

HIDDEN MUSIC

Echoes of a Musical Theology

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INTRODUCTION

This is an account of various ideas that I have come across over the years, which have helped me form a kind of personal theology of Music.

I have always been obsessed with the idea of composing. It's of no consequence whether what I produce is of any value. It's all a learning process – or, maybe, a kind of meditation. It passes the time. For me, music is a way of understanding how Creation works and our relationship with the world around us.

My first question is, “How does the world, and our experience of it, have meaning?”

I would say, at least in the pages of this study, that Creation *is* Music – not “like” Music. Creation has the same laws and workings as Music. Music is the language of Creation.

The composer's tradition, which might only be of value to a composer, even just this one, would say there are four fundamental ideas in this musical theology:

MUSIC – this is the language of things forming and combining. Things can form freely with the guidance of the natural Law of Harmony.

HARMONY – there is an inherent Law in everything. This is the key to structure within the Cosmos. This is Harmony. Harmony is NOT music; it is the law that allows music to be. We are not only made of the same stuff as the cosmos, we have the same laws within us. This is how we can be, but are not always, in tune with the world.

COMPOSING – things are constantly being composed, both in the world and in our own creative imagination. There is an eternal desire within us and in the cosmos to create, to find new forms. It is as if we and the universe are trying to bring to life music that already exists, beyond time, as if patterns in the Mind of God. There need not be any pattern, just the Idea of being a Work, a thing in itself, of finding “thisness” or Unity.

PERFORMING – or, perhaps, learning how to perform – the endlessly difficult task of learning how to be in tune, which is primarily a matter of learning how to listen.

To bring all these things together, I might go back to my original question: “How does the world have meaning?” Or, “How do we read the world?”

We experience the world in the same way as we listen to music. We do not hear something “out there”, as an object to be analysed and explained, but as something which resonates within us.

Many of the sources I will quote here, and most of the writers who have been helpful to me, come from the Christian-Platonist tradition.

This is a convenient but misleading term. The ideas of the Greek philosopher Plato and his followers had an enormous influence on Christian theologians until the 13th century, when the philosophy of Aristotle was rediscovered and began to dominate – disastrously, some might say. The key ideas about Creation, which the first thousand years of Christian theology associated with Plato, have mysterious and ancient origins. They are not part of an alien philosophy imported into Christianity. Plato and Christianity are part of a larger flow of ideas that go back a long way. However, as will be explained, a large part of the western Christian world lost track of this tradition during the 13th century.

Contrary to some misguided or prejudiced beliefs, this ancient tradition held an optimistic view of Creation and saw humanity, both body and soul, as an inseparable part of the whole. This meant inseparable from God. This was the vision of many thinkers from Augustine to the Romantic poets.

It might be useful to give a summary of the tradition to which I like to imagine I belong. It begins in the mists of time, perhaps in Egypt, with the discovery that Harmony was a mathematical law and that Number lay behind everything. If one has knowledge that there is a law within Nature, one might question the need for deities and supernatural beings to control nature and one’s destiny.

This Harmonic Cosmos seems to be present in ancient Hebrew traditions of the Temple. The story goes that it was passed into Greece by Pythagoras.

As I have said, this is an account of my personal tradition – the world I seem to belong to. The same point of view could be expressed in words from other traditions. It is also perfectly possible to live in a reality of quite a different understanding. The cosmos is a very complex performance. Apparent contradictory or opposite interpretations can both be true.

400 BC	Plato, and his philosophy of Unity as the Source of Being. Virtue as the effect of that divine Unity in nature and moral and political life.
100 AD	Early Christian traditions of the Incarnation – God’s intimate relationship with Nature.
200 AD	Clement of Alexandria, Christian Platonism.
300 AD-500 AD	Later Platonists: Plotinus and Proclus. Christian Platonist Pseudo-Dionysius.
Early 6 th century	Boethius’s philosophy of the harmonious cosmos and of Music.
12 th century	The discovery of Nature. The theology of Love. The great cathedrals. The Seven Liberal Arts. St Francis of Assisi and music.
13 th century	St Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor. The climax of Christian Platonism. Reading the World as the Book of Creation. Dante’s <i>Divine Comedy</i> – the poetic vision of the harmonious cosmos.
15 th century	Ficino translates and comments on Plato, Music as Medicine. The harmonious cosmos influences new Art and Music.
16 th century	The flowering of sacred Music and Platonism, particularly in England. Spenser, Shakespeare. Francesco Giorgi’s <i>Harmonia Mundi</i> – the climax of the ancient view of the cosmos.
17 th century	The English Mystery, local development of instrumental music as a philosophical language – Gibbons, Lawes et al. Thomas Traherne – Anglican Platonic visionary. Peter Sterry – Puritan, Platonist, musician.
18 th century	The development of musical language from c17 th opera, through comedy, to the classical style with its art of combining contrasts. English Platonists reaffirming the value of Nature against the materialism of the time.
19 th century	The Romantic poets. Music as an expression of Nature.
20 th century	Principally music, but with a few signs of rediscovery of the ancient tradition in theology.

WALKING INTO MYSTERY

*While I was still young, before I went on my travels,
I sought wisdom openly in my prayer.
Before the temple I asked for her,
and I will search for her until the end.
From the first blossom to the ripening grape
my heart delighted in her;
my foot walked on the straight path;
from my youth I followed her steps.¹*

John Bunyan (1628-88) has an important part to play in this story. This might be surprising. The tinker was a Calvinist Baptist, a far cry from the Christian-Platonists or St Francis.

I come from Bedford, Bunyan's town, where he was imprisoned for unlicensed preaching, and where a statue stands, impressive, but hollow and liable to collapse, or so I always believed. From the age of 14 we lived in Turvey, a village on the River Ouse, which makes expansive meanders through the North Bedfordshire countryside, past limestone villages. At one place you can see five spires and church towers on the curves of the river, pinning the landscape to heaven like lightning conductors. Clear, Christian country, of a Puritan slant.

A vicar of that village with the fine church tower went to America and founded Concord, Massachusetts, future home of Thoreau, Emerson, the Alcotts, and transcendentalism.

Could this be the same landscape that Bunyan walked, along these paths, through the fields, by the river. He would baptise in the Osier beds at Pavenham. The locals say the village of Stevington is in his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (first published in 1678).² The village cross stands at the head of a lane, which slopes down to the church above the river. Was this the preaching cross where his central character Christian lost his burden? It rolled down the lane to a place where there was a sepulchre.

A high retaining wall supports the church and churchyard of St Mary, above a strange damp place where a spring bubbles up from a Holy Well at the foot of the wall. A place to come on pilgrimage to bathe sore eyes, they say. I have done so myself. Was my vision cleared?

¹ *Sirach 51:13-15*, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Dover Publications, 2003 (first published 1678).

There's an old chair in the church, where, the story goes, the wandering preacher sat and dreamed his dream. The arm of the chair has a carving of a fellow drinking from a bowl. Not far away is the "Drinking Hole Field" where, at the annual beating of the bounds, the villagers would jump into a hole and drink ale.

Could Bunyan have imagined his hero's journey through this landscape? That was an exciting idea. I had always known that the ruined Houghton House, visible from his birthplace at Elstow, was "House Beautiful". Vera Brittain, in 1950, tells that he saw the Chilterns, a distant view on the horizon, as the "Delectable Mountains".³

Bunyan and his fellow traveller were trying to escape this world and find the Celestial City. The lures of the earth were the sleep-inducing vapours of the "Inchanted Ground". Yet there is beauty and meaning in the places where the pilgrims rest, at the houses of learning and with shepherds on the hills. Perhaps the City could be glimpsed in a certain light beyond Harrold or Carlton.

Bunyan says, in *Solomon's Temple Spiritualized*, that the ancient Israelites saw Canaan as a "type of heaven".⁴ This meandering valley could arouse such an image, or the way to the Sabbath of rest. When walking, like for Bunyan all those years ago, the landscape seems to impart meaning. We are part of its mystery, the things we discover hold messages for us.

I knew from my teens what mattered were the things that had meaning, not only the natural things – the rivers, fields of wheat or yellow oilseed rape – what about the heavy shoe of a plough horse, rusting agricultural machinery, the closed railway, the entrance to an underground Royal Observer Corps post with its stories of sinister military depots? Modern things like this could be as meaningful and mysterious as an ancient stone or Druid grove.

Stories, too, were part of the same world, the same mystery – stories that suggested themselves through the landscape. And there were the people, real and imaginary...

Even more importantly was music. There was music with a symbolic link to Bunyan's allegory, Vaughan William's Fifth symphony, his opera based on *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It was part of the same world. Music spoke the same language. There was no difference between the language of music and the language communicated through places and their stories. This was what the world was like. God, whatever that was, spoke through all of this.

The village church had beauty and mystery, but we were not churchgoers. I think I wished we

³ Vera Brittain, *The Steps of John Bunyan: An Excursion Into Puritan England*. Classic Reprint, Forgotten Books, 2017 (first published 1950).

⁴ John Bunyan, *Solomon's Temple Spiritualized*. Curiosmith, 2010 (first published 1691).

were. The rector, still appointed by the Lady of the Manor, was admirable, and walked the bounds of the village with his black Labrador – properly caring for all souls.

And yet there was true mystery in music – the great choral works of Elgar resonated with the real fire of the spirit – and Elgar had sat on a fence in a marsh near Tewkesbury where he heard the desolate music of the lonely Christ, interpreted in *The Apostles*. The end of his score is inscribed “In Longdon Marsh, 1903”.

There were no more vivid sparks of God than in Haydn symphonies, or Laurie Johnson’s incidental music for “The Avengers”, or in that series itself, or “Doctor Who”. These were all parts of the same world. There was no need to drag in anything supernatural. It was also a mystery that drew in people. Making a film, in 1971-2, and using a lot of these ideas, was my way of experiencing the mystery that continued to form in these places and drew in the people involved. For a moment you could enter a dance...

In my own writings, and in my film, Bunyan’s “House Beautiful” was represented by Turvey Abbey, then home of a businessman’s widow. It was a Jacobean farmhouse, to which the Victorian owner, who kept his hair uncut after bathing in the river Jordan, had romantically added Gothic touches. In 1980 it became a real abbey, the Benedictine house of Our Lady of Peace.

Of course, everything can go horribly wrong when you lose the careless rapture and succumb to usual temptations. In the late 1970s there was a vogue for ley lines and earth mysteries. The real mystery could be completely lost in the deadly obsession of looking for patterns, or ancient secrets. In spite of this, the real calling was there, an unpredictable search for knowledge, not necessarily an answer. Drawn in by the sense of mystery and, if we go deep enough, that we’ll experience the strange delight of becoming a part of it – The Great Poetic Mystery.

I gathered all my knowledge of theology from music, Elgar oratorios and the works of Messiaen. These were exciting and mystical. I would say that the two literary influences which began, for me, to make sense of this world, were Charles Williams and Thomas Traherne.

Charles Williams (1886-1945) wrote rather difficult “spiritual thrillers”. They have visionary moments. His novel *The Greater Trumps* introduced me to the image of the Dance. Small figures, representing the figures of Tarot Cards, move in a dance on a circular table. They are weaving the world.⁵ The Fool is Christ. Some see him spinning round and round weaving his way through the other figures, others see him motionless. This is the image that inspired T. S.

⁵ Charles Williams, *The Greater Trumps*. Regent College Publishing, 2003 (first published 1932).

Eliot's lines in the *Four Quartets*: "At the still point of the turning world. ...there the dance is."

Williams was my first introduction to the idea of "the Way of Affirmation". I had no idea there was a Christian tradition in which the things of Creation had meaning and were signs of God. As part of this idea, Williams wrote of the theology of romantic love.⁶ He introduced me to Dante. Hurrah! Things were beginning to make sense.

In 1977 I discovered Thomas Traherne (1636-1674), a hero of "the Way of Affirmation". I opened a book in the library, not recognising the name, and the poems looked so extraordinary. Here was a 17th century divine visionary, with an unexpected view of the world. Even with exclamation marks and bad spelling, it rang bells immediately.

His most famous passage, set to music by Gerald Finzi in *Dies Natalis*, is his innocent vision of the world where "the corn was orient and immortal wheat."⁷ Traherne sees the world as illuminated by God, but our human sins obscure the vision. To Traherne, Love is an immense "alluring" force that draws us towards God and brings life to everything in Creation.

As he tells us in his *Centuries of Meditations*, all Love comes from God and is all One Love, just as the three persons of the Trinity are One:

Lov in the fountain and Lov in the stream are both the same.

...Though it streameth to its object it abideth in the lover, and is the Lov of the lover.⁸

Traherne had a remarkable interest in imagination, which he seems to identify with the soul. What we imagine can be real experience is part of the same reality. This might seem fanciful or even dangerous, but it is also a part of the philosophy of Bonaventure.

There are other mystical writers with the same view of Creation, though they are hard to find. I favour the 17th century English Platonists, most enjoyably Thomas Traherne, Peter Sterry and John Smith, all of whom are quoted in this study. There are few complete texts which are as valuable as Bonaventure's apart from, I would suggest, Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation*. This is a wonderful exploration of recovered innocence and felicity as a way of rediscovering the lost Eden.

His poems, read as a unified work, include the Hermetic use of Imagination, inspired by the

⁶ See Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams*. Wipf and Stock, 2005.

⁷ *Thomas Traherne: Centuries of Meditations*, 3:3. Bertram Dobell (Editor), Cosimo Classics, 2007 (first published 1908).

⁸ *Ibid.* 2:41.

esoteric teaching of the ancient writings associated with Hermes Trismegistus, the *Hermetica*.⁹ These had been thought to date from the time of Moses, but in Traherne's time were shown to date from the early centuries AD, so they may contain far older teachings. He wrote:

*Thoughts are the Wings on which the Soul doth flie,
Elijahs firey Charet, that conveys
The Soul, even here, to those Eternal Joys.
Thoughts are the privileged Posts that Soar
Unto his Throne, and there appear before
Our selvs approach. These may at any time
Abov the Clouds, abov the Stars may clime.
The Soul is present by a Thought; and sees
The New Jerusalem.*¹⁰

This might seem visionary and strange to us, but conveys an important part of the world that I was about to enter.

Here was a rare soul that saw the world as a whole – as a valley of vision – even within the Anglican Church. At that time, living in a bedsit in Teddington, I discovered the mystical poet was buried there. I went to the church. The vicar was cleaning, I seem to remember. He couldn't see why I should be interested.

Though I never saw his memorial, I gathered some knowledge of Traherne's influences: Plato and the lovely Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino. I felt there were many questions to answer.

In 1981, in a different bedsit, this time in Putney, I wrote a novel which put together many of the things I had discovered. It was just a private amusement. One of the characters was able to talk like this:

If we live in ourselves we're lifeless, meaningless, destructive, but once we find the flow of love, the swing of the music, we come to life. To join the dance is a strange delight. We find true joy, and, if it suits us, inspiration, only in the dance. It's not just people. It's everything. Every part of Nature follows the dance. Rocks and hills can arrange themselves, the stars themselves dance. We may not see the movement, but we can feel the tremor of joy when we join. When we give ourselves to the dance we

⁹ *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a New English Translation, with Notes and Introduction*. Brian P. Copenhaver (Editor), Reprint edition, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

¹⁰ Thomas Traherne: *Centuries of Meditations, Thoughts* V. Op. cit.

find it is all ours, and, more than that, it is all each and every dancer's. The patterns the dance weaves wind sideways through time and space. We may not see them but we can sense the moments of grace when we pass through those mysterious interstices. Love is never static, but active, and often difficult – sometimes a light pleasure, sometimes intense, the old white spiritual flame, agonising but always rewarding with joy. The dance moves towards the establishment of peace – but it will never end. When the work of this dance of Creation is complete we will see the pattern of the dance, as visionaries may see it now, but we will dance on to preserve the peace and imitate eternity. The dance matters. Love matters. Nothing else.

The Dance, obviously, began with Charles Williams. After a while I felt this image had become a bit corny, even twee – but I came back to it, as the title of this little book shows. After thirty-seven years that speech still makes sense, even if the rest of the novel doesn't.

Back in 1981, this seemed a long way from anything I could recognise in more sober religious circles. Years later, in the 1990s, I got to know Gordon Mursell, then Rector of Stafford where I had lived since 1982. He was working on his epic two volume study of *English Spirituality*.¹¹ He told me that, if I liked Traherne, I should read Peter Sterry – a little known 17th-century writer with important insights into musical theology. Gordon, who later became Bishop of Stafford (2005-2010), also introduced me to Bonaventure who has a special place in this story.

Bonaventure's was a theology that made complete sense of the world I had enjoyed for many years. I had no idea that there were such ideas in the Catholic Church. It was a different kind of God. In learning more about Bonaventure and the 13th century, I began to see what it was that changed – a separation from Creation and God.

It might be possible to trace a clear thread of the tradition of a harmonious cosmos, from its mysterious roots, perhaps common to Old Testament Hebrew and Greek tradition, through the centuries when Platonism and Christianity moved side by side, to a flowering in the 12th and 13th centuries. Then came a departure from mainstream western theology, with occasional revivals in the following centuries, often gleaming and once again fading from memory.

This is not just something of historical interest. It's the story of how we lost our relationship with Creation and the disastrous consequences of that loss, and the hope of recovering our place in the cosmos.

As a composer I am very interested in the idea of the "Work". People have a tendency to

¹¹ Gordon Mursell, *English Spirituality: From Earliest Times to 1700*. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

think of Creation as separate objects – a flower, a bird, etc. But there are no separate objects, indeed, objects are all part of us – not things “out there”.

I once asked a group of people what they thought of as “Works of God”. Some mentioned such objects, but one person talked of a bird seen through the window as they did the washing up. This led them to begin to talk of the complex world of relationships. The “Work” is the encounter with the bird, not just the bird. We all live in this infinitely complex cosmos, yet perhaps something in the over-rational part of our brain, or a fixed idea of what God is, prevents us from seeing that this, yes, even the washing up, not just the bird, is a “Work of God”.

None of what follows is in any way academic. It’s just one personal point of view.

WHY IS THERE ANYTHING?

Why is the cosmos so creative? Why, indeed, is there anything at all?

There is a simple answer. All things come from God. As the word “God” means very different things to different people, it can be a very unhelpful word to use. What, in this study, does “God” mean? What can be said of God? It is useful to begin with the absolute minimum.

God, let’s say, is the absolute Source of All Being – absolute simplicity, the absolute point of Unity. To the followers of Plato, it was preferable to refer to “the One”. This is something (though God cannot be said to be a thing) unknowably simple. We might imagine God, from our human understanding, in human terms. Such an image is, however, just a convenience, and can be very misleading. We have to keep reminding ourselves that God is beyond words and images – the ultimate source of all things, of all Being.

The Platonic tradition, developed over centuries, became increasingly subtle and complex. At its heart was the idea that all things came from Unity, the One, and, in some way, had an aspect of that Unity within them.

Even though Plato wrote his *Timaeus* a creation myth, Platonism tends to think of Creation as eternal, with no beginning or end. The philosophy of the One is about the Unity of Creation and its eternal Source, not about a process of creation.

In musical terms, there is a Platonic concept of Harmony but not of composition. Things are constantly being formed, in the same way as we may form or compose a new work. It seems obvious from experience that flowers, people, and so forth, are being made anew, forming as we look at them.

The Biblical creation myth, *Genesis*, is about the supposed beginning of all things, but it doesn’t mention the process of continuing Creation. It might seem very unhelpful and can cause problems if we try to impose this story on our own actual experience. It is much better, I would say, to think of *Genesis* as a parallel to Plato’s creation myth in *Timaeus*, which is about the harmony and inherent structure of the cosmos, rather than the process of its becoming.¹² The two stories may have common roots.

¹² Plato, *Timaeus*. For full text see <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1572>

To a composer, Creation is a dynamic thing. It may come from Unity, but is, nevertheless, creative. We might think of the creative energy that makes everything desire to be something, as Love.

This is where Christian Platonism has something to offer. The insistence that God is a God of Love gradually encouraged a Christian view of Creation to develop which was dynamic. It could begin to embrace the idea of a continuity of creation, in which new things came into being, whether a tree or a symphony. This process of understanding took hundreds of years, only forming a coherent theology in the 12th century.

The figure who may be considered as a stepping-stone between late Platonic philosophy and Christian theology is the mysterious “Pseudo-Dionysius”, who wrote in the fifth century AD. He was regarded as very high authority in the Church because he was wrongly believed to have been Dionysius the Areopagite, a follower of the apostle Paul, and inheritor of mystical secrets. Pseudo-Dionysius’s writings, perhaps inspired by Proclus, the last great Platonist, had a powerful influence on theology for centuries.

To this mysterious mystic, God was ultimately unknowable. Pseudo-Dionysius wrote of the knowledge of God that was hidden by “the cloud of unknowing” – God can only be experienced in contemplation when every trace of worldly or personal knowledge has been put aside.

These ideas became the basis for a tradition of spiritual writing throughout the Middle Ages. They are used in the final part of Bonaventure’s *The Soul’s Journey into God*,¹³ and are the basis for the English spiritual masterpiece *The Cloud of Unknowing*, an anonymous work that draws on the mystical tradition of Pseudo-Dionysius, written a century later.¹⁴

The influence of the later Platonists on Christian Theology is complex and mysterious. It is important to be aware that Platonism and Christianity are woven together in ways that are not immediately obvious and were certainly not apparent to the medieval theologians. Pseudo-Dionysius was revered because he was believed to have been a student of Paul, but he was actually a fourth-century student of the philosopher Proclus. He adapted Proclus’s hierarchy of pagan deities into his hierarchies of angels.

Proclus’s influence on the medieval mind was enormous. Proclus emphasised the value of material things and, importantly, argued that things approach Unity, or God, by being an

¹³ *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*. Ewert Cousins (Translator), Ignatius Brady (Contributor), Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1988 (first published 1978).

¹⁴ *The Cloud of Unknowing* by Anonymous. James Walsh (Translator), Harper Collins 2004 (first published 1375).

individual, a unity in themselves. This concept was easily compatible with Christian attitudes and was developed by Duns Scotus in the 13th century – but this is not often recognised as a Platonic attitude from Proclus. Even more significantly, the medieval theologians believed that *The Book of Causes* which they knew from Arabic sources, was a work by Aristotle, defining the Nature of the One God,¹⁵ but Thomas Aquinas, later in the 13th century, was able to identify the text as an adaptation of Proclus, whose original writings were only then being rediscovered. Some centuries later, quotations from Proclus would help prove that Pseudo-Dionysius was a follower of Proclus, not Paul.

It is almost impossible to separate the Christian from the Platonic. In effect there is one single tradition – but by understanding how much is shared by the two threads (or more, if we include Islamic tradition, which is also interwoven in the Middle Ages), it is possible to see what elements are specifically Christian. Perhaps, most importantly, ideas of God's intimate relationship with Creation through the Incarnation, which is rooted in all aspects of the material world including suffering and death - and Time.

Christians know God in Christ, yet God is paradoxical, a union of opposites. To Pseudo-Dionysius, God is infinitely simple and very different from what we might imagine a medieval image of God the Father to be:

*He is not one of those things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing in among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no-one from anything.*¹⁶

God is unknowable, yet some things can be said of God. According to Pseudo-Dionysius, God is Being – but, really, God is beyond even our ideas of being or non-being. What he means is that God, this unknowable absolute Unity, is the source of all Being. Just by being, a Franciscan would say, a thing reveals God, by sharing in God's Being.

Other things can be said of God: God is Life, Truth, Power and Wisdom. Anything that has these qualities receives them from God. It's not that they have a Truth – which in some way is made by God or resembles, God's Truth. It is the same Truth – something that has Truth participates or shares in, God's Truth. In fact, every kind of being comes from God.

But if God is this abstract, infinitely simple and infinitely remote concept, one might ask why is there anything other than God? Why is there Creation at all? Why isn't this God sufficient in

¹⁵ *The Book of Causes*, uploaded by Hamad Habad.

<https://www.scribd.com/document/345947576/The-Book-of-Causes-pdf>

¹⁶ *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Colm Luibheid (Translator), Paul Rorem (Foreword, Notes, and Translation Collaboration), New York, Paulist Press, 1987.

Himself, content to be alone?

The understanding of Creation which came to its flowering in the Franciscan tradition, stems from the concept of God's Goodness. God, absolutely simple and absolutely One, is absolutely Good. The Goodness in Creation shares in God's Goodness.

(This seems clear enough, but, as will be explained, it was a dispute over this idea which led to devastating changes in theology, and the loss of this entire view of Creation.)

It is in thinking about Good that we begin to understand the origin of Creation, and why there is anything. Nothing can be said to be Good if it jealously keeps that Good within itself. Goodness is inseparable from Love.

Surprisingly, Pseudo-Dionysius did not explain the relationship of Goodness to Love. Incredibly, the central role of Love in the existence of everything was not clearly stated until the 12th century, in the writings of Richard of St Victor, a Scottish born theologian (died 1173). His theology of Love begins with the very abstract idea of God, as found in the works of the fifth-century Pseudo-Dionysius.

Dionysius rejects everything that can be said of God other than the absolute simple statements: God is One, God is Good. This is close to Plato, whose reasoning defines a Source of All Being, which is absolute Unity, and is also absolute Good. But Plato got this from Pythagoras, who was said by later biographers to have acquired it from the followers of Moses.

Plato is a philosopher, not a theologian. If the medieval writers had known more of his works they might have seen that his very abstract God is also the source of Love and Virtue, and that philosophy tends to evaporate and leave a need for religion if any true knowledge of God, Love or Virtue, is to be found.

Richard shows that, if God is absolute Good, there must be an object of his Goodness. God is Love in the relationships of the Trinity, but that absolute Love must also be creative to be truly Good. Love cannot be contained within itself; it must have an object.

As Bonaventure (1221-1274) tells us: "Love comes from God's Unity and Goodness."¹⁷ This is the first direct statement that Love is the active cause of Creation.

Richard of St Victor uses the term "caritas" for this love, which translates as the Greek "agape", the word used in the *First Letter of John*, for "God is Love". Charity, caritas, tends to

¹⁷ Ilia Delio. *Simply Bonaventure: An Introduction to His Life, Thought, and Writings*. New City Press, 2001, p.41.

mean simple kindness, but the idea of creative love suggests something stronger than this. Richard explains that the supreme quality of Goodness is Charity, freely given Love. The creative force of God is desire, “eros”, and eros or “amor” becomes the term used in the mystical tradition, the Love that draws us to God.

If God’s desire creates the world, we can find in ourselves a desire to return to God. This is, again, a Platonic idea. What comes from Unity desires to return to Unity. This desire does not mean a literal return to the beginning – it can draw us to seek the Source of All Being within us, which is the mystical way. At the same time, it is this desire for Unity which draws things, and us, to be what we are, to have Unity within ourselves, to be an individual Work of God.

Thomas Gallus (c1200-1246), like Richard of St Victor, drew on Pseudo-Dionysius and developed the idea that knowledge of God was both intellectual and emotional. Ultimately love supersedes intellect. This became a key idea in the work of Bonaventure. Bonaventure and other Franciscan theologians had to use all the armoury of medieval intellectualism to argue against the destructive force of the rival systems and to justify the precedence of love over intellect.

To Gallus, intellectual knowledge falls away and love remains – there are no words. This working of Love is “eros” – Creation is erotic by nature. The mystery here is that Gallus’s system of mystical ascent, which circulated under Bonaventure’s name, is based on the sayings of Brother Giles, who, according to Brother Leo, was an ecstatic mystic.

Bonaventure uses Giles’s seven stages of contemplation and, to further complicate the relationship, a treatise which was circulated under Bonaventure’s name “The seven stages of contemplation” is actually by Thomas Gallus.¹⁸

Richard, Thomas, Francis, Giles and Bonaventure all took ideas that remained hidden but were not developed by Pseudo-Dionysius, and transformed them, at a time when Love and Nature were in the ascendant. In Platonic-Christian theology, it was quite possible to say that Creation flowed and was formed in Love and that everything sought, through Love, to reflect the Unity of God – or sought that Unity in mystical Love.

It seems absurdly simple, that everything that exists comes from Love. This central place of Love is also essential to our understanding of The Trinity. The concept of the Trinity shows that Love, and the whole idea of relationship, comes from God. The Work of Creation is the outpouring of God’s Love. God is Love.

¹⁸ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism: 1200-1350*. Herder & Herder, 1998, pp.77-78.

God is absolute Unity, the One, as Platonists would say. The concept of the Trinity, as Bonaventure would have understood it, is a way of declaring that God is absolutely One, though we may think of God in the world and experience God in our lives, in different ways.

We may think of God as the Source of all Being – whether or not we use the Biblical imagery of God as Father. We may be aware of God’s creative power, and of God presence in Creation. We may think of God as an energy that gives life, affects things, or inspires us. However three-dimensional this Unity is seen from within Creation, God is indivisibly One.

Bonaventure used the word “circumincessio”, from the Greek term “perichoresis” which has the same meaning, “dwelling within each other”, to refer to the way that these three apparent faces (technically referred to as “Persons”, which means something like “masks” and certainly does not mean they are in any way individual or separate) exist within one another, or as one thing. They dwell within each other. Because of this, God, the Source of all Being, is both unified and also contains the essence of love and relationship.

This love is the reason why anything exists. Love, and original Goodness, cannot be self-contained. It pours out, creating everything, as an object or outpouring of its own Love.

The term “perichoresis” is sometimes misunderstood as being derived from the Greek for “dance”, as if the three Persons of the Trinity were dancing together. This would have seemed a nonsense to Bonaventure and Pseudo-Dionysius. God is beyond any concept of rest or movement, or even beyond being and non-being.

However, if we think of Creation, pouring from this invisible source, which might be imagined as the “still point of the turning world”, we can hardly avoid thinking in terms of movement and dance, flowing from the “still point”.

“Creation is a Performance”, as American writer David Fideler said.¹⁹

So, however complex and imperfect the creation we experience, its source and driving power, is Love. Creation, simply by being, share God’s Goodness.

At this point it’s easy to say, “but Creation isn’t good! What about evil?” This is a question people have been asking for at least two thousand years. It might not be convincing or satisfactory to everyone, but I hope that looking at this process of Creation in terms of music and dance will help us to appreciate that this mystery is a way of understanding. Everything flows from God because God is Love.

¹⁹ David Fideler, lecture, London, 2016.

Bonaventure was influenced by the theology of the Eastern Church when east and west were divided, as they still are. He worked for reconciliation between the two churches, which became divided over one single word in their definition of the Trinity. Perhaps his style of theology was always intended to unite both sides?

It is impossible, from the point of view of this theology, to think in terms of Creation as something that has happened. Creation is a continual outpouring of creativity in which things are, very clearly, dancing. Things are constantly forming, becoming themselves, combining into other things, dividing and changing. Everything is continually being composed.

Bonaventure wrote of things in a process of creation, in effect, evolving:

*God created matter lacking in final perfection of form so that by reason of its lack of form and perfection, matter might cry out for perfection.*²⁰

To the early theologians, beginning with Augustine, Nature was understood to contain potential creatures, “seminal reasons”, which would come to life in later times. To think in terms of a Creation at a point in time, or at the beginning of time, obscures this important idea that things are continually being created, as we are ourselves. Even the Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Jesus, saw the *Genesis* story as the story of God’s pattern of Creation, outside of space-time.

²⁰ Bonaventure’s sentences, translated by Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*. Op. cit.

GOD SHINES FORTH

Many of us have a tendency to think of Creation as something made, just as we might make a seed cake. We mix the ingredients according to a recipe, our own memory or pure luck, bake it, take it out of the oven and put it down on the kitchen table. It now sits there as itself, an object, a thing achieved, but separate from its baker – and possibly too hot to handle.

We must forget any ideas of making or baking. Instead, think of that unknowable source of creativity and relationship, with what we call God – the Source of All Being – as the mysterious source from which every kind of thing flows, everything is flowing.

It might be helpful to think in terms of radiance, or a light projected from a source, rather than any kind of idea of God making things, as we bake a cake, and putting them down, finished and complete, and out of his hands.

There have always been two opposing ways of looking at this process of Creation: Creationism and Emanationism. Creationism, in this context, means a belief that God creates things which have an existence separate from Himself.

In contrast, Emanationism sees all things as radiating from God, not separate but belonging, perhaps not even seen as anything other than God. We can imagine the way in which a white light can split into a spectrum of colours, so when shining through an oil-wheel (as in a 60s rock concert) or being reflected by a glitter ball, it will produce moving, dancing colours.

Because nothing is separate, knowledge of Creation leads us back to Source. Bonaventure, the key writer on this tradition before things began to go horribly astray, wrote:

This the whole of our metaphysics: it is about emanation, exemplarity, and consummation; that is, to be illumined by spiritual ways and to be led back to the supreme being. ...Any person who is unable to consider how things originate, and how they are led back to their end, and how God shines forth in them, is incapable of achieving true understanding.²¹

The idea of Emanation comes from Plato, but Bonaventure, as a Christian-Platonist disagrees with Plato in an important detail. To Plato everything emanates from “the One” out of

²¹ *Bonaventure, On the Reduction of the Arts to Theology*. Zachary Hayes O.F.M. (Translation with Introduction and Commentary), New York, Franciscan Institute Publications, 1996.

necessity. Emanation is a way of understanding how material, changeable things, are reflections of ideal forms which are more real and unchanging, closer to Source.

As Bonaventure is thinking in terms of a Christian God, however unknowable, he cannot be referring to a creation that is automatic or inevitable. Creation must come about because God freely desires it. If God did not desire to be creative, nothing would exist.

Bonaventure's view of Creation is a product of that outpouring of Love that Richard of St Victor described – something which, surely, should be at the very centre of our theology, but which took over a thousand years to be explained in Christian terms. By the 13th century all this was just beginning to make sense – perhaps returning to its roots. Sadly, forces were at work that would undermine this brief period of enlightenment.

In this kind of theology, it is impossible to think of God in human terms, as an anthropomorphic Supreme Being, sitting on his sapphire throne, making plans, decisions and judgments. God is something abstract, if you like, but, at the same time, is as close to us as our own hearts.

We can know the unknowable through Christ, but Christ unites us with the ultimate mystery. God is ineffable, but never remote – because we are part of His endlessly emanating Love, being created in every moment. Nothing can confuse God's unity and simplicity. Everything emanates from God because Love is God, and God is Love.

This is how it was for Bonaventure, but this is by no means a universal way of understanding Creation. At this point some Christian traditions part company, with the division between Creationism and Emanationism.

If God is Love, it follows that all Creation is free – everything is created freely and has freedom. Everything must have free will. There would be no freedom to form new things if there were not also the freedom to go wrong. There would be no pure Love if everything were planned, fixed, or ordained by God.

Creation must be a dance of continual change. The source is not in the past but eternal. This outpouring is continuous, the source is always present. Though it might be easier to think of this emanation as an outpouring from a source “out there” – this thing or Source we refer to as God, is within the very essence of everything.

Bonaventure is often associated with the statement: “God is a circle whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere.” This quote is actually from an esoteric mystical text “The Book of the Fourteen Philosophers”, which might date from the fourth century AD.

It is, though, a very good way of reminding ourselves that this creative light is not radiating from somewhere “out there”, as if from a celestial heaven that can be imagined in space, but is coming from within everything. This light is as much within our own souls (which we can think of as being the essence of who we are) as in the remotest flash of energy in the infinite depths of outer space.

As Bonaventure wrote:

*Creation ... is like a beautiful song that flows in the most excellent of harmonies but it is a song that God freely desires to sing into the vast spaces of the universe.*²²

So, if Creation, this infinite outpouring, is free, then “why is there not chaos?” This is a fair question, and to the modern mind there seems to be an obvious flaw in this theology. What gives all this outpouring of creativity form and meaning? Why is it that this radiance of love produces the seed cake and assortment of buns and dainties, rather than the after-effects of a custard pie fight (I am thinking of the 1965 film “The Great Race”)?

The answer to this question comes in two parts, one of which is almost universally forgotten by theologians today. Everything that comes into being, in this process of emanation, begins as an image of its source, infinitely varied as light through a kaleidoscope or many prisms. It has unity and a desire to return to Source, by discovering Unity within itself.

Creation is not a chaos. The Cosmos has inherent Law within it. Things are not pouring out into a vacuum, but into a world which is governed by Harmony – the first of God’s creations.

²² Ilia Delio, *Simply Bonaventure*. Op. cit.

COMPOSING THE COSMOS

*And the union of many into one, bringing a divine harmony out of many scattered sounds, becomes one symphony, following one leader, the Word, and never ceasing till it reaches the truth itself with the cry, 'Abba Father.'*²³

A composer, or any other artist, may have the feeling that his work already exists, and that composing is a struggle to remember something which is already there, as much as to make something from nothing.

This effect of something having had a prior existence can be experienced even more powerfully from something which is unfinished. Something incomplete or imperfect can give us a sense that the complete and perfect work is out there, waiting to be discovered. We can be filled with a desire to complete it, or, if we can't, with an aching sense of mystery and loss.

Incompleteness can be used as a deliberate artistic device, as in Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan*. There is a power in unfinished works; the potential poem projects itself into the imagination.

This same quality, of a work pre-existing and desiring to be born, can be felt in any aspect of Nature or life. As someone once said to me in a dream, "God draws all things to their image in the Mind of God."

People may have a sense that their life has a plan, that some things are "meant to be." This is sometimes explained as the workings of Providence, as if God has planned in advance everything that will happen to them. There is good scriptural authority for thinking like this. The psalmist says to God:

*My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,
The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there was none of them.*²⁴

²³ *Clement of Alexandria, Exhortation to the Greeks*, Chapter IX. Jeffrey Henderson (Editor), Loeb Classical Library, 1919. <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL092/1919/volume.xml>

²⁴ *Psalm 139 15-16*, King James Version (KJV).

However, if the pattern of our lives were already ordained, where is the freedom which, to Bonaventure, is an essential quality of God and Creation?

This is, no matter how hard we think about it, a tough philosophical knot. If we choose to think in terms of a God who thinks and plans in this way, how does this fit in with the idea of a God who is eternal, outside time and equally present in every era? We might say that God knows everything – our beginning and our end. But if God knows our future, that doesn't mean we haven't arrived there by our own devices. It need not mean that we are not free to become what we might be, to fulfil our potential, in God's great experiment.

Plato suggested that all learning was a matter of remembering – that we had Truth within us. The idea that we had fundamental knowledge within our souls from the beginning was commonplace throughout the Middle Ages, but this was interpreted in different ways.

Plato and his followers were very concerned with the notion that things had a pre-existence, the idea of a pattern in the Mind of God, which they tried to rediscover or grow towards through a process of remembering. It was as if God had first made a World of Ideas, or of perfect forms. Somehow, between our Creation and the Mind of God, existed this perfect blueprint.

This was thought of as containing a pattern of every individual thing. The patterns in God's Mind may be the only ideal patterns which individual worldly things aspire to copy, perfectly or imperfectly. In some versions of this philosophy, these patterns are fundamental principles, such as the Good, Beauty, or Truth. Plato is always exploring alternative views and changing his mind. Bonaventure, too, uses different versions of this theory at different times.

In whichever way we try to define this World of Ideas, the effect, it seems to us, is still that it is "as if" God has a pattern of everything in his mind – which is eternal and outside time. And yet, as Bonaventure believed, there must be freedom within this plan. We can all make mistakes. The world depends on freedom, and that includes the freedom to go wrong.

His solution to this paradox is, I think, inspired – and for me, at least, it rings true. It follows the Franciscan rule of simplicity. Bonaventure asks, what is the simplest law that could ensure infinite creativity and also freedom? His explanation is that there is only one pattern for everything that is – the Word.

The Word contains everything. As with most of his theology, Bonaventure was not being original. He was drawing together old ideas into a coherent whole. The idea that Unity or "the One" was the only "Idea" in God's Mind is a Platonic concept. Bonaventure sees this makes perfect sense when "the Word" is viewed as part of the theology of the creative Trinity.

The Word, or Logos, means something more than “word” in everyday language. The Word is the reason or meaning of God. It is present in all created things. Rather than there being a world of ideal patterns to which everything aspires, there is simply this one thing – the Word.

As the *Gospel of John* declares, “In the beginning was the Word”. It was a reasonable to suppose that this one Word contained the pattern of all things. “Cosmos” is the word used in the opening of *John’s Gospel*, usually translated, very misleadingly, as “World”.

St Augustine wrote that the Father “begot one word in whom He said all things before the several works were made.”²⁵ We can derive a simple dynamic concept of the Cosmos from this: God’s Love is the cause of Creation. God has a fundamental desire to reveal Himself in the infinite variety of things He reveals through Creation.

Created things do not need a predetermined pattern. Things form in complete freedom, drawn by the desire to simply be, to reveal God by having Being. In being itself, by its very nature, a thing has Truth and Unity. Thus, everything comes from absolute Unity, and is drawn to reveal Unity, or God, from whence it came.

Therefore, things cannot move towards Unity by joining together to become one thing, as that would destroy God’s infinite creativity. Similarly, things cannot reveal Unity by becoming the same. There would be no freedom and creativity in that.

Creation, Bonaventure said, is “the fountain-fullness of God’s Being”.²⁶ In this, his best-known treatise, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, he explains that all things are “vestiges” of God, revealing God in different ways according to their nature. Elsewhere, however, Bonaventure seems to suggest that things reveal God by being what they are, as expressions of the Word.

This concept of things revealing God was developed more precisely by Duns Scotus, who made more of the value of individual things. Scotus’s ideas of the value of individuality – the more individual a thing is the more it reveals God – were taken up in poetry by Gerard Manley-Hopkins in the late 19th century:

*Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.*

²⁵ Quoted in Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, Meditation & Cognition in the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press, 2011.

²⁶ *Bonaventure: The Journey of the Mind to God*. Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M. (Translator), Stephen F. Brown (Edited, with Introduction and Notes), USA, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993.

And –

*... For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*²⁷

It follows from this that everything, in being itself, is an expression of God, the Word. The Word is also in Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that Jesus is the Wisdom of God: "... the word of God, which is at work in you believe."²⁸

It is true to say that by knowing everything as it is, we know Christ. Conversely, the more we are Christ-like (as St Francis), the more we see things as a "theophany", a revealing of God, a sacramental work.

Indeed, Creation, in its entirety, must express Unity. It must also be an image of the Word. Creation must, in fact, be a Cosmos – a Unity of Form and Beauty. The complexity of Creation is a product of God's absolute simplicity.

This idea, of all things freely expressing the Word, is of enormous importance, and I am not sure that Bonaventure realised the implications.

The creation of things, and our own lives, need not be pre-determined by Providence. Creation is God's experiment. This "Dance of Creation" has life, death, change, constancy, beauty and horror, all embodied within it. Some things appear to us to be 'good', some 'bad' – often impossible to define. There is, nevertheless, a potential goodness in Creation because all things flow from God's Love.

We must see things as a whole and not look for God only in the comfortable, concordant things. It is a fundamental law that Truth can only lead to God. Even dreadful things can reveal God to us when we see them as True. Knowing reality is a first step to God.

What are these things that reveal the Word? If God is revealed in all things, the Word expressed through the infinite variety of Creation, everyone can know God – through everything "out there", and, also, within ourselves. We too, and everything within us, are an expression of the Word.

This premise is certainly implied in Bonaventure's theology, particularly in his theology of

²⁷ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *As kingfishers catch fire*. Penguin Little Black Classics, 2015.

²⁸ *1 Th. 2:13*, International Standard Version (ISV).

Imagination, which influenced his meditations on the *Tree of Life* ('Lignum Vitae').²⁹ If we can know God through Creation, in ourselves, and in contemplation, does this begin to undermine the Church's role in salvation? Do we need to be saved?

The Franciscans, including Bonaventure the "Seraphic Doctor" and Duns Scotus the "Subtle Doctor", also tended to chip away at the weight given by the Church to sin. Nothing they wrote was heretical, but some of it was put aside, left on the shelves of inaccessible parts of a library. Here was found the shocking book that is the key to Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, which gives a very good picture of the disputes in the Franciscan order in the 13th century.³⁰

And so –

My own phrase, remembered from a dream, was "All things are drawn by love to reveal God." Not long ago, I was delighted to find the same thought, quoted by Joseph Milne, that Bonaventure sees "Divine Love as the power that draws all things to Unity in the Mind of God."³¹

Everything that shares Being with God and is an expression of the Word. Everything comes from that absolute Oneness and, as Bonaventure's theory of emanation tells us, seeks to return to its Source. This does not mean, as in other religious traditions, that everything moves in great cycles, returning to the beginning, as if the universe was collapsing in on itself, and starting again.

What Bonaventure means is that everything seeks to return to Unity by becoming what it should be – like Hopkin's kingfisher, or the seed cake, which is just, oh, that delicious seed cake, communicating joy with a cup of Earl Grey tea.

²⁹ *Bonaventure: The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*. Ewert Cousins (Translator), Ignatius Brady (Contributor), Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1988 (first published 1978).

³⁰ Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*. Vintage Classics, 2004 (first published in English 1983).

³¹ Joseph Milne, *Metaphysics and the Cosmic Order*. Temenos Academy, 2008.

WORKS

What are these “Works of God?”

This seems to be the most difficult part of this theology to grasp.

Is there something in the human mind which makes us think of things, of all kinds, as separate objects? Nothing is ever “separate”. Nothing is ever an “object”. Everything is part of the cosmos, which is the expression of the Unity from which it springs.

We also, perhaps, have a tendency, when asked to think of Works of God to think only of physical objects, especially natural things like flowers and living creatures. This might be a surprising question – even slightly mad – but why are works of the imagination, even dreams, less real than trees and mountains?

Is it something to do with the story of the seven days of creation, which in *Genesis* talks only of natural things being made, at the beginning, as if God has put them together, placed them down and left them? This implies that God has no further contact with nature. And why limit our view to physical objects? This was not the view of theologians before the Age of Reason.

All Christian churchgoers, whatever their denomination, will recite the words of the Apostles’ Creed, stating that God “made all things, visible and invisible.” This is, surely, completely inclusive. It not only includes things that are non-physical, but it also says, without any shadow of doubt, that God made everything. There is no possibility, according to this, that any lesser deity, good or malevolent, made any part of the world – or even, if you want to see it that way, that we can claim responsibility for anything that is made, anything we make ourselves.

A work of Creation might not be a tree, or a forest – but a walk in a forest. Even a flower is affected by its environment. Every person becomes what they are through relationship with other people, other things.

This is a very good example of what this world, this cosmos, is like. It can also demonstrate, if we think about that moment in the kitchen, that Works are about forming. The bird, breakfast things, the lady, the washing-up liquid, the window – are all Works of God – potential epiphanies and sources of grace, come together, forming the Work.

A clear theological explanation is hard to find. We can read Bonaventure and Scotus and still think of Works as individual things. Perhaps that is because we read a text and see just words, asking, “what does it mean?” The theologians (and apostles) would not have had our modern, narrow-minded perspective. They were used to Scripture as a performance, living in a forest of words that opened-up new vistas and meanings. They would have lived in a world in which everything was from God, everything had Unity, everything existed in their souls. Nothing was “out there”. Nothing was “an object”.

A rare treasure, from a time when nature was in the process of being cut away from us by changing perceptions and misunderstandings, comes in the writing of Peter Sterry, one of those great writers whose spirit overrides his assumed theology.

Sterry (1613-1672) was a Calvinist, a Puritan preacher, at one time Oliver Cromwell’s chaplain. He wrote sermons declaring that the success of the New Model Army in Ireland was a sign that they were doing God’s work. After the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, when Charles II returned to England, he retired to a house at Sheen Abbey, near Kew, where he lived in a family community, a puritan parallel to Eliot’s Little Gidding. There is no-one more peaceful, more tolerant, or with a better understanding of the way Creation is a performance than Sterry. He was a Platonist at heart and a musician.

He is very clear that every Work is an expression of the Word. He knows that, because all Works are from God, the source of Creation, they not only ceaselessly combine to make new works, but they do so for pleasure, in the dance of Divine Love. The Idea (in the Platonic sense) of each Work is the Word:

... Every Idea of each Creature is this Idea, bringing forth itself according to the inestimable Treasures of the Godhead in it, into innumerable distinct figures of itself in the unconfined Varieties of its own Excellencies and Beauties, so that it may enjoy itself, sport with itself, in these, with endless and ever new Pleasures of all Divine Loves.³²

This vision of the creative, endlessly forming, cosmos, is a very important part of the more recent and radical approach by the contemporary Franciscan, Ilia Delio. She expresses her vision of a Creation evolving towards what she calls “Catholicity”, becoming part of the whole, the Unity.³³ This recent vision in the early 21st century is not dissimilar to that of the 17th century, but in the centuries between this outlook was lost almost completely, apart from by a few ‘mad’ visionaries.

³² Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Peter Sterry. Platonist and Puritan, 1613-1672. A biographical and critical study with passages selected from his writings*. New York. Greenwood Press, 1968. p.149.

³³ Ilia Delio, *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*. Orbis Books, 2015.

This awareness of the dynamic creativity of the cosmos, affecting us even at the kitchen sink, is thrilling, joyful, possibly startling or even terrifying. If it isn't, then you are missing the point.

It is surprising that this Truth – that no Work is separate, or even static – is not clearly stated in Delio's very useful short book, *A Franciscan View of Creation*. There is one comment, however, which implies it, and should leap off the page as something wonderful and astounding:

*Christ is the meaning and model of creation and every creature is made in the image of Christ. Because creation is centred on Incarnation, every leaf, cloud, fruit, animal and person is an outward expression of the Word of God in love... This means that sun, moon, trees, animals, stories, all have life only in Christ and with Christ, for Christ is the Word through whom all things are made.*³⁴

When I first read this (in the car, parked under the trees at Seven Springs, near Stafford), I shouted aloud "Hurrah!".

My own anecdotes and autobiographical ramblings are also themselves Works of God, formed of many influences, all working together. It's worth spending time meditating on how many things, and how many people, came together to make even that simple encounter with the bird possible, sharing in its creation.

"Creation is a Performance," said David Fideler.

A performance implies a continuous creation in which everyone is involved. When we think of music, we could say that a musical work only really exists when it is a performance in which the composer, performers and audience all play a part – they are co-creators. The Work may be beautiful and reveal the Word, or it may be a piece which is searingly tragic and pained, but still has Truth.

There is another dimension to any performance. This is explained by lutenist Anthony Rooley in his book *Performance: Revealing the Orpheus Within*.³⁵ Rooley took this theory of the effect of performance from *The Courtier* by the Renaissance writer Baldassare Castiglione (1478-1529), who looked at courtly behaviour.³⁶ The ideal of good manners was all about treating life as a performance, in which one had to achieve the right balance in relationship with others in conversation and action, so that everyone lived together in harmony – and avoided stepping on each other's toes.

³⁴ Ilia Delio, *A Franciscan View of Creation: Learning to Life in a Sacramental World*. The Franciscan Institute, 2004.

³⁵ Anthony Rooley, *Performance: Revealing the Orpheus Within*. Element Books, 1990.

³⁶ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (first published 1528).

See https://philosophynow.org/issues/107/The_Book_of_the_Courtier_by_Baldassare_Castiglione

This is, in fact, the principle of Peace, as defined by Pseudo-Dionysius – not silent inactivity but a state where everything is free to be itself – which depends very much on courtesy and right relationships:

Now, the first thing to say is this: that God is the Fount of Very Peace and of all Peace, both in general and in particular, and that He joins all things together in an unity without confusion whereby they are inseparably united without any interval between them, and at the same time stand unmixed each in its own form, not losing their purity through being mingled with their opposites nor in any way blunting the edge of their clear and distinct individuality.³⁷

This is the essential quality of a dance. A dance could be said to be Divine Peace in action. All human relationships, to be Good, must embody the characteristics of the Dance. Love depends exactly on this definition of Peace, as Plato explained in his *Symposium*. In his search for Truth, Socrates finds that his quest is ultimately about the search for Peace.³⁸

Castiglione’s theory of Performance can be applied to the formation of any Work of God, from a speck of dust to a nation. The performers, music and audience all share in the performance. We need to learn skills: how to play, listen, love in harmony with others and with nature. We participate at all levels, as co-creators.

A very important aspect of Castiglione, which might remind us of St Francis’s approach to life, is “sprezzatura” – the spirited, careless quality. There has to be a lightness of touch for everyone and everything to bring life and spirit to a performance. The key point, though, is “Grazie”. Rooley says that this is not the same thing as Divine Grace, but surely it is?

The performance, the music, the response of the audience, can all be inspired and create a wonderful effect, but Grazie is a rare and special gift – that moment of gold, when everything comes together and reveals, just in that flash, Truth. This is, surely, how the world is.

Everything in Nature is performing all the time. We can be aware of the Word in the process of anything being revealed, in any part of the world we experience, but these flashes of grace – that unpredictable, rare gift – might happen at any time and present us, suddenly, with a glimpse of God. The Performance might be something astounding, or completely trivial or absurd. It might be the shock of love at first sight, a performance of the most profound and

³⁷ *Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, 11. C. E. Rolt (Translator), Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Printed London, SPCK, 1920.
<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/rold/dionysius.html> (2000).

³⁸ Plato, *Symposium*. Written 360 BC, Benjamin Jowett (Translator). Full online text
<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/symposium.html>

delightful kind. It might only be a sudden spark, but that gleam is something that stays with us – a revelation or epiphany of God – confirming the faith that this sometimes chaotic dance has heaven within it.

Performance implies a continuous creation. New works are forming or struggling to be born, striving to discover what they are, to reveal an underlying Unity.

The same is true of us. As human beings, we spend our lives trying to uncover our own souls and become what we could be. Any “thing” or human person can only find that Unity, which might never be more than a dream, or a light far away in the night, by interacting, performing with other things. We might think we know who we are and what matters to us, but then we taste that seed cake – hear a song from that place we had never heard of or wander into an East End alley – and realise how little we knew of the potential of what was within us...

Perfection is only known in those moments of grace – and it comes from God. The world is constantly creating, like a vast experiment. We are not to think of any performance as something complete, or perfect. Every performance contains life and death, love and pain. It must, to be alive, contain concord and discord. Just as darkness is an absence of light, harmony is meaningless without discord.

This is more than a convenient musical metaphor. Music is not a sign or metaphor for the Cosmic Performance – it is a part of it – and Music is the most direct means that we have of understanding the language of Creation. This concept would not have been reflected upon before the 16th century.

Harmony was the common way of understanding the inherent Law in Nature (of which more will be said later), and most musical performance was thought of as an attempt to express this harmony. From the time of the Renaissance, music in the west began to experiment with the expression of human feeling and emotion, inspired by a belief that the ancient Greeks had the ability to move people in an almost (or actual?) magical way.

Music began to be based on contrast, with an increasing use of discord for expression and to give a sense of movement. By the early 17th century, music was philosophical, it could be complex and dark. Performance showed, if it wished, that even the most painful sound could convey meaning.

This is such an important way of understanding what Creation’s Performance is like. It is so rarely written about, that it’s worth quoting again the mystic and musician, Peter Sterry:

Every single Note in this sacred Musicke is a particular and singular Forme in the Divine Works ... These single Notes are contrary to another, are distinguished into flatts, and sharpes, Concords and Discords ... like to the Dancings of Witches, or howlings of Devills ... the Divine Harmony ... reconciles, and marries them into answering, and suitable Notes ... Thus they become the sweetest Rellishes of the Musicke, most necessary, and delighfull Parts of it, which bear the Universall Harmony Itselpe, as a Pearle-seed in their Bosomes, and a Crowne of Dyamonds upon their Heads.³⁹

To Sterry, even Hell can be thought beautiful in its place. We are reminded the risen Christ shows his wounds.

We can be aware of these Works and willingly join the Performance. We can become part of the Performance and know ourselves to be co-creators of the Dance – but we must also be aware that there are Works we cannot see or understand. Why should they limit themselves to our finite place and time? Perhaps, for a few steps, we join a dance that weaves through Creation in a way we could never follow. It might give us a spark of delight, or the sense that someone has trodden on our grave.

Works come in an infinite variety. I have a personal interest in ‘Spirit of Place’ – this is about our relationship with any small part of the world which we see as having a unity or meaning. It is no different to our relationship with any other kind of Work, but it is another useful way of reminding ourselves that all Works are made up of many elements in relationship, whether a forest, a symphony, cake, or visiting bird.

There is mystery in this – which draws our love. Mystery can be the intoxicating sense of touching something which is forming or has a form, but, as yet, we cannot understand. If we try find an answer to this mystery, we can lose our way through the forest.

In fact, surely it is increasingly obvious that Love really is the key to Creation? This makes me wonder, is Love the principal topic of study in the training of Priests?

Remember the church and well at Stevington? The church itself, its builders, the centuries of parishioners, the water that might clear my jaded eyes – here comes old Bunyan walking up the wet path through the gloomy Gunnera, like sinister giant rhubarb, in his big black boots – and if I follow the path I come to the osier beds where he has been baptising in the Ouse, and the Ouse, for a while, is the Jordan.

³⁹ N. I. Matar (Editor), *Peter Sterry: Select Writings*. New York, Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 1995.

This is what a place is like, with its multitudinous layers – and what any Work is like if we are really living in this New Creation – this Creation which was restored, or simply revealed, when in another place, both a stable and cave, shepherds and mystics heard angels singing.

There is a tradition that places, or any work of nature, can echo with deeper meaning when they reflect a scene in Scripture – as the river reflects the Jordan. I remember the tiny church, with its wobbly tower, the windows inscribed: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills”.⁴⁰ Here, at Capel y Ffinn, the Black Mountains of Wales, seen from that unexpected shrine to Our Lady, are the hills the psalmist sang about.

Bonaventure explains:

*For every creature is by its nature
a kind of effigy and likeness of the eternal Wisdom,
but especially one
which in the book of Scripture
has been elevated by the spirit of prophecy
to prefigure spiritual things ...*⁴¹

Such elevated places resonate deep in our memory, what some may call archetypes. A wood can transform as “The Magic Wood”, where we might find the narrow path taking us deeper than the confines of the wood should, by the nature of its restricted view, allow. Other places seem to draw down all darkness and discord. Then there are valleys which are, truly, an Earthly Paradise.

This is easy to understand if we make that leap away from “nature” into Nature. Such places, whether natural woodland and valleys, or beautifully landscaped gardens designed for aesthetic effect, resonate with Eden or the Temple – they have that ‘right’ balance of Harmony and Unity.

I can take you there. Such a place is no less real if it’s in a book.

At the centre of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is the Earthly Paradise where Dante meets the most mysterious character in the entire epic. She is Matelda, seen wandering by the river amongst the flowers. Surely, she must be so perfectly balanced in her spiritual and physical nature to live in such Earthly Paradise? If she were dead, we would have encountered her in heaven, or as a visitor from heaven, as with Beatrice. There is nowhere more real and tangible, no-one more real than Matelda, who seems to belong to this Earthly Paradise:

⁴⁰ *Psalm 121*, King James Version (KJV).

⁴¹ *Bonaventure: The Soul’s Journey into God*. Op. cit.

*A lady all alone, who went along
 Singing and culling floweret after floweret,
 With which her pathway was all painted over.
 "Ah, beauteous lady, who in rays of love
 Dost warm thyself, if I may trust to looks,
 Which the heart's witnesses are wont to be,
 May the desire come unto thee to draw
 Near to this river's bank," I said to her,
 "So much that I might hear what thou art singing.
 Thou makest me remember where and what
 Proserpina that moment was when lost
 Her mother her, and she herself the Spring.
 As turns herself, with feet together pressed
 And to the ground, a lady who is dancing,
 And hardly puts one foot before the other,
 On the vermilion and the yellow flowerets
 She turned towards me ..."⁴²*

This place, with its twin rivers, brings together classical and Christian imagery of the Earthly Paradise and Eden.

This reminds us that the bird seen through the widow, the Bedfordshire well, the Welsh hills, the Earthly Paradise, the stable or cave – all manner of dances – are all memories that we are all part of this one Work, one Cosmos, one Creation. We are never merely observers. It's not easy. Yet this is the same world in which we live, now, but we narrow our vision, close our ears, deny the imperceptible dimensions of our world are real. This is no different from the way some people deny the existence of some individuals and races to be as real or valid as their own. We only live fully in the world when there are no barriers between the senses, memories and imagination.

To quote Hippocrates (in 400 BC): "The life so short, the craft so long to learn."⁴³

Even an audience at a concert has a lot to learn to be able to participate in the Music. As co-creators of everything that has Being, an audience enjoys what Creation has to offer and then offers it back to God. Simply by experiencing the world we share in the creation of memories, feelings, and our own stories.

⁴² Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Purgatory, Canto XXVIII 'The River Lethe, Matilda', translated by H. W. Longfellow (1807-1882), Digireads.com Publishing, 2015. <http://gutenberg.org/ebooks/1004>

⁴³ Hippocrates, *Aphorisms*, Section 1, para. 1. Francis Adams (Translator). <http://classics.mit.edu/Hippocrates/aphorisms.html> (original translation by Chaucer).

If we are in true relationship with the cosmos, we might find ourselves drawn by the unfinished Work, that source of Mystery and desire. Perhaps we are moved to place a tower on a hill which demands a tower, or to clear a river of accumulated beer bottles.

Even more importantly, we participate in 'spirit of place' through prayer. There is nowhere so damaged and desolate that it is divided from us. Our prayers, and simply our presence, are part of that relationship, and draw us to God.

Nothing of this is "supernatural". We know there is no need for spirits and demons to explain natural processes, whether an earthquake, the growth of a tree or the formation of a sonata. The Holy Spirit is quite a different thing. Here, I'm equating it with "the love that moves the sun and stars." All this working of Love is God working through Nature herself, and through our own human senses, imagination and soul.

Each of us is a Work, searching for what he or she should be. A person is always changing, always in performance. The sense of vocation brings a sense of possibility, the mystery of what we might become. This is Christ, the Word in us, drawing us in Love to reveal Himself. We cannot predict what chance encounter might turn us on a different path; there is never a fixed pattern. If we cling to a certain image of ourselves and go against unexpected change, we can create destructive tensions in ourselves. Yet there is a goal of vocation, and it never changes, but, as for everything else, it is simply the Word.

This is the dynamic, dancing, Creation. This world is the song that Clement of Alexandria and Bonaventure wrote about. This is the world the dancing, singing and slightly crazy Francis lived in, a world where the sun, moon and stars, birds, wolves and lepers, were his brothers and sisters.

In the early Church, the image of the Dance was common. The Apocryphal *Acts of John* has a scene where Christ dances with his disciples on the eve of his death:

The whole universe shares with the dance on high.

He who does not dance

*Does not know what is coming to pass.*⁴⁴

Is this new Creation, which we enter when we join the Dance, "the Kingdom of God"? Many theologians suggest this not somewhere that can be thought of in geographical terms. It is not a world as such but a place of God, the realm of Creation to come when this world abides by

⁴⁴ Peter Dronke, 'Imagination in the Late Pagan and Early Christian World. The first nine centuries A.D.' Sismel, Edizioni del Galluzzo. *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 56, No. 2, April 2005. Published online by Cambridge University Press, May 2005. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002204690522328X>

laws from above. This perhaps suggests that this world is fallen, detached from God. Is the idea of a fallen world compatible with this theology, or is it a view that comes from the time before we lost this optimistic vision?

The Laws, as we shall see, are within Creation, renewed in the Incarnation, to be rediscovered. They are not to be imposed from anywhere external.

Surely, it is impossible to read St John's Gospel – the mystical reflection of the Word – without being reminded of the true "Kingdom of God" within Creation?

Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."⁴⁵

By Mystery, I mean the religious practice which is intended to bring us closer towards divine Unity – in Christian terms, the Eucharist. It is about entering a world that is already here. Can the holy well at Stevington, in Bunyan country, clear the eyes that our human stupidity has clouded since our baptism – and bring us inner vision?

The apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, written sometime later than *John's Gospel*, but, perhaps, with older material, tells us:

Jesus said, "If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the Kingdom is in the sky', then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you."

"It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying 'Here it is' or 'There it is.' Rather the Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."⁴⁶

This is less Gnostic (which often implies a denial of the material world) than the Biblical "the Kingdom of God is within you."⁴⁷ It seems to accord with the Creation I am describing – a unity of "within" and "without."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Gospel of John* 3:3-5, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁴⁶ *Gospel of Thomas*, 3 & 114, *The Nag Hammadi Library*. James M. Robinson (Editor), E. J. Brill, 1978.

⁴⁷ *Luke* 17:21, King James Version (KJV).

⁴⁸ *The Gospel of Thomas* version of the saying supports the King James Bible's use of the word "within".

It could be said that the Garden which Dante described, and the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, are images of the world that has been lost, which might one day be recovered. They are also places, or states of being, which are here now. Certain gardens may become, if only for a time during certain seasons, an Earthly Paradise. The Celestial City can, for example, be glimpsed in certain lights in the meanders of the River Ouse.

These places can also be present in our imagination. They are, as Henry Corbin would say, “imaginal” worlds which are as real as anything material.⁴⁹ If we can bring imagination, feeling, love and the world of the senses together, we can re-enter the Garden, or the Holy City, and discover our whole Cosmos lies within it.

This is no escape from reality? It’s a return to reality. It’s a case of seeing reality as a whole, and, as should be clear from all this, the spark of grace can be found in anything, however simple, if we see it as is, with feeling and imagination, in true relationship without imposing ourselves, or imposing a “meaning” of our own.

On a journey I made along the Welsh border, photographing the mysterious and liminal places (including the aforementioned Capel y Ffin), the real epiphany was found in a shop window in a small village:

*Autumn leaves scattered.
A few tins of beans and soup.
An autumn window.*

Tom Cheetham, in *Imaginal Love*, writing about the meaning of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman, suggests that all we should be saying is: “Look! Just look! Look at what there is!”⁵⁰ There are very big questions here.

If Creation is like this, if it communicates God, it must, potentially, communicate to everyone. It is totally inclusive. We all live in the same world. Everyone’s stories are our stories. There are no “Christian” trees or “Buddhist” trees. All trees are the Word of God, and our understanding must be adjusted to this fact. At the same time, it is useful to remember the epigram of Charles Williams (1886-1945): “This also is Thou; Neither is this Thou.”⁵¹

We can have our own religious discipline as a way of rediscovering this Unity, but, in the end,

⁴⁹ Ali Shariat, ‘Henry Corbin and the Imaginal: A Look at the Concept and Function of the Creative Imagination in Iranian Philosophy’. *Diogenes*, No 156, Winter 1991.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/039219219103915605>

⁵⁰ Tom Cheetham, *Imaginal Love. The meaning of Imagination in Henry Corbin and James Hillman*. Thompson, Conn: Spring Publications, 2015.

⁵¹ Charles Williams, *War in Heaven*. William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1930.

it is the same end for everyone. We need to think carefully about the implications of this.

What we experience, in seeing things as they are, is something beyond – the touch of grace. How do we live like this? How do we make ourselves better performers, dance with sprezzatura, and avoid bumping into people? (If we do, we can apologise gracefully, perhaps, and if appropriate, laugh.)

It is possible to live as Francis did. But, apart from those few moments of vision, it's a very hard struggle.

As Traherne wrote:

You never Enjoy the World aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your Veins, till you are Clothed with the Heavens, and Crowned with the Stars: and Perceive yourself to be the Sole Heir of the whole World: and more than so, because Men are in it who are every one Sole Heirs as well as you. Till you can Sing and Rejoice and Delight in God, as Misers do in Gold, and Kings in Scepters, you never Enjoy the World.⁵²

⁵² Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations*, 1:29. Op. cit.

HARMONY

Everything that exists, every Work, from the simplest atom to the most complex life, city, or symphony, flows from God as the Source of All Being. It is an expression of that one Idea, the Word.

How is it possible for such an effusion of creativity to find a state of peace, as Pseudo-Dionysius described, in this world of Creation, this Cosmos, without causing chaos and confusion? How is the Cosmos a Dance rather than a riot? A seed cake rather than an explosion in a custard factory?

We could answer, “everything follows the laws of nature, or physical cause and effect.” Indeed, in which case there would be no need for God. However, that seems an inadequate explanation for the kinds of Works described in the previous section.

A suitably Christian answer might be, “God guides all things.” Such an outpouring of invention surely needs God’s hand to guide everything towards form, to fulfil its intended design. However, that comes from a way of thinking of Creation and God and, as mentioned, is not the same understanding as Francis, Bonaventure, or anyone before the 16th century, would have had. In their world, God is responsible for everything, and in all things, so his means of governing Creation comes from within.

The essential difference is that, from an unknown distant time until the confusion and misunderstanding caused by the discoveries of astronomers in the 16th century, it was assumed that Creation was, indeed, a Cosmos, a Unity which had order and beauty within. The Cosmos had its own law – God’s first Work of Creation – which governed everything and was embedded in all things that came into being.

In its simplest form, this law was Number, but that is a rather dry and cold way of thinking of what was, at heart, Harmony. In *The Soul’s Journey into God*, Bonaventure writes of the Numbers, a term which is far better read as Harmonies, that exist through all Creation. He refers to St Augustine’s *On Music*, which followed earlier sources going back to Plato:

[Who] indicates the differences of numbers [harmonies] which ascend step by step from sensible things to the Maker of all so that God may be seen in all things.⁵³

⁵³ Bonaventure: *The Soul’s Journey into God*. Op. cit.

Number and Harmony are signs of the ultimate Unity of everything. We can, mathematically and philosophically, say that all numbers derive from the One. We can demonstrate, musically and mathematically, that all harmonies can be derived from one note. Harmony and Number pervade Creation – they guide the Cosmos.

Nothing in Creation, ourselves included, is controlled by Providence, in the sense of a pre-ordained plan. My dictionary defines Providence as “...conceived as omnisciently directing the universe and the affairs of humankind with wise benevolence.” There is no need for the hand of God to guide every stage in our, or anything else’s, growth – there need be no divine plan other than one Idea in the Mind of God. Creation is a vast experiment in which an infinite number of possibilities are explored. Every Work needs no other goal than the desire to express God, the Word, which is also Christ, drawn by the energy of the Holy Spirit, which all things experience as Love. God’s plan is Love.

God, as Love, must allow the Dance to live and grow in freedom. There is no chaos in Creation because Harmony has guided chaos to find form. Harmony was God’s first work, the first Created Thing – not so much a plan or pattern, more a Law embedded in Creation.

This is a very ancient idea. Its origins are mysterious.

Throughout the first 1400 years of Christianity, the key source for this understanding was Plato. Plato (427-347 BC) explored the origins of Creation in several dialogues, but *Timaeus* was the only significant piece of his writings known throughout the Middle Ages, and then only in part. His explanation of the nature of the Cosmos was revered through the early centuries of Christianity and was often treated as divinely inspired. Here was a Greek philosopher speaking in terms of a creator God, a single first cause and maker of everything.

This story of Creation was deemed to be compatible with the story of the seven days of creation in *Genesis*, which takes its name from the Hebrew opening words, “in the beginning”. It was accepted as a useful interpretation by the Jewish philosopher Philo, a contemporary of Jesus. Philo explained that God also created Time, and that the story of seven days was an allegory of the pattern of Creation, outside time. This was something deeply Holy that remained secret.

According to Margaret Barker in her book *Temple Mysticism*, the creation story was one that was not permitted to be read aloud.⁵⁴ Medieval minds might have been unaware that this compatibility was due to the fact that Plato’s story had much more ancient roots – it probably came from the same source as *Genesis*.

⁵⁴ Margaret Barker, *Temple Mysticism: An Introduction*. SPCK Publishing, 2011.

The Renaissance philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) was the first to translate all of the works of Plato, which had been recovered by way of the Islamic world, into Latin. Ficino saw that Plato's account came from Pythagoras:

*Just as Plato devotes his energies, in the Parmenides, to encompassing all matters divine, in the same way he embraces, in the Timaeus, all things natural; and in both dialogues he is principally a Pythagorean, his discourse being uttered through the mouths of Pythagoreans.*⁵⁵

Pythagoras lived in the fifth century BC. He is a mysterious figure who is believed to have been the first to discover that Creation had an inherent Law of Harmony within it, yet even he is said to have received this secret from more ancient sources.

Creation, according to Plato, is a Cosmos. Cosmos means "ornament". It implies a beautiful whole. The Cosmos is Good because God created a universe which reflected his own Goodness. It has fundamental Order in every part, in every facet, however complex and imperfect it may seem.

Plato explains how the creator made the Cosmos, by firstly making a pattern, not in the sense of a plan of everything that would be made, but a blueprint of fundamental principles, or laws, which would establish guidelines of everything to be created. As always, Plato describes a way of looking at things, a way of understanding, in complicated terms, not to be taken literally. This pattern, as if made from paper – a celestial origami – the first created thing, is not an active force but a guiding principle, which Plato calls the "World Soul".

The use of the term World Soul, with its implication that Nature is a single living being, led to confusion when Christian scholars tried to adapt Plato's philosophy in Christian terms. In the 12th century, Peter Abelard (1079-1142)⁵⁶ came into conflict with Bernard of Clairvaux (c.1090-1153) who denounced his teachings to the pope as heretical, over Abelard's suggestion that the World Soul was the Holy Spirit. This seems incredible for a French medieval theologian, when the World Soul is very clearly defined by Plato as something made by God. This should, according to the most important tenets of orthodox theology, mean that it cannot be equated with the Holy Spirit, which is, by definition, not made, but *is* God.

The key to the World Soul is Number. The same mathematical principles are true of everything and are an expression of the Unity from which they come. While this seems a very cold, abstract way of thinking, the student of Plato would understand that this reverence for the

⁵⁵ *All Things Natural, Ficino on Plato's Timaeus*. Arthur Farndell (Translator), Shephard-Walwyn, 2010.

⁵⁶ The love story of Abelard and Héloïse has been alluded to by many writers. See *The Letters of Abelard and Héloïse*. Michael Clanchy (Editor), Betty Radice (Translator), Penguin Books, revised edition 2004.

divine value of number originates from Harmony. This is the secret of the Cosmos. All things express Harmony. Harmony was reflected in the structure of the Cosmos itself.

From very ancient times until the 16th century, it was assumed that the sphere of the Earth was the whole of material Creation. The Earth was at the centre of a much larger Cosmos made up of transparent spheres on which the planets turned, and beyond them, the sphere of the stars.

The clearest description of this singing Cosmos from the classical period is in Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*. Cicero describes the order of the planets and their spheres, and the music they make: "What is this sound that fills my ears, so loud and sweet?" asks Scipio.⁵⁷

This is no physical phenomenon to be observed scientifically. Scipio's guide, his grandfather, explains that the music is caused by the numerical relationships of the spheres and their speed of revolution. He says,

*Gifted men imitating this harmony on stringed instruments and in singing, have gained themselves a return to this region, as have those of exceptional abilities who have studied divine matters even in earthly life.*⁵⁸

The stars and planets (including the sun and moon) were not part of material creation. They were the visible representations of the structure of the Cosmos – Harmony – which pervades everything. This needs to be remembered if we are to understand anything of the philosophy and theology from ancient times, until the beginning of what is known as the modern era.⁵⁹

We know this was not what the physical universe is like. There is far more to the material creation than this Earth, which we now know is a planet like millions of others.

The "Music of the Spheres" is, however, still true, and not simply a myth. When our ancient thinkers looked at the heavens, what they saw was a pattern of Harmony in everything. The planets, rather strangely, did seem to move with the same proportions as those that governed musical Harmony. Their view of the heavens might not accord with our modern, literal, scientific minds, but Harmony remains "true". The Cosmos, as described by Plato and Cicero, is a symbolic model of this inherent Law.

⁵⁷ Cicero, *The Dream of Scipio – Somnium Scipionis* (1883), p.10. Translated by W. D. Pearman.
http://www.tertullian.org/fathers/cicero_dream_of_scipio_02_trans.htm

⁵⁸ Translated by Joscelyn Godwin in *Music, Mysticism and Magic: A Sourcebook*. Arkana, 1988.

⁵⁹ This includes the early modern period, which lasted from the end of the 15th century to around the end of the 18th century.

An essential aspect of this worldview is that the human soul is made of the same stuff as the World Soul. In Plato's symbolic description, human souls are made from the material left in God's mixing bowl after the making of the World Soul. By knowing the same laws are within us – the harmonies of the Cosmos in ourselves – we can reach for the knowledge of God's Unity. This Harmony is an inherent law, a ladder by which we can ascend to God.

To Plato, these laws express themselves in Nature as Virtue, which guides every aspect of human nature.

So, how does this Platonic concept relate to a Christian model of salvation? To the Greeks, it allowed them to ascend by virtue of philosophy and good living, through the spheres to the knowledge of the One, or God. In Christian terms, this journey became hindered by the weight of sin. To what extent it was possible to journey upwards within the Church was open to question.

This brings us to the very deep question of the value of Nature itself, against the need for a law imposed from without, or covenanted by God. The understanding of an inherent law, Harmony, is much more ancient, and must be considered when we think about the Old Testament attitude to the Christian idea of God.

Plato's ideas of Harmony were not new. They are traditionally associated with Pythagoras, who had lived a century earlier. It was Pythagoras (c.570-c.495 BC) who was said to have discovered that musical harmonies derive from simple mathematical ratios. He is said to have realised this when hearing the different tones emanating from the striking of different sizes of the blacksmith's hammer. This was one of the most dramatic discoveries in history. It revealed that Harmony was derived from Number – that there was a harmony in everything, and that harmony derived from a divine Unity.

This, in turn, led to the idea that Unity must be the source of everything. There must be one God, about whom nothing can be said other than that he is One, and that Unity is, as Plato and his followers would say, the same as the Good and the True.

This knowledge changed completely the human understanding of Creation. Everything came from Unity. There was a Unity in everything. Was this an older knowledge that had been kept a sacred secret?

Although he lived only century before Plato, the well-recorded historical figure of Pythagoras is the subject of various legends. Plutarch (c.46-c.120 AD) recorded in *Isis and Osiris* that Pythagoras had studied astronomy and music with Egyptian priests, the Magi in Persia and

other Eastern wisdom traditions,⁶⁰ which suggests that his knowledge and ideas came from more ancient sources. Iamblichus (c.250-c.325 AD), who was a student of Plotinus' disciple Porphyry, mentions that Pythagoras studied with descendants of "Moschus" (Moses) in Phoenicia.⁶¹

Whatever the truth of this, there was an ancient belief that the ideas of Pythagoras and the ancient Hebrew religion shared common origins.

The Holy of Holies in the Temple of Jerusalem, a chamber in the form of a perfect golden cube, was constructed as a representation of the divine pattern of Creation. To the priests it was more than a representation, it was the place where the divine pattern was present on Earth.

This was also the place of the original Tree, in the form of the great branched candelabra, the Menorah, one of the oldest symbols of the Jewish faith. Clement of Alexandria, in the second century AD, drawing on the Jewish philosopher Philo from over a century earlier, writes:

*The lamp, too, was placed to the south of the altar of incense: and by it were shown the motions of the seven planets, that perform their revolutions towards the south. For three branches rose on either side of the lamp, and lights on them; since also the sun, like the lamp, set in the midst of all the planets, dispenses with a kind of divine music to those above and to those below.*⁶²

Margaret Barker's research into the meaning of the Temple suggests that the Holy of Holies represented the inherent Law in Creation, centred on the same belief in Unity and Harmony.⁶³ This seems to be reflected in the Old Testament wisdom tradition. Wisdom appears as a personification of that divine pattern, the first created thing, which guides all Nature.

According to Barker, this belief in an inherent Law was part of the original religion of the Temple. Only later, after Jerusalem had been hit by a series of disasters, suggesting that sinful humans needed stricter control, was this replaced by a Mosaic written law. The priests and prophets felt that the people needed an imposed law, which would order religious life and

⁶⁰ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Volume V, 'Isis and Osiris'. Frank Cole Babbitt (Translator), Harvard University Press, 1936. See also Loeb Classical Library 306.

⁶¹ Iamblichus, *Theurgia or The Egyptian Mysteries*, translated from the Greek by Alexander Wilder, M.D. F.A.S. New York, The Metaphysical Publishing Co. 1911. http://www.esotericarchives.com/oracle/iambli_th.htm

⁶² Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 2, 'Stromata, or Miscellanies', Book V, Chapter VI by Clement of Alexandria (10 volumes originally printed in 1885). Christian Classics Ethereal Library https://ccel.org/ccel/clement_alex/stromata/anf02

⁶³ Margaret Barker. Op. cit.

society, rather than be trusted to find the law in their hearts.

Pythagoras, who brought together teachings from other cultures with the idea of Harmony at the centre, became a teacher rather reminiscent of Buddha, his contemporary. Together with and his followers, they lived a life of peace, wore white robes and were vegetarian. They also abstained from beans.

There are curious parallels with St Francis. These stories go back further, to the hazy figure of Orpheus, whose music, with its power over Nature, might also be echoed in Francis.

Iamblichus tells of Pythagoras's relationship with animals:

The Daunian bear, who had severely injured the inhabitants, was by Pythagoras detained, long stroking it gently, feeding it on maize and acorns, and after compelling it by an oath to leave alone living beings, he sent it away. It hid itself in the mountains and forest, and was never since known to injure any irrational animal.

... Once happening to be talking to his intimates about birds, symbols and prodigies, and observed that all these are messengers of the Gods, sent by them to men truly dear to them, when he brought down an eagle flying over Olympia, which he gently stroked and dismissed.⁶⁴

Whatever its origins, this discovery of the mathematical roots of Harmony, is one of the turning points human consciousness. The key points of this understanding of the Cosmos are:

God is Unity and the unchanging source of all things.

God's first work is the World Soul. All changing things, the world of Nature, are made through this pattern.

The Cosmos, as a whole, is Good and reveals God.

We have the same harmonic pattern within ourselves.

This is why Creation has meaning. Mankind speaks the same language as Creation.

⁶⁴ *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie (Translator), David R. Fideler (Editor and Introduction), Phanes Press, 1991 (first published 1919).

THE MUSIC OF CREATION

*But to know Musick is nothing else then to know the Order of all things, which pertakes of divine wisdom; for an order of all things artificially pitched upon one generall, will make in divine Melodie a certain sweet sounding and most true Harmony.*⁶⁵

To understand music is to comprehend the order or arrangement of all things, which is determined by divine proportion.

The most influential Platonist throughout the Middle Ages was Boethius (c.475-c.526 AD). He marks the end of a continuous philosophical tradition from the ancient Greeks, through pagan and Christian theologians, to the sixth century. Boethius had hoped to translate the works of Plato and Aristotle into Latin but before his grand design could begin, he was executed for treason by the new ruler of the Western Empire, the Ostrogothic king Theodoric the Great.

Boethius was, in effect, the head of the civil service. Why he was imprisoned is unknown, but one factor might have been that Theodoric was an Arian, supporting the view that Christ was created by God rather than being God. Boethius, as his *De Trinitate* makes very clear, was a supporter of the Trinitarian theology of the Eastern Church,⁶⁶ and so possibly inclined towards the Emperor Justin.

The Consolation of Philosophy is a conversation between the imprisoned Boethius and a personification of Lady Philosophy, written about 524 AD.⁶⁷ In his cell, the author attempts to understand how a world that came from a good God could involve such misery and evil. Philosophy's answer is that Creation can only be good if it is free, and that the effect of evil (not a thing in its own right) is the price we pay for freedom.

At the turning point of the dialogue, Philosophy suggests that they sing a song to the Father of All. In this beautifully constructed poem of only 28 lines, "O qui perpetua mundum ratione

⁶⁵ *Ascpelius, the perfect discourse of Hermes Tismegistus*, Section 13, edited and translated by Clement Salaman., Duckworth, 2007, p.67.

Note: John Everard translated the original ancient mystical text *Corpus Hermeticum*, in 1650.

⁶⁶ Boethius, *De Trinitate* (On the Holy Trinity), translated by Erik C. Kenyon, 2004.
<http://www.pvspade.com/Logic/docs/BoethiusDeTrin.pdf>

⁶⁷ *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy*. Victor Watts (Translator), Penguin Classics, 1999 (first published 1969).

gubernas ...” Boethius encapsulates the whole of Plato’s creation myth in the light of his own point of view:

*O thou who governs the world with perpetual reason,
creator of earth and sky ...
... you draw all things from
on high, yourself most beautiful,
carrying a beautiful universe
in your mind ...*⁶⁸

As with Plato’s *Timaeus*, it is understood that the human soul copies the pattern of this “beautiful universe in your mind”.

Developing ideas from St Augustine, Boethius made the study of Music the key to the understanding of Creation. He defined three kinds of music:

Musica Mundana
Musica Humana
Musica Instrumentalis

Musica Mundana is the “Music of the Spheres”, the study of the fundamental harmonies of all things. Actual music, as we usually listen to it, is the lowest level, Musica Instrumentalis.

Musica Humana, human music, is not to do with singing, or any music created by people, but the music within them – the music of their souls. This is another statement of the understanding that the human soul is a microcosm, a cosmos in miniature.

Boethius’s version of the cosmic worldview became a golden thread throughout the following centuries, when the collapse of the Empire and the rise of Islam meant direct knowledge of Greek philosophy was lost. His *Consolation of Philosophy* was one of the most copied books of the Middle Ages.

One of its translators and commentators was King Alfred the Great, who showed that the royal court was a place of sophisticated learning. Peter Dronke, historian of medieval philosophy, tells us that Alfred added his own touches in his greatly extended version of “O qui perpetua”:

⁶⁸ Boethius: *The Consolation of Philosophy*, cited by Peter Dronke in *The Spell of Calcidius. Platonic Concepts and Images in the Medieval West*. Florence, Sismel, 2008.
<https://ebook4scaricare.com/gratis/the-spell-of-calcidius/>

*... leaf and grass
Spread over Britain, blossom and grow,
An honour to mortals.*⁶⁹

Dronke suggests that it is perfectly possible that the priest John, whom Alfred brought to his court from France, was John Scotus Eriugena. Scotus, as his name makes clear, was born in Ireland, but he is no way a “Celtic” theologian. His book on Nature was inspired by the fragments of Greek writers that were available, the Greek fathers and the sixth-century mystic Pseudo-Dionysius. It is possible that John Scotus Eriugena (not to be confused with Duns Scotus) influenced Alfred’s writing.

In spite of being accused of some obscure heresies, Scotus aimed to produce a purely Christian version of Platonic cosmology. To Eriugena, the Word is the source of all creation and, just as white light splits into a rainbow and a fundamental tone produces harmonies, the Word first created a divine pattern that he calls “Dignities of God”. These are imitated by the planets, harmonies and all things on Earth. Just as with Plato, all things are made of the four elements: Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

Eriugena directly influenced the 12th century and, by way of the Victorines, Bonaventure, who arrived at a simple and more direct Trinitarian version of the Platonic cosmic worldview, inspired by Francis.

Alfred and Eriugena mark a climactic turning point. After Alfred’s death, this kind of learning again vanishes as the political situation becomes chaotic. There is a legend that Eriugena was murdered by his students at Malmesbury Abbey, stabbed by their pens, but this is almost certainly a confusion with another Malmesbury scholar.

The study of Harmony has always been the study of the inherent law in Nature. The study of Music, that is, the language of music and the way in which ideas, tones and harmonies come together to make Works and have meaning, can be a way of understanding how all those Works of Nature, discussed in the previous chapter, are formed.

Medieval and Renaissance musicians studied this language in depth. Just as medieval medicine believed that parts of the body were affected by the stars and planets, so, with far more reason, musicians believed that the Harmony which the soul shared with Nature brought with it different qualities, through which the various musical modes could communicate. They imagined the various characters the planets seemed to personify: solar, jovial, lunar, for

⁶⁹ Peter Dronke. *Ibid.*

example, were qualities that pervaded everything.

Thus, Harmony was far more than a structure of abstract number. It was the key to a shared language of meaning: symbol, emotion and colour – the rainbow was another sign of this law shared with all Nature. This was the common imagery of the Middle Ages. God's covenant, indeed!

We may have dismissed the ancient imagery of the spheres, but, and it is worth repeating, this way of understanding based on Harmony, not on a mistaken observation of the stars, still holds true.

Some contemporary writers suggest that these qualities are comparable or compatible with Jung's psychological archetypes, pervading all Creation. It's a nice idea, perhaps, but these things are impossible to define. It's too easy to be literal and narrow minded, and to force neat patterns onto something which can only be experienced in the subtler and ephemeral language of Music.

Music was an essential part of the Franciscan tradition from the earliest days of the Order, inspired by the tradition of Francis himself dancing, singing, and playing an imaginary violin. The importance of St Francis and his early followers in the development of music cannot be overestimated.

The Church in those days, and the philosophers who rigidly followed Boethius's definitions of music, thought instrumental music could only be associated with the pleasures of the flesh. Instrumental music was mostly associated with dance rather than seen to have aesthetic value. Music, rather than Harmony, was not yet understood as the language of Creation.

There is, of course, a good Biblical precedent in the story of David playing the harp to cure Saul's madness, but the Church seems to have forgotten this justification for music for centuries – perhaps due to puritanical (and, it has to be said, possibly Platonic) influences.

Directly influenced by Francis himself, who is said to have sung troubadour songs, accompanying himself on an imaginary fiddle, the Franciscans saw music itself as having meaning and value, not only through the setting of words. Singing the mass was an essential part of evangelism. Different modes would be used to create certain moods at the various points of the liturgy.

When we understand the background, this story of St Francis is startling and perhaps revolutionary. Here is instrumental music as something divine.

There is a story that Francis, when he was very ill, asked to hear the music of a new lute that he had heard of. Because his friends would not arrange for a musician to come and play to Francis, an angel came down and played the lute to him. He probably really did play an air-violin.

The idea that there are musical modes that are directly related to the form of the cosmos, the planets, fascinates me. This is something that I have used in my own work, however fanciful. The implication is that the Harmony of the spheres is not only present in the musical scale but known in terms of qualities, or characters, of which the mythological image of the planets is a reflection.

Knowledge of ancient Greek music is sadly lost, in spite of much extant theoretical writing. It is known, though, that it used what would sound to Western ears as exotic scales. While the music was built around harmonic concords, it used smaller intervals, microtones, for added expression.

Church music deliberately avoided the expressive microtones and exotic scales of Greek music, believing that purer tuning, derived from the natural harmonic series, was closer to God. Although Gregorian music, used for sacred chant, used a system named after Greek modes, each focussing on a different note of the scale, these do not necessarily relate to the original ancient modes.

In the Middle Ages there does not seem to have been any attempt to match these modes to the qualities of the planets, even though Cicero's description would appear to make that feasible. There certainly was an understanding that the different musical modes had different qualities, and these would suggest which mode to use for which purpose. This belief in the different qualities of the modes predates by two centuries Marsilio Ficino's use of music to create different emotional effects as part of his magical theory of medicine.

The Franciscan Juan Gil de Zamora (c.1230-1318) was a contemporary of Bonaventure. His *Ars Musica*, probably written around 1250, shows how music was important to the Franciscan mission very early on. His introduction gives the traditional history of music and its emotional and healing powers. Gil conveniently gives a list of the church modes and describes how the different musical modes, or scales, and their varying qualities associated with the music of the different planets, could be used to express the mood of the various parts of the mass.⁷⁰

Gil's church modes are not simply scales based on each of the notes of the diatonic (white

⁷⁰ Juan Gil de Zamora, *Ars Musica*, cited by Peter V. Loewen in *Music in Early Franciscan Thought*. Brill, 2013.

note scale). Only the “Perfect Modes” are, in effect, scales from a keynote (the scales on D, E, F and G). The other modes are adjusted to avoid discord.

He explains, for example, Mode 1, the Dorian mode or scale on D: “One should note that the first tone is flexible, easily suited, and accommodating to all affects, as in the Song of Songs.” This is not very specific, but his description of Mode 3, the Phrygian mode or scale on E, is clear: “One should note that the third tone is angry and stimulating, having vigorous leaps in its contour.” This mode is, in most cases, the tone associated with Mars. There does seem to be a relationship between the musical mode and the quality which was thought to belong to the planet. Mode 5, the Lydian mode on F, which can be identified with Jupiter, is “modest and delightful, cheering the sad and softening the anxious, calling back the fallen and hopeless.”

The qualities of these two modes, the expression of Mars and Jupiter, can be seen to have a musical purpose. In the Martial Phrygian mode, the second is flattened in comparison with the minor scale it resembles. This gives, to modern ears used to only minor and major scales, a sour effect in a phrase descending to the tonic, or keynote, which accounts for the “angry and stimulating” effect. The jovial Lydian mode can be likened to a major scale but with a sharpened fourth – an F sharp instead of an F natural in the key of C. This gives a very bright and piquant quality. In classical harmony it makes the music sound as if it wants to modulate upwards by a fifth.

Not all Juan Gil’s definitions are so obviously related to the planetary qualities. The modes could be used in many ways; the mood is not fixed and simple. Obviously, rhythm, melodic shape and tempo all have an effect and show that Music has value and meaning in itself.

The study of Music is the key to the inherent Law which guides Creation. Music *is* the pattern of Creation. Of course, this was a medieval commonplace and was something that continued to have a special interest for the Franciscans. Gil’s work provides evidence that music is inseparable from the Franciscan tradition.

The greatest and most sophisticated depiction of this harmonious worldview is in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, written at the end of the 14th century. Dante’s work seems to be suffused by Franciscan ideas, though there is no proof that he was himself a Franciscan. The *Divine Comedy* is a journey from Hell to Paradise; it can also be seen as an allegory of the soul. Dante conveys that those in Hell have brought about their own punishment as a result of human failings, mostly from misdirected love.

The heavens reveal the harmonious qualities, the planets, which combine in us to create our own individual music. The divine influences from above conclude with the Love which moves

all things. Love is the key to the whole vision.

After two centuries during which time Platonic philosophy had been supplanted by that of Aristotle, the works of Plato, most of which had been unknown for centuries, were reintroduced into Europe through the Latin translations of Marsilio Ficino. Ficino was a Dominican and his massive work *Platonic Theology* aimed to show that Plato was compatible with Christianity. However, this outpouring of pagan ideas failed to mix with the Aristotelian theology of the Church. Very soon afterwards, the discoveries of Copernicus put the entire ancient view of the cosmos into question.

Ficino was a musician who wrote about the healing power of music, drawing down the qualities of the planets. He was an enormous influence on the Italian Renaissance, most obviously on the last flowering of the Platonic-Christian tradition.

The epic *De Harmonia Mundi* “Harmony of the World” by the Venetian Franciscan monk, Francesco Giorgi, is a song of praise in which the whole of Creation is seen, for the last time, as a work of Music.

Francesco Giorgi (born 1466) was an important figure in religious politics in Venice. In 1500 he was guardian of the monastery of San Francesco della Vigna, where he famously advised on the appropriate mathematical proportions for their church, based on threes in celebration of the Trinity – a physical expression of the theme of Harmony. He was closely involved with Venetian Jews and is said to have converted Rabbi Marco Raffaele to Christianity.

Giorgi became familiar with the Jewish mystical tradition of Cabala, and his *Harmonia Mundi* includes a passage which uses the Cabala to show the relationship between the name Jesus and the name of God. This is a passing detail in a massive work that aims to show how all things come from Unity and, amongst everything else, how all religions embody traces of Truth within them. This was in the spirit of earlier attempts by Ramon Lull (c.1232-c.1315) to reconcile the inconsistencies in various religions. Lull was apparently favoured by the Franciscans and paved the way for the doctrine of Duns Scotus.

Giorgi had a later connection with England which may have brought him favour in high places. He was involved with the very detailed research to support Henry VIII’s case for an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon (he was never legally divorced from any of his wives). Through working with the English agent Richard Croke, Giorgio made contact with the rabbinical scholars who might give a ruling on the legitimacy of a marriage to the king’s brother’s widow. Though a case could be made, Giorgi was warned to drop this hot potato by the Venetian senate.

There is a possibility that Giorgi came to England in 1530 or 1531. His friend the ex-rabbi Marco Raffaele certainly did come to England as an exile at that time. Giorgi was a controversial figure in the Roman Church, but *De Harmonia Mundi* was published in Latin in 1525 and in a French translation in 1579. The historian of esoteric tradition, Dame Frances Yates, believed his book was a major influence in England. It may be a rather decadent feast of esoteric imagery but, as Joscelyn Godwin writes:

*... every page shines with Giorgi's own Franciscan piety. For there is only one purpose behind his enterprise: to be reunited with God.*⁷¹

De Harmonia Mundi is divided into three Cantos, or Songs. Each canto is divided in eight "tones", corresponding to a musical scale. The first canto is about Creation and shows how all things come from Unity and how Harmony runs through everything that exists, from the planets that are the source of each tone of the scale, or mode with an individual quality, down to the smallest object. Giorgi lists all the traditional correspondences of plants, stones and scents, in a form which medieval doctors were familiar.

The second canto is devoted to Christ, with a strongly Johannine theology, showing how all things come from the Word of God, and how Christ contains all things and all harmonies within Himself. The third canto is devoted to Man, describing how man is a microcosm of all harmonies and can be led back to Unity and God, through Christ.

Giorgi's positive attitude towards Creation is very Franciscan, although the celebration of nature and beauty had become a central aspect of the Italian Renaissance. His optimism extends to the next world as he tends towards the idea, derived from Origen, that ultimately all people will be saved.

At the end of Creation:

*We will sing perfect and harmonious songs – so God grants – because we will sing in the highest together with the angels.*⁷²

Is Giorgi behind Lorenzo's speech in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*?

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st

⁷¹ Joscelyn Godwin, *Harmony of the Spheres: A Sourcebook of the Pythagorean Tradition in Music*. Inner Traditions, Bear & Company, 1992, p.185.

⁷² Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia Perennis: Historical Outlines of Western Spirituality in Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Thought*. Netherlands, Springer, 2004.
https://archive.org/details/springer_10.1007-978-1-4020-3067-3/mode/2up

*But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eye'd cherubins:
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.*⁷³

This poetic, Platonic, convention, that we have the same harmonies in our souls as pervade the cosmos, was one that was losing its place in both theology and science.

Music continued to be important in the Franciscan tradition. In the 16th century the composer Palestrina was a Franciscan tertiary. By the 18th century there was another late Franciscan showing of the value of music as a key to Creation. This was St Anthony of Padua who can, perhaps, be seen as the patron saint of Music as a universal language.

St Anthony (1195-1231) was a contemporary of St Francis and one of his most important early followers. He became famous as an eloquent preacher. As St Francis preached to the birds, St Anthony preached to the fish. Both lives have resonance with stories about Pythagoras, whose philosophy came from his cosmic understanding of harmony.

It might seem rather odd to those unused to the tradition of relics, that there is a special chapel devoted to St Anthony's tongue at Padua Cathedral. His tongue, representing the saint's power of communication, spoke to everyone, even the fish. It was as if he conveyed true meaning even if his words were not understood. What is interesting and unusual about Padua is that it began to make a feature of purely instrumental music. An understanding developed that music without words was itself a valid form of worship.

As Pierpaolo Polzonetti explains, his relic became a focus of spectacular musical celebrations. By the 18th century, Padua had some of the finest church music in Europe. Polzonetti suggests that music had become more and more expressive and dramatic in the Catholic Church since the Counter-Reformation as Latin ceased to be a lingua franca, a common language. All the most modern devices of music, particularly from opera, could be used in church music to engage the feelings and imaginations of worshippers. From the 17th century, oratorio could tell Biblical stories in a style identical to opera. This was a Catholic tradition long before Handel (from the 1730s) adapted it to suit English audiences.

The leading musician at Padua Cathedral was Giuseppe Tartini (1692-1770), who was violin soloist there from 1721 to 1765. His concertos were clearly related to the idea of universal communication, an important feature of the worship in devotion to St Anthony's tongue.

⁷³ Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited, Introduced and Annotated by Cedric Watts, Wordsworth Classics, 2000.

Tartini's connection with the cathedral puts his career as a composer in an unexpected light.⁷⁴

Tartini is remembered as a virtuoso and teacher, who taught many violinists from all over Europe. His school was known as "The School of Nations". As a very influential musician, Tartini's music is little known. Misleadingly, his most famous work is associated with a story of diabolically difficult music that he heard the devil play in a dream. This is a complete distortion of the story that Tartini told in *The Devil's Trill Sonata*. What he heard in his dream was not devilish fiddling but something exquisitely beautiful which the composer feared he would never be able to reproduce. Tartini had a more sophisticated understanding of temptation than pantomime devils – perhaps it had more to do with vanity and pride.

Tartini was also a mystic, with largely impenetrable ideas of the mathematical basis of harmony. At the time of his connection with the cathedral and St Anthony at Padua, his musical aim was to find simplicity and expression rather than to be showy. He wrote many solo pieces for himself to play, inspired by folk songs (the songs of Venetian gondoliers). Some of his scores are annotated with poetry, which he aimed to communicate in music alone. His writings state his belief that the simplest folk melodies could be more expressive than intellectual composition, more like the ideals of ancient Greek music which was said to have a direct effect on the listener's emotions.

Tartini's musical ideals are also very Franciscan. He was never a member of a Franciscan Order himself – unless he was a Tertiary – but he was connected with the Franciscans most of his life. His parents, in Venice, wanted him to be a Franciscan friar, but instead Tartini married. His wife was a favourite of a local Cardinal who objected to the marriage, so Tartini went to Assisi and learned the violin there. He either taught himself, or was taught by a Bohemian Franciscan composer, Cernohorsky. Eventually he came to Padua, started his school and his involvement with the cathedral.

It is unlikely that Tartini and the friars at Padua were aware that there was a very old Franciscan tradition of valuing music as conveying meaning. This could be traced from Giorgi, Gil de Zamora and back to St Francis's time.

The implication of all this is that music is always sacred. Harmony is an aspect of the inherent Law in Nature, and Music demonstrates the principles of formation and creativity. Music can be used for sacred purposes in any kind of worship or liturgy, but there is always a possibility that words can obscure the value of the music itself.

⁷⁴ The information about Padua, St Anthony and Tartini is largely derived from the article 'Tartini and the Tongue of Saint Anthony' by Pierpaolo Polzonetti in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. 67, No. 2 (Summer 2014), pp.429-486, published by University of California Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/jams.2014.67.2.429>

St Francis probably didn't say of preaching, "use words if necessary." Words are not necessary because Music is the laboratory of Nature. Music is the sacred language of all things. This is universal and beyond personal prejudices, differences of style and culture, and religious traditions. If we really believe in the divine Cosmos, we should be confident enough to explore it according to our abilities and natures, free of the limitations of words.

THE SIRENS – OR MUSES

In his "Myth of Er" which concludes the *Republic*, Plato calls upon the spirits, the Sirens, which sing the "Music of the Spheres". This seems to conflict with the more destructive version of the Sirens in Homer, though Plutarch explains that there is no conflict. The Sirens song is the divine harmony in all things, which is why it is so alluring.

The Sirens are the same as the Muses, says Plutarch:

Here on earth a kind of faint echo of that music reaches us, and appealing to our souls through the medium of words, reminds them of what they experienced in an earlier existence. The ears of most souls, however, are plastered over and blocked up, not with wax, but with carnal obstructions and affections. But any soul that through innate gifts is aware of this echo, and remembers that other world, suffers what falls in no way short of the very maddest passions of love, longing and yearning to break the tie with the body, but unable to do so. Not that I fall in with this interpretation at all points. My view is that just as Plato speaks of 'shafts' and 'of axes,' and of 'whorls' for 'stars,' so here, too, contrary to usage, he gives the name of 'Sirens' to the Muses, because they 'sēyēn' (eirousas), that is 'speak,' the divine truths in the realm of Death.⁷⁵

Clement of Alexandria (c.200 AD) quotes a lost play by Euripides: "He who is a (true) Gnostic must imitate God as far as possible ..." Euripides says:

*I have golden wings on my back,
And the winged sandals of the Sirens fit me too:
I shall go floating into the vast ether
In order to approach Zeus.⁷⁶*

In ancient musical theory, the Muses were associated with the planets and stars. There are nine muses, eight for the spheres, which are the fundamentals of harmony, and one for the Earth, to guide us towards the heavenly music.

⁷⁵ Plutarch, *Moralia*, Volume VIII: 'Table-Talk', Book 6. Loeb Classical Library.
<https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL424/1969/volume.xml>

⁷⁶ Euripides, *Stromateis IV 25, 172*. This translation, the reference to Plutarch and other ideas in this section are cited by Peter Dronke, 'Imagination in the Late Pagan and Early Christian World.' Op. cit.

For very good reasons the goddess of the Earth – the material world – was Thalia, the muse of pastoral poetry and comedy,

Music is more than a metaphor; as well as Mystery there is also Comedy. Comedy is a characteristic of Creation. It is in comedy that we learn that music is made of all the harmonies. Comedy teaches us the necessity for tolerance and variety. The music of Earth, this world, is all about change, surprise. To trip on someone's toes, or a banana skin, is part of the work of Creation.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Comedy. Comedy involves a combination of contrast and surprise. When we think of the Platonic comedies of Shakespeare, we think of the idea of tolerance, variety of characters and styles, a mixture of comedy and tragedy, all resolved in Harmony. This is the working of the language of Nature in the form of drama.

It was two hundred years before the language of western classical music could accommodate a form of comedy, and when it did the memory of Shakespeare was never far away.

This was one of the messages of Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713) who was an influence on Haydn, amongst others. Developing a sense of humour is an essential part of becoming a performer or composer. We should laugh at the absurd even in religion.

And, of course, such comedy can be the result of chance, not Providence. This juxtaposition produces new kinds of works, as chance might trigger a new direction in evolution. The language within Creation can accommodate the most ludicrous slapstick and the subtlest wit (as seen in Jane Austen, Will Hay, Father Ted).

But the essence of comedy is not in mockery but variety; it can arise from the surprising connection of incongruous things, and, like a Haydn symphony, the joyful inclusion of opposites. There was nothing more serious than comedy, which had a deep philosophical purpose.

The greatest composer, in my humble opinion, Joseph Haydn (1732-1809), had a reputation for humour, as a person and in his music. In his symphonies, which are about tolerance, what we might call inclusiveness, the tragic and the absurd could be thrown together in the same work, not only for comic effect but because this reflects the nature of Creation. These were virtues learned from Lord Shaftesbury and his German followers. All Haydn's scores are headed "Laus Deo!" Praise be to God!

Shaftesbury was following Aristotle's lost opus, of course, as anyone who has read a great book about a Franciscan detective will know. Nothing new in this. John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century (over a thousand years ago) said that "true reason laughs", when taking the

story of Adam and Eve literally.

Both Comedy and Mystery are destroyed if we take a literal or empirical approach. This is a human failing for which all these different ways of understanding creation and ourselves – the intimate Unity of God – are here presented as antidotes.

To Proclus, who thinks there are three different kinds of Sirens – the celestial Sirens of Plato that dance around the World Soul – this is a very attractive image. As far as Plato is concerned, the Sirens are themselves aspects of the World Soul, which is the pattern of Harmony as a whole, within all of Nature and within us.

We can imagine the Sirens or Muses in human terms because the harmonies they represent are also part of us – they are archetypal qualities or modes. They are “real”, as fundamental principles. The imagination clothes them and makes them intelligible, with whatever images and memories speak to the individual.

There is a deep connection between this imagery of the Sirens’ dance and the Seven Liberal Arts. In the first stone representation of the Virgin Mary, at Chartres, the Liberal Arts are the work of the Muses or Sirens in practical form.

The serious danger here is that people dismiss poetic or “pagan” imagery as something alien to the Christian world, when it is simply a way of understanding aspects of Nature – which in this study I call Harmony.

Any understanding of the Incarnation, and the story which Bonaventure sees as the completion of Creation, must involve an understanding of the Unity of all things, which are True regardless of our religious language. This is brought about by the Laws of Nature, Harmony, or the Sirens’ Song.

QUEEN OF THE COSMOS

We cannot understand the medieval Christian view of Creation without understanding the role of Mary. Our understanding of Mary, and the meaning of the Incarnation, depends on our understanding of the nature of Creation.

Was the Incarnation a miraculous birth into a wholly sinful, or fallen, Nature, or a birth into a Creation which was fundamentally Good?

This leads us to a key question. Was Creation something made by God but separate from God, influenced by God from without, by supernatural intervention, an occasional miracle, as it were? Or was Creation a theophany, a window into God – in essence, sacramental?

Either Creation is Good, as God saw it in *Genesis*, or Creation was damaged from the outset. Were we part of Creation or somehow standing above it, as stewards – users, or sometime abusers of Nature – in which case, human life is a struggle against a Nature and inevitably tends to be chaotic and threatening?

Attempting to explain Creation according to the theology of this study, it is, in fact, a Cosmos which continually flows from God. Creation is the image of the Word in every part. It is drawn by Love towards a new Unity and ideal completion.

Plato's *Timaeus*, accepted by theologians and philosophers for centuries, explains that we contain in ourselves the pattern of Creation. Our souls are made in the image God, bearing the Word within. They are formed by the same Harmony which allows, by the guidance of its inherent Law, the formation of all Works of God.

The Incarnation was God coming into a world which had this Harmony within it but to which had become deaf. The use of imagery associated with Mary from the Old Testament wisdom literature was a reminder that this law, this wisdom, came from God, and was the first made thing – the pattern which allowed Nature to flourish. This is more than a metaphor if the Incarnation is to be taken seriously.

The Albigensian Crusade only came to an end in 1229. The fall of its last stronghold, Montségur, followed in 1244. To the heretics, Christ could not have been a physical being,

born of a woman. Any image or idea of Mary, his mother, as a human woman, was in direct opposition to their extreme view that the material world was evil.

In contrast, the positive view of Nature can be seen in spectacular form in the building of Chartres Cathedral, which was exactly contemporary with the life of St Francis. Chartres also signifies the growth of "The Cult of the Virgin". Possibly the oldest shrine to Our Lady, this beautiful Gothic cathedral was dedicated to Mary, Mother of God.

Chartres had long been a pilgrimage site focussed on veneration of a relic of the Virgin's chemise or veil, the "Sancta Camisa". There was also an image in wood, a "Black Virgin", an aspect of the pre-Christian divine feminine going back to Isis. The new cathedral raised her image in new and dramatic ways, with a spectacular representation of Mary in stained glass, dating from between 1145 and 1155. Her first representation in stone, above the western doorway, is surrounded by the Seven Liberal Arts.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Mary was seen as patron of the Liberal Arts. The tradition of music as the key was a reminder that humanity and Nature had inherent Wisdom within it and Mary passed this Human Nature to her son.

The concept of the Seven Liberal Arts originated with Boethius, who was influential in the philosophy of Music. This idea of seven areas of learning had previously been described in a pagan context by Martianus Capella, but Boethius ensured these subjects would become the framework of education for centuries. They were classified as the *Trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric, and the *Quadrivium* of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy.

All the Arts stem from the ancient viewpoint that Number, or Harmony, was at the heart of all things and an understanding of this would lead to the knowledge of Unity in God. The number seven reflects the number of planets, which in turn derives from the seven notes of the diatonic musical scale. All worldly wisdom stems from this inherent Law of Harmony.

Mary, at Chartres, is not only Mother of God, but also patroness of wisdom and the divine Truth that we can discover in Nature through Knowledge and Art. Music is the key to all the Arts and Sciences, and has an intimate association with the ancient Hebrew idea of Wisdom.

This is how Mary was seen in the Middle Ages, as the image of Wisdom and teacher of worldly wisdom to her son. She is sometimes represented as "sedes sapientiae", Seat of Wisdom, seated with her son on her knee. To the right of Mary, in the doorway at Chartres, Pythagoras is shown with his monochord, a single stringed instrument with which he could measure the Harmony of Creation.

One of Mary's many titles was "Mother of God", the common translation of the Greek *Theotokos*. This term was defined by the Council of Ephesus in 431 AD. The precise way in which Jesus could be born as both the son of God and son of Mary is probably beyond our understanding. All the arguments from the first Christian centuries until more recently were affected by what seem to us to be bizarre misunderstandings of biology.

The point which was defined at Ephesus holds true in whatever way we interpret it. The key issue was the nature of Jesus Christ. In orthodox Christian theology, he was not seen in terms of the heresies which were still influential in Francis's time. The Council of Ephesus defined Jesus as having two natures: he was both Human and God. We may imagine that the Council declared his conception and birth, his Human Nature, to come from Mary, and his Divine Nature from God.

Theotokos, or Mother of God, defines Mary as being the source of Jesus's humanity. Her own human nature, was, of course, created by God, however she might be considered to have been chosen or prepared for the role as Christ's mother. Dante correctly addresses her, nearly a thousand years later, as "figlia del tuo figlio", "Daughter of your Son".

We might ask what, though, is "Human Nature", as understood by the Council of Ephesus and St Francis? It does not mean physical nature. Mary, it was said, must have given Jesus material substance according to the process by which reproduction was believed to work. Mary was Jesus's mother "according to the flesh", but this is not what "Human Nature" means.

Human nature is the aspect of the soul which makes us human, rather than the physical matter or substance from which we are made. It is the innate pattern or form, the harmony or template, which we share with the whole of Creation.

Human nature is not masculine or feminine but embodies both. The harmonies within the soul have all the potential qualities that the ancients ascribed to the planets. It is the divine pattern, God's first creation, which is present in everything in varying degrees, from the cosmos to the smallest creature; it is wholly present in humanity, though obscured by our sins.

This belief that Mary was Theotokos, giving Christ human nature, depends on the belief that human nature contains within it this divine harmony, however imperfectly we manage to find it within ourselves, due to the intractable effects of sin.

To Bonaventure, the Incarnation was not merely to remove sin but to perfect or complete Creation. God's completion of his plan is a mirror of the first Creation. We struggle to read the Book of Nature and to hear the Music of Creation because we tend to see only the surface, only ourselves, or impose our own meaning without a deeper understanding.

Mary was an individual human being. It is not important who she actually was or what she looked like. No matter how she might be pictured, it is her humanity that is important. While being perfectly human and in giving birth to Christ, Mary becomes the representative of, or simply is, a perfect reflection of that inherent Law, Cosmic Harmony – the pattern of God’s first creation through which Nature is born.

Mary was prepared for her role in the new Creation, as everyone in the Middle Ages knew from popular stories of her childhood, what is now known as the Protoevangelium of James meaning “precursor of the gospel”. It’s very nice to think of Mary, as legend tells, dancing in the Temple. She has music in her. The Temple, the heart of Creation, is her natural home.

In Christian imagery, without Mary it could be possible to forget that Creation is an emanation of God. One might imagine Christ as a purely supernatural visitor to an evil world of matter, as some dualist heretics might have done, or even “orthodox” people with a negative attitude towards Nature.

Mary is not a goddess or a symbol of an abstract, unearthly idea. She is a human being. She is not only the human embodiment of Harmony, the pattern of the original Creation (which some call the “Soul of the World”) she is, very importantly, material. Like all of Nature, she is made of the matter which the Platonic tradition imagined to be the indefinable stuff that only had meaning when combined with form. This is the “Silva” (literally meaning “wood”) which the philosophers of the School of Chartres wrote about – matter searching for form.

Mary, in bearing Christ, is being, not merely representing, the whole of Creation. As chaos bore Creation, Mary bears Christ. The image of Mary is the image of Creation as the Cosmos, containing Harmony within.

It is not necessary to concern ourselves with a historical Mary to recognise this very powerful image of the inherent goodness of Creation, and its intimate, inseparable, union with God. The theology of Incarnation conveys in a many-layered way that a living God is present in all Nature.

There could be nothing more powerfully opposed to the dualist belief in the negative power of matter.

All Nature is in Mary. Christ is in all Nature.

In her Assumption into Heaven, she is still an individual human being, and, while also epitomising the Cosmos, she draws the whole of Creation into Heaven. The True Kingdom is renewed in the Incarnation and united with God in her Assumption. Mary takes Nature into God’s presence when she is crowned Queen of Heaven.

This is all very far removed from the sentimental version of Mary, with the emphasis on purity, which was popularised after the Counter-Reformation.

Margaret Barker believes that Mary's role adopts aspects of the ancient figure of Wisdom, who represented the inherent Law, but was lost after the return from Babylonian Captivity and the invention of Mosaic Law.⁷⁷

Regardless of her mysterious background, Mary does share the following meanings with the Biblical wisdom tradition, but, because she is a human being, she represents a very intimate relationship between the Source of All Being and Nature.

The Lord created me the first of all his works long ago, before all else was made.
(*Proverbs 8:22*)

Then I was at his side each day, his darling and delight, playing in his presence continually, playing over his whole world, while my delight was in mankind.
(*Proverbs 8:30-31*)

It is he who created her, beheld her and measured her, and infused her into all his works. (*Ecclesiasticus 1:9*)

She spans the world in power from end to end, and gently orders all things.⁷⁸
(*Wisdom 8:1*)

In Christian theology, the language is complicated by the way Christ is also referred to as the Wisdom of God, as the incarnate Word, but Mary, the woman, can be understood to have Wisdom within her, as Nature has Harmony within it, and Christ is that Law Incarnate.

Mary, therefore, whether we think of her as a historical character or a poetic image, is a representation of the Harmonic pattern of the Cosmos, working within Nature, to guide the birth of new Songs, new Numbers.

Christian Platonism has a far greater emphasis on Nature. The earlier Platonic tradition values Nature because it reflects the divine world. Nature can be True and Beautiful even in its imperfection, just as human beings can be. Rather than look only for the beautiful, we can hope to find God in all that is of the world, even in its dark and damaged aspects. This *Hidden Music* of Nature is composed of and reflects both concord and discord.

⁷⁷ Margaret Barker. Op. cit.

⁷⁸ According to Margaret Barker, in the Septuagint Mary "harmonises" all things.

PERFORMANCE – IMAGINATION

Creation is a Performance. We are performers in Creation. The Word is in all things. We all share the same inherent Harmony.

Unfortunately, our human failings prevent us from performing as well as we might – and it is only through performing and participating that we become what we should be.

How can we become better performers?

In the Christian tradition there are spiritual practices and mystical tracts to guide us in the process of becoming more Christ-like, which, in affirming the value of Nature, must also mean becoming better performers, like St Francis, singing with all Creation.

As Music is the language of Creation, it must follow that music must also be a mystical process – learning the language of Creation through the practice of performing and listening.

Listening is an essential aspect of this work, whether we begin from a religious or musical angle. I would include within this ‘reading’ – seeing and feeling – being, in the widest sense, an audience responding to the meaning conveyed through Creation as a whole, whether scripture, or music.

All music, literature and art, is sacred. Its human originators are not creating something from ego but from a shared Truth that exists in the soul.

Within the Christian-Platonist tradition there are three outstanding 13th century texts by Bonaventure on the theme of learning to perform: *The Life of St Francis*, *The Soul’s Journey into God* and *The Tree of Life*.⁷⁹ Within these, and other writings by the Seraphic Doctor, is the theme of creation as having meaning and value, before this theology became lost for centuries.

The Life of St Francis was written as his official biography at a time when legends were proliferating. Francis was the perfect performer. Bonaventure’s very artistically composed *Life* is intended to encourage us to emulate Francis as a way towards imitating Christ.

⁷⁹ These three texts by Bonaventure: *The Soul’s Journey into God*, *The Tree of Life*, *The Life of St Francis*, were translated by Ewert Cousins with contributions by Ignatius Brady. Op. cit.

The Soul's Journey into God (1259) is considered the classic text of the Seraphic Doctor's theology of ascent from knowing God in Creation, through knowledge of the working of God within ourselves, to ascent beyond "the cloud of unknowing" to absolute Unity.

The first stage of the ascent is to recognise God as present in all things. If this union is achieved, if only for a moment, we can return to see creation in the light of God's unity.

Bonaventure refers to God's "vestiges" or footprints in Nature. We also find that Nature reflects qualities of God. This awareness of God in Creation is not simply a matter of theology. It is emotional, not intellectual.

He tells us that we should not:

*... believe
that reading is sufficient without unction,
speculation without devotion ...
knowledge without love,
understanding without humility ...*⁸⁰

Though Bonaventure does tell us that an analytical and scientific view of Nature can also lead to wonder, awe and love. Whatever means we prefer of considering God in Creation, we have a duty to pursue this knowledge. This is the first stage to finding God.

From all this, one can gather that:

from the creation of the world
the invisible attributes of God are clearly seen,
being understood
through the things that are made (*Romans 1:20*)

And those who do not wish to heed these things, and to know, bless and love God:

*in all of them
are without excuse;
for they are unwilling to be transported
out of darkness
into the marvellous light of God.*⁸¹

⁸⁰ Bonaventure: *The Soul's Journey into God*. Op. cit.

⁸¹ Ibid.

The second stage is to find God within us, in our own souls. The third stage is to contemplate this knowledge of God until we pass beyond Pseudo-Dionysius's "cloud of unknowing" until we leave everything behind, and touch, even if for an instant, unity with God.

This is an endless spiritual practice. From this knowledge of the unity of all things, we return to the world with renewed love for Creation. It is only by sharing this love with every part of the world that we come to know Creation. If we can achieve this, and it is not an easy challenge, we might have a chance of entering that visionary world, the Dancing Cosmos or *Hidden Music*, which this study describes.

The third of Bonaventure's three mystical guides concentrates on the difficult task of identification with Christ. In *The Tree of Life* (introduced in section 5), he brings Christ into our own experience in a way which is usually associated with the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, nearly three hundred years later.

The Tree of Life was one of his most influential writings (Bonaventure died in 1274, the date of his book is uncertain). Its meditations, which are designed to guide us to know Christ and become Christ-like, may have been intended as a training manual for Franciscans. Rather like the exercises of Ignatius Loyola, he invites the reader, or meditant, to imagine themselves in the various scenes and to participate in the experience of the events of the gospel story. However, unlike the popular manuals of devotional exercises which imitated Bonaventure in the century that followed, this is not simply "affective" exercise, one of developing an emotional response to the story.

In Bonaventure's mysticism, this imaginative series of meditations can be understood as a means of entering into "real" experience and knowledge, through imagination. We are so intimately connected with Creation and God that imagination can lead us to Truth. (This is not always recognised and comes from the distinctive Franciscan tradition, inspired by Francis himself.)

The Tree of Life is divided into three sections: Origin, Passion and Glorification of Christ. There are twelve chapters, which the author calls "fruit" after the Tree in *Revelation*, each of which has four meditations. According to Bonaventure, who is totally Christocentric, knowledge of Christ is knowledge of everything. We know the nature of things because Christ is present in us, in our understanding, at the heart of imagination.

We are invited to put ourselves directly into the events, as in this example from the nativity, which may remind us of St Francis's physical recreation of the scene, Jesus born of Mary. We are to join with the heavenly melody, to participate:

*Now, then, my soul, embrace that divine manger; press your lips upon and kiss the boy's feet. Then in your mind keep the shepherds' watch, marvel at the assembling hosts of angels, join in the heavenly melody, singing with your voice and heart: Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men of good will.*⁸²

Bonaventure's meditations, as in *Jesus Transfigured*, lead us to the highest levels of vision:

*So the soul devoted to Christ, strengthened in truth and borne to the summit of virtue, can faithfully say with Peter: Lord, it is good for us to be here,⁸³ in the serene enjoyment of contemplating you. When heavenly repose and ecstasy are given to the soul, it will hear the secret words which man is not permitted to speak.*⁸⁴

Bonaventure is not merely hoping that we will imagine, in the modern sense, the vision, but that we will know the nature of things, and see "both interiorly and exteriorly that most desired splendour." Imagination is an essential part of entering into the mystery, and a means by which we participate in Creation.

*Christ teaches interiorly, so that no truth is known except through Him, not through speech as it is with us, but through inner enlightenment... He Himself, then, is intimate to every soul ...*⁸⁵

This mystical interpretation of Bonaventure's work can be justified in several ways: as a reflection on the older relationship with God and Creation, which was being lost in the 13th century; in terms of his own references to newly rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy of the Soul; and in terms of Bonaventure's Franciscan theology of God in all things.

Bonaventure made use of Aristotle's writing on the soul to explain his theology of Imagination. This is discussed in detail by Michelle Karnes in *Imagination, Meditation and Cognition in the Middle Ages*.⁸⁶ The author explains in detail how Bonaventure differs from later medieval meditations which are not supported by a belief in "real" knowledge through imagination.

According to the medieval theory of the Nature of Imagination, we understand what things are because we receive from them their "species", or idea. In Bonaventure's version of this, Christ is the clearest and brightest of "species" within us and shines on these darker things to make them evident and clear.

⁸² Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*, translated by Ewert Cousins with contributions by Ignatius Brady. Op. cit. With reference to *Luke 2:14*.

⁸³ *Ibid. Matt. 17:4*.

⁸⁴ *Ibid. 2 Cor. 12:4*.

⁸⁵ Bonaventure, *Collationes on the Hexaemeron XII:5*, quoted by Karnes, p.76. Op. cit.

⁸⁶ Michelle Karnes. Op. cit.

This may seem obscure when expressed in the language of medieval philosophy, until the various comments in Bonaventure's works are put together. It can be seen that he had a much more powerful understanding than Augustine or other contemporaries:

*You are able to see within yourself the Truth that teaches you.*⁸⁷

*By the same cognition by which anyone knows the Word, he knows things in the Word.*⁸⁸

*Our intellect is joined to that eternal Truth itself.*⁸⁹

In fact, this intellectual use of Aristotle argues what the Platonist would have known from the beginning – that we have within us the same Truths as Creation as a whole – the Harmony that is also the pattern of Creation. Imagination draws us closer to that Truth.

Bonaventure's belief that everything that exists is an expression of the Word is important to our understanding of imagination, and of the value of works in the arts and humanities. He writes:

*O, if only I could find this book whose origin is eternal, whose essence is incorruptible, whose knowledge is life, whose script is indelible, whose study is desirable, whose teaching is easy, whose knowledge is sweet, whose depth is inscrutable, whose words are ineffable, yet all are a single Word!*⁹⁰

God has only one blueprint, or idea, and that is the Word. In an infinite and free outpouring of Love, God creates an infinite variety of things which are all declarations of the Word.

Because Christ is in each one of us, we can have real knowledge of God through created things and things within our imagination – created or imaginary. With Christ in our understanding, God is "closest to the soul, closer than even the soul is to itself."⁹¹

As Thomas Jackson wrote, in his *Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes* (1628), the sculptor "only makes that visible and apparent to the eye which was formerly hidden or inveiled in the stone."⁹²

⁸⁷ Bonaventure, *Soul's Journey into God*, quoted by Karnes p.76. Ibid.

⁸⁸ Bonaventure, 3 Sent.XIV.ii.i.arg. 4, quoted.p.78. Ibid.

⁸⁹ Bonaventure, *Soul's Journey into God* III.3, quoted Ibid.

⁹⁰ Bonaventure, *The Tree of Life*, 'Jesus, Inscribed Book'. Brady. Op. cit.

⁹¹ Bonaventure, *Breviloquium I:iv*, quoted by Karnes p.80. Ibid.

⁹² Thomas Jackson, *Treatise of the Divine Essence and Attributes*. London, 1628, cited by Douglas Hedley in *Living Forms of the Imagination*. T & T Clark International, 2008.

Bonaventure's *Tree of Life* guides us through the imagination in every aspect of life, death and resurrection. But it must also be the case that our imaginative experience of Creation can also guide us in this process of self-knowledge, which is actually the process of tuning our souls to the Music of Creation.

There are traces of this positive view of Imagination to be found in 17th-century England, where neo-Platonism continued to be an influence.

In the works of Thomas Traherne, who some have suspected was also aware of Bonaventure, the imagination has another kind of power. It is not just the means of understanding things experienced, it is also, in a visionary way, a means of experiencing the past, or things that may appear remote from us.

*Thoughts are the Wings on which the Soul doth flie,
Elijahs firey Charet, that conveys
The Soul, even here, to those Eternal Joys.
Thoughts are the privileged Posts that Soar
Unto his Throne, and there appear before
Our selves approach. These may at any time
Abov the Clouds, abov the Stars may clime.
The Soul is present by a Thought; and sees
The New Jerusalem.*⁹³

There can be no doubt that Traherne found this idea of imagination as a means of spiritual travel in the *Hermetica*, the mysterious writings of Hermes Trismegistus from the early Christian centuries. These texts were believed, until Traherne's time, to date back to ancient Egypt. Some people today suggest that they do actually contain survivals of Egyptian tradition. Traherne, who certainly studied Ficino, may have known the *Hermetica* from Ficino's Latin translation, or from John Everard's English translation, published in 1650, which cites the following:

And judge of this by thy self, command thy Soul to go into India, and sooner then thou canst bid it, it will be there.

Bid it likewise passe over the Ocean, and suddenly it will be there: Not as passing from place to place, but suddenly it will be there.

Command it to flie into Heaven, and it will need no Wings, neither shall any thing

⁹³ Thomas Traherne: *Centuries of Meditations, Thoughts V*. Op. cit.

*hinder it; not the fire of the Sun, not the Aether, nor the turning of the Spheres, not the bodies of any of the other Stars, but cutting through all, it will flie up to the last, and furthest Body.*⁹⁴

This apparently telepathic or visionary use of the imagination seems to be more extreme than Bonaventure's use in his meditations, where scenes in which the meditant place themselves are not "literally" true. We cannot expect to see a scene as it actually was – it is the images that we imagine which bring its Truth to life for us. Any image of Christ we picture is most true when it is an image which is true to us – one that we resonate with may be "more true" than an image which is "realistic" but alien to us.

I am not sure whether Traherne meant this imaginary journey to be taken literally. The important point to take from these fragments of a theology of imagination is that the imagined Work is True. It is far removed from what we would usually think of a fantasy. Traherne's imaginary flight to the New Jerusalem is no different from the image the sculptor sees in stone, or the symphony a composer develops in his mind. These are all translations into different media of something which, in itself, is invisible, intangible or unheard – what I think of as *Hidden Music* – the subject of this study.

Bearing this in mind, it is possible to see that any kind of vision, or visionary writing, need not be "literally" true, but may still be true in the sense that the visionary art form – like the statue or symphony – is a medium that, if true, can reveal God in the same way as a tree, a landscape, or a life.

There is no doubt that Bonaventure's philosophy allowed him to see imagination as a way to find true knowledge of spiritual realities. It was a philosophy shared with Islam, which enjoyed a sophisticated use of imagination and vision. We know that Traherne found a similar justification for a belief in the reality of imagination in the *Hermetica*. It could be, though it's an intellectual minefield, that there are common origins in these traditions.

This high regard for imagination could be seen to support the medieval tradition of literary vision. I am sure Dante saw his *Divine Comedy* as a reality. Imagination also flows in the creative world of Renaissance art and poetry, and in the poetry and visual arts of William Blake, a seminal figure of the Romantic period.

These things are not fantasy, but could the use of Imagination be considered magic? There is a very interesting difference between this ancient and medieval use of imagination and the world of ancient and medieval magic.

⁹⁴ John Everard, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 'The Divine Pymander' in XVII books. London, 1650 (from the Ficino Latin translation). <https://www.alchemywebsite.com/corpherm.html>

We might think that magicians aim to produce effects on people or nature (for good or bad) through the force of their will and the use of their imagination. This is, however, a fairly modern idea, originating in the 19th-century occult revival, particularly the work of Eliphas Levi (1810-1875).

Medieval magic in neither the west nor the east used imagination. A textbook of magic such as the *Picatrix*, an Arabic text which was translated at the court of Alfonso the Wise in the 15th century, makes no mention of imagination. Its spells are based on the theory of sympathetic correspondence, the effects of the stars brought to bear on earth through the use of stones, herbs and plants, or words that reflect their qualities.

This book gives a very good indication of the state of magic at the time of Bonaventure, but the difference is surprising, considering that the *Hermetica* was popular in both east and west and had an influence on the *Picatrix*, but not, it seems, in its attitude to imagination.

Egil Asprem, in his online article that mentions Bonaventure and the Imagination, seems to suggest that the esoteric or magical use of imagination derives, in the west, from the Franciscan tradition.⁹⁵ His own work looks at the angel magic of Dr Dee in the late 16th century, which certainly does make use of imagination, or at least in a way which might today be termed clairvoyance. At some point the alchemical tradition moved from practical activity to an imagined operation, but quite when it would be hard to say.

This whole question of imagination is of enormous importance. Creative works are not simply made. They are discovered in the imagination.

⁹⁵ Egil Asprem, *The scholastic imagination*, 'Heterodoxology: Exploring the Heterodox in Science, Religion, and Politics', 2016. <https://heterodoxology.com/2016/02/24/the-scholastic-imagination/>

READING THE WORLD

By the end of the 13th century, Bonaventure's Platonic idea of Creation emanating from God, like light, never detached from its source. It was, however, replaced in the world of scholasticism by an Aristotelian idea of Creation as an object, separated, in a more literal sense. This led to a loss of the sacramental view of Creation in much of both Catholic and Protestant theology.

This conflict of attitude was one of the questions which inspired Bonaventure's last, unfinished, work, the *Collations on the Hexaemeron* or *Conferences on the Six Days of Creation*.⁹⁶ This was a series of lectures for the Franciscan brothers in Paris. At its core it is about different kinds of wisdom.

The year was 1267, only forty years after the death of Francis, when the Order was, Bonaventure believed, threatened by dangerously different ways of thinking – principally the influence of Aristotle. What we would term as scientific method is not a bad thing in itself; already Franciscans like Roger Bacon were thinking scientifically, but this is “literal” thinking – about how things work – had nothing to do with true wisdom or God. If such an approach is applied to faith – and scripture – faith is destroyed.

Bonaventure believes the brothers he is addressing should be “vires spirituales” – spiritual men. It may surprise us to read that at the start he warns them that “being in love with the beauty of nature” leads to death.⁹⁷ What he means is love of nature for itself, not as a window through which to see God. This is, I believe, how we do, naturally, see Nature. We don't see a wood or a forest “scientifically” as an object, detached from ourselves, we experience a relationship with that wood, as we walk through the trees – how we see and feel is part of the Work.

Wherever we wish to look – at people, relationships, particular landscapes and on pilgrimage, and – if we learn to listen – Nature can be found in any place at any time.

Wisdom comes from reading and contemplating Scripture, which is part of Creation. There are four kinds of Wisdom, four steps to God:

⁹⁶ See the Works of St. Bonaventure, *Collations on the Hexaemeron*. Franciscan Institute Publications, 2018

⁹⁷ Ibid. Collations I:17.

UNIFORM WISDOM – the literal reading of Scripture. The scientific method is part of this but is not spiritual wisdom.

MULTIFORM WISDOM – reading Scripture on all levels. For the Franciscans, this would include “Lectio Spiritualis” – reading spiritually – whereby we become co-authors of the text, as the Word is also in us.

OMNIFORM WISDOM – reading the world – Creation – because everything is an expression of the Word – and we are part of Creation’s Performance. If the world in its entirety is Scripture, then it is a universal Scripture. There are no Christian, Muslim, or Pagan trees. If we have the faith that God speaks through everything, we have to avoid imposing meaning on the world. We may enjoy our own religious traditions and systems of imagery but in the Book of Creation we walk together with people of every kind of worldview, we all read the same texts which speak in our own language. If Scripture includes all of Nature, its language of forming and communicating Truth is beyond human language – guided by the inherent Law within Nature. Reality, some might say, is angelic. It is a performance that communicates.

NULLIFORM WISDOM – in which Love of God draws us away from all words to pure contemplation. This contemplative forgetting of the world is the object of later mystical tracts such as “the cloud of unknowing” which follow this aspect of mysticism, directly derived from Pseudo-Dionysius but omit Bonaventure’s affirmation of the value of Creation. This is, I would say, the nearest the medieval mind gets to our relationship with Creation that is equivalent to our view of Music. Western music, as we know it today, with its ability to combine ideas and expression, learned over centuries, is closer to the hidden language of Nature than words. This is because its language, however complex, is directly related to the fundamental Harmonies of the Cosmos.

If the deep understanding of Incarnation shows us that God is within every part of Creation – and that in knowing Christ we can find that Unity of God’s wisdom – it surely follows that by knowing Creation just as it is, we know Christ. Christianity needs to be universal if it’s about finding a true relation with Creation, but this does not mean that the language of Christianity should be universal. Any religion should lead to union with God. If people have other traditions, or have natural insight and understandings, perhaps from a more recent cosmic worldview which brings them to the same knowledge of Unity, it is not for us to impose our own language on them.

We can all “read the world” exactly as we experience music. At least, this is a nice idea with which to occupy myself in my declining years.

MUSIC IN THE LANDSCAPE

All music and stories are Works, but there are certain kinds of music and stories which are inherently part of Nature, not composed by humans. There is music that threads through time, connecting things, people and events, and music that flows through a landscape.

If we are to live completely in the world, we must also live this music and in these stories. It's all too obvious what damage can result to the world and humanity in being detached from the world, looking upon it as if it were something "out there". An integrated view of the world must include its stories, particularly those which connect human life to the natural life of this planet on which we happen to live, and to the fundamental harmonies which we share with the cosmos.

Any place or story which connects us to life on this Earth is to be valued. The 21st century mind might well reflect upon a view of the universe which is not actually true, an attitude that implies we are looking on the world from a detached position. This happens when stories are lost. It is good to be strictly scientific in the proper place, but we need to respect the stories to bring us back to Earth.

Perhaps we need to employ a discernment of mythology. If local stories or sacred places demand death and blood, that might be thought of as negative. If there is a cult about power and control, or the power of a specific group of people, that is, perhaps, not a good thing. But discernment might show that there is more than one level of meaning in these myths or cults, which are obviously not just things of the past. A sacred tradition of kingship, for example, may have archetypal meaning beyond any particular king.

These myths may also be related to nature itself, and about the relationship of people to Nature. Nature has to include energies, aspects that may at first seem negative but are necessary to life, just as certain characteristics are in a person.

Because God, in the terms of the monotheistic religions, is an absolute Source of Being, both beyond Nature and immanent within it, any myth has to be seen as part of Creation. Myths are as real as a tree, a Gresley Pacific locomotive, or a Schubert piano sonata – it's purely a matter of personal choice.

The fifth-century Platonist, Proclus, managed to accommodate and justify all Greek mythology as a view of the cosmos in which everything flowed from Unity but had many layers. His

idea of hierarchy was converted by Pseudo-Dionysius into the hierarchy of angels.

If there are, within Harmony, archetypal qualities that exist in everything, such as colours or musical modes, could there be actual places which reveal one dominant mode or quality? Sometimes it seems as if certain places, with strong archetypal qualities, attract events, ideas and people into that landscape.

The music of Earth has no mode of its own because its music is mixed. It is composed of all the elements of the material world – a complex interweaving of all the different colours, moods or planetary influences. It is by sharing in this diverse music that we discover Unity, the source of all Harmony.

Each planetary mode has its own muse. As mentioned previously, the muse of the Earth is Thalia, muse of comedy. In some places, though, a particular mode breaks through and becomes dominant, as it does in a person, or a song. For example, we can imagine an ideal Arcadian landscape, where people can live in harmony with Nature. This ideal world has a reality in itself. It might be considered to exist in the “Imaginal World”, an Islamic term popularised by Henry Corbin to refer to worlds which are far more than imaginary. They have a real existence and create a relationship between us and God.

The Arcadian world *is* Imaginal but there are also earthly places which are completely natural and have this quality to a greater or lesser extent. There are landscapes which have been “improved” to bring out this quality within them, and there are completely artificial landscapes, like the gardens at Stourhead. All these share the same music. They are all, in a way, aspects of the Imaginal Arcadia.

Such a place, an Arcadia or Earthly Paradise, is one where all the modes are in balance – a place that reflects Eden, the Temple, or the cosmos as a whole. There might be places which have one dominant modal quality, of Mars or Venus, or, perhaps, one dominant theme, a signature combination of archetypal sounds.

I like the idea that a place with a strong music of its own attracts things unto itself, as if in the process of forming, or being composed. We can study harmony and its archetypal qualities, just as an astrologer might study the planets, but Truth is known from the music of an individual place, even from that shed in the corner of the allotments, or a field with a rusting abandoned plough.

If this theology of a musical Nature is to be explored, there are other paths to knowledge. We can all find our own music which helps to explore the spheres within us.

Peter Sterry, whose musical allusions are quoted, has this wonderful moment of advice to his son, which equally applies to all composing mortals:

Let us ever remember that we are here in our pilgrimage and Disguise. Let us have our own country and the way to it ever in our hearts ... I know nothing pleasanter, than that which David sung to God; Thy Statutes are my Songs in the house of my pilgrimage. Even in this earthly body, the Manifestations of the Love, and beauty ... are Songs, harmony, Musick made by the heavenly spheres of the divine beings themselves in us, by the Charms of which even our house, our Pilgrimage, and all things in it are turned into heavenly Dances and Delights.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ N. I. Matar (Editor), *Peter Sterry: Select Writings*. Op. cit.

BUT THE SPHERES ARE SILENT...

Let us imagine that we are made of the same stuff as the Cosmos, and that even our Souls, or, if we prefer, our consciousness or mental life, must follow the same inherent Laws. In the Platonic tradition, and in its Christian, Jewish, or Islamic versions, we experience the Divine in our experience of Beauty and Truth. Everything can reveal “God” (The Source of All Being) by being itself. This is possible because we have the same laws within our souls; we speak the same language and sing the same songs.

This is what the “Music of the Spheres” implies, as a metaphor. We have the same music in us as that which guides the cosmos.

So far so good.

But the Spheres are silent.

This was obvious to many, even in the classical world. The image of the planets being fixed to spheres which were enclosed within each other, making celestial music as they revolved, was never a scientific theory. To Plato, who gives us two different versions of this image – in the “Myth of Er” in the *Republic* and in his creation myth *Timaeus* – it is very clearly meant to be a myth.

Very soon after Plato, the literal minded Aristotle argued that the reason why we could not hear the “Music of the Spheres” was not that our ears were dulled by human weakness but because there is no sound. If the planets were tuned to a musical scale and each emitted that note as they turned, this would not make music but a cacophony of all the notes sounding at once.

The ancient view of the cosmos as an image of a musical scale was a good and “true” metaphor for the idea that everything came from number, music. This encouraged people to look closely at the heavens, to measure the planetary movements. The mathematics did not, however, match the musical scale. As the centuries passed, this desire to find the literal truth of the revolutions in the universe led to signs that the universe was not like this metaphor at all. The truth was that the planets did not revolve round the earth.

As this shows, for hundreds, even thousands of years, people have loved the metaphor or myth, while questioning the reality of it. By 1700 the entire vision of the cosmos had

collapsed. What, then, was left of this original vision?

The Scientific Revolution of the Renaissance when a new view of nature emerged, actually proved that earlier insight, whether it was Pythagoras or an older tradition, was correct. There are laws in Nature – Nature follows inherent laws. There is no need for gods, or even some versions of the monotheistic “God”, to control Nature. It looks after and carries on by itself. And so do we. This has to be accepted by anyone who believes reason itself to be divine.

We do not need, as the 17th and 18th century Deists believed, to follow any set of laws given to us by “God”, or his prophets. Pythagoras would say that we find the law in ourselves if we understand our place in Nature.

Early Christian and medieval theology seem to show that this could have been understood by a great many theologians. From reading the texts, in the earliest days there appears to have been a tension between the theological idea of God as ultimately unknowable and simple, “The One” or “The Good”, and the very different versions of God in the Old Testament.

Bonaventure, for example, was heavily influenced by the fifth century Pseudo-Dionysius, whose ideas of God were very Platonic. On the whole, the Biblical God is always seen in the light of this more abstract concept. The New Testament seems to be full of ways of accepting this more theological God as being, at the same time, intimately connected to Creation. Christ is the law that we can know in ourselves.

Bonaventure came up with an inspired adaptation of the Pythagorean/Platonic tradition of things being made according to Ideas in the Mind of God. With sublime Franciscan simplicity, always looking for the simplest answer, he suggested that there need be only one design in God’s Mind. This in Christian terms is “the Word”, the emanation of God, and everything that exists is an expression of this one Idea. Everything is Unity and Being, which comes from God.

This struggle between confidence in an inherent Law and a law imposed by those who believed themselves to be inspired, seems to be a theme throughout the Old Testament. People have always been unhappy about abandoning their gods, spirits and demons, and even more unwilling to abandon myths and traditions which make them feel separate, special, or chosen.

Christianity seems to come from the same ancient tradition which inspired Pythagoras, and clearly runs as a thread throughout earlier Hebrew tradition. The core of Christianity, perhaps, becomes clearer when we take a rational view of Nature, which becomes distorted when we turn a blind eye to reason.

But – if the Spheres are silent – what about music?

An essential part of the myth of the “Music of the Spheres” is the idea that not only is there an inherent Law of Number but also that the human Soul contains the same qualities as the cosmos. This immediately lifts the concept away from the purely material – what we are spiritually is also an aspect of this same law.

Plato’s *Timaeus* expresses this in mythical terms, with God, as a first step towards Creation, making the Soul of the World. This is the pattern which would guide Creation. The Creator uses an offcut of the same pattern to make the human soul, which has the same structure as Nature as a whole. From this image derives the idea that the human being is the microcosm, the cosmos (or macrocosm) in miniature.

This idea is illustrated in the Music of the Spheres by the image of the planets and stars as the pattern behind everything, with each planet having a different quality. As the human soul has these same qualities within it, this is what makes it possible for the soul to resonate with the influence of the stars.

The fact that it was possible to imagine the shape of the universe in musical terms is itself extraordinary, even verging on the miraculous. The perceived arrangement of the planets could be matched to the seven notes of a musical scale. Given that the original concept of the universe was based purely on how the skies looked to observers on Earth (who were unable, without telescopes, to see that there were further planets), it is a mystery of coincidence that this was even possible. At the same time as theorists tried to make the planets fit this heavenly musical scheme, they did so in reverse. The imagined qualities of the planets (that is, the moving heavenly bodies of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury and the Sun and Moon) were also looked for in music.

Even if one believes that planetary spheres make a sound, as a glass hums when a finger is run around its rim, for example, because it can only make one note it is difficult to relate to any kind of expressive music. What was possible, however, was to think in terms of a musical mode, the musical scales centring on each of the notes of the scale, each of which had a distinct sound due to the fact that the seven note scale is irregular, made up of tones and semitones. We think of a scale starting on ‘A’ as a minor scale. One starting on ‘C’ is major. That starting on ‘F’ has a distinctive sound because the ‘B’ is natural, not flat, as it would be in a major scale. There is no absolute solution to this, but the idea that the different qualities of different modes were related to the qualities of the planets was believed in different forms for centuries, though it was often held to be a lost art – something the ancients understood but which could not be recovered.

An important aspect of this is that the perceived relationship between the musical scale and human qualities and emotions could be held to be true regardless of the physical reality of the Music of the Spheres, or the ancient view of the cosmos. At its heart is the belief that there is direct connection between music and the way the human mind or soul works. It might be unnecessary to define this further; it is mystery enough.

By the time of the Renaissance, at the same time as the literal belief in the harmonic structure of the cosmos was breaking down, there were signs that a direct connection between music and these planetary qualities was becoming more defined. Ficino claimed to be able to sing in different modes that caused different (emotional) effects on people. It was a kind of music therapy. He explained this by imagining a spirit which conveyed effects from the planets to the music and then to the listener. We might, nevertheless, think that an imagined medium was unnecessary given the soul has the same qualities as in Nature.

Ficino did not, however, use music to summon up the effects of all the planets. Some, he believed, had no music of their own. Other music theorists and composers, most famously Franchinus Gaffurius (a contemporary and friend of Leonardo da Vinci) at the end of the 15th century, happily identified the planetary qualities of each of the medieval modes. When listening to music in these modes, there does seem to be some truth in this. For instance, the Lydian mode in 'F' can be heard as having the jovial qualities of Jupiter. There were ancient traditions that the Phrygian mode in 'E' could invoke the qualities of Mars.

So, what happens when the ancient view of the cosmos is suddenly proved to be false? The mathematics doesn't work because, in reality, the Earth goes around the Sun and the Moon goes around the Earth. The belief in the connection between the soul and music carries on. Not only is this justifiable by an understanding of harmony, without any reference to the stars, but it is increasingly understood from experience. The old pattern of the cosmos can be retained as a metaphor for music. This only works if it is not taken literally – which is another fundamental mystery.

Though the basic building blocks of harmony are based on simple ratios (Pythagoras was essentially right), it proves impossible to tune instruments strictly according to Pythagorean mathematics. There was a change in the nature of music in the West when tuning began to be based on the sound rather than pure mathematics. The ear could accept approximations and rationalisations. By 1600 it was possible to use a wider range of notes, with semitones between all the tones. This was especially necessary for keyboard instruments as a string instrument can make a 'B' flat and an 'A' sharp sound different according to context, but on a keyboard they are the same note.

The desire to find way of expressing emotion in music, that would recreate the effects which

ancient writers claimed for ancient Greek music, led to a new style of music. This used the full range of available notes, with harmonies supporting an expressive vocal or instrumental line. This new style, which was quite unlike the modal system, produced music that really was expressive, and could be experienced as having a direct effect on the listener. It was a human kind of music, allowing for variety and contrast of harmony. It was not aiming to draw down one pure planetary quality but to reflect the complex mixture of qualities that made up the human soul.

In a new way, this new music revealed, by its demonstrable power, that there could be a connection between music and the soul. As time went on, it became possible to introduce more contrast and drama, to create works which reflected the works of nature by drawing on many qualities all seeking Unity.

The language of music, as we know it today, can draw attention to the possibility that we have feelings and ideas in us that are also present in the world outside. We relate to the world because we are made of the same stuff and have the same language within us, a *Hidden Music*.

The puritanical writer Peter Sterry, in the 1670s, used the language of the Music of the Spheres in a letter to his son (referred to in the previous section), to say that we all have the basic harmonies of the universe in our souls. Sterry could also write about music in a way that would not have been possible in the 16th century, explaining that music, with its mixture of light and dark, concord and discord, reflects the way God works in Nature.

This ancient image still has some truth in it. The myth of the Music of the Spheres is about the key elements present in all things. We can study these ideal harmonies, which include the laws of physical nature, but what belongs to the sublunary world – the world we live in – is a constantly changing music containing all these elements in infinitely varying combinations. It is this harmony that allows darkness and discord to play an essential part in the Work.

This is by no means an over-rational and material view of nature. A musical work is more than a metaphor, it is as real as a forest. The Works which we relate to are not purely material but include ideas, memories and stories. They are a sign or example of the way we find meaning in nature. While the connection of the fundamentals of harmony with an imagined cosmos of planetary spheres may not be literally true, it is still a useful metaphor for the idea that the roots of music are common to our minds and all of Nature.

The Renaissance brought a new understanding of music as Performance, a group of performers working together and sharing experience. In doing so, the performers can touch truths or moments of grace. Music exists in performance, on various levels. It is never a solitary thing. A

composer is part of a performance, working with experiences, memories and techniques, creating the music of Nature. Nature is also a Performance. The audience is part of the Work. How we see or hear the Work, whether it is a work of music or a walk in a forest, a life or a story, is part of that Work.

So, the idea is that inherent Harmony has meaning regardless of the physical workings of the planets. It is not necessary to go further and look for more complex patterns, which may distract us from simply learning how to listen or compose. However, there are ways in which it is possible to find meaning in the old idea of the planets and their qualities.

The medieval mind would accept that the different characters of the planets matched qualities which we all share. By chance these seemed to be connected to the musical modes. But, as mentioned, we know this is not literally true.

Yet the idea of these fundamental qualities persists in esoteric tradition (such as the Jewish Cabala) and in popular imagination. Is it reasonable to believe that what we might call Jungian archetypes within us are also present in all the works of Nature? While I don't think this is an article of faith, it is an intriguing concept to explore. The danger is that by thinking too much of these things we become deaf to the music.

By the end of the 15th century, sacred music had developed large forms which imitated heavenly music. Though they are structured around the words, the Marian antiphons sung at Eton are large musical structures which echo the architecture of the buildings. This is true of many other sacred buildings. The great cathedrals are spaces for music and performance – they are far more than symphonies in stone.

The Renaissance developed musical expression to imitate the emotional effect of Greek drama, combining concord and discord to express the meaning of the words. Music had learned how to combine the possibilities of harmony and discord to imitate Nature.

By the 16th century, Western music had found a language which could express feelings and allow more complex works to form. In attempting to recreate the power of Greek drama, composers developed the dramatic style of opera.

In the early 17th century this expressive effect of opera moves into instrumental music. An artificial rationalisation of tuning made it possible to change key and construct dramatic forms. This is the first time, I feel, that instrumental music could be heard as the complex language of Creation.

There are works from this period that seem to me to be sacred texts for meditation. I am thinking of the string consort music of William Lawes, Orlando Gibbons, and others. Then there is music that is intended specifically for religious meditation, such as the mystery sonatas of Biber.

The historical accident of England being separate from Catholic Europe meant that English musicians could learn the new harmonic language of the Italian baroque (chiefly Monteverdi), but England had neither a demand for a similar kind of church music nor opera. The subtle kind of music with the quality of philosophical conversation was absorbed into music for private string ensembles, even in Puritan households such as that of Peter Sterry or Oliver Cromwell.

In 1676, English composer and musician Thomas Mace looked back at what had already become old style, the violin consort. He wrote that music had become like

... so many Pathetical Stories, Rhetorical and Sublime Discourses, Subtil and Acute Argumentations.

Mace nevertheless appreciated that this was a sacred language:

In that Musick speaks so transcendently, and Communicates its Notions so intelligibly to the Internal, and Incomprehensible Faculties of the Soul so far beyond all Language of Words that I confess and most solemnly affirm, I have been more Sensibly, Fervently, and Zealously Captivated, and drawn into Divine Raptures, and Contemplations by Those Unexpressible Rhetorical, Uncontroulable Perswasions, and Instructions of Musick's Divine Language, than ever yet I have been, by the best Verbal Rhetorick, that came from any Mans Mouth, either in Pulpit, or elsewhere.⁹⁹

To me, the works of “Musick’s Divine Language” that Mace would have known, are just as important sacred texts as the poetry of George Herbert or Donne. Perhaps more so, as this divine language speaks more directly to the soul than words. Mace thinks of this in terms of rhetoric, as a language of feeling or what became known technically as “affect”. Is music conveying ideas or merely feelings? Do we know and remember things other than by the feelings they produce?

In the 18th century it was the demands of comedy in opera that encouraged the development of larger musical forms, in which many moods could be combined into a more complex work.

⁹⁹ Thomas Mace, *Musick's Monument; or a Remembrance of the Best Practical Music*. London, 1676.
<https://archive.org/details/musicksmonumentto00mace/page/n8/mode/2up>

This used Western classical musical language which could modulate and contrast keys and moods for dramatic effect.

The expansion of harmony over the next two centuries allowed closer parallels with nature. The music we irresistibly associate with images in our imagination are often of place and landscape. Thus, the language of music is the language of Memory and Imagination. It is as if there is a *Hidden Music* in nature which expresses itself in images and feeling, of which our musical language is the closest representation.

All music is sacred as all music comes from the language of Creation. But the music that is most sacred is, simply, good music, of whatever style we prefer – music that fires the imagination whatever its subject matter or intention of its maker – that speaks of archetypal truths and can lead us to Unity.

CONCLUSION

The language of Music is the same as the language of Nature, which governs the combination of all manner of parts into a whole. Composing and performing has a direct parallel with ancient theurgic magic, not as a means of controlling the world, but as a means of bringing the soul closer to the harmonic structure of the cosmos, the Soul of the World, and to God. It is a search for Unity.

My original quest was inspired by the sense of meaning in Nature – the sense of working with language and the dance – things and experiences being formed.

Platonism explains the Unity and Truth in nature and the language of Harmony – the principle of an inherent Law in Nature, which allows freedom of creation. Philosophers were slow to find the language to explain the power of music – its ways of expressing meaning – the meaning of Nature.

The Christian element emphasised the working of nature itself, and the value of the material world as much as heavenly ideas, reaffirmed by the idea of the Incarnation.

In terms of music, it is easy to see a relationship between the idea of the Word, as the active Unity of God, and the idea of Wisdom, as God's Law in Creation. In theology, the two can be confused somewhat – but if we think of that Unity entering Creation and becoming, within the Cosmos, that pattern or template of Harmony, just as a single fundamental sound produces harmonic overtones, we can understand the relationship of Word and Wisdom. Wisdom is, thinking as a musician, the first created thing – but it is, in effect, the same thing as the Word – as light splits into colours of the rainbow.

While those 17th and 18th century writers that I like are strongly Platonist, their love of Nature and understanding that discord is essential to life comes from a Christian outlook. They are not trying to escape this world, as some Christian traditions appear to be. Philosophy and theology launch into complexity. I will never understand Proclus or most of the theology that came after 1300 AD.

This is a search for simplicity. It is about forgetting the ideas and concepts that paradoxically block our human understanding and allowing ourselves to love.

I am increasingly aware that much of the musical theory in this study contradicts other traditions – lost traditions that were dominant in the West and are still being rediscovered. How much theology do we need to forget?

In 1899, W. R. Inge's *Christian Mysticism* was ahead of its time.¹⁰⁰ Christian-Platonism had been almost forgotten and largely misunderstood. Inge explained that it was the Platonic outlook that valued Nature. Of the 17th-century English Platonists, he had a particular love for John Smith, who writes:

*God made the Universe and all the Creatures contained therein as so many Glasses wherein he might reflect his own Glory: He hath copied forth himself in the Creation; and in this Outward World we may read the lovely characters of the Divine Goodness, Power and Wisdom ...*¹⁰¹

Though Smith, I believe, knew Bonaventure the Seraphic Doctor, this is hardly mentioned by Inge. Bonaventure has only been rediscovered in the last forty years, and the differences between his theology and what followed, which was influenced by Aristotle, have become clear.

Thomas Traherne was unknown until his manuscripts began to miraculously turn up just over a hundred years ago. An annotated edition of his works has just begun. Traherne has been thought of as a reader of Bonaventure, as John Smith, the 17th-century Cambridge Platonist, appears to have been. He certainly knew his Ficino. Ficino, similarly, has become far more known and understood in recent years, with translations of his commentaries on Plato and other works.

Even when I began my quest in the 1970s, some of this was unknown. The Dance has led me to congenial voices – and in the last year I have been researching the 18th century Platonists who went back to sources that supported their philosophy at a time when there seemed to be no interest in the Church of England, or a sacramental or spiritual relationship with Nature.

This is a personal view, of course, but it does try to explain the world as I first saw it many years ago. I think it also offers an explanation of Charles Williams' evocative image of the Dance in his novel *The Greater Trumps* – of a Cosmos that is continuously weaving new forms and Works.

Very little “mainstream” Christianity in the West has any appeal to me. Twenty years ago, I

¹⁰⁰ W. R., Inge, *Christian Mysticism*. Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2010 (first published 1899).

¹⁰¹ Quoted in *Cambridge Platonist Spirituality* by Charles Taliaferro, Alison J. Teply, and Jaroslav Pelikan. Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 2004.

I have restored Smith's original word “glasses” in place of the unnecessary modernisation in this edition.

saw the early Franciscans, especially Bonaventure, as a high point, a moment of understanding, but now I see that moment as a bright spot in a much longer tradition, which went underground and, apart from these few visionaries, is now beginning to re-emerge.

We no longer see the meaning of St Francis and his early followers in the same way that we did, even twenty years ago. New research on the importance of music to the Franciscans is in progress as I write.

The quest is certainly not the attraction of the ancient. This philosophy is about the here and now, it is concerned with the key problems of today – the separation of humanity from Nature, which western Christianity has been partly responsible for. Some would argue that changes in religious outlook are caused by an evolutionary change in human nature.

What remains is the Mystery. In Christian terms this is the Eucharistic liturgy – through the blood and wine we hope to approach Unity. Any other interpretation weakens the Mystery. As I heard someone once say to me in a dream, “Always pass on the story and not what you think it means.”

Our understanding of the historical background of this Mystery is changing. Even if we do not take the research of Margaret Barker, for example, as convincing, there is enough new knowledge to encourage us to question old interpretations. The Mystery remains and there is a possibility, which I can't help being attracted to, that its origins are in an ancient Temple tradition. This tradition is all about the inner workings and inherent Law of Creation – Harmony and *Hidden Music*.

Yet throughout a period of lost knowledge, music was being written and performed. In the 17th century, even if no-one but Peter Sterry could explain it in words, the composers and performers of consort music were participating in developing the secret language of Nature.

In 18th-century England, when Platonism was out of fashion, one could experience the mystery in the opera house or any inspired instrumental music. To me and others, the direct experience of a sacramental nature came through Elgar or Vaughan Williams.

The exploration of all Music is an exploration of the Hidden Music, the Language of Creation. The object of all that I do is learning to listen, to see, to perform – and, perhaps, to help other people (as Thomas Traherne said) to “enjoy the world aright.”

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