

Jupiter's Tunes

By Kyle Gann

Music in Renaissance Magic

Saturn orbits the sun in 10,759 days. If you transpose that period of revolution upward 38 octaves, as Joachim-Ernst Berendt does in *The Third Ear*—that is, divide it by 2 to the 38th power—you get a frequency of 295.7 cycles per second, the pitch D. Similarly, you'll get F-sharp for Jupiter, G-sharp for Uranus, and a Lydian scale on D for the entire solar system. That's one way to calculate the harmony of the spheres, but there are others. Early Neoplatonists assigned the seven visible (astrological) planets to the seven natural pitches, while later writers attributed whole scales or modes: Phrygian mode to Mars, Mixolydian to Saturn, and so on.

Modern accounts approach the subject either from the mists of New Age gnosis (like Joscelyn Godwin's books) or with an unenlightening scholarly exhaustiveness (Claude Palisca's *Humanism in Italian Renaissance Musical Thought*). But a new book by a U. of Pennsylvania music historian, Gary Tomlinson's *Music in Renaissance Magic* (University of Chicago), reconsiders musical occultism with neither academic condescension nor New Age gullibility. Taking a cue from recent anthropology, Tomlinson (a 1988 MacArthur Fellow) starts from the principle that we will never understand past viewpoints unless

we admit the subjectivity of our own; we have no privileged position from which to pooh-pooh ancient beliefs. In a brilliant stroke, he applies Foucault's distinction between resemblance and representation in *The Order of Things* as a key to open the secrets of prerationalist musical magic.

His protagonist is Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), the Florentine student whom Cosimo de Medici recruited to translate Plato and Plotinus into Latin, and who, more than any other figure, kick-started the Renaissance. Ficino believed that music was of the same airy substance as the spirit that connects our souls to our bodies, and therefore can have immense effect on our spiritual well-being. His *De Vita* (translated and published as *The Book of Life*) instructs how to use herbs, foods, and songs to bring your life into accord with the heavens. He played the lute and sang "Orphic Songs" to increase benefit from astrological transits, just as the alchemist Michael Maier, 130 years later, wrote canons to facilitate his experiments. Ficino's musical therapy involved finding harmonies that resonated healthfully with his clients' bodies; composer Pauline Oliveros offered a similar service a few years ago.

Though planetary melodies are at the heart of *De Vita*, Ficino sang not just for astrological influences but for the poetic furor that Plato deemed necessary for inspired creation. Following Ficino, Henry Cornelius Agrippa asserted

that music could evoke the spirits of the dead, and also "loosen the bonds of soul and body, allowing the soul to achieve unmediated contact with god." Even in the 15th century, though, instances of music's supernatural power were mostly drawn from antiquity: David's harp driving out Saul's evil spirit, Pythagoras's lyre dissuading a youth from murder. The main exception was the cult of tarantism—a mania associated with tarantula-bite poisoning and cured by playing tarantellas—which survived in southern Italy through the late 19th century. Tomlinson devotes a chapter to this phenomenon, showing its similarity to other shamanistic traditions.

In Ficino's world, hearing was a more spiritual sense than vision; sight distances us, while sound brings essences into our bodies. One of Ficino's magical premises comes from Plotinus's *Enneads*: the soul and higher powers "are wrought to one tone like a musical string which, plucked at one end, vibrates at the other also." Berendt provides an evocative image that Ficino would have liked: noting that sound vibrations can elicit crystalline patterns in a fluid suspension, he asks, "is it not probable that sound also created all the other patterns in nature . . . shells and cochlea . . . molecular structures such as the DNA double-helix, and galactic spirals?" Ficino's world came to an end when the magical interplay of resemblances lost its power in the early 17th century, giving way to the dominance of vision and representation theory. Still, as late as 1630, Tommaso Campanella used Ficino's astro-musical rules in séances with Pope Urban VIII.

Ultimately, perhaps inevitably,



SANTIAGO COHEN

Tomlinson's conclusion disappoints. He takes Ficino's word that his songs "worked, in all the bright efficacy he envisaged for them," but how they worked, he adds, "sits obstinately on Ficino's side of the space between us." It may be too much to ask scholarship to provide what only experience can grasp. Still, Ficino could have satisfied a heap of curiosity by leaving us a few scraps of musical notation. His recipes for astral tone-magic are maddeningly un-specific: Jupiter's tunes are grave and intense, Venus's lascivious and voluptuous. Texts of two Orphic songs survive in his *Opera Omnia*, and a few charts of harmonic ratios, but no notes. All we can safely assume is that his songs were based on pure tunings and ratios of the natural numbers, anticipating, in those respects, certain trends in American experi-

mental music.

Why Ficino now? As concerts decline as a way of experiencing music, and social structures undermine the power of musical forms to entertain, music casts about for some new, (or perhaps ancient) social purpose. As long as we Westerners project spirituality onto the East, as long as we have to borrow techniques from India, Japan, or Africa to express spirituality in sound, we remain alienated, strangers to our own music. The West has a spiritual-music tradition, forced underground these last few centuries, and Ficino is its starting point. Tomlinson's book is a scholarly step toward a goal that many composers have aimed for: to rescue the *idea* of New Age music—that music can promote spiritual well-being—from the New Ageists who have reduced it to a level of sonic wallpaper. ■

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