# Music? What does that have to do with esotericism?

*Joscelyn Godwin*

Once upon a time, it had everything to do with it, because "music" meant a lot more than it does today. The ancients knew of *musica mundana*, the music of the cosmos; *musica humana*, the music of the human entity; and *musica instrumentalis*, music as sung and played. This implies some resemblance or connection between the cosmic system, the human being, and those activities, and that "music" is a common factor that runs through all three. Such thinking rests on the doctrine of correspondences, epitomised by the *Emerald Tablet*'s dictum concerning the likeness of things above to things below, and vice versa. In this essay we shall work our way up the hierarchy, beginning with the most familiar type of music.

*Musica Instrumentalis* comprises music as composed, improvised, sung, played, and heard: the only sort acknowledged today and ostensibly of merely human creation, though widespread traditions attribute its origin to some higher power such as the Muses, Gandharvas and Apsaras, angels, the Holy Spirit, or even the Devil. There is some justification for this, for the composer or improviser may feel inspired or possessed by an external intelligence and transported to altered states of consciousness. Poets have had similar experiences. Such cases resemble mediumistic and trance communications, not least in that they are no guarantee of the quality of the result.

The Western tradition is unique among the world's musics in developing polyphony and harmony, and consequently emphasising composition over improvisation. Polyphony sometimes occurs in folk musics, but was deliberately cultivated in the medieval church, hence by a literate minority well versed in classical theory and the arts of the Quadrivium: Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, and Astronomy. Composing with multiple voices depended as much on quasi-mathematical skill as on aesthetic judgment. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, while philosophers were developing schemes of universal correspondence, composers such as John Dunstable, Johannes Ockeghem, and Jacob Obrecht incorporated arithmology and symbolic proportions in their sacred music. This was literally esoteric, in the sense that such encodings are only perceptible from the inside, by the rare singer or analyst able to detect them, if not a secret reserved for the composer alone.

Music that deliberately carries esoteric ideas is rare during the Baroque, Classic, and even Romantic periods. The arithmology used by Johann Sebastian Bach is a special case. Beside its use as a compositional aid, its motivation seems to have been theological or self-referential, rather than esoteric. Freemasonic symbolism in works by the Viennese classical composers is not so much esoteric as imbued with the principles of the Enlightenment, through musical representations of darkness yielding to light. Examples are Mozart's *Magic Flute,* Haydn's *Creation,* and Beethoven's *Fidelio.* As for Richard Wagner's reputed esoteric knowledge and intentions, any creative artist who uses the materials of myth invites multiple interpretations, of which the esoteric is but one.

The situation changes with the onset of musical modernism, coinciding with the occult revival and the influence of Theosophy. Then we have Alexander Scriabin, planning a multimedia "Mystery" that would usher in a new age; Claude Debussy, with his secret arithmology based on the Golden Section; Erik Satie, composing for Sar Péladan's Rose+Croix movement; Gustav Mahler, with his syncretic inspirations from Christianity, Nietzsche, and eventually Taoism (*The Song of the Earth*); Arnold Schoenberg, influenced by Theosophy and Swedenborg (*Die Jakobsleiter*); Gustav Holst, by astrology (*The Planets*), Gnosticism (*The Hymn of Jesus*), and Indian philosophy (*Savitri*); early Stravinsky, collaborating with the Theosophical painter Nicholas Roerich (*The Rite of Spring*) and setting Konstantin Balmont (*The King of the Stars*); and a host of lesser-known composers.

So much for esoteric intentions. What of the effect of music on the listener? This can range from the unconscious influence of background music to inducing meditation, trance states, and visionary experiences. In the late 1960s it became fashionable in both classical and popular music to allude to astrology, alchemy, ceremonial magic, Eastern wisdom, Gnosticism, Satanism, witchcraft, etc., and the trend has never quite died out. This drew mass attention to realms banished from respectable debate. The popularisation of mind-altering drugs simultaneously opened a generation to a more intense experience of music. All this was part of the New Age phenomenon: a reflection of esoteric traditions and practices leading in one direction to parody and travesty, in the other to a potential gateway to serious engagement.

One great monument to this movement is Karlheinz Stockhausen's seven-opera cycle *Licht* (1977-2003), the culmination of a lifelong dedication to spiritualising the musical experience. Whether that monument will stand the test of time, as Wagner's has, only posterity will know. Another is the work of John Cage: not so much his compositions as his principle

that "music" includes not only noise but also silence, and that composition is no better at organising it than chance. Ideally, and perhaps for Cage himself, this led to a stillness and openness of mind from which the ego is absent, thus able to accept any sound or event with equanimity. What he certainly achieved was to arouse interest in Zen Buddhism, from which he derived this attitude, and a devastating effect on the arts, turning an esoteric spiritual discipline into the pseudo-esoteric doctrine that anything is as good as anything else.

The second traditional category, *Musica Humana*, analyses the human being as a microcosm reflecting the greater cosmic order. Its body parts from head to toe are ruled by the twelve signs of the zodiac, its seven internal organs by the planets, and its four humours correspond to the elements. It also harbours a subtle element called *spiritus* or vital spirit, and a soul which, as the Platonists maintain, is harmonically composed. *Musica Humana* attempts to put this concept into practice. The Pythagoreans first formulated the idea that different musical modes have specific effects on body and soul. One of their anecdotes tells of a Tauromenian youth who, inflamed by a "Phrygian song," was intending to burn down his mistress's house. Pythagoras told the musician to change the mode to a sober "spondaic song," which instantly restored the youth to his senses.[1]

Similar ideas existed in the Islamic world, whose music theory was likewise derived from Greek sources. In the tenth-century encyclopaedia of the Brethren of Purity, the four strings of the lute were assigned to the four elements and the four humours of Galenic medicine, which blamed illness on imbalance of the humours. Playing on one of the strings was supposed to strengthen the relevant humour and restore equilibrium.[2]

In the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino recreated the Orphic tradition of singing hymns to the planetary gods in order to draw down beneficent influences. The vital ingredient in the process was the *spiritus,* imagined as a kind of rarefied air linking body and soul. It receives musical vibrations from the air and transmits them to the soul, which responds accordingly.[3] Some courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tried to replicate such effects on a large scale through staged performances of music, poetry, dance, and theatre: in effect, magical rituals with the intention of collective and political harmony.[4]

1 Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras,* 25.
2 *Epistle on Music of the Ikwān al-Ṣāfa'*, 43.
3 Walker, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic*, 18.
4 Yates, *French Academies*, 273-274.

The theoretical basis of *Musica Humana* collapsed with the Scientific Revolution, but its practice survived as music therapy.[5] New theories were devised to explain its efficacy, such as Franz Anton Mesmer's system of planetary influences acting via a "universal magnetic fluid." In his sessions, the spooky sounds of the glass harmonica would help to direct the fluid and induce a healing crisis in the patients. This suited the Romantic idea that music is primarily a language of the emotions. Nevertheless, it remains an enigma that the mathematical patterns from which music is made should translate into this language.

The materialist consensus grants music no inherent meaning beyond a certain resonance with body rhythms, most obviously in marches and dances. Supposedly, it is only social and cultural conditioning that attaches significance to harmonic and melodic gestures, as it does to the phonemes of language. In support of this is the common inability to respond to types of music foreign to one's own culture, race, age group, or social environment. However, one branch of music therapy today, finding this a constricting attitude, draws on the ideas of Carl Gustav Jung, Hans Kayser, Rudolf Steiner, and other representatives of the esoteric revival, as well as on the findings of ethnomusicologists. Jung's psychology suggests that one reason for music's power is that the archetypes speak to us through it.[6] Kayser's holistic approach to harmony ranges from high metaphysics to physiology and the laws of growth.[7] Steiner's lectures on music describe its origin in higher worlds, of which it gives us a foretaste, and explain how the perception of intervals has changed through human evolution.[8] These teachings have their exoteric result in the strong musical emphasis of the Steinerian Waldorf schools.

Turning now to the Harmony of the Spheres, we enter a rarefied realm that may seem to have nothing to do with "real" music but is really at the heart of the matter. At a time when the cosmic model was a cluster of concentric spheres surrounding the earth, those spheres were believed to make literal harmony. Pythagoras's school planted the idea firmly in the Greek philosophical mind. Plato's Myth of Er depicted it as eight Sirens standing on the spheres and each sounding her own tone.[9] The question of what this harmony might be engaged the Neoplatonists, the Western Middle Ages, and the early modern cosmologists up to Robert Fludd and Johann Kepler.

5 See Godwin, "Metaphysics of Music Therapy."
6 For a rare example of the Jungian approach to music, see Donington, *Opera and Its Symbols*.
7 See Kayser, *Textbook of Harmonics*.
8 Steiner, *Inner Nature of Music*.
9 Plato, *Republic* 617b.

After the Scientific Revolution it survived only as a poetic conceit, until its revival by modern occultists and neo-Pythagoreans.

Back to Pythagoras: what was it about music that made it seem so important? It was that our perception of harmony corresponds to the simple numbers of the arithmetical series. Two strings in the ratio 2:1 sound an octave; 3:2, a perfect fifth; 4:3, a perfect fourth. These numbers comprise the tetraktys, the sacred symbol of the Pythagoreans. Translating it into the tones bounded by an octave[10] yields a musical tetraktys of 12:9:8:6 (all multiples or powers of 2 or 3). On a string of length 12 units tuned notionally to D, it gives the tones D G A D'. These form the matrix of the scale system upon which, according to Timaeus the Pythagorean, the World Soul created the cosmos.[11] It is interesting that in today's Standard Model of Elementary Particles, the spin and charge of the particles are expressed solely through combinations of 1, 2, and 3. You might say that in hearing the octave and the fifth, we are perceiving the ratios at the very basis of physical reality.

Monophonic music such as Gregorian chant can be sung effectively in "Pythagorean tuning," using only the intervals defined by the Tetraktys. This tuning exaggerates the difference between tones and semitones and consequently highlights the different modes and the emotional affects claimed for them. Yet polyphonic or chordal music needs the next prime number, 5, to make triads from the major third (5:4) and minor third (6:5). There were metaphysical objections to this departure from the Pythagorean matrix, for did not Plato say that "one should be cautious in adopting a new kind of poetry or music, for this endangers the whole [political] system"?[12] Around 1300, Walter Odington (incidentally an alchemist) had to argue for acceptance of the thirds as consonances, against the dogma that the only consonances are those produced by the numbers up to 4. Matters have gone much further with today's equal temperament, in which no interval but the octave is tuned to a rational number. Some esoterically-minded musicologists deplore this, as depriving music of any possibility of moving the soul as it is meant to do.[13] Yet esoterically-minded composers such as Scriabin and Schoenberg embraced equal temperament as essential for their innovative harmonic systems.

10 Harmonic arithmetic reduces all tones through octave transposition to the space of a single octave; thus the prime number 2 and its powers are irrelevant. This allies harmonic theory to geometry, in which proportion is constant irrespective of size.

11 Plato, *Timaeus* 35b-36b.

12 Plato, *Republic* 424c.

13 For instance Daniélou, *Music and the Power of Sound*.

Studying the mathematical basis of music and its correspondence in the heavenly motions required all four disciplines of the Quadrivium. Although the ancient Greeks claimed to have invented everything, recent researches have shown that this integrative study long predated the classical world.[14] Centuries earlier, the Babylonians had based temporal and spatial measures on the prime numbers 2, 3, and 5. Hence the division of the year into 12 months, of day and night into 12 hours each, of the circle into 360 degrees ($2^3 \times 3^2 \times 5$) and each degree or hour into 3600 seconds ($2^4 \times 3^2 \times 5^2$). The precession of the equinoxes at the rate of 1 degree in 72 years gave the cyclic number 25,920 ($2^6 \times 3^4 \times 5$). Multiplying this by 500 ($2^2 \times 5^3$) gives 12,960,000: Plato's enigmatic number of "better or worse begettings."[15] The ancient Hindus also shared this game of prime and harmonic numbers (examples being the numbers in the *Rig Veda*), as did the Chinese. The Zeng Carillon of bronze bells, dated circa 500 BCE, has its three "keynote" bells tuned to 64, 128, and 256 Hertz.[16] It seems too good to be true, but makes sense if the Chinese adopted the Babylonian sexagesimal division of the day (hence fixing the duration of the second) and divided it by powers of two. Measurement of 64 vibrations per second could have been ingeniously achieved by counting the beats between closely-tuned bells or strings.

The numbers in the Hebrew scriptures also bear witness to an obsessive search for the perfect tuning system. We know that Greek names were "rigged" to yield significant numbers through their alphabetic equivalents (e.g. the word T.E.T.R.A.K.T.Y.S, whose letters add neatly to 1234). Hebrew names also incorporate a musical Kabbalah. For example, the name of Adam (Aleph Daleth Mem) sums to 1+4+40, which is either 45 ($3^2 \times 5$) or, if taken as 1440 ($2^5 \times 3^2 \times 5$) is the limiting number for a chromatic scale in Just intonation.[17] Only one note is missing: the tritone, which in a D scale would be G♯ or A♭. And there was the crunch. Just as the ancient geometers struggled to find a rational expression for π (pi), usually settling for the close approximation of 22/7, so they wrestled with the equal division of the 2:1 octave, which is the irrational fraction √2 (1.41421...). Perhaps significantly, the name of Eve provides a very close approximation to the missing note,[18]

14 See the pioneering works of de Santillana and von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill*; McClain, *Myth of Invariance*; Critchlow, *Time Stands Still*; Heath, *Harmonic Origins of the World*.

15 Plato, *Republic* 546a-d.

16 McClain, "Bronze Chime Bells."

17 D'-720 C♯-768 C-810 B-864 B♭-900 A-960 G-1080 F♯-1152 F-1200 E-1280 E♭-1350 D-1440. See Heath, *Harmonic Origins*, 55-57.

18 Eve (Chet Vav He) sums to 19. The 19th harmonic makes an interval with the fundamental which, taken twice, comes within 99.7% of the tritone, because $19^2/2^8 = 1.410156...$

while adding Eve's 19 to Adam's 45 gives 64 ($2^6$): hence the first couple is "attuned" to the fundamental tone.

This approach to sacred texts may be disconcerting to some, and is certainly hard to absorb without some grounding in music theory, but that is what one must expect in esoteric studies. We are only just beginning to grasp the magnitude of ancient quadrivial theory, which has lain like the Sphinx buried in the sand, its excavation blocked by the assumption that prehistoric people were motivated only by religion and superstition. On the contrary, the motivation of their elites seems to have been akin to that of modern physicists: to discern the mathematical reality at the basis of existence. Musical theory held a special place in this quest because harmonic ratios, unlike quantitative measurements, are invariant at every level and also under reciprocation (2/1:1 = 1:1/2), so that the infinitely large is mirrored in the infinitely small.

In the end it seems that despite these many connections, music and esotericism are no longer a natural marriage. To become expert in any path of music – composer, performer, theorist, historian, even listener – demands innate talent and lifelong dedication. The same can be said of any esoteric path such as alchemy (operative or spiritual), astrology, ceremonial magic, theosophy, Kabbalah (Jewish or Christian), or the imported disciplines of yoga, Sufism, Buddhism (Theravada, Vajrayana, Zen), etc. The positive conclusion is that music is a world in itself, comprising both exoteric and esoteric dimensions, and offering as valid and fruitful a path as most of those just mentioned.