

## Orpheus in Mersenne. The Figure of the Ideal Musician

Sławomira Żerańska-Kominek

*Institute of Musicology, University of Warsaw*

### **Introduction**

Together with Johannes Kepler (1571–1630), Robert Fludd (1574–1637) and Athanasius Kircher (1601–1680), Marin Mersenne (1588–1648) belonged to the group of the most illustrious music theorists of the seventeenth century. Although the philosophical-musical doctrines that they elaborated differed considerably from one another, they were linked by common basic premises concerning the musical nature of reality.<sup>1</sup> Like Kepler, Fludd and Kircher, Mersenne was primarily a natural scientist, and among his greatest achievements in the field of music theory, as broadly understood, are undoubtedly acoustics and organology.<sup>2</sup> His advances in this domain represented a real step into modern learning, beating a path for contemporary empirical research into the nature and organisation of musical material. Yet whilst looking ahead into the future, Mersenne also maintained the profound ties that linked him to the past. His numerous works contain a synthesis of virtually all the current knowledge of the world in which the principal actor is the Ideal Musician, derived from ancient notions of man as a microcosm corresponding to the macrocosm.

In archaic and traditional cultures, the concept of such a correspondence was applied to all levels of human existence and organisation: to the anatomy, physiology and psychology of the individual, to social institutions,

to dwellings and to sanctified spaces.<sup>3</sup> It constituted the cornerstone of the whole of ancient philosophy, from the natural philosophers to the Neoplatonists. For example, Democritus already stated clearly that man was a 'little world' (*μικροκοσμος*). The most beautiful definition can be found in a text by an anonymous Pythagorean, related by Photius, which states thus:

It is said that man is a *microcosm* (*μικροκοσμος*) not because he consists of the four elements (this property is possessed by every living creature, even the simplest), but because man contains all the spiritual and physical qualities that exist in the cosmos. For he has a divine trait in the form of reason, he possesses innate elementary properties.<sup>4</sup>

The image of man as the cosmos in reduced proportions played a key role in medieval cosmology and anthropology, where arithmetic and music were of vital significance. The use of the sonorous number in shaping the image of reality was one of the greatest achievements of the Pythagoreans, successfully applied first by Plato in his wonderful vision of a harmonious, sonorous cosmos and subsequently by Boethius in his division of music (harmony), of exceptional importance for the whole of music theory to come, into three varieties or levels of functioning: the music of the world (*musica mundana*), the music in man (*musica humana*), and instrumental music (*musica instrumentalis*), i.e. that rendered by musicians on musical instruments.<sup>5</sup> The concept of the micro- and macrocosm connected by a mathematical and musical modulus – a concept solicitously cultivated during the Middle Ages<sup>6</sup> – was taken up anew, as it were, by the philosophers of the Academy of Florence. However, under the initiative of Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, the Pythagorean-Platonic model of the world was subjected to a thorough reorientation towards a religious universalism pervaded by mysticism and fixed in the hermetic tradition and in the heritage of the Jewish cabbala. A complete explication of all the aspects of the Renaissance doctrine of harmony, enhanced by non-Christian religious elements, is contained in *De harmonia mundi* by Francesco Giorgio, dating from 1525. In chapter ten, devoted to the enneads of the human body, Giorgio writes thus: 'Man [. . .] being the most perfect image of the world, contains all those things which create the fabric of the great world and in the same proportions'.<sup>7</sup>

At the time Giorgio's work was published, Renaissance thought was focussing on a detailed structural analysis of the cosmic order, and in particular on elaborate descriptions of the relationship between the world as macrocosm and man as microcosm. As with the Pythagoreans, the principal tool for analysing and describing musical harmony remained numbers, comprehended in a qualitative sense, which constituted not merely abstracts of quantity, but also numeral symbols of non-mathematical substance.<sup>8</sup> The model of harmony elaborated during the Renaissance era was reproduced exactly by Robert Fludd in his great, although unfinished, work *Utriusque cosmi historia*, from 1617.<sup>9</sup>

In the substantially musical world, the musician plays an exceptionally important role. Through the use of sounds he transcends visible reality, and creates images which can be neither seen nor touched. From the earliest times, the person of the poet-musician has incarnated the idea of mediation between man and the universe, has brought to life the image of the Perfect Man – the microcosm. As an intermediary between the deities and humankind, the singer-poet, 'godlike in his speech' or 'translator of the gods', had a guaranteed connection, as it were, with nature; he was a link between immobile eternity and time, between the worlds of the spirit and of matter. Bestowed with the gift of divine inspiration, he possessed the most profound knowledge of the musical-numeric nature of reality. For Mersenne, the symbol and embodiment of this perfection was the mythical Orpheus, poet, singer and sage, with whose lips God spoke to men, leading them along the path of virtue and redemption.

The most complete characterisation of the ideal musician is contained in *Les préludes de l'harmonie universelle*, written in 1634 as a sort of introduction to *Harmonie universelle* (1636–37), Fr Mersenne's principal theoretical work. Barely familiar among musicologists, *Les préludes* forms the basis for the study presented below of the Ideal Musician, whom Mersenne describes in four aspects: 1. Astrological, 2. Psychological, 3. Intellectual and 4. Social.

### The Astrological Horoscope<sup>10</sup>

The Perfect Musician reflects in himself the structure of the macrocosmic order, no wonder then that his life should be *a priori* determined by the configuration of the celestial bodies at the moment of his birth. In *Les préludes de l'harmonie universelle*<sup>11</sup> Mersenne analyses three horoscopes taken from 'the most learned astrologers of this century', presenting three examples among the many possible stellar configurations under which may be born a musician who satisfies the criteria of perfection.

A comparison of the three horoscopes allows one to state that their most characteristic common feature is the presence of the exact conjunction of Mercury and Venus. Moreover, this conjunction always occurs in a sign from the air triplicity at the cusp (beginning) of the tenth house, the Medium Coeli or 'mid-heaven'. In the language of modern astronomy this means that both planets are in their upper culmination, crossing at this moment the local meridian. Such a configuration is indeed most favourable to the development of all artistic talents, since Venus in Libra (in the second and third horoscopes) as well as Mercury in Gemini (in the first horoscope) are in their respective domiciles. As Mersenne rightly points out, Venus in such a position constitutes (beautiful) musical form for the substance bestowed by Mercury, namely all intellectual aptitudes, and in particular the preference for mathematics and logics together with their skilful expression, which would indicate the aptitudes of a composer.

The second common feature of these horoscopes results from Mersenne's efforts to provide their natives with the best (the most fit) temperament, or psychophysical constitution. Without going into detail, let us say that he considered this to be the sanguine temperament,<sup>12</sup> characterised by the elements (as understood by Aristotle) of heat and moisture. Astrologically speaking, this means that at the ascendant should stand either a sign from the air triplicity (♊ ♎ ♋) or planets whose influences may modify the undesirable characteristics of a sign from another trine. Such requirements are best fulfilled by the first horoscope, where almost the entire first house is located in the sign of Libra. Also, the planets situated there (Jupiter and the

Moon) are of the proper nature; although the Moon is a little too cool, this is balanced by the beneficial influence of Mars in sextile with the main conjunction. In the second horoscope, with the dry, hot sign of Sagittarius at the ascendant, Mersenne also points out the presence of Jupiter and the Moon in the first house. In this case, however, it is insufficient, and Mersenne consequently adds the influence of a *new star*, whose nature is that of Jupiter and Venus. Although situated in the astrological sign of Sagittarius, from the description as a whole this appears in fact to be the supernova in Ophiuchus of 1604, described, among others, by Kepler.<sup>13</sup>

As the third common feature of these horoscopes one should regard the position of Jupiter, which largely determines whether the future Perfect Musician will be, in Mersenne's words, a *grand amateur de la verité et de la Religion Catholique*.<sup>14</sup> In the first horoscope, the matter is straightforward, since here Jupiter stands in Libra (a sign from the air triplicity) and at the ascendant, alongside which stands the star Spica ( $\alpha$  Vir, or 'ear of corn', French *l'epy*), in beneficial aspect to the main conjunction Mercury-Venus. According to the author, such a constellation guarantees an exceptional love of faith in the native. In the second horoscope Jupiter lies exactly at the ascendant (in conjunction with the Moon), but the native's inclination to faith is even stronger as the Sun is in the ninth house (religion) and Venus remains in close neighbourhood with Spica, both being situated at the limit of the tenth house, or Medium Coeli. These beneficial features can also be seen in the third horoscope, where Jupiter (in Libra) stands almost at the very 'mid-heaven', in the immediate vicinity of the conjunction of Venus and Mercury, with Spica also alongside, at the limit of the ninth house.

The first horoscope, most extensively interpreted by Mersenne, foretells a person greatly inclined towards music, kind, open-minded, and an earnest lover of truth and the Catholic faith. This person will possess a great facility for sciences and an excellent memory. While travelling extensively, he will meet the most outstanding musicians. Extremely assiduous and eager in studying the ancient books on music, he will enrich and advance this branch of knowledge. His pleasant and sweet voice will delight audiences with songs stirring them to battle, filling hearts with longing and sorrow, or

soothing even the most violent rage. He will be rich, showered with gifts and ecclesiastical honours. He will be admired in his own country and beyond, his name will become immortal, and the memory of him will endure for centuries. His works will be inscribed on cedar wood or carved in marble. He will be envied by all musicians unable to compose better than him. Such will be the Perfect Musician, surpassing all who have been before as well as those to come after him.<sup>15</sup>

The second horoscope, meanwhile, promises a man of harmonious stature and spiritual beauty, righteous, moral and possessing all possible virtues. As an ardent lover of the Christian religion, he will proclaim purity, and will receive visions and revelations. The music he composes will be sweet, serious and eternal, like the music of Orpheus, who might have been born under such a stellar constellation.<sup>16</sup>

### **Temperament**

It has already been mentioned here that the perfection of the Musician is expressed in his psychophysical construction, determined by the configuration of the stars at the moment of his birth, which Mersenne addresses in detail in the fourth chapter of *Les préludes*,<sup>17</sup> referring to the classical theory of Galen, founded on the concept of a profound affinity between microcosm and macrocosm.<sup>18</sup>

As Mersenne writes, some opine that the most suitable temperament for the cultivation of music theory is the melancholic, where the dominant element of earth favours serious reflection and profound knowledge of the structure of the musical composition. The material constitution of earth, its hardness and blackness, is much more compatible with a natural leaning towards composition than the brightness of fire, the transparency of air and the sparkling white of water. The choleric possesses the characteristics of active and destructive fire, and is therefore not apt for composition. He is too quick, unable to arrange sounds in a competent and well-considered manner. The sanguinic is light, unstable, akin to the delicate air, which is also

unfavourable to composing. The inconstant phlegmatic, too, associated with water, is rather unsuited to composition, since he cannot concentrate on the complex thoughts and deliberations inherent in the process of composing. Due to the predominance of cold humours he also lacks imagination. According to these opinions, the most appropriate for the practice of music<sup>19</sup> is a choleric or sanguine temperament. Music also serves for entertainment or the cheering of spirits, and for this the sanguine and choleric temperaments are better suited than those of phlegmatics and melancholics, who have lower and unclear voices. Due to the predominance of moisture in the temperament of phlegmatics and dryness in the temperament of melancholics, they quite rarely sing for amusement. The predominance of moisture among sanguinics and heat among choleric imparts a clarity to their voices and makes them very willing to sing for amusement. The best temperament of all for beautiful singing is the choleric, as the dominant fire transfuses the songs, which are thus divested of the melancholic and phlegmatic humidity.<sup>20</sup>

Although each of the temperaments outlined above may serve the perfection of the Musician, each has its drawbacks:

This contrariety of opinions shows that it is too difficult to discover the temperament of the Perfect Musician of which we speak; nevertheless, since Apollo was held by the Ancients to be the God of Medicine, we may assume that a complexion of this type [i.e. 'Apollonian' - note S.Ž-K] is nothing other than a harmony<sup>21</sup> or tuning of the four simple elementary qualities, namely heat, cold, humidity and dryness; or to put it another way a mixture of the hot, cold, dry and wet.<sup>22</sup>

The Perfect Musician ought to possess a balanced temperament, intermediate between the hot, wet (i.e. sanguine) and the cold, dry (i.e. melancholic). Other complexions have certain faults and imperfections; the sanguinic is too cheerful, and wants only to laugh; the choleric is too bold, too impetuous; the melancholic is suspicious, difficult to reassure and to correct, too sorrowful; the phlegmatic is lazy and torpid, as a cold, wet phlegm cannot produce a creative individual. The only possibility for the Perfect Mu-

sician remains the intermediate temperament, with which Mersenne also links further character traits:

[. . .] a person who is very temperate is very prudent, such as the Perfect Musician should be. What is more, a person who has attained perfection is courteous, amiable and affable; he is not too tempestuous, nor too gay, nor too sad; he is mild, humble, patient in his work, with a moderation in his morals and his actions which is proportionate to the beauty of his body and the perfection of his temperament.<sup>23</sup>

Mersenne was aware of certain weaknesses of the rigid, schematic theory of the humours in its application to musical talent and skills. The doubts expressed in the closing fragment of the fourth chapter of *Les préludes* concerned principally the possibility of unequivocally associating temperaments with types of musical emotion and the way in which they are expressed:

Those who say that the sanguine temperament is the most excellent and the most appropriate for producing beautiful songs [. . .] say that the sanguine temperament comprises an equal temperature of the four humours in which blood is predominant. The choleric, meanwhile, likes music that is brusque, sudden and harsh, the melancholic grave and sad music. [. . .] I know that there are musicians who compose and who sing all sorts of song, even though they are not sanguine. Yet one can say that they have that perfection and that inclination of their ancestors which can often be perceived at the third or fourth generation, or that the influences of the heavens have contributed to this generation and that they produce excellent musicians, poets, orators, lawyers, etc. of all sorts of temperament. Nevertheless, this great difference of spirits can be linked to the metaphysical principle of individuation, for which we know of no other reason or efficient cause than the will of God.<sup>24</sup>

In the spirit of rationalism, Mersenne also emphasises that temperament must be subordinate to the power of free will. Just as a person is apt to correct his behaviour, a musician can modify his natural musical leanings by submitting himself to the rules of his art, which guide the mind against the senses and the soul against the temperament. The rules of musical composition derive from God and illuminate one's reason with such a bright light that it overcomes all the detrimental tendencies of the humours.<sup>25</sup>

### Knowledge

The cosmos is harmony, and harmony appears in everything in the world, at the same time showing the musical beauty of things:

For the wisdom of God ordered all things according to weight, number and measure in such a way that there exists nothing that would not be connected to all other things in the world and that would not testify the work of the Highest Mathematician, who so composed the spheres of heaven and earth and all within them that they contain nothing of imperfection.<sup>26</sup>

The harmony of the world is the subject of many different sciences, which are interconnected, 'hold each other by the hand', just like all the parts of the harmonious cosmos. According to Mersenne, they form a little universe or kingdom, whose structure reflects the nature of the things and phenomena that are analysed. The order of the existing sciences constitutes a representation of the order of the world, whose unifying principle is the numerically expressed sound. Marin Mersenne understands the perfection of the Musician as an extraordinary ability to meet a cognitive and intellectual challenge that surpasses the capabilities of the ordinary person and the ordinary musician. 'By music I understand the science of sounds and of harmony'<sup>27</sup> that the Perfect Musician must come to know and comprehend, which is tantamount to the undertaking of profound studies in all the disciplines that describe to us the universe.<sup>28</sup> The foundation of the Musician's education is the traditional *trivium* set of humanistic arts (the *artes rationales* or *sermoniales*) and the *quadrivium* of practical arts. So, gifted with a subtle spirit and nimble mind, above all he must be fully conversant with the seven liberal arts, enumerated in the following hexametric verse: *lingua, tropus, ratio, numerus, tonus, angulus, astra*, i.e. grammar, rhetoric (with which poetry is also associated), logic, arithmetic, music, geometry, astronomy.<sup>29</sup> Grammar orders words, and is exceptionally useful for the musician, who employs many terms derived from Greek. Rhetoric teaches how to put a theme to music, lending its figures and phrases to words. Above all, however, the Musician needs the most suitable poetry for singing. It goes without saying that anyone wishing to achieve perfection must be an excellent poet, after the

fashion of the singers of antiquity. Logic provides the proper ways of reasoning and argumentation, skills which form the basis for one's knowledge of natural things, without which it is not possible to comprehend the essence of sound. Astronomy enables one to learn of consonance, which constitutes the basis of the movement, dimensions, distances and intervals of the stars and planets. It is linked to physics, which treats of the nature and properties of sound. Geometry and arithmetic, and also architecture, share with music many fundamental rules which the Musician needs to understand. Numbers are a wonderful phenomenon, thanks to which we are able to contemplate the nature of things, since every number has its own distinct property, and is therefore able to represent every type and every unit.<sup>30</sup>

The musician is also conversant with all the elements of philosophy, namely metaphysics, ethics, theology and medicine. Metaphysics is the science of all manifestations of nature, which include sounds, and for the trained Musician constitutes essential knowledge. Medicine is the scientific discipline thanks to which we learn of the rhythm, consonance and dissonance of the substance of the body and of the beating of the pulse.<sup>31</sup> It teaches one how to discern temperament from facial appearance and to adapt the songs one is performing to the skills and preferences of the listener, to various temperaments, and to the characteristics of the air and of other fluid things. A knowledge of ethics allows one to moderate the passions, and teaches appropriate behaviour and the observance of the duration of works during a concert. Politics, meanwhile, shows how to contain the dissolution of morals.

As for the music itself, the fundamental – though not, of course, the only – object of interest for the Perfect Musician is theory. Practice, far-removed from intellectual speculation, maintains the same relationship to theoretical reflection as the earth to the sky and as created things to the Creator. Practice is dependent on theory as a sunbeam on the Sun, heat on fire, a house on the architect, an image on its prototype, and material existence on eternal ideas. The reference point for Mersenne is the definition of Boethius:

And seeing that the whole is founded in reason and speculation, this class is rightly reckoned as musical, and that man as a musician who possesses

the faculty of judging, according to speculation or reason, appropriate and suitable to music, of modes and rhythms and of the classes of melodies and their mixtures and of all those things about which there is to be discussion later on and of the songs of the poets.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly to Boethius, Mersenne stresses that the learning of music through reasoning is considerably more excellent than its learning through practice. *Le Musicien Parfait* is a theorist, conversant with the mathematical rules governing the world of sounds, whereas the performer is often no more than a mere servant, with a certain technical expertise at his disposal:

Those who know only how to sing and to compose [. . .] do not deserve to be called Musician, just as masons are not worthy of being called Architect, since the former are unaware of the sense of the concerts which they give or which they attend, just as the latter know not why palaces and other edifices possess that and not another form. Therefore the practice of Music is like a body without a spirit if one is not conversant with theory, which surpasses practice as the spirit surpasses the body, and as the heavens surpass the earth.<sup>33</sup>

Intellectual speculation is of the highest order, and only the musician who is not a slave to practice can call himself a true musician. The musician is, above all, an excellent, all-round scholar and philosopher, who understands the profoundest sense of musically organised sounds, seeing in them always and invariably the manifestation of the order of the universe established by God.

### **Social Function**

The Perfect Musician, whose attributes were so frequently referred to by Fr Mersenne in his works, had – according to his plan – an exceptionally important social mission to fulfil, the source of which can be found in the programmatic principles of the French Académie de Poésie et de Musique. The Academy, founded in 1570 on the strength of an edict issued by Charles IX, under the initiative of Jean-Antoine de Baïf and Joachim Thibault de Courville, was aimed at restoring both the kind of poetry and the measure

and rule of music anciently used by the Greeks and Romans [. . .] in accordance, or as near as may be, with the laws of the masters of music in the good old times'.<sup>34</sup> The Academy was also guided by the idea of education through music, which, according to its founders, constituted a conduit of the moral values necessary for the preservation of social order. The influence of music on man, understood after the fashion of the doctrine of ethos in ancient Greece, was expressed in Boethius' preamble to the Academy's statute:

In order to bring back into use music in its perfection which is to represent words in singing completed by sounds, harmony and melody consisting in the choice and regulation of voices, sounds, and well harmonised accords, so as to produce the effect which the sense of the words requires, either lowering or raising or otherwise influencing the spirits, thus renewing the ancient fashion of composing measured verses to which are accommodated tunes likewise measured in accordance with the metric art. In order also that by this means the minds of the Auditors, accustomed and trained to music in all its parts, may be composed so as to become capable of the highest knowledge after being purged of the remnants of barbarism, under the good pleasure of our sovereign lord the King we have agreed to form an Academy.<sup>35</sup>

Marin Mersenne wished to become the heir and continuator of the tradition initiated by Baif's Academy. He was infused with the ancients' profound convictions of the religious, mystical and moral influence of music by his beloved teacher Jacques Mauduit (1557–1627), who in his day was a member and one of the principal musicians of the Academy. The academy planned by Mersenne was to be musical not so much – or at least not exclusively – in the narrow, technical and artistic sense of the word, but also a place for the 'perfection of both the human body and mind'. Music is understood here in accordance with the Platonic model of knowledge concerning the order and nature of reality, encompassing all the arts and sciences. The studies were to cover philosophy, poetry and mathematics, music as the skill of composition, painting and languages, and even the military art and gymnastics.

Wherefore they wished so to provide that nothing should be lacking in the Academy which should make it suitable for the perfecting of a man, both in mind and body. [. . .] Would God that that Academy were started which should praise God with continual praises, hymns, and psalms by day and night: in which young men might be so imbued with musical discipline that the best

singers of churches, cathedrals, and other places should be taken from thence, and the whole of Gaul, in fact the whole world, should ring to the greater glory of God, and the hearts of all be inflamed with divine love.<sup>36</sup>

The chief executor of this educational programme is the musician-humanist, the Perfect Musician, the sage and scholar who devotes his life to contemplation and study. He knows that the works of nature are perfectly arranged, that nothing is erroneous or accidental. His mission is to transmit this knowledge to people, to awaken their religious feelings, deepen their devoutness, temper their emotions and develop their intellect. Through the intermediary of the Perfect Musician, people learn about the harmonious structure of the universe, expressed in the metaphor of the cosmic concert conducted by God:

Those who are more knowledgeable and who study the theory and the will of God and his designs, into which they often enter, as into the sovereign sanctuary, and from which they exit subsequently with satisfactions of the spirit that cannot be explained with the language of men, are equally content to suffer as to act, and to be the subject or the object of the disgraces of the world as of its favours, because they recognise that God governs them and that he has destined them for this part of the universal harmony while he leads the concert to its end, that is to say to the octave and the unison of eternal glory, which he will give to all those who have held their part well and who will content themselves with the place that is given them by the sovereign Master of the great choir of the universe.<sup>37</sup>

The harmony of the universe is the work and manifestation of the Highest God. Music reflects this harmony, and the Perfect Musician expresses with his compositions a love for God, directing mortal souls towards the contemplation of things sacred:

Those who serve to sing praises to God can with all the assurance of their conscience spend their days and nights in search of new chants, and of new charms in the three genres of Music [diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic] in order to elevate all mortals to the contemplation of things divine and to warm and rouse their will with the desire for heavenly Jerusalem and for the love of God, that all things created, and music in particular, may serve as a degree to reach eternal glory and to unite us with Him of whom we hope for all sorts of benefice and contentment.<sup>38</sup>

And only such music that reveals the secrets of faith has any sense and value at all. Only such music is perfect, for through it speaks the Truth that is God:

Indeed, if Music is to serve any purpose, and if its practice has any goal, it cannot have a more excellent one, after the glory of God, which is the ultimate goal of all things possible, than the recreation of learned men who sacrifice their time and their spirit to the meditation of the mysteries of Religion, and to the search for the reasons that serve to combat all those who oppose the infallible truth of our Faith, and to persuade everyone of this truth and of the virtues which depend upon it.<sup>39</sup> [ . . . ] From which it is easy to conclude that all the songs of the Court, which have no other subjects than profane, and which praise men, who most often subsist in flattery alone and who have no other sustenance than vanity and lies, cannot be perfect, since they are lacking the truth without which there is no perfection, and which are deprived of subjects which delight the Angels and which will serve for an eternal life for all those predestined, and blessed.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

The Perfect Musician (*Le Musicien Parfait*) comes from a harmoniously ordered world resounding with music that only the initiated can hear and understand and which is inaudible to the uninitiated. The musicality of the universe was in essence synonymous with the order which, during Mersenne's era, was supposedly reflected at all levels of intellectual and community life.<sup>41</sup> The concert conducted by God became a metaphor for the unity, proportionateness, interaction and meaning of life of all things on earth. Reflected in the body and mind of the Perfect Musician is the *concordia mundi*, of which he is the bearer and representative. In Him is integrated the cosmos, and thus he constitutes the incarnate wisdom of God, who speaks to people through his intermediary. He is a special example of the determinant influence of the heavenly spheres on man. We are not surprised, therefore, at the serious reflection on the horoscope of his birth in *Les préludes de l'harmonie universelle*. During the seventeenth century, astrology, which is the product of the traditional, pre-Copernican, magical-religious model of the world, held

the status of a true science, to which Fr Mersenne – admittedly not without discussion – refers in his characterisation of the Perfect Musician.

The Perfect Musician as the microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic order is an expression of longing for the mythical Golden Age, when man lived in harmony with nature, in simplicity and innocence.<sup>42</sup> For Marin Mersenne, Orpheus, enchanting plants and animals with his music, symbolised a happy time irredeemably lost, echoed in so-called ‘Orphic’ songs performed in a ceremonious recitative style to accompaniment on the lyre. The conviction prevailed that those Orphic hymns, and the whole repertory of ancient sacred odes in general, derived directly from Orpheus. Ficino regarded Orpheus as a divine theologian possessed by a poetic madness (*furor poeticus*) and as an artist-sorcerer, who employed music not only to talk to the animals but also to civilise barbarians.<sup>43</sup> Mersenne planned for the civilising mission of the New Orpheus, through the revival of the ethical music of the ancients, to be realised in the Academy.

One must finally draw attention to the fact that in the figure of the Perfect Musician in *Les préludes de l’harmonie universelle* – a figure carved out by ancient culture – focussed as in a lens was the entire tradition of the past that had been preserved up to that time. Now, however, in the face of the pessimistic vision, characteristic of the era during which this eminent Frenchman lived, of culture, of the human condition, and of the end of the world,<sup>44</sup> it also constituted a hope for a renaissance in the spirit of Christian ideals. Ultimately, the image of the inspired singer and poet, of the mythicised bard, of the all-knowing teacher of the nation survived Mersenne for a long time in European culture. On the threshold of the Romantic era, Orpheus was reborn.

Translated by John Comber

### Notes

- 1 William J. Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance 1550-1640* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 143–65.
- 2 Cf. Frederick B. Hyde, *The Position of Marin Mersenne in the History of Music* (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1954), pp. 514–42.

- 3 Mircea Eliade, *Historia wierzeń i idei religijnych*, t. 3: *Od Mahometa do wieku Reform* (Histoire des croyances et des idées religieuses, vol. 3: De Mahomet à l'âge des Réformes), Polish translation by Agnieszka Kuryś (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy PAX, 1997), p. 168–73.
- 4 After Giovanni Reale, *Historia filozofii starożytnej*, t. 4: *Szkoty epoki cesarstwa* (*Storia della filosofia antica*, vol. 4: *Le scuole dell'età imperiale*), Polish translation by Edward Iwo Zieliński (Lublin: Wydawnictwa Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1999), p. 393.
- 5 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, quoted in: Oliver Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1950), p. 84.
- 6 Cf. Marian Kurdziałek, 'Średniowieczne doktryny o człowieku jako mikrokosmosie,' (The Medieval Doctrines about Man as a Microcosm) in: *Średniowiecze w poszukiwaniu równowagi między arystotelizmem a platonizmem* (Middle Ages in Searching of the Balance between Aristotelism and Platonism) (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL), pp. 271–309.
- 7 Francesco Giorgio, *Harmonia Mundi* (Venice, 1525), chapter X, quoted in: *The Harmony of the Spheres: a Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*, ed. Joscelyn Godwin (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Tradition Inter., 1993), pp. 185–95.
- 8 Cf. Andrzej Wierciński, *Przez wodę i ogień. Biblia i Kabala* (Through Water and Fire. The Bible and the Cabbala), (Cracow: Nomos, 1996), p. 22.
- 9 Robert Fludd, *Utriusque Cosmi Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica atque Technica Historia* (Oppenheim, 1617); *De Supernaturali, naturali, praeternaturali et contranaturali Microcosmi historia* (Oppenheim, 1619).
- 10 This section was elaborated by Robert M. Sadowski.
- 11 The chapter I: 'Quelle doit estre la constitution du Ciel, ou l'horoscope d'un parfait Musicien,' in: Marin Mersenne, *Les préludes de l'harmonie universelle, ou questions curieuses* (Paris: Chez Henry Guenon, 1634), pp. 1–34.
- 12 In the chapters devoted to the temperament of the Perfect Musician, Mersenne presents a somewhat different opinion.
- 13 Johannes Kepler, *De Stella Nova in Pede Serpentarii, Et Qui Sub Eius de Novo Inuit, Trigono igneo* (Prague: Sessius, 1606).
- 14 Mersenne, *Les préludes*, p. 2.
- 15 *ibid.*, chapter I, p. 8, section: 'De la profession, des moeurs, de l'esprit et de l'excellence du mesme Musicien'.
- 16 *ibid.*, pp. 23–4.
- 17 *ibid.*, chapter IV, pp. 109–32, section: 'A scavoire si le temperament du parfait Musicien doit estre sanguin, phlegmatique, bilieux, ou melancholique, pour estre capable de chanter, ou de composer les plus beaux airs qui soient possibles'.
- 18 Andrzej Bednarczyk, *Galen. Główne kategorie systemu filozoficzno-lekarskiego* (Galen. The Main Categories of His Philosophical-Medical System), (Warsaw: Uniwersytet Warszawski. Wydział Filozofii i Socjologii, 1995).
- 19 By 'theory', Mersenne understands here the composition, but principally the

understanding, of a complex musical work. By 'practice' he understands the singing and arranging of (simple) songs.

20 Mersenne, *Les préludes*, pp. 118-9.

21 Cf. Andrzej Bednarczyk, 'Teoria humoralna. Temperament,' (Humoral Theory. Temperament) in: René Descartes, *Człowiek. Opis ciała ludzkiego* (L'Homme. La Description du corps humain), Polish translation by Andrzej Bednarczyk (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1989), pp. 168-9.

22 'Cette contrariété d'opinions fait voir qu'il est trop difficile de trouver le temperament de l'excellent Musicien, don't nous parlons: neanmoins puis qu'Apollon a esté tenu de Anciens pour le Dieu de la Medicine, voyons si elle nous pourra donner ce temperament, puisque la complexion n'est autre chose qu'une harmonie, ou un accord des quatre simples qualities elementaires, à sçavoir de la chaleur, de la froideur, de l'humidité, et de la ficcitéou pour mieux dire, un mélange du chaud, du froid, du sec, et de l'humide.' Mersenne, *Les préludes*, p. 119.

23 '[. . .] celuy qui est tres-temperé, est tres-prudent, tel que doit ester le parfait Musicien. Ded plus, celuy qui a acquis le degree de perfection, est courtois, amiable et affable; il n'est trop cholere, ny trop gay, ny trop triste; il est doux, humble, patient au travail, ayant une moderation dans ses moeurs, et en ses actions, qui est proportionnée à la beauté de son corps, ou à la perfection de son temperament.' *ibid.*, p. 123.

24 *ibid.*, p. 129.

25 *ibid.*, p. 135.

26 Marin Mersenne, *Traité de l'harmonie universelle, où est contenu la musique théoretique et pratique des anciens et modernes, avec les causes de ses effets* (Paris: Guillaume Baudry, 1627), p. 22.

27 'Entends donc par la Musique, la science des sons et de l'harmonie.' Mersenne, *Les préludes*, p. 140.

28 *ibid.*, p. 136.

29 Mersenne, *Traité de l'harmonie universelle*, p. 20-9.

30 Mersenne, *Les préludes*, p. 211.

31 Mersenne, *Traité de l'harmonie universelle*, pp. 22-4.

32 Boethius, *De institutione musica*, quoted in: Strunk, *Source Readings in Music History*, p. 86.

33 'Car ceux qui sçavent seulement chanter et la maniere de composer (comme les Chantres, et ceux qui touchent les instruments) ne meritent pas le nom de Musicien, comme les massons ne meritent point celuy d'Architecte, puis que ceux-la ne sçavent point la raison des concerts qu'ils font, ou ausquels ils assistant, comme ceux-cy ne sçavent point pourquoy les Palais et les autres edifices ont plustost cette figure qu'in autre: de là vient que la pratique de la Musique est comme un corps sans ame, si on ne connoist la theorie, qui surpasse autant la pratique comme l'esprit surpasse le corps, et comme lest cieus surpassent la terre.' Mersenne, *Traité de l'harmonie universelle*, pp. 352-3.

- 34 From the statute of the Academy, after Frances Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 21.
- 35 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 36 *ibid.*, p. 24.
- 37 'Mais ceux qui sont plus sçavant, et qui s'estudient à la Theorie de la volonté de Dieu, et de ses desseins, dans les quels ils entrent souvent, comme dans le souverain Sanctuaire; et don't ils sortent aprcs avec des satisfactions d'esprit qui ne peuvent ester expliquées de la langue des homes, sont aussi contents de souffrir que d'agir, et d'estre le suiet, ou l'obiect des disgraces du monde, que de ses faveurs, parce qu'ils reconnoissent que Dieu les gouverne, et qu'il les a destinez pour cette partie de l'harmonie universelle, tandis qu'ils conduit le concert à la fin, c'est à dire à l'octave, et à l'unisson de la gloire eternelle, qu'il donnera à tous ceux qui auront bien tenu leur partie, et qui se seront contentez du lieu qui leur a esté donné par le souverain Maistre du grand choeur de l'univers.' Mersenne, *Les préludes*, p. 179.
- 38 'Ceux qui servent à chanter les louanges de Dieu ils peuvent avec toute assurance de leur conscience, passer les iours et les nuits à trouver de nouveaux chants, et de nouveaux charmes dans les trois genres de Musique pour élever tous les mortels à la contemplation des choses divines, et pour échauffer et embrasser leur volonté du desir de la Ierusalem celeste, et de l'amour de Dieu, afin que toutes les creatures, et particulièrement la Musique nous servent de degré pour parvenir A la gloire eternelle, et pour nous unir à celuy, dont nous esperons toutes sortes de biens, et de contentemens.' *ibid.*, p. 186.
- 39 'En effect si la Musique doit servir à quelque usage, et si sa pratique a quelque fin, elle n'en peut avoir de plus excellente, apres la gloire de Dieu, qui est la derniere fin de toutes les choses possibles, que la recreation de savans, qui consomment leur temps, et leur esprit à la meditation des mysteres de la Religion, et à la recherche des raisons, qui servent pour combatte tous ceux qui s'opposent à la verité infaillible de nostre Foi, et pour persuader cette verité, et les vertus qui en dependent, à tout le monde.' *ibid.*, p. 184.
- 40 'D'ou est aysé do conclurre, que toutes les chansons de Cour, qui n'ont point d'autre suiet que les profanes, et qui louanges des hommes, qui ne subsistent le plus souvent que dans les flatteries, et qui n'ont point d'autre soustien que la vanité et le mésonge, ne peuvent estre parfaites, puis que la verité leur manque sans laquelle il n'y a nulle perfection, et quelles sont privées du suiet qui ravit les Anges et qui servira d'un entretien eternel à tous predestinez, et les bien-hereux. Quant aux autres conditions necessaires, i'en parleray dans un livre particulier, car ie veu finir cettuy-ci par ces vers qui sont propres pour chanter les louanges de Dieu.' *ibid.*, pp. 223-4.
- 41 Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance*, p. 161.
- 42 *ibid.*, p. 207.
- 43 Cf. Szymon Paczkowski, 'Apoteoza muzyki: Ficino i „L'Orfeo” Claudia Monteverdiego,' (The Apotheosis of Music: Ficino and "L'Orfeo" by Claudio Monteverdi) in: *Mit Orfeusza. Inspiracje i reinterpretacje w europejskiej tradycji artystycznej* (The Myth of Orpheus. Inspirations and Reinterpretations in the European Artistic Tradition), ed. Sławomira Żerańska-Kominek (Gdańsk: Słowo/obraz terytoria, 2003), pp. 131-47.
- 44 Bouwsma, *The Waning of the Renaissance*, pp. 179-98.