The Music of the Spheres

By Elizabeth Sherlock

The music of the spheres, also called “universal music” is a theoretical concept that considers the intervals in the movements of the sun, moon and planets as a particular vibration, and thus, music. Most consider this music inaudible and the concept a harmonic or mathematical concept rather than an actual musical one. In the middle ages, it took on religious overtones. This idea influenced thinkers for many centuries, until late in the middle ages and the Renaissance.

The roots of these ideas are very ancient. In fact, in Plato’s opinion, songs and poetry had existed among the Egyptians for ten thousand years and he postulated that only the gods could have composed them. One Greek tradition was that the Lyre reflected the human being, with the instrument’s body the physical form, the strings as the nerves and the musician as the spirit. The spirit thus plucked the nerves and while in harmony everything functioned well, but if in discord then illness occurred.

An early proponent of this theory was Pythagoras. Legend has it that Pythagoras was given the power to actually hear the music of the spheres by the Egyptian god Thoth. He is said to have brought forward these concepts of harmony and vibration from the Egyptians and the Chaldeans who described the heavenly bodies as singing a cosmic chant as they moved through the sky. Even Job in the Bible mentions a time “when the stars of the morning sang together.”
Pythagoras is said to have discovered the mathematical basis of music. In the Pythagorean concept of the music of the spheres, the interval between the earth and the sphere of the fixed stars was considered to be the most perfect harmonic interval, and all of the harmonies that make up music flowed from these perfect intervals. He categorized the many aspects of creation into a large number of planes and spheres and assigned a tone, a harmonic interval, a number, a name, a color and a form to each. Thus all of creation could be reflected in number, and thus music, flowing from the perfect harmony of the intervals of the planets. Everything in existence has a voice and all creatures are constantly singing the praise of the creator. Humans don’t hear these divine melodies because they are caught in the illusion of material matter. He realized what a profound effect music had on the body and the emotions and used music to assist people with what he called “musical medicine.” He might be called the originator of sound healing.

Plato suggested that sirens positioned on the edges of each planetary orbit emanate a sound pitch which then made up the musical scale, somewhat like the Greek lyre projected onto the heavens. Cicero posited the idea that the planets produced different tones due to their different speeds of revolution. The high and lower tones could thus blend together and produce a variety of harmonies and by playing these harmonies on stringed instruments and also singing, humans could spiritually return to
the heavens. Music theorists spent much time and effort trying to exactly imitate this music of the spheres and began to create the science of harmonics.

One version of creation which illustrates this is found in Timaeus (one of Plato’s dialogues), and describes creation as follows:

The Demiurge created a substance called the world-soul and inserted it into the centre of the world-body. He then divided up this soul-stuff according to the ratios of the three consonant musical intervals, that is, the octave which resonates in the proportion of 2:1, the perfect fifth, 3:2 and the perfect fourth, 4:3, continuing, by further division, to create the intervallic steps of the Pythagorean scale. The soul was cut into two parts which were bent around each other, forming the circles of the Same and the Different: the Same containing the unmoving sphere of the fixed stars, the Different containing the moving instruments of Time, or the planets. The Different was then divided into narrower strips which were arranged according to the geometrical progressions of 2 and 3; 1 2 4 8 and 1 3 9 27. Permeating the whole cosmos, the soul connected the physical world with the eternal, being ‘interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven’ and partaking of ‘reason and harmony’. The human soul, also partaking directly of the anima mundi, must therefore be regulated according to the same proportions. But due to the passions of the body, the soul on entering it became distorted and stirred up - only the correct kind of education could restore harmonious equilibrium. This education would induce a recognition of the soul's congruence with the cosmos through the audible harmonic framework of the musical scale, for as we have seen, the proportions in the world-soul could be reproduced in musical sound.
This line of thought continued throughout the middle ages as music theorists created elaborate systems of connection between the planetary distances and musical intervals, between musical patterns and emotional states and between different planetary and astrological traits and audible sound. Of course the basis for this, the ordering of the cosmos, both astronomically or musically, was number, as elaborated by Pythagoras. Number was considered to be revealed by the heavens and to unfold on earth as Time, which the human soul was to mirror by aligning itself to the gods. The way to do this was to align with the underlying harmonies of the cosmos. This alignment was the way to true unity and no merely humanly contrived system would allow true knowledge of the depth of existence.

Anselmi of Parma, in 1434, wrote that the planets were not tied to individual notes but each sang its own song, related to all of the others. The planetary cycles were part of a huge cosmic symphony which was orchestrated by the spirits.

These ideas continued through the middle ages and an important proponent of them was Marsilio Ficino of Florence. He died in 1499, and had read deeply and translated many works of the Greeks and other philosophers. Out of these sources he developed his own systemic cosmology which
was a combination of music and astrology. He published his own system for astrological music as a therapy thus becoming the modern “father” of music therapy. In his system, two vital ingredients were at play. They are the desire and imagination of the person, especially as focused on images such as music, stars or talismans.

He also wrote about how to arrange one’s life in accordance with the heavens and described how important the power or words and song were to obtaining celestial benefits. He wrote:

tones first chosen by the rule of the stars and then combined according to the congruity of these stars with each other make a sort of common form, and in it a celestial power arises. It is indeed very difficult to judge exactly what combinations of tones especially accord with what sorts of constellations and aspects. But we can attain this, partly through our own efforts, partly by some divine chane.

He stated that the power, timeliness and intention of the therapy song would promote in both the singer and the audience the qualities the song was imitating and help connect man’s spirit to the soul of the world. This music-spirit was thought to be like an actual living animal, breathing and living. The power of the song would depend on both is congruence with the heavens and the intention and imagination of the singer. The intention of the singer must unite the desire of heart and focus his imagination. Then diseases, both physical and mental could be dispelled through a sympathetic resonance between the music spirit and the human spirit. The music would affect both body and soul. It could penetrate to the deepest levels of human experience.

This tradition was continued by Gafori (late 15th century), who emphasized the spiritual implications of the music of the world. He envisioned a soul-filled cosmos which was designed to awaken and set in motion spiritual energy which emanated as musical harmony from the “silent depths of nature.” He said that musical systems could contribute greatly to the perfection of virtue, which was a theme carried forward from all of these writers.

Sadly today the music of the spheres is no longer discussed due to changes in thought brought about by the scientific revolution. The relationship of music to creation and soul has become an esoteric
sidelight in modern day thought and education. However, Ficino suggested a simple way to reconnect with these roots, which is to look up at the heavens and marvel at the perfect order one sees and then who can deny God’s hand in creation?

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