

Commentary on Penelope Gouk, *Music, Melancholy,
and Medical Sprits in Early Modern Thought*

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Music 190FS

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25 Sept. 2019

Music maintained its position as a firm component in the majority of theories regarding the divine, the human spirit, and especially the field of music and medicine throughout the renaissance and the early modern period. Marsilio Ficino, a Italian scholar and priest, significantly contributed to such discourse through his own theories on music, which subsequent academics used as a foundation for their own theories to further interconnect the disciplines of music and medicine. Penelope Gouk, in her piece *Music, Melancholy, and Medical Spirits in Early Modern Thought*, summarizes the theories of Ficino and his theoretical followers throughout this timeline, while painting Ficino as the core inspirator of such thoughts, as well as presenting Robert Burton and Kircher, both scholars of later years, as their organizers and developers. Thus Gouk argues that Marsilio Ficino influenced significantly the thoughts of his contemporary philosophers regarding theories of the music and the spirit, and formed a foundation upon which Burton, Kircher, and other academics could found their subsequent theories on.

The author outlines the extensive reach, both in its universality in theory and academic influence, of Ficino's work regarding Music and Medicine, to show (of the time) their reliability and robustness. Ficino's works are first laid out with summaries of their content: "his own *De triplici vita* or Three Books of Life (1489) provided the philosophical underpinnings for most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts on magic,"¹ while also establishing his academic background to place him in historical academic context though his own "learned editions of Hermes Trismegistus and Plato."² His book, the *Di vita*, is presented as the "starting point for all later discussions of melancholy [and] philosophy and music,"² with its extensive coverage of dealing with "preserving health, [...] prolonging life, [...] and astral influences on them." The foremost presentation of these books accompanied by their impressive coverage establishes Ficino as the authority in the field of the "musico-magical doctrine,"² while the supposed influence of such books

¹ Penelope Gouk, *Music, Melancholy, and Medical Spirits in Early Modern Thought*, 173

² Gouk, 174

are also shown in a reasonably credible fashion, describing how “his music-spirit theory was widely disseminated via such popular works [by] Gregor Reisch [...] and Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa,”² whose works themselves “proved an important source for astrological medicine and the psychology of temperaments.” A hint at latter discussions regarding the development of the theory by later philosophers is given as “Rober Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* and Athanasius Kircher's *Musurgia universalis*”² is mentioned. While Ficino’s theories may be abstract and even overly contemporary for the modern reader, Gouk presents them in a descriptive, visual fashion that the modern reader can understand, in order to portray them as “monumental”³ ideas of the time.

Engravings of his ideas by Robert Fludd, such as the analogy of the Macrocosm, the monochord spanning the human and the divine⁴, as well as the Microcosm of the musical ratios of the organs of the human body⁴, are presented alongside explanations of how these show “the invisible power of music to affect the passions and the soul can be explained in terms of universal sympathy,” depicting Ficino’s theories as possibly not scientific to the contemporary reader, but reasonably or even remarkably convincing and revolutionary taking into account the lack of such theories in Ficino’s time.

Ficino’s theories are not only significant within itself but also—as the author suggests— within the framework of latter scholars that were influenced by his work, evidenced by the provision of concepts encapsulated in works of subsequent physicians and artists. The introduction of Richard Brown’s *Medicina Musica*, a piece of literature from the 18th century with ideas on “how singing communicates pleasure to the soul by means of the vibration of the nerves”⁵ which are noted to be “remarkably similar to those used by Ficino in the *De vita*,” as well as “Richard Brocklesby” who “explicitly cites Ficino,” shows the extent to which the philosopher has influenced latter medicinal literature. This influence, as the author denotes, is not limited in its geography;

³ Gouk, 175

⁴ Gouk, 176-177

⁵ Gouk, 178

French literature, despite the fact that only “few French physicians actually [seemed] to have treated music in any depth in their medical writings,”⁵ references to music therapy in its form proposed by Ficino is exemplified by “Louis Roger’s [book which] represents the ‘first clear support for music therapy’ in the French medical profession.”⁵ On the other hand, the “healing powers” of music have also been “explored by composers and poets” as well; the author notes that major themes of courtly entertainments featured “Ficino's neo-Platonic and magical doctrine,”⁵ revealing how influential Ficino's writings have become to engrain itself in not only the academic world, but also the culture of its time.

This raises, however, a question on whether such influences were direct and based on Ficino's works, or if Ficino's ideas would have been an inevitable consequence of the public’s notion and philosophical sentiment of the time. Much of the literature referenced as influences of his ideas do not directly provide Ficino as their source (with the singular exception of Brocklesby⁵) and were unique and rare in their support, as the author herself notes that “early modern medical textbooks have little to say about the subjects, music’s healing powers.”⁶ Without a generalized emphasis on the citation or reliable chain of idea development, it is reasonable to question: *how would one determine the origin and development of, for example, Ficino’s theories on musico-magic, or the direction of influence in and of popular sentiment to or from academic literature?*

This would be a consequence of the rather loose ideals on the reliability or integrity of philosophical arguments; this, therefore, makes Ficino’s argument not medical but rather a philosophical one, regarding ideas that were yet to be tested until Vesalius’s dissections in **the latter part of the 16th century**. This leads to intriguing details regarding the interpretation and development of Ficino’s ideas as more evidenced understandings of the human body were formulated, such as the role of nerves or the veins, within the frameworks of Ficino as well as Gallen which we shall discuss here forth.

⁶ Gouk, 179

Ficino's influence, felt extensively through the writings of Burton and Kircher, is shown also through their ideas regarding music, specifically, as a cure of ailments—which the author mentions regarding concept of the connection of music and soul, thus suggesting that such early modern academics following Ficino regarded music as an active physical cure for diseases. The “Galenic framework,” adopted by a multitude of philosophers of the time including the pair above, regarded medicine, as Ficino did, as a “philosophical status,” requiring no formal training for application or practice. As the author lays out the four humors—fluids in our bodily system, the “blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile”—particular emphasis is placed in the idea that “training in natural philosophy” was the core of medicine, and thus the abstract theories of music could be applied to practices of physicians as they were both more theory-based than scientific. This theoretical framework, provided previously by Ficino, was the basis of any such theories, which, as the author reiterates throughout the piece, “relied on their understanding of the way musical instruments worked for their grasp of the inner workings of the body, just as Ficino did 300 years prior.”⁷ Provided as evidence are Wright's work, *Passions of the Mind*, which understood nerves as “secret channels [to] the heart,” and thus “the spirits about the heart take in that trembling and dancing air (music) into the body”—showing that he regarded music as having a physical, rather than a psychological effect on the body.⁸ Further intriguing are the ideas of George Cheyne, which used analogies; the brain as a place “where all the nervous fibre terminate inwardly, like a musician with a well-tuned instrument,” and thus, as Gouk summarizes analogously, “if the organ of the human body is in tune, its ‘music’ will be distinct and harmonious, but if it is spoiled or ‘broken’, it will not yield true ‘Harmony’,” interpreting Cheyne's ideas as further support for the beliefs of such academics that the music and the body is connected in fundamental ways.⁹

⁷ Gouk, 190

⁸ Gouk, 187

⁹ Gouk, 189

It is curious, however, whether such philosophical ideas were regarded as “analogies,” just as Cheyne has used them “as a means of conceptualizing” them.⁹ It is natural to then ask: *To what extent did contemporary physicians, artists, and philosophers believe the connection between the music and the soul as pure analogies or real truths?* Fludd’s illustration of *the Divine Monochord* and the *Man the Microcosm*,⁴ physically depict relation of the land, the elements, and the divine, suggesting a true belief in music as the foundation of the universe, while the author also suggests that music was simply “recognized as a useful diagnostic tool,” indicating its mere practical utility in medicine.

Ultimately, Penelope Gouk’s suggestion of Ficino’s notable theories and its influence, as well as the outline of the details of the connection between music and medicine that such theories suggest, depicts a convincing picture of a society and its school of thought in which music performed a fundamental role in the human and the divine, and thus brought together the artistic tones of music and the philosophical, spiritual concepts of medicine. Such ideas are conveyed convincingly and articulated with expansive evidence and interest, delineating how one, living in the renaissance, the antecedent of the scientific revolution, would conceptualize the role of music in their lives.