
The Natural Magic of Marsilio Ficino

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Marsilio Ficino of Florence (1433–99) is chiefly remembered for his role as the head of the Platonic Academy, a cultural centre where the foremost artists and humanists of the day gathered to promote a new Renaissance attitude towards philosophy, religion and the arts. One of the members was Lorenzo de' Medici, who was deeply influenced by Ficino and was one of his closest circle. Ficino stands at the forefront of the Italian Renaissance as he was the first to translate and comment upon the complete works of Plato, followed by neo-platonic works hitherto undiscovered. As a Christian priest, his vocation was to unite philosophy and religion in a total wisdom of being, and to this end he also advocated the use of ritual magical practices, including a unique form of astrological music therapy. In this article I present some of the 'occult' ideas which underlie both Ficino's personal activity as a magician, and the esoteric intentions of the Florentine Academy in the late 15th century.

It is in the third book of a treatise entitled the *Liber de vita* ('Book of Life') that we find Ficino the magus advocating talismanic magic, astrology and music as therapies for the health of mind, soul and body. This book, *De vita coelitus comparanda* ('How to fit your life to the heavens') culminates with a formulation of an astrological music-therapy involving the innate power of words when combined with music. But in the preceding chapters Ficino prepares the reader by discussing the probable means by which images and inscribed figures effect physical and psychological changes – and since audible music can be compared to 'figures in motion', the same theories apply. 'You are not unaware that harmonious music through its numbers and proportions has a wonderful power to calm, move, and influence our spirit, mind and body'¹ says Ficino, explaining that music acts in the same way as astrological figures (that is, the varying aspects made by the planets and stars between themselves at any given moment in their perpetual cycles), affecting our bodily temperament and inner harmony: 'by their harmonious rays and motions penetrating everything, they daily influence our spirit secretly just as overpowering music does openly.'² Ficino again hints here at the two most important conditions for the efficacy of natural magic: knowledge of the very particular quality of a particular moment, and intuition of the occult properties of the stars and planets. The coincidence of planetary configuration with earthly event (such as the playing of music, making of an image, use of a medicine) is crucial, and man has the responsibility to put his free-will to use in electing such times to obtain maximum benefit:

just as a given thing is fortunately born and coalesces and is preserved not elsewhere than here nor at any other time but just then, so also such or such a material action, motion, or event does not obtain full or perfect efficacy except when the celestial harmony conduces to it from all sides.³

The notion of the occult or secret properties of matter, that is, those influential qualities beyond sense perception but nevertheless profoundly affecting our own psychological

balance through their effect on the *spiritus* – the airy substance which links body and soul – is central to Ficino's magic. These qualities may be hidden, but they are natural, and as such the Magus who perceives them is a natural philosopher and not a conjuror.⁴ In his late work *De Sole*, Ficino talks of the 'two lights' of the Sun and stars, one visible and obvious, the other innate but beyond the scope of our senses: 'Clearly all heavenly things have brought with them their own light at their birth, but it escapes our notice, being either infinitesimal, or hidden from us, or with a certain fineness and brilliance, or for another reason.'⁵ It is this occult ray which, he believes, can implant hidden powers in images. It carries gifts from the imaginations and minds of the stars and planets as ensouled beings, comprising a force which gains its intensity from both their mental dispositions and the rapid motions of their bodies. This ray acts on the spirit which is most similar to it in nature according to the particular property of the star or planet from which it emanates – in an instant a particular combination of rays will fall and connect with a material which is either especially prepared to receive it, or attracted by natural affinity. This is made possible, Ficino says, because air (and to a lesser extent, sound) 'passes right away through solid things and influences them with a quality of its own.'⁶

The art of understanding the planetary and stellar significations in order to attract the occult benefits of their rays at the most propitious times is acknowledged by Ficino to be very difficult: 'It is truly a discipline of special importance to grasp correctly which spirit, which force, which thing these planets especially signify.'⁷ The 'ray' theory would appear to be a metaphorical way of explaining the instantaneous, synchronous connection of above and below which results in an overwhelming sense of meaningfulness and participation in a 'play of forces' beyond one's control. Ficino himself experienced such a meaningful coincidence at the very beginning of his career. After singing a hymn to the Cosmos, he experienced a 'certain inspired heavenly instigation' (*celesti quodam afflatus instinctu*) at work, bringing him the benefit of Cosimo de' Medici's patronage.⁸

Certainly the reader of *De vita coelitus comparanda* would have to be an expert astrologer to put Ficino's magic into practice. His detailed instructions on the observation of planetary qualities and aspects implies a continual awareness of the movement of the heavens, in particular the phases and aspects of the Moon. She acts as a transmitter of the benefits of the three most benefic planets, the Sun, Jupiter and Venus, (which Ficino names 'the three Graces')⁹ to things below, and her movements must be closely observed when choosing the right time to sculpt an image, take a medicine, pick a herb, or perform an incantation. One should also ensure that the planet whose influence one wishes to cultivate is in its dignity and term,¹⁰ and take note of rulerships for particular parts of the body. This was of course standard medical practice – but Ficino extends the notion of 'health' to all mental and bodily activity. Above all, he recommends cultivating



*Bust of Marsilio Ficino, Andrea di Piero Ferrucci (1522), Florence, Santa Maria del Fiore
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the power of Jupiter, which contains all the properties of the Sun, Venus and Mercury and through its temperateness will regulate the motions of the heart, natural procreative force and vital spirit.¹¹ If one thoroughly grasps the symbolic significance of planetary characteristics, it is possible consciously to order life-experiences, surroundings and even friends in order to achieve maximum correlation with both one's innate nature as symbolised by a natal horoscope, and with the current disposition of the heavens. This, suggests Ficino, cannot be done unless one keeps mind and body in active imitation or counter-imitation of planetary movements. Stagnation of mind or body would prevent any point of contact arising, for it must be a two-way process of interaction between above and below:

When you fear Mars, set Venus opposite. When you fear Saturn, use Jupiter. And see to it that you engage in some continual motion, just so you avoid weariness; and make sure that your own motion is the opposite of the external motions which are secretly going to harm you, and that you imitate so far as possible the action of the heavens. But if you can pass through larger spaces in your motion, you will thereby imitate the heavens all the more and will get in contact with more of the strengths of the celestials which are diffused everywhere.¹²

The aim is to render oneself more receptive, to refine perception and sensibility and, most importantly, to bring the *physical* dimension of existence into harmony with the purified mind, as the 'music of the body' is expressed in ritual dance:

While experiencing ... the motion of shining water, of clear air, of a fire that is not too close, and of the sky, you will receive the motion of the life of the world; if you yourself also move lightly, and in almost the same way – executing as many gyrations as you can without dizziness, traversing the celestial bodies with your eyes, and revolving them in your mind.¹³

Later in the work Ficino describes the feeding of the 'spiritual body' with the subtle counterparts to the gross elements, wine for earth, odour of wine for water, sound and song for air and light for fire.¹⁴ The two 'higher' elements of air and fire are ascribed to Apollo, and the two lower of earth and water to his 'brother and inseparable companion'¹⁵ – thus the Apolline and Dionysian aspects of existence are married in the intermingling of the elements and the absorption of their fine qualities – abundant taking of wine (as long as drunkenness was avoided) was highly recommended by Ficino, who apparently carried a flask around with him for (one assumes) spiritual nourishment.¹⁶ Purification of the spirit should lead to the transcendence of earthly materiality through transforming and refining it, which will liberate the man from domination by his instinctual desires and the strengthen his conscious will.

All astrological techniques lead, for Ficino, to this end. The *spiritus*, being Jovial, Solar, Venereal and Mercurial in nature is naturally inclined to attract similar properties from its cosmic counterpart, the *spiritus mundi*, and convey them to the organs of the body – 'a healthy spirit does

not have much in common with Saturn, Mars or the Moon'¹⁷ says Ficino, for these planets are heavy with melancholy, irascibility and natural instinct. However, he departs from tradition in recommending the potential beneficial effects of Mars and Saturn when used homeopathically as antidotes ('just as doctors sometimes use poisons'),¹⁸ and especially in his radical understanding of the power of Saturn as a signifier of philosophical speculation. The steady pursuit of Saturnine occupations may recall the spirit from the outer to the inner faculties and aid contemplation of 'the more secret and the higher subjects.'¹⁹ In conformity with the *spiritus*, light, colour, odours, 'motions of the mind' and musical sound may, as carriers of 'occult' gifts, directly affect the mind and thence the body – and music in particular may induce vivid emotional 'affects' when combined with a text:

Sounds and songs which are pleasing and agreeable pertain to all the Graces and to Mercury; sounds which are quite threatening and fearful, however, represent Saturn and Mars.²⁰

This is the general principle behind Ficino's astrological music-making, and in chapter XXI of *De vita coelitus comparanda*, devoted to 'The power of words and song for capturing celestial benefits', Ficino gives us his rules for composing, or improvising, astrological music. He begins by suggesting that the power of emotionally-charged spoken words may intensify the effect of an image – attributing the idea to the Arabs and Egyptians: 'they hold that certain words pronounced with a quite strong emotion have great force to aim the effect of images precisely where the emotions and words are directed.'²¹ The argument of Thomas Aquinas, that inscribed words are 'unnatural' and must therefore inevitably be addressed to daemonic intelligences, is not understood by Ficino to apply to spoken or sung words in the Pythagorean tradition of musical healing. In fact he makes a point of disapproving of 'incantations' which were aimed at any manipulation of intervening daemons, emphasising 'we are not teaching philtres but medicine'.²² The implication is that we are to understand Ficino's own use of music in ritual to be of another order, and he is able to gain all the more credence through the writings of his neo-platonic authorities on the power of words – Origen, Synesius, Al-Kindi, Zoroaster and Iamblichus.²³ He also had evidence of the morally therapeutic use of words and music in the practices of his supreme master Pythagoras and the neo-platonist Proclus, who also sang Orphic Hymns. He would have read in Iamblichus' *Life of Pythagoras* that Pythagoras derived his musical practices from the disciples of Orpheus himself – and it was Orpheus, as both ancient theologian and musician inspired by Platonic *furor* or 'frenzy', who provided Ficino with a perfect model for his speculative and active music-making.

For Ficino the supreme precedent for the power of verse combined with rhythm and harmony to move both performer and listener is given by Plato's notion of poetic frenzy in *Ion* and *Phaedrus*.²⁴ In an early letter to his friend Peregrino Agli, Ficino echoes the Platonic conviction that the inspired performers are not those who merely use voices and instruments to create pleasant harmonies, but those who know how to imitate the 'inner reason and

knowledge' of the heavens in their declamation of lyric poetry:

It is these, who, inspired by the divine spirit, give forth with full voice the most solemn and glorious song ... For the more superficial kind which I have just mentioned does no more than soothe with the sweetness of the voice, but poetry does what is also proper to divine harmony. It expresses with fire the most profound, and as a poet would say, prophetic meanings, in the numbers of voice and movement. Thus not only does it delight the ear, but brings to the mind the finest nourishment, most like the food of the gods; and so seems to come very close to God.²⁵

Ficino's discrimination between 'magic' incantations intended for manipulative, self-seeking purposes, and those which arise from the humility of the devout poet who becomes a channel for a divine power thus justifies his emphasis on musical and verbal ritual in *De vita coelitus comparanda*. In the movement downwards through the neo-platonic chain of being from spirit to matter, reflected in the hierarchical rank of the planets from Saturn to the Moon, Ficino describes seven corresponding steps or stages of manifestation. Words, sounds and song, all dedicated to Apollo or the Sun, are found in the fourth, central position, midway between the material concerns of the Moon, Mercury and Venus and the immaterial, emotional and spiritual domains of Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Ficino tells us that he is giving this 'octave' of correspondences in order to show the similitude of medical compounds, concocted with astrological knowledge, to music specially composed according to planetary significations:

tones [*tonis*] 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 kinds of tones are suitable for what sort of stars, 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 chance [*divina quadam sorte*].²⁶

Human diligence and divine intervention, the latter being dependent on the former, combine in a performer thoroughly grounded in musical and rhetorical technique and theory who then allows himself to become seized by the *furor poeticus*. The astrological music, Ficino suggests here, is improvised or composed according to the practitioner's knowledge of musical/astrological theory (perhaps involving traditional analogies between modes, intervals and planets) and his intuitive, unreflected inspiration. The astrologer/musician would intensify the effect of his music by taking into account the 'pattern' or 'model' [*norma*] of the heavens, choosing tones or intervals which correspond to this pattern, then composing them into an order and harmony which in some way imitates this *musica mundana*, in the re-creation of the harmonious intervals which underlie the very structure of the cosmos. Before giving us his rules for composition, Ficino again stresses that this procedure in no way involves wilful action on the part of the stars, but is a method for the wise man to adapt *himself* to 'the occult and wonderful gifts' of the stars'

natural influence.²⁷ Ficino's three rules for 'accommodating our songs to the stars' are somewhat musically unspecific but demand expert understanding of astrological symbolism:

The first [rule] is to inquire diligently what powers in itself or what effects from itself a given star [*stella*], constellation [*sydus*] or aspect has – what do they remove, what do they bring? – and to insert these into the meaning of our words, so as to detest what they remove and approve what they bring. The second rule is to take note of what special star rules what place or person and then to observe what sorts of tones and songs these regions and persons generally use, so that you may supply similar ones, together with the meanings I have just mentioned, to the words which you are trying to expose to the same stars. Thirdly, observe the daily positions and aspects of the stars and discover to what principal speeches, songs, motions, dances, moral behaviour, and actions most people are usually incited by these, so that you may imitate such things as far as possible in your song, which aims to please the particular part of heaven that resembles them and to catch a similar influx.²⁸

The power of such a song, says Ficino, will provoke both singer and audience to imitate the qualities it itself is imitating through its action on the airy *spiritus*, which is akin to it by nature. This music-spirit is conceived by Ficino to be like a living animal, composed of warm air, 'still breathing and somehow living'.²⁹ It carries both emotion and meaning, and its influence will depend in part on its congruence with the heavens and in part with the 'disposition of the imagination' of the singer – the meaningfulness of the experience being dependent on the synchronicity of 'outer' and 'inner', objective and subjective dimensions. The singer must be a finely-tuned instrument whose quality of spirit has been rendered strong and solar, for such 'vital and animal power' will readily attract the music-spirit – particularly if, in addition to the rules already mentioned, the ritual is also conducted at a suitably elected astrological hour. The three essential requirements for the conception of such a music-spirit are therefore the vital, solar power of the singer's own spirit, the propitious moment and the singer's *intention*, which involves and unites the desire of his heart and the focusing of his imagination. Then, Ficino suggests, both mental and physical diseases may be dispelled or induced 'since a musical spirit of this kind properly touches and acts on the spirit which is the mean between body and soul, and immediately affects both the one and the other with its influence.'³⁰

We are given some idea of the kind of the musical characteristics of each planet. Ficino stresses that all music proceeds from Apollo, but that Jupiter, Venus and Mercury are also musical to the extent that they naturally partake of solar qualities. However, Saturn, Mars and the Moon 'have voices [*voces*] but no song [*cantus*]'. He describes the voices of Saturn as 'slow, deep, harsh and plaintive', those of Mars 'quick, sharp, fierce and menacing', and the lunar ones of an intermediate quality.³¹ As for the music of the other planets,

The music of Jupiter is deep, earnest, sweet and joyful with stability. To Venus, on the contrary, we ascribe songs voluptuous with wantonness and softness. The songs between these two extremes we ascribe to the Sun and Mercury: if with their grace and smoothness they are reverential, simple, and earnest, the songs are judged to be Apollo's; if they are somewhat more relaxed, along with their gaiety, but vigorous and complex, they are Mercury's.³²

Ficino instructs us to use 'their songs', with appropriate musical sounds, at the right hour (when the petitioned planet is 'dignified')³³ to so purify the human spirit that it will naturally attract the response of the planetary spirit:

When at the right astrological hour you declaim aloud by singing and playing in the manners we have specified for the four gods, they seem to be just about to answer you like an echo or like a string in a lute trembling to the vibration of another which has been similarly tuned.³⁴

Ficino mentions that a prayer, like a song, achieves its effects through a similar natural power 'when it has been suitably and seasonably composed and is full of emotion and forceful'.³⁵ Certainly his own practice of reciting the hymns of Orpheus to the *lyra* combined musical skill with invocation to particular deities – and these texts would appear to be the most appropriate candidates for the kind of astrological singing specified in *De vita coelitus comparanda*. As Pico della Mirandola – Ficino's *frater mysticus* in his spiritual alchemy³⁶ – stated in his 'Orphic Conclusions', 'Nothing is more effective in natural magic than the hymns of Orpheus, if the correct music, intent of the soul and other circumstances known to the wise were to be applied.'³⁷ However, although Ficino himself undoubtedly used the hymns for such religious, ritual purposes, his 'rules for composition' do not exclude the possibility of specially-composed words to suit a particular individual – indeed he would hardly expect his intended readership to have access to the Orphic texts or necessarily find them meaningful.

The gifts which are attracted through the 'occult' powers of the stars when the spirit is exposed in this way may also be enticed through the use of images, medicines and odours. But they may equally be harnessed through affinity of soul, rather than of matter, vapour or air. So beyond the Solar domain of music and dancing we find 'well-accorded concepts and motions of the imagination' (Mars), 'fitting discourses of reason' (Jupiter) and 'tranquil contemplations of the mind' (Saturn), all of which may reap the benefits of these three higher planets all the more powerfully than 'inferior things' due to their greater affinity of nature.³⁸ We may imagine, for example, that unguents might accommodate one to receive the harmonising influence of Venus, but would not be so useful in attracting the intellectual acumen of Jupiter. For this reason, Saturn is greatly propitious to intellectual contemplation, but experienced as hostile to those still caught up in worldly affairs or emotional concerns (the spheres of Jupiter and Mars). The imagination, reason and understanding are all located in the soul, and Ficino suggests here that when these three planets are invoked it is the soul, rather than the body, which is directly affected.

There follows, in chapter XXII, a eulogy to Saturn as the true philosopher's gold, the planet signifying the extremes of misery or the capacity to transcend fate. For the average human being, Saturn signifies worldly frustration, struggle and melancholy, and needs to be tempered by good doses of Jupiter, in an allopathic cure of the compensation of opposites. However, for the true contemplative Saturn offers an incomparable gift of intellectual union with the divine mind itself.³⁹ That Ficino was preoccupied with the trials and tribulations of Saturn, and with the compensatory temperance of Jupiter, reflects the astrological symbolism of his own natal horoscope which is dominated by a Saturn-Jupiter opposition across the horizon (the ascendant-descendant axis). His advice to those of overly Saturnine temperament to seek out Jovial friends is based on personal experience, as he writes to the Archbishop of Amalfi:

You have divined, I think, how much I have long wanted to live my life with someone of a Jovial nature, so that something of a bitter, and as I might say, Saturnine element, which either my natal star has bestowed on me or which philosophy has added, might eventually be alleviated by the sweet fellowship of someone born under Jove.⁴⁰

In *De vita coelitus comparanda* Ficino is essentially concerned with finding Jupiter, that is, the fire and water of the imagination and the soul (astrologically Jupiter rules the fiery sign Sagittarius and the watery sign Pisces) as a healthy counterbalance to the heaviness of an overindulged, duty-bound Saturn (the ruling planet of the earth-sign Capricorn). This approach to maintaining the health of mind and body requires an active imagination, willingness to suspend rational judgements and preconceived ideas, and above all a symbolic attitude towards every aspect of life. Too much Saturn dries and hardens – Jupiter irrigates and tempers. Ficino has much to say about the conflicts and complements of Saturn and Jupiter, but this is material for another study. Suffice it to say here, in the context of Ficino's music-making, that he quotes Orpheus in the Orphic *Hymn to Eros* as saying that the higher cosmic divinities possess the keys to free us from fate,⁴¹ understood as the blows of fortune which appear to inevitably correlate with adverse aspects in the heavens. It is Love, in the Platonic sense of the *desire* for self-knowledge, which unlocks the door to free-will and choice. To achieve this is to freely enter the domain of Saturn, where he no longer becomes a threat but a friend. Ficino knew from his own experience that this freedom, evoked by Orpheus, could be encouraged by the imitation of the heavens in words and music. What could be more appropriate to marry to the echo of the 'music of the spheres' than the poetry supposedly stemming from the pen of Orpheus himself? When Lorenzo de' Medici immortalised his friend in his poem *L'Altercazione*, exclaiming 'I thought that Orpheus had returned to the world',⁴² he was not just praising Marsilio's musical skill, but the power of profound psychological transformation embodied in the ritual combination of astrology and music, understood by Ficino as 'natural magic, which, by natural things, seeks to obtain the services of the heavens for the prosperous health of our bodies.'⁴³

References

1. Ficino, *Liber de vita* Book 3, chapter XVII, line 28. References are to the edition by Carol Kaske and John Clark, *Ficino, Three Books on Life*, Binghamton, New York, 1989
2. *ibid.* 3.XVII.32
3. *ibid.* 3.XII.109
4. Ficino's chief authority on occult properties would be Galen, who stressed the importance of the 'indescribable properties' of natural remedies which act 'from the whole substance' and whose effects cannot be rationally understood. See B. Copenhaver, 'scholastic Philosophy and Renaissance Magic in the *De vita* of Marsilio Ficino' in *Renaissance Quarterly* XXXVII (1984) pp.523–54
5. Ficino, *Liber de Sole* in his *Opera omnia* (Basle, 1576) p.972
6. *Liber de vita* 3.XVI.19
7. *ibid.* 3.VI.1
8. Letter to Cosimo de' Medici, in *Supplementum Ficinianum* ed. P.O. Kristeller, Florence 1937 vol.2, pp.87–8
9. *Liber de vita* 3.III.5
10. *ibid.* 3.X
11. *ibid.* 3.VI
12. *ibid.* 3.VI.170
13. *ibid.* 3.XI.16
14. *ibid.* 3.XXIV.29
15. *ibid.* 3.XXIV.35
16. *ibid.* 3.XXIV.46. See A. della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze*, Florence 1902 p.811
17. *Liber de vita* 3.XI.65
18. *ibid.* 3.II.58
19. *ibid.* 3.XI.85
20. *ibid.* 3.XI.140
21. *ibid.* 3.XXI.1
22. *ibid.* 3.XIII.22 and 3.XXI.6
23. *ibid.* 3.XXI.14
24. Plato, *Ion* 533d, *Phaedrus* 245a
25. *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino* translation by members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, vol.1, London 1975 p.46
26. *Liber de vita* 3.XXI.42
27. *ibid.* 3.XXI.62
28. *ibid.* 3.XXI.62
29. *ibid.* 3.XXI.82
30. *ibid.* 3.XXI.112
31. *ibid.* 3.XXI.122
32. *ibid.* 3.XXI.124
33. Carol Kaske (*Ficino, Three Books on Life* p.35) gives the following explanation for the astrological terms 'dignity' and 'term': 'Any given sign [of the zodiac] offers many other relations to the planets: it is to one planet a debility, but a dignity – namely a house (or domicile) and an exaltation – to two others; each third of it is allotted as a "face" to a different planet; and varying still smaller arcs of it are allotted to different planets as their *termini, fines*, "bounds" or "terms".'
34. *Liber de vita* 3.XXI.130
35. *ibid.* 3.XXI.144
36. In the *Apology* to his *Liber de vita*, Ficino refers to himself and Pico della Mirandola as the brothers Phoebus and Dionysus (l.130). Elsewhere (2.XX.42) he elaborates on this relationship, emphasising that Phoebus and Bacchus are inseparable and almost identical.
37. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Conclusiones numero XXXI* no.2, in *Omnia quae extant opera*, Venice 1557 p.159
38. *Liber de vita* 3.XXII.9
39. *ibid.* 3.XXII.35
40. *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, vol.4 (London 1988) p.60
41. *Liber de vita* 3.XXI.101. For Orphic hymn to Eros, see *Orphica* ed. E. Abel, Leipzig 1885 p.89
42. Lorenzo de' Medici, *L'Altercazione* cap.II, in *Opere* ed. A. Simioni, Bari 1914 vol.2 p.41
43. *Apologia* to the *Liber de vita*, l.59