scholars of Europe.

At that time, an integrated vision of music emerged in European thinking, which included both the ethos and the cosmos. It was thought that music could have beneficial effects on humans because of its astrological significance as a mirror of the deep structure of the universe. The Pythagorean-Platonic tradition of Antiquity combines two trends: the ethical and the astrological, but they were not fully integrated. Correspondence between planets, zodiac signs, musical sounds, chemical elements, humours were

¹ Prof. PhD Habil Transilvania University of Braşov, Music Faculty, dragulin@unitbv.ro

carefully researched by Muslim scholars. Their works did not influence European thinking because the most important texts were not translated into Latin. If Plato is the most important figure of Antiquity, Aristotle with his scepticism about sphere music takes his place in the Middle Ages. Music has therapeutic value at that time because of its power to appease the soul's accidents, not because it would reproduce cosmic harmony in the human structure. From the perspective of music therapy, the Renaissance period is considered as a time of revival of Platonism in the mid-fifteenth century and its absorption into the wider magic world, a magic that could be called more accurately, "occult philosophy" (Tomlinson 1993, 291-306).

The sources of this philosophy are different; these are texts of Arabic origin (which were accessible to Christian scholars in Spain recaptured from the Islamic world) or Jewish Kabbalah. There are several scholars who are representatives of the Platonian revival (Tomlinson 1993, 77).

Among them, the most outstanding is the philosopher-physician-musician Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499). Songs from *the Second Orpheus* were created to eliminate the soul and body disorders through musical sounds appropriate to the stars. Ficino searched for classical and late antique texts about music therapy, different from what existed in the Middle Ages. His work was the starting point for more discussions, especially among the occult philosophers. Doctors, musicologists reproduce common place ideas taken from the Bible, or from Pythagoras' philosophy, about the power of music (*Institutione harmoniche*, 1558, Gioseffo Zarlino 1517-1590) (Webster, 1982). Occult philosophers are the ones who bring new ideas, by subtly reinventing the Pythagorean cosmology. They are important for their work and for being the link with what might be called the Scientific Revolution as well as the religious reforms of the early modern, Catholic and Protestant period.

2. The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino

Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) is one of the leading scholars of the great spiritual and cultural revival called Renaissance. As a priest, theologian, astrologer, physician, musician and magician he dedicated his whole life to the reconciliation between faith and reason, seeking self-knowledge and knowledge of God. At intellectual level, he tried to unite Platonism and Christian religion, while at practical level, his holistic approach on healing and therapy provided a new way of understanding the world: natural magic. Ficino's magic is based on Hermetic, Neoplatonic and Arabic texts which he combined with his medical, astrological and music knowledge. He tried to put the human soul, who was seen as an intermediary

between mind and body, in harmony with the soul of the world, mediating between heaven and earth. Ficino showed that the most powerful means of restoring this union was music or therapy through music. In addition to his writings, there is a lot of evidence that the way Ficino interpreted music made his listeners call him Orpheus.

It appears that Ficino acquired the vocation of healing the human spirit already from an early age. He even tells us that while he was still young, he was chosen by Cosimo de Medici to lead his Platonic Academy. Ficino translated the works of Plato as well as the recently discovered *Corpus Hermeticum*, written by Hermes Trismegistus, an old magus whose spiritual revelation prefigured Plato's religious philosophy.

Even before the hermetic texts were translated, Ficino had discovered Orpheus and translated his hymns into Latin, also describing their mysterious power.

In his preface to *Commentaries* on Plato we find the idea that true self-knowledge can only be achieved by understanding and practicing a kind of astrology that is far from the deterministic science of classical tradition. Ficino believes that Philosophy, the daughter of Minerva, is the one who urged Lorenzo de Medici to enter the Platonic Academy. This invitation is seen as an urge for humanity to embark on a journey into wisdom.

Ficino considers astrology to be a symbolic language capable to reveal the inner workings of divinity. In the heavens, as well as on earth, in the Neoplatonist and hermetic vision of the cosmos, heavenly bodies were gods and their movements indicated the will of the supreme god, their souls being part of the vast network starting with animated beings and reaching all the way down to inanimate matter. Thus, their energies can be understood, tempered and harmonized within the human soul, seen as a microcosmos with the help of music, because Plato's followers understood the sound as an echo of perfect harmony in the heavens. By imitating the music of the spheres, the soul rises above its human condition by regaining its original, pure state.

The source of this idea is found in Plato's *Timaeus* where he states that listening to music and contemplation of the heavens are essential to self-understanding. Also, in this text there is a myth of creation that demonstrates the musical principle of the proportions underlying the whole universe, because the demiurge has divided the mixture of cosmic mind and matter in proportions of 2: 1, 3: 2, and 4: 3. These generate accurate intervals of the octave, the quarte and the quint, and are believed to represent the creation by sound.

Ficino found the philosophical basis for his magical practice in the Neoplatonist Plotinus. To him, the cosmos has soul; it is the soul of the

world, *anima mundi*, the one who unites the pure ideas of the divine mind with the middle realm of the stars and planets and the earth's realm of matter. The soul transforms ideas into instruments, puts the sublunar world in motion, planting in each being a drop of divinity, which Plotinus called the seed of wisdom. There is an energy travelling between the mind, soul and nature that Ficino calls the *circuitus spiritualis*, "a divine influence from God that passes through the heavens, descends through the elements, and reaches into matter" (Ficino, 234.). For Ficino, astrology has become the means he used to work on these consequences as they manifested themselves as planetary energies within the human soul.

Plotinus maintains that magic works through "attraction and the fact that there is a natural understanding of things that resemble and an opposition between things that are different and that make up the life of an animate being" (Plotinus 1966-1988, 261). Incantations, along with the attitude and intent of the participant, exercise a natural power over the irrational part of the soul, which must be brought in a more orderly state. These powers that can be acquired from the stars do not have their own will but are found in the cosmic tides. Plotinus suggests that the physician or the quack can enter this interplay of natural forces.

In Ficinian magic, the specific level of vocal and instrumental music (*musica instrumentalis*), in the concrete form of musical interpretation or when it manifests itself as work of art, becomes the vehicle that leads to the clarification and harmonization of the soul (*musica humana*), by conveying the latter towards the great cosmic dance. Ficino has named the third part of his treaty about magic *Matching the Soul with the Cosmos (De Vita coelitus comparanda)*. He points out that his magic is not an ordinary one, and that life itself can be seen as a magic ritual.

In this context, we begin to understand the meaning of Orpheus' song for Ficino, which can be used to harmonize the soul with the help of *spiritus*, imitating *musica mundana*, harmony of spheres.

Plotinus urges man to "close his eyes and wake up to another way of seeing, which everyone has, but few use it" (Plotinus 1966-1988, 259). This kind of seeing can be developed through prayer, "a tension of the soul," an act of true reconnection in the true sense of religion. If our deeper desires are in resonance with the forces of the universe, conscious connection will open up the channels, and these forces will penetrate the human being.

This ritual facilitates *spiritus* fusion by subjectively transforming the one who prays, by means of invocations. This changed state of mind involves the cessation of logical thinking and can be obtained by using certain rituals. Iamblichus, another Neoplatonic, also speaks of the importance of ritual attitude.

Gemisthos Pletho, a Byzantine Platonian who brought to Florence, in the 15th century, the complex system of hymn singing, may have influenced Ficino. Pletho considers the process to be self-purifying, modelling, and marking our own imagination, thus making the latter obedient and malleable to all that is divine in us.

To Ficino, the way Plato used language, could captivate and remove the mind from rational worries, just as the musician can bring the listener in accord with the cosmic harmony, transmitting through his performance a music that can only be heard with "the ears of the mind". And so, we return to Orpheus who had this capacity which Ficino was also targeting.

3. Ficino's music

It is obvious that Ficino believed that his healing vocation also referred to body and mind diseases and music was very important for his work. Indeed, after the mind came into harmony, the body followed: "the sound and the song stir imagination, influence the heart and reach the most hidden recesses of the mind; they appease and move the humours and limbs of the body ... All living beings are fascinated by harmony, "he says in a letter to Antonio Canigiani and adds," Even I often use the lyre and play to avoid other sensual pleasures. I dismiss the discomforts of the soul and body and to lift my mind to God as much as I can" (Ficino, 141-144).

It is clear that to Ficino, music was not only used for his personal enjoyment, since he often mentions in letters the therapeutic effects of "his orphic lyre" on his friends. In a letter to Sebastiano Foresi, he says: "We play the lyre, so we never end up with weakened nerves ... let the lyre always be our salvation when we use it properly." (Ficino, 16-17). And on another occasion, he says: "After I wrote you goodbye, I got up and took the lyre. I began to play a long song from the Orphic Liturgy. And when you have read this farewell, if you are wise, you will rise up and take the lyre, sweet comfort of your labour" (Ficino, 823-824). He wrote to his friend Giovanni Cavalcanti, who said that Ficino was complaining too much about his Saturnian temperament: "You're telling me to play a hymn of silence to Saturn that I've been complaining about lately. I really complain about a melancholic state, an unpleasant thing if it could not be improved by using the lyre" (Ficino, 33).

An example of successful treatment is that applied to Francesco Musano, who writes: "As soon as you have been healed of what was mistakenly said to have been intermittent fever, you and Giovanni Aurelio have expressed your respect to the Academy as if it had been your doctor. Then you asked to listen to the lyre and the hymns" (Ficino, 609).

Ficino's music creates a state of solidarity in his audience. What makes him improvise with such talent and obtain such a result is the poet's *furor divinus*, the state of spiritual mastery which is mandatory for communicating divine truth, the experience of submerging the soul into the process of reconnecting with the source. According to Plato there are four types of furore: that of the poet, that of the priest, that of the prophet, and that of the lover. The creation of the "inspired madman", as Plato calls him in *Phaedrus*, goes beyond the efforts of the one who thinks it is enough to master the technique to be a good artist. Ficino admires the musician's frenzy so much that he goes farther than Plato and says that "any madness, prophetic, religious, or amorous, is considered poetic madness when expressed through songs and poetry" (Ficino 1981, 84). In other words, musical frenzy is the vocal expression of the other three and turns the musician into a divine messenger.

Orpheus's image becomes even more significant since Ficino considered him to be full of all four madness: as priest, prophet, lover, and musician. Under all these disguises lays the power of love that he brings to the world, and the Neo-Platonic magic is only effective by creating harmony through love with the cosmic hierarchies. Ficino is the one who invented the term *platonic love*, referring to love between two people, love that derives from their love for God.

4. Ficino's Cosmic Harmony

From *Matching the Soul with the Cosmos (De vita coelitus comparanda)*, it can be found that Ficino sank into the world of natural magic where talismans, herbs, plants, animals, colours, ointments and aromas and especially music played an important role in calming the soul. Ficino says the strength of the remedy lies in the patient's attitude towards it. He also states that the most excited speaker will excite the others and in his commentary on *Timaeus* he says: "The musical sound, more than anything else, conveys, as if it had life, the emotions and thoughts of the singer or the musician to the listener" (Ficino, 1417).

Matching the Soul with the Cosmos includes a chapter (21) which is dedicated to „the power of words and songs" to obtain heavenly gifts. This chapter describes the way of composing or improvising astrological music. It starts by emphasizing the power that words have when used in combination with the right images, and then explains how music harmony of different heights passes through the seven steps that correspond to the seven planets; they range from rocks to metals, which are attributed to the Moon and Saturn.

The words, songs, and sounds that are dedicated to Apollo or the Sun are the most powerful. Thus, divine harmony reflects and refracts by moving through the whole creation.

Through this system of correspondence, natural substances are impregnated with *divines in fluxus* from a particular planet, because the seed of wisdom is randomly planted by the Soul of the World. All levels of creation are a part of the divine, therefore these substances can be effective remedies using medicine and astrology. At the same time, music can be given a "heavenly power" if we consider what Ficino calls the pattern of the stars and whether sounds that match this pattern are chosen and then arranged in order and harmony that reflects the heavenly arrangement. As regards the choice of music as a remedy, it is necessary to take into account the planets that are dominant at the birth of the patient, and which ones impart his qualities to his soul.

Ficino points out that it is difficult to decide which sounds match with a specific planet, but this can still be discovered partly through work and partly with the help of fate, *divina sorte* and a flow of grace. As its intensity grows, it turns into frenzy when the soul is in perfect alignment with the divine power and is no longer sensitive to its human condition. Ficino offers three strange musical and astrological rules to match sounds with the stars. First, he warns that it is not to be thought that he is idolizing the stars but merely trying to imitate them. He emphasizes that the stars do not transmit their gifts of their choice but through natural influx, *influxus naturalis*.

"First of all, it must be found out what power and what effects has the star, what it brings and what it takes. Then, these meanings must be introduced in the meanings of our words so we can reject what it takes and appreciate what it brings. Secondly, we need to find out which planet dominates a place or a person and then see what sounds and songs are used in this region or by this person so that we can use some of them similar to the meanings of words. Thirdly, the daily position and the aspects of the planets must be observed, and what songs, speeches, movements, dances, moral behaviours and actions are generated in humans by these planets, to be then reproduced in songs to please that part of the heaven, to acquire the power that in stills them" (Ficino, 357-358).

The power of such a match is so great that the spirit of the performer will open to *influxus celestis* which in its turn will open to him and the spirit of the music will have access to his spirit and then to the listener's spirit. Ficino presents what kind of music fits with each planet, emphasizing that all music

comes from Apollo, the Sun, and that Jupiter is musical only when in harmony with them. Venus and Mercury are also musical when they are near the Sun. He points out that Saturn, Mars and the Moon have a voice or sound, but they do not sing. Saturn's sounds are slow, deep, harsh and crying; those of Mars are fast, sharp, violent and threatening; those of the Moon are "in the middle". As for the music of the other planets, Jupiter has deep and intense harmonies, "lovely and cheerful", Venus's songs are voluptuous and Apollo's music is graceful, respectful and simple, and Mercury full of vigour and joy. "By choosing to invoke a god with his proper music, you will surely receive his gifts; and prayer has the same power as a song. As we expose our body to the rays of the sun, we expose the spirit of the hidden powers of the planets". Ficino, when talking about his therapy, says that each individual can increase the healing power of the remedy by positive thinking and by liberating the imagination. Ficino talks about the intersection of subjective and objective experiences, and that status changes are facilitated if the interpreter and the listener (or the therapist and the patient) meet on the ground of imagination, the place from which one can access higher realms and from where spiritual healing can be generated. The *liber de vita* instructions are quite vague with regard to imitation techniques for the position and aspects of the planets through words and music.

5. Music and Cosmic Harmony

In the *Principles of Music*, in a letter written to Domenico Benivieni, Ficino tells about the astrological aspects and musical intervals and the "true music" that God has given us, the harmony of the mind. Ficino speaks about the "gentle harmony of the third" and describes the qualities of consonant and dissonant harmonies in a musical range, about the perfection of the octave that he sees as a reflection of the hermeneutical procession of the soul. He also explains how different intervals can occur and is very interested in the "astronomical causes of harmony". The strong influence of Ptolemy's Third Book, *Harmonics* is noted. Ficino compares the qualities of astrological aspects with musical intervals:

"Beginning from the end of the twelve zodiac signs and proceeding sequentially, it can be noticed how the second sign falls away from the first as in a musical range the second note is different from the first, but the third zodiac sign has a favourable aspect compared with the first, an element that astrologers call sextil ..."

How he embodied his theory in his orphic songs is only speculation. It is merely known that there was a tradition of *improvvisatori*, singers who accompanied themselves with the *lira da braccio*, and Ficino may have called the *lyre*, the “orphiclyre”. From the pictures of the time, it can be found out that the lyre was actually associated with Orpheus, and the singer Baccio Ugolino interpreted it in the *Orfeo* drama in Mantua, in 1471. It is also possible that Ficino played the harp as seen in a sculpture carved by Ferrucci. Ficino is presented holding a volume of Plato in the position where the harp would have been held. It can be certainly assumed that Ficino’s music was a monodic semi-improvising made on the lyrics of orphic hymns or astrological or mythological texts written by him.

If Ficino intended to achieve the “moderation of the heavenly signs” by means of his orphic lyre, it means that Orpheus received the most noblest embodiment possible.

6. Conclusions

The period of the European Renaissance stands out due to its profound changes involving characteristic aspects of Europe’s societies in the 15th century. Among the early promoters of the Renaissance in Italy, Ficino is recognized as a pro-active factor of stability and influence on Florence’s cultural and social scene. His influence on the way of thinking and action of most important European rulers and scholars of the time was a significant one. Ficino’s ideas about the human being and the way he imagined man’s immortal soul triggered a wave of intense creativity in fine arts, music, literature, and philosophy.

Under Ficino’s leadership the Platonic Academy of Florence left its hallmark on Italy’s society. Many influent figures of Florence’s society, among which Lorenzo de Medici, Leon Battista Alberti, and Pico della Mirandola, came together under its auspices. A great number of Renaissance creators and intellectuals were also influenced by and inspired from Ficino’s ideas. Ficino’s wide expertise in multiple scientific and artistic domains as well as his classic languages proficiency allowed him to perform accurate and complete translations into Latin of numerous writings of the classical Greek philosophers.

In many of his writings he lays the emphasis on the immortality of the soul, a previously largely disregarded concept, whose effect materialized in a significant religious awakening. One of the most important consequences of the latter was the introduction of the concept into the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church as was pronounced by the Lateran Council.

Ficino's writings provide helpful elements in approaching modern themes centred around the relationship between individual and authority in present-day society. His ideas outline general guidelines for interpreting the individual's personal autonomy and creativity within the general frame of leadership and authority seen as a nucleus of decision makers, and the ways of reconciliation among these entities.

REFERENCES

- ***, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, Trans. The Language Department of the London School of Economics, 8 vols., London, Shephard-Walwyn Ltd., 1975-2010.
- Allen, Michael, *The Platonism of Marsilio Ficino: A Study of His Phaedrus Commentary, Its Sources and Genesis*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1984.
- Copenhaver, B-P., Schmitt, C.B., *Renaissance philosophy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Ficino, Marsilio, Allen, Michael J. B., *Marsilio Ficino and the Phaedran Charioteer: Introduction, Texts, Translations*, University of California Press, 1981.
- Ficino, M., *Three Books on Life. (De vita libri tres)*. Carol V. Kaske, John R. Clark (eds.), Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies in conjunction with the Renaissance Society of America, 1989.
- Ficino, Marsilio, *Opera Omnia*, 2 volumes, Basel, 1576.
- Lindberg, D.C., Westman, R.S. (eds.), *Reappraisals of the Scientific Revolution*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Maxwell-Stuart, P.G., *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary History*, London and New York, Macmillan Education UK, 1999.
- Perkins, L. Leeman, *Music in the Age of the Renaissance*, Ed. W.W. Norton, New York and London, 1999.
- Plotinus, Armstrong, A.H., *Plotinus: in seven volumes*, Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Plotinus, *Enneads III*, Arthur Hilary Armstrong (ed.), Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Schmitt, C.B., *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Siraisi, Nancy. *Avicenna in Renaissance Italy: The Canon and Medical Teaching in Italian after 1500*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1987.
- Tomlinson, Gary, *Music in Renaissance Magic: Toward a Historiography of Others*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Vickers, B. *Occult and Scientific Mentalities in the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984.
- Wear, A., French, R.K., *The Medical Renaissance of the Sixteenth Century*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.
- Webster, Charles. *From Paracelsus to Newton: Magic and the Making of Modern Science*. Cambridge; New York, Cambridge University Press, 1982.