

‘Most heavenly music’

In this essay I will discuss Shakespeare’s linguistic approach to music, with specific reference to the metaphorical and the metaphysical, touching also on associated areas such as healing and the symbolic treatment of the lute.

The play ‘Richard II’ offers a plethora of musical imageries, which not only perfectly express the emotional states of key characters at key moments, but also act as ‘leit motif’ thematically developing throughout the work. The play can therefore be seen as a microcosm, giving us a succinct overview of the musical elements of Shakespeare’s metaphorical art.

Music makes an early appearance in act one where the newly banished Mowbray states;

‘My native English now I must forgo,
And now my tongues’ use is to me no more
Than an unstringed viol or harp,
Or like a cunning instrument cas’d up-
Or being open put into his hands
That knows no touch to tune the harmony.
(Act I scene iii)

Shakespeare commonly expresses civil or personal strife metaphorically as being out of tune with oneself or with the current paradigm. This conceit is eloquently expressed by the later Jacobean playwright John Ford in his incestuous revenge tragedy of 1633 ‘Tis pity she’s a whore’.

Giovanni:-
The love of thee my sister and the view
Of thy immortal beauty hath untuned,
All harmony both of my rest and life.
(Act 1 scene ii)

The concept of the tongue as a musical element returns and is developed in Act II of Richard II via the prophetic dying words of John of Gaunt.

‘O’ but they say the tongues of dying men ,
Inforce attention like deep harmony’.
(Act 2 scene I)

This perhaps gives us an insight into the writer’s own awareness of the transcendent power of music and its potential effect on listeners. Ironically however when Gaunt’s death is announced;

‘His tongue is now a stringless instrument’
(Act 2 scene I)

This definition of the end of mortality links beautifully with the earlier utterances of both Gaunt and Mowbray.

The play’s garden scene adds a new element of imagery. Now separated from Richard, Isobel his queen is asked to dance by way of a diversion from her predicament;

‘My legs can keep no measure in delight,
When my poor heart no measure keeps in grief’.
(Act 3, scene iv)

This adds a rhythmic element to the idea of the inharmonious disordered mind by suggesting that it is unable to maintain the regularity of rhythm essential for dancing. As well as its metaphorical status this idea has a basis in medicine not unknown to the Elizabethans, that heightened emotion can lead to a quickening or in some instances an irregularity of heartbeat.

It is of interest to note that other plays including ‘Much ado about nothing’ and ‘A midsummer night’s dream’ end with communal set dances representing a return to order and also in both of the above cases as a prelude to connubial fulfillment.

Harmony and rhythm are united in the play’s final reference to music in which we find Richard dethroned and languishing in Pomfret castle prior to his regicide. Hearing musicians outside his cell he states;

‘Music do I hear?
Ha,ha, keep time- how sour music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept.
(Act 5 scene v)

Commenting on the poor musicianship, Richard compares it to the human condition;

‘So it is in the music of mens’ lives.
(Act V scene v)

He reflects further on his shattered kingship;

‘And here I have the daintiness of ear,
To check time in a disordered string;
But for the concord of my state and time’

Had not an ear to hear my true time broke:
I wasted time and now doth time waste me'.
(Act V scene v)

The fallen king of course quibbles on the double meaning of time and employs the familiar Shakespearean conceit of time's ultimate revenge on us all.

The disordered string mentioned in this section probably belongs to a lute or an instrument of its family. This leads us to examine Shakespeare's poetical approach to this most significant of instruments. Richard's metaphor bears some parallels with sonnet 8 where the concord of unison strings (as are of course found on the lute) expresses the natural union of husband and wife. In one of many poetic attempts to persuade 'The only begetter' of his sonnets to marry and engender children thus preserving his youth reliant and thus temporary beauty through his offspring;

If the true concord of well tuned sounds
By unions married do offend thine ear,
They do but gently chide thee, who confounds,
In singleness the parts that thou should'st bear.
(sonnet 8)

The last line of this section suggests not only the qualities that the youth should convey to his child, but also plays on the part writing of consort music where individual lines are dependent on others, contrary to the recipient's single state, or seen in this way monody. As in the Richard II metaphor, untuned or disordered strings signify a breakdown of natural order, in the case of the above sonnet marriage and childbirth. This type of thinking is evinced with a political slant in Ulysees' great speech in the darkly cynical 'Troilus and Cressida';

'Take but degree away, untune that string,
And hark what discord follows'.
(Act 1 scene iii)

The comic potential of this is exploited in 'the taming of the shrew', in which Hortensio, an unsuccessful and ridiculous suitor to the beautiful Bianca, is thwarted in his attempts at seduction. Posing as a lute tutor to Bianca, she subtly rejects his advances by complaining that his instrument is out of tune;

Hortensio-
Madam, my instrument's in tune.

Bianca-
Lets' hear. O' fie! The treble jars.
(Act 3 scene I)

In general terms the lute was seen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as capable of the highest expression of musical ideals. The lute's rose can be seen as reflecting symbolic geometry reflecting order and cosmic harmony. Comparisons were even made between the whole of creation and the lute;

'God binding with great tendons this great all
Did make a lute which had all parts given,
This lutes' round bellie was the azured heaven,
The rose, those lights which hee did there instiall;
The bases were the earth and ocean,
The treble shrill the aire: The other strings
The unlike bodies were of mixed things'
(William Drummond of Hawthornden)

Even by 1636, twenty years after Shakespeare's death, the lute was still being described in cosmological terms;

'A lute player can fulfill his every wish by means of his instrument; For example he can represent the two proportional means, the duplication of the cube, the squaring of the circle, the proportion of the movements of the heavens and their planets, That of the speed of gravity and a thousand other things by means of the tunes and tones of his instrument'
(Marin Mersenne, Harmonie universelle)

The fitness of the lute for royalty (especially in the Scottish tradition) is well documented, as is its suitability for ladies of refinement. This is of course parodied in 'The taming of the shrew' where the ability to play the lute well is seen as an essential facet of a young woman's education. A more serious encounter with this ideal however occurs in Shakespeare's early revenge tragedy 'Titus Andronicus', where playing the lute is cited as the apotheosis of the refined and elevated use to which the Titus' daughter Lavinia put her hands to before her brutal rape and mutilation, which included the severing of her hands. Marcus Her uncle laments;

'O' had the monster seen those lily hands
Tremble like aspen-leaves upon a lute,
And made the silken strings delight to kiss them,
He would not have touch'd them for his life'
(Act 2 scene iv)

The lute's lubricious alter ego as a tool of seduction alongside other licentious associations are also fully explored by

Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries. In the famous opening soliloquy of Richard III, the future king bemoans the current political climate in which the post war peace is much at odds with his own warlike proclivities. He expresses his contempt for his soldier's peacetime activities, from which his own deformity precludes him;

'And now instead of mounting barbed steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a ladies' chamber,
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.
(Act 1 scene I)

This passage offers us a glimpse into the erotic world of the lute. A visual parallel exists in seventeenth century Dutch painting in which a lute hung on the wall can often symbolise a brothel, or at the very least a scene of seduction. Paintings of this type were a valued sub category of Dutch art. Good examples are Van Mieri's 'The soldier and the prostitute' of 1658, (which features not only a lute but also copulating dogs further driving the sexual content home!) and Van Babouren's 'The procuress of 1622'. This particular painting also appears as a painting within a painting in Vermeer's 'lady seated at a virginal'. In Van Babouren's original the featured prostitute 'procures' and plays the lute at the same time. Obvious parallels also exist in both the courtesan and Geisha traditions, both of which were expected to be skilled in the art of music.

The image of the male lover's melancholy is also married to the lute. This fashionable Elizabethan melancholy (perhaps best expressed in the miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard and in the lute songs of John Dowland) is parodied in the coruscating wit of the cynical Benedict in 'Much ado about nothing'. Speaking aside prior to Balthasar's song 'Sigh no more ladies';

'Now divine air! Now is his soul ravished!
Is it not strange that sheep's guts should hale souls
Out of men's bodies.
(Act 2 scene iii)

Behind the comedic value of the forlorn lover lie more serious metaphysical concerns. As well as its quotidian and recreational uses, music existed in the Elizabethan mindset also in the realms of the metaphysical and in the occult sciences, epitomised in the figure of the polymath Doctor John Dee.

In the minds of such thinkers music could be expressed in Neo-Platonic terms as something which brings us closer to the divine light, described by the philosopher Plotinus as 'The One'. In other words, music has the transcendent ability to pull us from earth bound darkness, or the absence of 'The One' and enable us as to climb 'the ladder of divine ascent' to the 'celestial' and ultimately the 'super celestial' realms.

The concept of melancholy in Elizabethan thought was very much tied in with the occult philosophy practised by Dee and many others which included Cabala, alchemy, and Hermeticism. The earlier Galenic concept of the four humours, sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic and melancholic, on which medieval and renaissance medicine were based, had placed the melancholy humour at the bottom of the pile. Earthbound melancholics with their reliance on the darkest of planets Saturn, their dark hair and dark complexions, all produced by the overplus of black bile, were seen as miserable, unable to achieve, poor and condemned to the basest of employment. This idea is used by Shakespeare in sonnet 127

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;

A new way of looking at melancholy however crept into Renaissance thought via the writings of a 'pseudo Aristotelian' anonymous text, 'Problemata physica', which ascribes the melancholic temperament to 'heroes' and 'great men'. This idea ties in with the Platonic idea of the 'madness' or *furore* associated with the inspiration of the creative process. This shift in thinking led to the elevation of the melancholy temperament to one of the highest ideals of Elizabethan art. Indeed the musical motif associated with the 'Lacrimae pavane' of John Dowland became emblematic of tears and weeping throughout Europe.

Sonnet 127 seems to flank these opposing views;

But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame:

The inspiration of the melancholic is also wonderfully illustrated in Durer's 'Melencolia I' in which the black faced archetypal Melancholic, surrounded by many of the symbols associated with the temperament and adopting the traditional head in hand pose, is clearly conjuring the 'ladder of ascent'.

Without doubt, Shakespeare was familiar with such concepts and expressed both aspects of melancholy in both his plays and poetry. The so called dark lady of the sonnets (already mentioned in the examples from sonnet 127) may of course epitomise this, evoking as she does the basest and most passionately inspired utterances from the poet.

It is also likely that Shakespeare knew personally, or at least was familiar with the work of Giordano Bruno the Italian philosopher, burnt at the stake by the inquisition as a heretic in Rome in 1600. Bruno's own 'The expulsion of the triumphant beast', the work which featured largely in the Holy office's case against him, concurs with the new view of melancholy and ties it in with the popular notion of the wheel of fortune often employed by Shakespeare;

Saul,
'The more depressed is man
And the lower he is on the wheel,
The closer he is to ascending,
As with it round he turns'.
(first dialogue second part)

A later section of the same work contains the lines;

'Take this he said to the fifth, which by bringing about a certain melancholic reaction, has the power to incite enjoyable frenzy and prophecy'.
(second dialogue third part)

It has been suggested by his biographer Vincenzo Spampinato that Bruno's only comedy 'Il candelaiò', had an influence on both Moliere and Shakespeare and that traces of this work can be found in works including 'King Lear', 'Hamlet', 'Richard II, and significantly 'Love's labours lost'. The character of Biron in 'Love's labours lost' may even be an homage to the renegade philosopher. The ecstatic creativity which springs forth from the melancholy scholar's devotion to Rosaline is certainly in keeping with the esoteric ideas previously discussed, especially when seen in opposition to the hyperbolic intellectualism of Nathaniel and Holofernes who surely represent the type of pedant so despised by Bruno and with whom he had his notorious altercation with whilst lecturing at Oxford in 1583.

These strains of thought existed in Elizabethan thought alongside the earlier Pythagorean concept of the harmony of the spheres in which the rotation of the planets at intervallic distances to each other create a divine music.
The French philosopher Montaigne expresses it thus;

'What philosophers deem of the celestial music, which is that the bodies of its circles being solid smooth, and in their rolling motion touching and rubbing against one another must of necessity produce a wonderful harmony.'
(translation by Florio)

Plato suggested that that the idea had a parallel with the harmonies of the soul. It is therefore highly significant that in the mind of Shakespeare, moments of transcendental significance are often in part expressed musically.
An example of this occurs in the final scene of 'A winter's tale', where the statue of Leonte's dead wife Hermione magically comes to life;

Paulina-
Music awake her:
Strike 'tis time; descend; be stone
No more; approach.
(Act 5 scene iii)

The play 'Pericles' features another magical process by which Thaisa, the wife of the eponymous hero is brought back to life by the Ephesian Cerimon. Again music features as part of this miraculous resurrection;

Cerimon-
'The rough and woeful music that we have,
Cause it to sound, beseech you.
The vial once more. How stirr'st thou block!
The music there! I pray you give her air.
Gentlemen,
This queen will live; nature awakes; a warmth
Breathes out of her. She hath not been entranced
Above five hours. See how she gins to blow
Into life's flower again.
(Act 3 scene ii)

This passage makes clear the importance of music to this magical physician, who at the end of the above scene invokes the aid of Aesculapius, the classical god of healing and the son of Apollo, whose musical associations are well known.
Towards the end of the play Pericles is reunited with his daughter Marina, long thought dead. This is done by way of a recognition scene much admired by T.S. Elliot;

'To my mind the finest of all the 'recognition scenes' is act 5 scene I of that very great play 'Pericles'. It is a perfect example of the 'ultra dramatic', action of beings who are more than human... or rather seen in a light more than that of day'.

Directly after his recognition of Marina Pericles hears music;

'Pericles-
O heavens bless my girl! But hark what music?
Tell Helicanus, my Marina, tell him
O'er, point by point, for yet he seems to doubt
How sure you are my daughter. But what music?

Helicanus-
My lord I hear none.

Pericles-
None?
The music of the spheres! List my Marina.
(Act 5 scene I)

Here, the joy that Pericles experiences over his reunion with his daughter leads the Prince to hear a divine harmony. It is significant that only he hears it as it acts as an expression of the Platonic idea mentioned earlier of the correspondence between the harmony of the spheres and the harmony of the individual soul. It can also be viewed as a transcendental experience which gives Pericles a glimpse of the divine as in Plutarch's 'De re musica' where he describes the human condition while immured in 'this murky vessel of decay' as incapable of hearing the music of the harmony of the spheres.

Cerimon's earlier invocation in the play carries further significance in the work of Shakespeare regarding the healing power of music. This concept has generally fallen into obsolescence in modern western medicine. The origin of music's therapeutic value can be traced back to Pythagoras who felt that the harmonies of music could both moderate and mollify agitation of the spirit and furthermore influence the emotions. In Vermeer's painting 'the music lesson' the idea is contained on the virginal lid; 'Musica laetitiae comes medina dolorum' (music is the companion of joy and a medicine for suffering).

In seventeenth century France music was often prescribed for ailments such as melancholy, hypochondria and even love sickness. Music designed for dancing was considered restorative for the proper balance of the bodily humours. Indeed the sixteenth century physician Ambroise Pare advised patients to have a consort of violins on hand to 'make them merry during their recuperation'.

In Shakespeare's deepest of tragedies 'King Lear', the symbolic and actual awakening of the king in his daughter Cordelia's camp following his madness during the previous night's violent storm is one of the most beautiful and moving scenes in all Shakespeare.

Although Lear is not restored to life as in the previous examples, his awakening can however be seen as a spiritual renaissance with the king himself believing that he is a spirit;

Lear-
You are a spirit I know, where did you die?
(Act four scene vii)

His attendant doctor again feels that music is the best physic for his awakening;

Doctor-
Please you draw near, louder the music there!
(Act four scene vii)

The presence of music in all of these scenes acts as a conduit between one state and another; between death and life, madness and sanity, sleep and wakefulness.

This idea is often used in reverse, where music's narcotic qualities are employed for dramatic effect. The experience of Pericles with the music of the spheres illustrates this usage;

Most heavenly music!
It nips me into listening and thick slumber
Hangs upon mine eyes: Let me rest.
(Act five scene I)

The intoxicating slumber of Pericles brings him a theophany of the nocturnal goddess Diana showing the mortal experience of the divine.

'A midsummer night's dream' also gives us much in the way of sleep and music. Titania queen of the fairies is desirous of music as a prelude to her repose;

Titania-
Sing me now asleep;
Then to your offices and let me rest.
(Act two scene ii)

Similarly following the reunification of Titania and Oberon evincing a general move towards resolution ;

Oberon-
Titania, music call, and strike more dead
Than common sleep of these five the sense.

Titania-
Music ho- such as charmeth sleep.
(Act Four scene I)

The 'still music' called for in 'A midsummer night's dream' (also used to accompany the appearance of Hymen at the end of 'As you like it') is directly followed by the stage direction 'the music changes' which leads to a dance between the king and queen,

again symbolising concord.

This popular Elizabethan notion is also wonderfully expressed in John Davies' orchestra (1594);

If they whom sacred love hath linked in one,
Do as they dance, in all their course of life,
Never shall burning grief nor bitter moan,
Nor factious difference, nor unkind strife,
Arise between the husband and the wife.
For whether forth or back, or round he go,
As the man doth, so must the woman do.

The conclusion of 'The merchant of Venice' contains a host of classical allusions pooled together to form an homage to both night and music including the celestial harmony;

Lorenzo-
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like the angel sings,
Still quiring to the young eyed cherubins.
(Act Five scene I)

Shakespeare combines this idea with the mutability and transient nature of music;

Lorenzo-
Soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
(Act five scene I)

This beautifully poetic statement of course perfectly expresses the non absolute nature of music, and that its effect on the listener is dependent on momentary features such as the emotional state of the listener or in the example above atmospheric conditions or even the absence of sunlight.

This of course is neatly summed up by Orsino at the start of 'Twelfth night';

Orsino-
Enough no more,
'Tis not as sweet as it was before.
(Act one scene I)

Here it is the listener who has changed and not the music.

Also alluded to in the 'merchant of Venice' is the Ovidian version of Orpheus;

Lorenzo-
Therefore the poet
Did feign that Orpheus drew trees, stones and
Floods
Since not so stockish, hard and full of rage,
But music for the time doth change his nature.
(Act five scene I)

This leads to the conclusion of Lorenzo's 'ode to music';

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved by concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for stratagems and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
His affection dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted.
(Act five scene I)

Therefore by way of a prelude culled from his beloved Ovid, Shakespeare puts into the mouth of Lorenzo the conceit that one who cannot feel the power of music, the deep harmony referred to in 'Richard II' is somehow out of tune with the cosmic order and therefore with its implicit moral order.

In this essay I have attempted to illustrate Shakespeare's textual use of music and musical imagery with which he produced a wealth of metaphors and poetical ideas much in keeping with current trends in Elizabethan thought on philosophy, psychology, medicine, politics, love, the occult sciences and metaphysics in general. His use of contemporary song texts in his plays has I feel a separate dramatic function. This is certainly the case with Ophelia's 'mad songs' in 'Hamlet' which graphically illustrate her plight alongside giving the audience glimpses into the culpability of other characters in the play. The music which these tunes were set to at the time of the play's first performances does not however change their meaning and function in the play, regardless how interesting their provenance may be. The particular examples cited here are integral are examples of a purely musical experience, as is the case of the accompaniment to Lear's awakening, as philosophical expressions of the human condition as in the examples from 'Richard II', or as experiences of the metaphysical as in Pericles' 'most heavenly music'

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