

9-21-2017

Shakespeare's Philosophy of Music

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Recommended Citation

Sulka, Emily A. (2017) "Shakespeare's Philosophy of Music," *Musical Offerings*: Vol. 8 : No. 2 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2017.8.2.1

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol8/iss2/1>

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Abstract

Shakespeare is one of the most widely read figures in literature, but his use of music is not usually touched on in literary discussions of his works. In this paper, I discuss how Shakespeare portrays music within the context of his plays, through both dialogue and songs performed within each work. In Shakespeare's time, Boethius's philosophy of the Music of the Spheres was still highly popular. This was the idea that the arrangement of the cosmos mirrored musical proportions. As a result, every aspect of the universe was believed to be highly ordered, and this idea is prominent throughout Shakespeare's works, from "Hamlet" to "A Midsummer Night's Dream." To make this clear to the reader, I discuss dialogue symmetry weaved throughout "The Merchant of Venice," clear allusions to the music of the spheres in "Pericles," and the use of music as a signifier of the strange and mysterious – from madness to love – in numerous works, always relating these topics back to the philosophy of the music of the spheres. In order to compile this information and make it clear, I researched the philosophy of music during Shakespeare's era. I also researched how he uses music thematically to emphasize different characters' struggles as well as plot details. After examining his plays as well as the other sources available on the subject, it is clear that Shakespeare was highly influenced by the philosophical and practical ideas regarding music of his time, specifically the theory of the music of the spheres.

Keywords

Shakespeare, literature, music, analysis, philosophy, music of the spheres, drama, Pericles, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Boethius, The Merchant of Venice, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Tempest

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Shakespeare's Philosophy of Music

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William Shakespeare is one of the most important figures in literary history. During the course of his lifetime, he authored over 37 plays and 150 sonnets, and in accordance with this extensive output, nearly everyone in the Western world has at least a passing knowledge of his works. However, while a large percentage of people study Shakespearean drama in literature courses, it is rare for these classes to address the musical aspects of staging a Shakespearean production or the attention that Shakespeare gives to music philosophy. As a result, it is surprising to see how big of a role music plays in Shakespeare's works, especially because his use of music reveals a wealth of information regarding music's influence in his time. Shakespeare was born in 1564 in England and died in 1616, which places the span of his life near the end of the Renaissance. Although the philosophy of the music of the spheres came from several centuries earlier, it was one of the most prominent ideas about music at this time, and Shakespeare was highly influenced by it. This influence shows itself in most of his works, and can be seen in the literary structure of his plays, his presentation of madness and other psychological states, and the use of the supernatural.

The philosophy of the music of the spheres was developed by Boethius, a Roman philosopher who lived around AD 500. Boethius outlines three types of music in his *De institutione musica*, or *The Principles of Music: musica mundana, musica humana, and musica instrumentalis*. Boethius defines *musica mundana* as the "objective music of the cosmos," while understanding *musica humana* as the "subjective music of the soul."¹ The idea of objective music in the cosmos reflected a theory originated

¹ Nadezhda Prozorova, "The Philosophy of Music in Shakespeare's Drama," *European English Messenger* 23, no. 1 (2014): 39, [Academic Search Complete](#), EBSCOhost 96269892.

by Pythagoras around 600 BC. In his time, the prevailing belief was that there were literal, concentric, clear spheres that held the observable universe. Pythagoras discovered that musical intervals were based on mathematical ratios and that the same ratios could be found in astronomy. According to Pythagoras, each of these spheres completed a rotation in a twenty-four hour day, and their movement caused sound: one tone for each sphere. As each sphere moved, their individual tones harmonized.² Humans could not hear this harmony, however, because they were imperfect and therefore not in harmony with the perfect spheres. As time went on, prevalent thinkers began editing and adding to the theory, but in his book, Boethius works from the theory that the ratios among the heavenly spheres mirror musical intervals. In contrast to *musica mundana* (music of the cosmos) and *musica instrumentalis* (instrumental music), Boethius defined *musica humana* as a “reflection of the indivisible human essence and...the expression of man’s inner world.”³ Music was related to order in both the universe and humanity, and this order was another major part of the theory. Since philosophers believed that the entire universe was constructed of the same mathematical and harmonious ratios which caused the music of the spheres, every aspect of the universe was ultimately meant to be ordered.

As a result of this philosophy, many works of art and literature reflected balance and symmetry. Though Shakespeare wrote over one thousand years after Boethius, his trust and belief in order and ultimate simplicity can be found alongside the idea of the spheres in many of his works. According to Claudia Olk, music and language were considered by late medieval and early Renaissance writers to be “two manifestations of one harmonic language of creation.”⁴ Olk finds that this is evident in *The Merchant of Venice*, which “creates an unheard music of musical ratios.”⁵ Many lines are framed in such a way that the audience can see echoes of the same motif throughout the play, and while at first this seems to be simply a literary device that many authors use, it is greatly influenced by the theory of the spheres. However, the way that Shakespeare draws such connections can be missed easily. For example, Portia’s line, “Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear” (3.2.326),

² George Rogers, “The Music of the Spheres,” *Music Educators Journal* 103, no. 1 (2016): 43, doi:[10.1177/0027432116654547](https://doi.org/10.1177/0027432116654547).

³ Prozorova, “Philosophy of Music,” 39.

⁴ Claudia Olk, “The Musicality of *The Merchant of Venice*,” *Shakespeare* 8, no. 4 (2012): 389, doi:[10.1080/17450918.2012.731705](https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2012.731705).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 390.

is contrasted with Gratiano's earlier statement that "They lose it that do buy it with much care" (1.1.79).⁶ In the first line, Portia states that she will love Bassanio because he has been bought, but in the second line—which occurs earlier in the play—Gratiano states that even if one buys something with care, he or she will lose it. Despite their distance within the play, these two lines play off of each other in such a way that when Portia vows to love Bassanio, listeners remember Gratiano's warning and understand that everything will not necessarily be well. As mentioned by Olk, "The relative absence of referential meaning leads the listener to a more active role in the perception of patterns of similarity and difference,"⁷ as in a musical performance. Though the lines do not reference each other internally, viewers can connect deeper threads if they are paying attention. The inclusion of these lines in the play, as well as the patterns of similarity and difference mentioned by Olk, reflect quite clearly the theory of the music of the spheres. Because the entire cosmos was believed to be greatly ordered, taking the time to weave intricate callbacks throughout the play and to ensure that such similarities in phrasing could portray larger themes was a reflection of that common belief in ultimate order.

In his other works, Shakespeare uses music theory and philosophy in his presentation of characters' mental states, which adds a second layer to the way that a character's actions should be perceived. For example, Shakespeare associates being musically "out of tune" with madness. This is evident in *Hamlet* in act 4, where Ophelia is seen singing constantly, and the things she is saying make little sense.⁸ After interacting with her for a few moments, Claudius and Gertrude come to the conclusion that she has been driven mad by grief following her father's death. Since madness was connected to a wrong tuning with the spheres in both philosophy and other works by Shakespeare, it is easy to see why he made this connection between singing and madness.⁹ Ophelia's insistent

⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011), 123, 13.

⁷ Olk, "Musicality," 392.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 207, 209, 217, 219.

⁹ Percy Scholes, "The Purpose behind Shakespeare's Use of Music," *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 43 (1916–1917): 2, doi:[10.1093/jrma/43.1.1](https://doi.org/10.1093/jrma/43.1.1).

singing only emphasizes her insanity, because a nonsensical song cannot be aligned with the order, harmony, and beauty evidenced in the spheres.

Shakespeare uses music to signify madness even further in *Hamlet*. Erin Minear discusses the idea that Hamlet's sung songs are "in some ways more disconcerting" than Ophelia's.¹⁰ It is quite clear when Ophelia moves from thinking logically to thinking musically, but Hamlet's movement is far more subtle; actors and readers alike have a hard time telling the difference between what is meant to be sung and what is meant to be spoken, which obscures the truth that he is only pretending to be mad. For example, in a discussion with Polonius, Hamlet quotes a chanson. When Polonius assumes that this quotation is relevant to their discussion and that Hamlet is responding through its use, Hamlet points out that his reasoning is flawed.¹¹ Polonius then asks what would follow logically in their discussion, but Hamlet responds instead with the next line of the song. According to Minear, this "suggests that a world of orderly and logical causation has given way to a world where one event comes after another for no other reason than that it does."¹² Hamlet no longer conforms to the logical flow of thought assumed by others. Because Hamlet is believed to be mad throughout much of the play, this scene is a telling example in understanding Shakespeare's philosophy of music. As with Ophelia, the use of music underscores madness but also reminds the audience that it is a façade. The other characters cannot discern whether he is in line with the spheres or not. In Hamlet's case, that fact that it is not always clear when he is meant to be singing can be seen as a metaphor for the fact that it is not always clear if he is truly mad or not. While he is singing, even when his individual statements do make logical sense, they don't always make contextual sense, as seen in his discussion with Polonius. This disconnect, though not as strong as Ophelia's, shows that Hamlet is acting as though he is out of balance, whether or not he truly is.

Catherine Dunn expands on the discussion of madness in Shakespeare's works in her analysis of *Pericles*, where Shakespeare seems to draw many connections between psychological states and the philosophy of

¹⁰ Erin Minear, "A Verse to This Note": Shakespeare's Haunted Songs," *Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal* 29 (2010): 19, [Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost 59756068](#).

¹¹ Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet*, 107, 109.

¹² Minear, "A Verse to This Note," 20.

the spheres.¹³ In this work, madness is seen as the state of being “out of tune,” while sanity is seen as the state of being “in tune.” Within *Pericles*, Shakespeare primarily references *musica humana*, or the “subjective music of the human soul,”¹⁴ and the allusions to *musica humana* within *Pericles* take one of two forms: either “the harmonious or inharmonious tuning of the bodily elements and humours to produce a certain character” or the ability of music to provide cures to those physical and mental ailments, often by tuning the body to the spheres.¹⁵ The first form of allusion to *musica humana* (that tuning produces character) can be seen in a remark from Antiochus to Pericles: “Yet hope, succeeding from so fair a tree / As your fair self, doth tune us otherwise” (1.1.115–116).¹⁶ Antiochus is describing the idea that hope will tune his body differently and therefore put him into harmony with the universe, causing him to act differently. This idea flows easily from the musical theory of the time, which those living in Shakespeare’s era believed, that one’s body or life could be tuned either harmoniously or inharmoniously to the cosmos. Similar allusions to the theory are contained throughout the rest of the play. An example of the second form of allusion to *musica humana* (that tuning cures ailments) can be seen in multiple scenes as well, including one where dancing is offered as a remedy to Pericles when he is feeling “moody and silent.”¹⁷ In this scene, Shakespeare reflects the idea that being exposed to music, even in the form of dance, has the power to retune someone to the harmony of the cosmos. In this case, after dancing, Pericles would, theoretically, cease to be “moody and silent,” an idea that links forward to the doctrine of affections, which was beginning to emerge at the time of the writing of *Pericles*.

However, the most dramatic use of music in *Pericles* occurs in the climax. Pericles is insane and therefore thought to be out of harmony, so Marina is asked to sing for him because she is perfectly in tune with the spheres. As she does so, Pericles is cured of his madness, and the only example of *musica mundana* in the play can be found: “Most heavenly music! / It nips me unto listening, and thick slumber / Hangs upon mine

¹³ Catherine Dunn, “The Function of Music in Shakespeare’s Romances,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1969): 394–399, doi:[10.2307/2868536](https://doi.org/10.2307/2868536).

¹⁴ Prozorova, “Philosophy of Music,” 39.

¹⁵ Dunn, “Function of Music,” 394.

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 9.

¹⁷ Dunn, “Function of Music,” 395.

eyes. Let me rest" (5.1.225–227).¹⁸ As can be seen in this climax, Pericles can only hear the music of the spheres when his soul is in balance with the universe. According to Dunn, Shakespeare almost suggests this as a solution to man's problems.¹⁹ The only time *musica mundana* is evoked in the play is when Pericles is healed, so it seems clear that Shakespeare is supporting the idea that music can be used as a cure for ailments, psychological as well as physical. Where Ophelia's song emphasizes its own disconnection with the universe because the things she sings do not make sense, Marina's song is beautiful enough to bring Pericles back into balance.

Shakespeare uses music to signify psychological states other than madness as well, and Percy Scholes discusses the idea that music is tied to love.²⁰ Interestingly, he neglects to mention it in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*. As this is perhaps Shakespeare's most famous romance, it is important to understand music's place within the play. While music is associated with discussions between Romeo and Juliet toward the end of the play, it is most significantly tied to love in act 2, scene 2. In this scene, Romeo and Juliet are speaking to one another and Romeo exclaims, "How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night, / Like softest music to attending ears!" (2.2.176–177).²¹ Here, he compares the speech of lovers to music. Later, in act 4, several characters hold a witty exchange regarding why the sounds of instruments are called "silver-sweet," and the musicians cannot quite give a compelling explanation.²² In the same way that describing music as "silver-sweet" is inexplicable, describing the speech of lovers is in the same way inexplicable. As these two sounds are linked in Romeo's line—"Like softest music to attending ears!" (2.2.177)²³—Shakespeare strongly connects the speech of lovers to music. Love is seen as a departure from one's normal state of being and is tied to an unexplainable descriptor, just as music is. For these reasons, *Romeo and Juliet* reflects the music of the spheres in two ways. First, it reflects the earlier idea that by connecting phrases throughout the play, Shakespeare mirrors the balance and order that are integral to the worldview brought about by a belief in the spheres. By connecting the two statements of "silver-sweet" sound, he creates a symmetry in his

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *Pericles*, 94.

¹⁹ Dunn, "Function of Music," 397.

²⁰ Scholes, "Purpose behind Shakespeare's Music," 2.

²¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 81.

²² *Ibid.*, 207.

²³ *Ibid.*, 81.

literary structure which reflects that of the cosmos. Secondly, by comparing the speech of lovers to music, Shakespeare seems to show the inverse of his presentation of madness. Aligning madness with music emphasizes the idea that madness involves a character out of line with the spheres, but this idea is overturned with the presentation of love in *Romeo and Juliet*. In this play, love, which evokes comparison to “silver-sweet” instruments, can be seen as bringing one into order with the balance of the universe.

The Tempest is a strong example of Shakespeare’s use of character and the supernatural to represent the philosophy of the music of the spheres. John Cutts describes the play as taking place on “an island that resounds continually to music in the air,” which, he believes, is “equivalent to music of the spheres.”²⁴ The music in this play is integral, and Joshua Cohen describes it as a metaphorical, even “metaphysical principle.”²⁵ In his article, Cohen argues that Ariel, one of the spirits in *The Tempest*, is portrayed as the living embodiment of music. This is evident because every time that Ariel makes an appearance, it is underscored with music. This can be seen even in act 1, scene 2, when Ariel appears for the first time, singing, and Ferdinand asks “Where should this music be? i’ the air or the earth?” (1.2.465).²⁶ Though at the time he cannot see Ariel, the presence of the character is closely tied to music. In addition, Ariel lives in the air of the island, which is described as being “alive with music.”²⁷ In Shakespeare’s time, the word *air* was commonly associated with music because it evoked the idea of arias and other melodies. This is seen near the beginning of the play, when Ferdinand reflects on the fact that an unseen music has helped to soothe his grief regarding the death of his father. The music he hears in the air is the song of Ariel, which more firmly cements Ariel’s role as the embodiment of music and draws a comparison between his song of the air and the spheres’ song of the cosmos. Cohen states, “So much is music a part of the air of the island, and Ariel a part of both, that we come to realize that music is somehow

²⁴ John Cutts, “Music and the Supernatural in *The Tempest*: A Study in Interpretation,” *Music & Letters* 39, no. 4 (1958): 347, doi:[10.1093/ml/XXXIX.4.347](https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/XXXIX.4.347).

²⁵ Joshua Cohen, “The Music of *The Tempest*,” *Raritan* 33, no. 1 (2013): 70, [Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost 90431201](#).

²⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), 41, [Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost 90431201](#).

²⁷ Cohen, “Music and the Supernatural,” 72.

intrinsic to Ariel's nature."²⁸ This alone reflects the idea of the music of the spheres; according to Shakespeare's contemporaries, since the island and the air are elements of nature, this would mean that they should be highly ordered and should contain the same proportions as the spheres. The fact that the air is filled with music reinforces this idea by showing that the island is in tune with the spheres. Ariel is then aligned with the music of the air, which associates him with the spheres and the heavens. This concept reflects back to the idea that Shakespeare used music to signify the supernatural and unusual. According to Cohen, Ariel is seen, through his interactions with humanity, to be a link between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm, which is similar to the role of the music of the spheres as a heavenly force signifying order on earth.²⁹ Finally, as Ariel ultimately teaches Prospero to control his anger, while also gaining more empathy for humanity himself, Shakespeare seems to again reflect the idea that the music of the spheres can be a solution to humanity's problems. Only with the influence of Ariel could Prospero become a better person.

In all of these plays and examples, it is important to note the way through which Shakespeare often introduces music. Since Shakespeare's plays incorporate music from offstage, they often include moments where the characters suddenly become aware of music being played.³⁰ Often, Shakespeare seems to hide the source of the music from those characters most affected by it. In the case of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare ensures that as Ferdinand comes out of the sea, encouraged by Ariel's music, he cannot see this source, while the other characters on stage can; even the stage instructions state that Ariel is invisible. Though this may not seem to connect to the music of the spheres at first, this use of music is highly influenced by the philosophy. The idea that music symbolizes the strange and supernatural is seen to reflect the idea of the spheres because it shows that such things are a departure from the order assumed by Shakespeare's contemporaries. Shakespeare purposely obscured certain characters from seeing the source of the music that was ordering their lives, which draws a parallel to the belief that imperfect humanity could not hear the perfect music of the spheres. In the end, both the philosophy of the spheres and Shakespeare's decision to prevent Ferdinand from seeing Ariel emphasize the fact that humanity cannot sense that which orders

²⁸ Cohen, "Music and the Supernatural," 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁰ Michael Witmore, "Shakespeare's Inner Music," *Upstart Crow: A Shakespeare Journal* 29 (2010–2011): 74–75, [Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost 59756072](https://academic.oup.com/ebSCOhost/59756072).

their lives. It is clear, then, that Shakespeare used music in practice in the same way he wrote about it—in reference to the philosophy of his time.

Throughout his works, Shakespeare incorporates many incarnations of the philosophy of the music of the spheres. In an overwhelming number of examples, he uses it to underscore characterization or departures from the natural, such as the states of being mad or in love. He also embodies music in the character of Ariel and the island of *The Tempest*, as well as through his practical portrayal of music in performance. It is clear that Shakespeare was heavily influenced by the philosophy of music at his time, and he weaves the many implications of the music of the spheres through nearly every one of his works. Though the topic is rarely a course of study in most literature classes, the details regarding music in Shakespeare's plays grant the reader a new understanding of the culture in which Shakespeare operated, and a closer study may help to reveal even more about what he is saying about the state of his own world.

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