

Orpheus redivivus: The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino

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In a letter to Paul of Middelburg, written when he was nearly sixty, Ficino looks back over the great achievements of the Florentine Renaissance: "This age, like a golden age, has brought back to light those liberal disciplines that were practically extinguished: grammar, poetry, oratory, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and the ancient singing of songs to the Orphic Lyre". 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. Nothing, says Pico della Mirandola, is more effective in natural magic than the Hymns of Orpheus, if the kind of music - and other circumstances - are applied which are only known to the wise.

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. The poet Naldo Naldi even affirms that in Ficino the very soul of Orpheus has been reincarnated: "Hence he soothes the unyielding oaks with his lyre and his song and softens once more the hearts of wild beasts." However, it is in the words of his friend Poliziano that we begin to glimpse a greater significance in Ficino's association with Orpheus; the poet was accustomed to hear Marsilio discourse on the secrets of the heavens, on healing, on metaphysics; "Often," he says, "his wise lyre chases out these grave thoughts and his voice follows the song springing up from under his expressive fingers, like Orpheus, interpreter of Apollo's songs ... Then when he has finished, drawn on by the Muses's furore I return home, return to the composition of verses, and, ecstatically invoking Phoebus, I touch the divine lyre with my plectrum." Elsewhere the poet concludes that "[Marsilio's] lyre... far more successful than the lyre of Thracian Orpheus, has brought back from the underworld what is, if I am not mistaken, the true Eurydice, that is Platonic wisdom with its most all-embracing understanding."

What is this wisdom of the underworld, which the classical Orpheus failed to bring into the light of day, and which is re-born into Renaissance Florence by the sound of Marsilio's lyre? To begin to answer this question, we must travel back through history, to the Greece of the sixth century BC or earlier, to the time when Orpheus first emerges in mythology. From Thrace or the northern regions he appears as a shaman-like figure; one who travels to the depths of the underworld and converses with gods and spirits, who knows the power of incantation and song to heal the sick and invoke ecstasy, the divine ecstasy of initiation into the mysteries. Some say he was a priest of Dionysus, the god of intoxication and generation, who we also know as Bacchus. Dionysus also came from the north with his followers, the Satyrs and Maenads. In one version of the story his mother was the earth-goddess Demeter; for the followers of Orpheus, she was Demeter's daughter Persephone. As offspring of these goddesses, Dionysus embodied the spiritual and physical life of nature, passion, inspiration, metamorphosis. His fate was to be torn asunder by the Titans, only to be brought back to wholeness by his grandmother Rhea - a myth which revealed to his followers the continual flux of the cosmos from unity to diversity, as the One descends to the Many, only to be restored back to unity. The death and rebirth of Dionysus were re-enacted in his rituals; he was tended by his wild women, who, full of frenzy, were inspired by his spirit. This was far indeed from the cult worship of the Olympian gods in their 'luminous perfection' - far from the lofty, dispassionate gaze of the Athenian Apollo. The worshipper of Dionysus was not a mere mortal in awe of the divine; he became the god. Dionysus and Apollo appear to have little in common; yet once, Apollo too was worshipped at the portals of the underworld, such as the great oracular site at Delphi where the priestess uttered her prophecies from deep within the earth, and where the Sun god fought the Python not to destroy him, but to absorb his divine powers.

Now Orpheus is intimately connected not only with Dionysus, but also with Apollo - he is known as his priest, prophet or even son. But one ancient source tells us that it was only after his descent into the underworld that Orpheus understood Apollo to be the Sun, that he understood his prophetic wisdom to spring from the depths of the night. The same source recounts that having followed the Sun through its underworld journey, Orpheus climbed Mount Pangaion to watch the glory of its rising. In an Orphic Hymn to Apollo we read: "through the dark night, in silence, in the midst of starlit darkness, you bestowed the roots underneath." Apollo thus unites the dark and the light - he is Dionysus-Apollo.

With the united forces of Dionysian enthusiasm and Apollonine insight Orpheus charms his way to the rulers of Hades with his music, to bring wisdom back from the night to the day. And what did Orpheus learn in the underworld? That the human soul is immortal, and because of that it is divine.

In the incubation rites at Apollo's shrines the initiate underwent the transition from life to death, deep under the earth for three days, in the consciousness of a dream. Freed from the body, the soul met Persephone, the goddess of Hades, who passed judgment and communicated her laws through oracle and prophecy. The followers of Orpheus and Pythagoras, who shared common rites and understanding of these things, knew that these laws were the eternal laws, laws with which the wise were to govern their communities. We learn from Diodorus that Orpheus himself used his knowledge to bring a new dimension to the orgiastic Dionysian rites; to raise them from earth to heaven. It now became possible to assimilate the powers of the gods not through the bloody rituals of animal sacrifice and dismemberment, but through inner spiritual experience. Orpheus knew this after he had visited the portals of Hades, and he taught it to men through his skills on the lyre. It has been pointed out that in early vase-painting he is never associated with taming wild-animals - rather, in a spirit of purity and peace, he plays quiet music to the wild Thracian men. He may have been a living teacher and priest of the mysteries; certainly the rituals instigated by his followers are those of the mystery traditions which taught of judgement after death, reincarnation and eventual freedom from the cycle of death and rebirth. But whatever he embodied for the early Orphics, for the men of the Renaissance he emerges as a civiliser, a reformer, even a redeemer, renewing the religious impulses of the Greeks with a spiritual fervour, a fusion of sobriety and intoxication, self-control and enthusiasm - embodying priest and artist, and holding the key to personal salvation.

With risk of great over-simplification, we could say in summary that Orpheus came to be interpreted as one who effected a great shift in the religious sensibility of Western man. He seems to teach that the individual soul can be freed from its unconscious identification with the forces of nature so that it may achieve knowledge of itself, and thus transfigured, find eventual union with the god of heaven. In this context it is no wonder Orpheus was torn apart - like Dionysus - by the enraged Bacchantes, infuriated by his spurning of their rites, by his honouring of the Sun, and some say, by the exclusion of women from his sanctuaries. But it would appear that such is the destiny of those who steal fire from the gods - who break through and change, for ever, the relationship of mankind to divinity.

The wisdom that Orpheus brings into day, into consciousness, is embodied in the figure of his wife, Eurydice. The meeting of the dark and the light, the sacred marriage, was the central mystery of Orphic ritual, and in early versions of the myth Orpheus rescues Eurydice, he guides the underworld goddess up into the light and unites with her. "I walked the dark road of Hades trusting my cithara" says the Orpheus of the *Argonautica*, "for love of my wife". Orpheus loved; he desired to be united with the eternal feminine, with Eurydice's disembodied shade. Is not this the true nature of Platonic love, which, kindled by eros, desires nothing less than a union of two souls? By the time of Virgil's classic account, Eurydice has been lost. Orpheus fails to obey the injunction of Pluto not to look back, and she returns to the shadows. It is no longer possible to marry night and day, dark and light. Darkness becomes separated, ignorance, evil, God becomes all radiant light. And in the darkness, the underworld, lives the eternal feminine. She cannot be redeemed through logic, or empiricism, or dogmatic theology, or natural science. But she can be found in music, art, poetry - in the realm of the imagination. She can be rescued and brought back into a world arid with sterile theological debate and 'abominable ignorance' of the divine, as Ficino puts it. And so, like Orpheus, Ficino rescues her - but not from Hades. His is a new Eurydice, a Eurydice who shines with the clear light of divine knowledge. She no longer embodies the mysteries of the night, the wisdom of Persephone, but brings Goodness, Truth and Beauty to seduce the minds of men away from their earthbound concerns. "I have not impiously sung of ... Proserpine", exclaims Ficino, "but, as is the way of the Platonists, I have depicted the sublime, upward soaring of the heavenly mind". His Eurydice, his Philosophy, has not sojourned in the underworld: "O treasure, of all things most precious, in no way produced from the bowels of the Earth and Pluto, but descending from the topmost point of heaven and from the head of Jove!"

For Ficino, Orpheus was a venerable ancient theologian who learned the secrets of immortality from the Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus and passed them on to Pythagoras, and so to Plato and his neo-platonic interpreters. Most importantly, Orpheus played a central role in the transmission of a perennial wisdom which Ficino understood to be fully unfolded in the Christian revelation - a

philosophical confirmation of religious truth necessary for the salvation of mankind; and indeed in Orpheus he found a model for his own aspiration to lead his fellow man towards a more enlightened state of being. The Orpheus of the Hymns, of the epic Orphic Argonautica, was revered by Ficino precisely for giving voice to the divine truth of theology through a poetic mythology - and the singing of hymns. In this sense Orpheus provided the key to Ficino's Christian Platonism. For example, in naming Jupiter as the supreme creative principle, the "beginning, middle and end of the universe", Orpheus demonstrated his understanding of one of the fundamental assertions of the ancient theology - that the whole of creation is constantly being regenerated in a never-ending movement towards unity: "all things first flow from that eternal source when they are born; then they flow back again to it, when they seek their own origin; and finally, they are perfected, after they have returned to their source."

As poet, priest, prophet and lover Orpheus embodied the four conditions on which knowledge of God depended, the four frenzies or madneses in which the human soul was lifted beyond its earthly condition and achieved spiritual possession. In Ficino's understanding, the frenzy of the poet or musician was the beginning of the initiatory process, the awakening of that dormant memory of divinity which came to fruition in the final rapture of love. But "any madness", says Ficino, "whether the prophetic, hieratic or amatory, justly seems to be released as poetic madness when it proceeds to songs and poems." What do we see in Orpheus' madneses, other than a transformation of Bacchic frenzy? The Maenads of Dionysus have become the Muses of Apollo, the initiation takes place not through the intoxication of the senses but through the fire of the imagination. For Orpheus, and for Ficino, the function of the priest in leading people to recognise their own divinity was precisely the function of the musician, for music, in imitating or reproducing the laws of the cosmos in sound, reveals the true nature of the soul to itself - that it partakes of the soul of the world. But Ficino's music was not for the ears of the rulers of Hades - it was for the divinities of the celestial sphere, and in particular those divinities addressed by Orpheus in his Hymns.

In the Orphic Hymns Ficino found perfect vehicles for what he termed natural magic, a process of bringing the human soul into alignment with the harmonies of the heavens, and ultimately, with God Himself, although Ficino could hardly make this explicit. Composed in the Hellenistic era under the name of Orpheus, the Hymns praise the powers in the cosmos, with instructions for burning appropriate incense, in a sequence of epithets to individual deities. Very early in his career, Ficino had discovered the magical power in singing Orphic Hymns: shortly after singing a hymn to the Cosmos, Cosmus himself, alias Cosimo de' Medici had granted him patronage and a villa in which to work. A delightful pun, but more seriously, something, it seemed, was brought about when the Hymns were performed in a particular context; when the internal emotion and external ritual were perfectly aligned in a mysterious way. "Our spirit", Ficino says, "is in conformity with the rays of the heavenly spirit, which penetrates everything either secretly or obviously. It shows a far greater kinship when we have a strong desire for that life and are seeking a benefit that is consistent with it, and thus transfer our own spirit into its rays by means of love, particularly if we make use of song and light and the perfume appropriate to the deity, like the hymns that Orpheus consecrated to the cosmic deities." And why are the hymns so powerful? Because, Pico says, in them Orpheus "interwove the mysteries of his doctrines with the texture of fables, covering them with a poetic veil", so that to the uninitiated they would appear to be the "sheerest tales and trifles."

What did Orpheus know about music and poetry, what was the secret preserved in his Hymns? For Ficino and Pico, to perform the hymns was to move from everyday consciousness to a spiritual perception of reality. You will not understand the essence of the Hymns, insists Pico, unless you know how to comprehend sensible properties by way of secret analogy. Their neoplatonic masters knew this: Plotinus tells us to wake up, turn around and see with different eyes "which all have but few use"; Iamblichus assures us that conceptual thought or theoretical philosophising will not lead to knowledge of the gods; rather, "the perfect efficacy of ineffable works" and "the power of inexplicable symbols" will "impart theurgic union". In this way music, incantation, poetry, ritual, may all foster the growth of a different way of encountering and interpreting the world. As Ficino describes it, in his letter on Divine Frenzy: "the soul receives the sweetest harmonies and numbers through the ears, and by these echoes is reminded and aroused to the divine music which may be heard by the more penetrating sense of mind." On hearing earthly music, the soul is reminded of the music of God and the heavens that it once enjoyed, and "kindles with desire" to return to its divine source. The inspired musician, thus enraptured, conveys the "inner reason" of divine harmony to the listener, who is moved in sympathetic resonance with the performer. So when Ficino sang hymns to the cosmic deities, there

was no question of intentionally invoking a spirit or god. The object was to tune oneself, like a string on a lyre, until one's spirit resonated in unison with the desired archetypal principle. In playing music which specifically corresponded in quality to Venus, Jupiter or the Sun - and Ficino describes such qualities in his Book of Life - the magician was thus transforming himself into the perfect medium for a divine presence, and he perceived that presence through an immediate intuitive sense, a sense innate to the soul like a light infused by God. Likewise on a more lofty plane, it would follow that the more profoundly one's contemplation of God Himself allowed one's soul to recognise its own divinity, the more profoundly one might come to know God. "I often resort to the solemn sound of the lyre and to singing" Ficino tells us, "to raise the mind to the highest considerations and to God as much as I may."

At the shrines of Apollo, a healing took place. In a state of trance it is said that the initiate heard the music of the spheres and was made whole. "It is hardly surprising", says Ficino, "that both music and medicine are often practised by the same man" as they are united in the power of the one god. In the words of Orpheus, Ficino found his own vocation as a healer confirmed. "Orpheus, in his book of hymns", he tells us, "asserts that Apollo, by his vital rays, bestows health and life on all and drives away disease. By the sounding strings, that is, their vibrations and power, he regulates everything; by the lowest string, winter; by the highest string, summer; and by the middle strings, he brings in spring and autumn." Apollo's lyre thus becomes a model for the harmony of the whole cosmos, uniting the physical order with the spiritual, the body with the soul. In revealing to the listener or player the harmonic proportions in his own soul, through number and pitch, the lyre is both a visual and audible image of a secret order to be found beyond the level of sense-perception; an articulation of the hidden relationships between different levels of reality. How suggestive is this fragment from a scholiast on Virgil: "Some say that Orpheus' lyre had seven strings corresponding to the seven circles of heaven. Varro says there was an Orphic book about summoning the soul, called the Lyre. It is said that the souls need the cithara in order to ascend." So the musical magic of Orpheus is concerned with no less than the redemption of the soul, and the key to its effective operation is the desire and intention of Love.

In the preface of his Commentary on Plato's Symposium, Ficino whispers a secret to his beloved Giovanni Cavalcanti: "A long time ago, dear Giovanni, I learned from Orpheus that love existed, and that it held the keys to the whole world..." It was the key of Love that unlocked, for Ficino, the gates to unity; a unity of perception in which there could be no opposition of philosophy and religion, knowledge and piety, Platonic thought and Christianity, Mind and Soul. He saw Orpheus, in his Hymns, addressing the gods as multi-faceted, multi-layered cosmic principles, each one mirroring the diversity of creation yet all representing aspects of a single unified power - all the gods in each god and each in all. Or as Pico puts it, "He who understands profoundly and deeply how the unity of Venus is unfolded in the trinity of the Graces, the unity of Destiny in the trinity of the Fates, and the unity of Saturn in the trinity of Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto, knows the proper way of proceeding in Orphic Theology." Thus "to proceed Orphically" meant adopting a poetic vision, a vision rich in mythology, symbol, allegory, metaphor. Indeed, Michael Allen has pointed out that "to proceed Orphically was the only way of accommodating polytheistic structures to the deep grammar of monotheism." And the only way to "proceed Orphically" was to suspend logical thinking and abandon oneself to eros, the god whose arrow provokes an acute desire to reconnect with one's source, who leads the mind to abandon its habitual cause and effect way of thinking and to follow the meaningful sign. Love is a magician, says Ficino, "because the whole power of magic consists in love. The work of magic is the attraction of one thing by another because of a certain affinity of nature."

Ficino's Orphic insight was to reach its metaphysical culmination in his anagogical meditations on the Sun and Light, little books which draw the reader from episteme to gnosis, to the realisation that in the end, the source of knowledge and the knower are one and the same. In his letter The Orphic Comparison of the Sun to God Ficino explains "It is certainly in the Sun that visible light is created from the light of consciousness, and there also sight is created from understanding. For there understanding is no different from the same light of consciousness, nor sight from visible light itself." Using the analogy of many colours emanating forth from the unified source of pure light, Ficino elaborates on what he calls the Orphic Mystery itself - colours unite sense-perception with their ultimate essence through the mediating function of sight's influence and will. "They are in no way differentiated through the absolute essence" says Ficino, "for there all colours are a single, pure light; but they are distinguished through the power of seeing and through the will, for the light sees and wills the pouring out of the one light in many ways through many objects." So also the gods play and dance

in an eternal outflow of divine energy, and just as colours are perceived through the sight of the eyes, they are glimpsed through the desire of the soul. The supreme Orphic insight - the many in the one - can be most powerfully demonstrated by the unity of the literal, symbolic and anagogic levels of perception in relation to the one Sun.

This is the basis of Ficino's understanding of astrology, which plays an integral part in his Orphic singing. In natural magic, the stars and planets are not observed as causal agents by the objective mind, but as symbols through a different kind of knowing, the kind which intuitively connects the cosmos at all levels and seeks to enter fully into the play of forces in creation. In singing to Venus at "a suitable astrological hour", when she herself is visible in the heavens, or joining the Sun or Jupiter, the singer is consciously uniting inner and outer dimensions of experience. Moreover, if the singer himself is full of intent, emotion, and longing, he is making himself receptive to the influence he is desiring. If you "yearn vehemently", says Ficino in his Book of Life, you will get a great deal more help from your remedy. "The Arabs say", he continues, "that when we fashion images rightly [or make music] our spirit, if it has been intent upon the work and upon the stars through imagination and emotion, is joined together with the very spirit of the world and with the rays of the stars" and moreover, "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." There can be little doubt that Marsilio says this too, and he gives us specific rules for composing songs according to the "rules of the stars". A song that corresponds to the heavens, both in its imitation of planetary configurations and in the "disposition of the imagination" of the singer, will powerfully affect both performer and listener. Ficino concedes that it is very difficult to know what kinds of tones are suitable for what sorts of stars, but that such knowledge comes about through a combination of our own efforts and "divine chance" - when the ritual is perfected, the god appears.

The message behind Ficino's Orphic singing is clear: the stars are not being worshipped, they do not choose to act in any way; deities are not being invoked. Rather, the singer is refining and perfecting his own spirit so that it may reach a condition in which it naturally receives the gifts of the heavens, freely offered, and he does this through imitating them. The theurgic implications of raising one's spirit beyond the celestial realm to the condition of divinity - of becoming god - are not dwelt upon by Ficino in the Book of Life - he had enough trouble justifying his natural magic to the Papal authorities. But he does acknowledge that prayers act in the same way as songs, not through any intention to worship a divinity, but in the wholly natural power of speech, song and words to connect with the spiritual realm. The Pythagoreans, says Ficino, "used to perform wonders by words, songs, and sounds in the Phoebean and Orphic manner"; they knew how music healed, and they knew that the more clearly the laws governing the cosmos could be reproduced in sound, the more effective the healing. In manifesting these laws, they spoke with a divine, not a human voice. As Pico tells us, "nature works its magic first of all through the voice of God", adding "in magic a voice only has power in so far as it is informed by the voice of God." For Ficino, all musical theory and technique must be in service to this end, for it is only through a knowledge of harmonia that the musician can understand the equivalence of musical tone and interval to the ratios inherent in the hidden structure of the cosmos, as revealed by Plato in his Timaeus. Ficino lays out the rules of consonance in a letter to his fellow musician, Domenico Benivieni, on the principles of music. In his letter, Ficino not only describes the particular qualities of the consonances and dissonances that make up a musical scale, but finds the same qualities in the interrelationships of the zodiacal signs, thus extending the Pythagorean notion of harmonious ratios governing the movements and distances of the planets to the divisions of the tropical zodiac used in traditional astrology. For instance, Ficino begins "just as with notes we find the second dissonant from the first, so here we find that the second sign is in some way dissonant from the first. But then the third sign, as though it were the model of the third note, looks upon the first constellation with that friendly aspect called sextile by astronomers." He is of course suggesting that the way we listen to musical harmony is analogous to the way we perceive symbolic meaning in the heavens; that the two are manifestations of the same underlying cosmic law. Thus the combination of musical and astrological expertise enables Ficino to move the listener swiftly to that level of perception beyond conceptual thought and differentiation where a congruence between outer and inner dimensions of experience may lead to a process of healing, a re-alignment of the fragmented soul.

This may well be what the original Orpheus learnt in the Underworld; it is certainly what Poliziano meant by the true Eurydice - for Ficino and his friends only the Platonic mode of understanding reality allowed for knowing to be a property of soul rather than disconnected mind; a kind of knowing

symbolised by the marriage of philosophy and poetry. When he sang his songs to the Orphic lyre, possessed by a divine frenzy, Ficino knew what Orpheus knew. But unlike Orpheus, he was not torn apart by the Maenads. Instead, the brilliant vision of Florentine Platonism itself was to be hurled into the depths of Hades by the forces of ignorance and fear, as the bonfires of the vanities were lit by the zeal of Savonarola. Eurydice was banished to the underworld, and it would seem that we are still awaiting her return.

I shall give the last word to that passionate Edwardian scholar Jane Harrison, who in her *Prolegomena to Greek Religion* suggests, with characteristic insight, why Orpheus assumed such spiritual authority in the innermost sanctuary of Ficino's Platonic Academy: "The religion of Orpheus is religious in the sense that it is the worship of the real mysteries of life, of potencies rather than personal gods; it is the worship of life itself in its supreme mysteries of ecstasy and love ... It is these real gods, this life itself, that the Greeks, like most men, were inwardly afraid to recognise and face, afraid even to worship ... Now and again a philosopher or a poet, in the very spirit of Orpheus, proclaims these true gods, and asks in wonder why to their shrines is brought no sacrifice."