Magic, astrology and music: the background to Marsilio Ficino’s astrological music therapy and his role as a Renaissance magus


This thesis is structured in four substantial chapters with subsections. The first two present his own attitudes towards magic, astrology and music. Chapter one is concerned with aspects of *musica inundana* as represented by Ficino's three main authorities, Plato, Hermes Trismegistus and Plotinus. Firstly I present the fundamental ideas underlying Ficino's mode of thought and musical practice: the structure of the cosmos, Pythagorean harmonia and the human soul as microcosm, concluding with the nature of Platonic wisdom. Secondly I consider the role of Hermes and the Hermetic texts with their emphasis on intuitive revelation, aichemical transformation and the imagination. From, this synthesis of the intellectual and the intuitive emerges Plotinus, whose understanding of cosmic sympathy and resonance has profound implications for a significatory attitude towards astrology. chapter two moves on to musica humana, and the magical means by which the Pythagorean and Platonic traditions aspired to bring the human soul into harmony with the cosmos. I discuss the nature of magic and mysticism, of occult ritual and the values of a symbolic mode of perception. The first half deals with Platonic and Plotinian attitudes towards magic, which were predominantly spiritual; the second half considers the practical magical rituals of theurgy, as revealed through the writings of the neo-platonists Iamblichus and Proclus and the Chaldaean Oracles. The central notion, that of time and its two orders, leads to a consideration of astrology as divination and a conclusion on the way of being and perception on which the efficacy of 'magic' depends. The second half of the thesis is directly concerned with Ficino's own synthesis of this material. Chapter three firstly presents his formulation of ways of knowing as found in the Iamblichus Commentary, then considers the implications of this for his attitude towards astrology. The 'scientific' astrology of Ptolemy and the syncretic tradition of the Arabs leads to a presentation of the dilemma between the scientific and divinatory approaches. I then discuss Ficino's reaction to astrological determinism and his own views in relation to his Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum and Commentary on Plotinus. Finally, chapter four brings both astrology and music into focus as the ingredients of Ficino's practices of natural magic. I discuss his ideas concerning the nature of hearing, the function of the musician and the concepts of spiritus and anima mundi in connection with the sympathetic magic of De vita coelitus comparanda. Ficino's attitude towards the power of words and song and his rules for composing astrological music lead us to the final section on musica Instrumentalis - Ficino's role as the 'second Orpheus'. Contemporary anecdotes, the importance of Orpheus as a model and the rediscovery of the Orphic hymns precede a more historical discussion of Ficino as a music theorist and improvisor within the context of 15th century Italian musical culture. I speculate on his instrument, Renaissance performance practice and musical repertoire, concluding with examples of relevant musical forms.

**Publication Type:** Thesis (Doctoral)

**Subjects:** M Music and Books on Music > M Music

**Departments:** School of Arts & Social Sciences > Music

**URI:** http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/7977
See 'Magic, astrology and music: The background to Marsilio Ficino's astrological music therapy and his role as a Renaissance magus' (City University of London), specially the third part, at the Warburg Institute Library, London. In 1477 the Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino wrote, but did not publish, a vehement attack on the practices of astrologers; his Disputatio contra iudicium astrologorum. [1] Anyone reading this text would assume that the author found the very foundations of traditional astrology ready for demolition by the power of Reason and the authority of God.

Orpheus redivivus: The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino. Article. Full-text available. He is of course referring to both his own and his friends' well-attested skill at improvising or composing musical settings for the Hymns of Orpheus, which he himself had translated from the Greek, and whose ritual use in the practice of natural magic lay at the very heart of Ficino's work with the Platonic Academy. Many of Ficino's friends recognised a particular quality in his music-making, a gift that led them to name him Orpheus, the mythical musician who was said to change men, animals and stones with his lyre-playing.