

# ROBERT FLUDD'S SYMBOLIC RECORDER

By JOSCELYN GODWIN

In the vast *Utriusque Cosmi... Historia* of Robert Fludd (1574-1637), in which this remarkable philosopher, "the English Rosicrucian," sought to encompass the totality of human knowledge, there is an interesting use of the recorder as a symbol. Referring to a six-holed instrument, which he illustrates (see illustration), Fludd shows how it reflects, for him, the organization of the Cosmos: the physical or elemental realm is represented by the lowest holes, the planetary spheres by the upper ones, and the Empyrean by the sound-hole, while the part of God is filled by the player who provides the "breath of life."

This is the medieval cosmology, to which Fludd adhered valiantly in the face of the new Copernican system. He uses various musical metaphors for this "harmony of the spheres:" in the preceding chapter he illustrates it by means of a pyramidal harp (the "device" mentioned below), while in numerous other places in this and other works he likens it to a monochord.<sup>1</sup> One of his books, in fact, is called *Monochordum Mundi*, the Monochord of the World.

Unfortunately the recorder is not discussed in Fludd's other chapters which deal specifically with musical instruments,<sup>2</sup> but it is nevertheless intriguing to see this possibly unique treatment of it. Here follows a translation of his Latin into suitably wordy English — for whenever Fludd has a point to make, he makes it three or four times.

## CHAPTER VI

*How can all the preceding be shown more clearly by the recorder,<sup>3</sup> invented for the art of Music?*

Behold a remarkable demonstration, never suspected by the inventor, from which it will become clear how vast secrets often lie hidden in common objects. Yet the eyes of the multitude, viewing things superficially rather than radically, will never see through to their reason and foundation.

Jocelyn Godwin holds a Ph.D. in musicology from Cornell and is an Assistant Professor at Colgate University.

This musical instrument, called a recorder, truly contains the proportions of the whole world. It is divided into three regions: two lower ones with three holes each denoting their respective beginnings, middles, and ends, and an upper one with only one large hole, showing the nature of the supercelestial heaven whose every part is saturated with the divine unity. Now just as this instrument, of its very nature, does not sound or have any virtue without the motion of the breath (*anima*), so neither the world nor any part thereof can act by itself without the excitation of a vast mind. God, the highest mind, at the apex of the device (and as it were beyond the world's remotest surface) causes the seams of the world to give forth music, evoking deep tones from the lower parts, and higher and more brilliant ones the closer they approach to the summit. Even so the musician blows life and motion into the top of the recorder from beyond its confines. And the greater the distance of the holes from this inspiring virtue, the lower are the sounds which issue from them: whereas they give forth loftier tones as they ascend closer to the bellows of this spirit. So this single hole (A) gives to the lower ones as it were their life and breath (for certainly without it they would give no sound), just as the Empyrean [gives the same] to all the lower spheres. Oh what great and heavenly contemplation is in this trifling thing, if considered deeply and diligently by the understanding mind."<sup>4</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

1. See the lavishly illustrated account of Peter Amman "The Musical Theory and Philosophy of Robert Fludd," in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 30 (1967), p. 198.
2. See our forthcoming articles in the 1973 *Galpin Society Journal* and (British) *Lute Society Journal* for details of these.
3. Fludd uses the word "fistula," meaning "pipe," which signifies both recorder and transverse flute in Latin treatises (e.g. Athanasius Kircher's "fistula militaris," which is a fife).
4. From pp. 94-95 of *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technia Historia; Tomus Primus De Macrocosmi Historia* (Oppenheim 1617), section on "Musical Mundana."



