



Shakespeare's Philosophy of Music

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Introduction



- ▶ Shakespeare: 1564-1616, the end of the Renaissance
- ▶ Thirty-seven plays and 154 sonnets
- ▶ As evidenced by the dialogue and sung songs in his plays, Shakespeare was highly influenced by the philosophy of the music of the spheres. This influence shows itself in most of his plays, from *The Tempest* to *Hamlet*, and, among other things, it is used to highlight characterization, plot, and aspects of the supernatural and unknown.



The Music of the Spheres

- ▶ Pythagoras – 600 BC
 - ▶ Music of the spheres – heavenly music that humanity could not hear
 - ▶ Mathematical ratios ordering the universe, reflected in the arts
- ▶ Boethius – Roman philosopher from 500 AD
 - ▶ *musica mundana* - objective music of the cosmos
 - ▶ *musica humana* - subjective music of the soul
 - ▶ *musica instrumentalis* – reflection of the indivisible human essence and the expression of man's inner world



Music and Language

- ▶ *The Merchant of Venice*, according to Claudia Olk, is based on mathematical proportions – requires closer listening
 - ▶ They lose it that do buy it with much care (Gratiano)
 - ▶ Since you are dear bought, I will love you dear (Portia to Bassanio)
- ▶ Balance and proportionality reflects the philosophy of the spheres, as well as the idea that language could be used to reflect the musical truth of the universe



Pericles

- ▶ Madness as being “out of tune” with the spheres
 - ▶ Musica humana used primarily – used to show two things
 - ▶ “Yet hope, succeeding from so fair a tree / As your fair self, doth tune us otherwise”
 - ▶ Dance offered as a cure to being “moody and silent”
 - ▶ One instance of musica mundana
 - ▶ Marina’s singing cures Pericles’ madness
 - ▶ “Most heavenly music! / It nips me unto listening, and thick slumber / Hangs upon mine eyes. Let me rest”



Music as a Signifier of the Supernatural and the Strange

- ▶ The Supernatural

- ▶ Music used to make fantasy seem more realistic, much like how lighting is used today
- ▶ Music also used to signify the magic of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- ▶ Music used to signify ghosts in *Cymbeline*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Henry VIII*

- ▶ The "Strange"

- ▶ Used to signify madness in *Pericles* and *Hamlet* (Ophelia, Hamlet's witty exchanges)
- ▶ Love in *Romeo and Juliet*
 - ▶ How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night, / Like softest music to attending ears!



Characterization

- ▶ *The Tempest*

- ▶ Ariel as the living embodiment of music

- ▶ Music with every appearance

- ▶ Lives in the air, which is “alive with music,” arias

- ▶ “an island that resounds continually to music in the air, which is, I believe, equivalent to music of the spheres” (John Cutts)

- ▶ A link between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm

- ▶ Ferdinand

- ▶ Prospero

- ▶ Music of the spheres as a solution to humanity’s problems (as in *Pericles*)



Offstage Music

- ▶ Offstage music as representing the “magic and unworldly” just as music was a representation of the supernatural and strange
- ▶ Characters become suddenly aware of the offstage music
- ▶ Those most affected by it cannot see the source
 - ▶ *The Tempest* – Ferdinand and Ariel
 - ▶ Humanity cannot see that which orders their lives

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Conclusion

- ▶ Shakespeare uses the philosophy in many ways
 - ▶ Ordering his plays and reflecting proportionality
 - ▶ Suggesting the music of the spheres as a solution to man's problems
 - ▶ Underscoring the presence of the strange and supernatural, as well as the magical and unworldly
 - ▶ Highlighting mental states
- ▶ Illustrates his familiarity with the philosophy and the power of music



Thank you!