

## THE MEANING OF MUSIC IN 18<sup>th</sup> CENTURY ENGLAND

### THE FORGOTTEN STREAM

Some see the 18<sup>th</sup> century in England as a time of materialism, leading to the Industrial Revolution. Theology had pushed God out of Creation. The universe turned like clockwork. Nature was a purely material thing, there to be exploited.

(Historians of ideas seem not to notice the time spent by the wealthy classes in opera houses and theatres immersed in a world of imagination and magic.)

There is, though a forgotten Platonic tradition, flowing as an underground stream through the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

I cannot say whether any composers were aware of it (and a composer is working with Platonic Ideas and the Hidden Music of Nature whether he is conscious of it or not) but if I had been a composer of a platonic frame of mind in the second half of the century I would have had sympathy with this stream of thought.

I would define the key ideas of this version of Platonism as these -

Everything flows from Unity

All things seek Unity – return to Unity by being a thing in themselves, a work

The desire for Unity flows through all things, like a ray of Truth

There is an Inherent Law in creation – which is Harmony, or, in human lives, Virtue.

Works form freely in Nature, or in our Imagination, guided by this Inherent Law, which is the language of the Hidden Music

Music is the closest we can come to the Language of Nature.

Music is a language which can convey meaning because all things are formed according the same Inherent Law and all things are expressions of the same Truth.

### THE MEANING OF MUSIC – THE HANDEL/HARRIS DEBATE

James Harris (1709-1780) was, for fifty years, the guiding force of Music Festival in Salisbury, where he lived in Marlborough House on the cathedral close He was a friend of Handel. His life in London (he was MP for Christchurch) was a whirl of opera and concerts. He was a

composer himself in a small way. He was philosopher, inspired by his influential uncle the 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury. And yet his philosophical views on the value of music were extremely narrow.

This seems astonishing, but he was not alone. Philosophers, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, does not appear to have had the language with which to explain music - what it was actually doing and how it worked its effects - or the meaning that music had for them every day of their lives. Part of his reason for this inability to write about music might lie in Harris's concern to be traditional. His books are repositories of ancient tradition as a bulwark against modern ideas – most notably the philosophy of Locke and Descartes. Harris crammed his books with ancient sources that would argue against modern materialism. He had no interest in being original.

The Preface to Harris's *Hermes* (1751) explains that the purpose of this odd book, which is more footnotes than text, is

...to excite his readers to curiosity and inquiry...to become Teachers to themselves...

The footnotes are the real purpose of the book.

Harris hopes that the variety of sources, Greek and Roman, will help the reader understand that

there is ONE TRUTH, like one Sun, that has enlightened human Intelligence through every age, and saved it from the darkness both of Sophistry and Error.

If Harris had looked into more recent times, to the 17<sup>th</sup> century when instrumental music was developing, free of words, as pure music, he might have found writers who had a different view, based on the experience of this new music, but Harris was focused on the more distant past.

Because of this tunnel vision Harris's own writings on music may not represent his actual experience – but when seen in their precise historical context they can be seen as one side of a dialogue which does delve deep into the philosophical value of music. The other side of the dialogue is conveyed in music, not words, and the other person in the conversation is George Friderick Handel.

Harris's musical thoughts are expressed in his *Three Treatises* of 1741, an important book, even the key book, of the lost 18<sup>th</sup> century Platonic tradition, but not for its very limited view of music.

The canon, the key texts of this 18<sup>th</sup> century Platonic tradition, is not limited to philosophical writings. The most important texts include musical works and gardens.

Harris's discussion of music in *Three Treatises* is important and was influential in its own way. Harris argues that music is extremely limited in its mimetic, or imitative, role. It cannot imitate nature apart from in very crude ways - the imitation of movement, birdsong, wind, storms. This is perfectly true, and if this gives music a very low place in comparison with Art and Poetry if the representation of Nature is seen as the purpose of art. It is true that music is limited in its imitative capabilities but even within its limitations, music can imitate some aspects Nature

with a great deal of sophistication. From the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the development of the new musical language of the Baroque, particularly in instrumental music, music had learned to imitate nature, often with subtlety. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> century the imitative and expressive aspects of music come together in Biber's *Mystery Sonatas*. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* were written in 1723.

But Harris the philosopher cannot escape the hold of the ancient understanding of music. Music was believed to have expressive power when combined with words, as in ancient Greek drama, which was sung rather than merely declaimed, but there seems to be no thought at all in the ancient mind or the mind of James Harris that music could have meaning or be a language in itself. It's curious that this question of music as language never struck Harris as one of his interests was the fundamental structure of language – as discussed in his book *Hermes*.

What Harris does argue in his *Three Treatises* is that Music's expressive nature can create moods, or what are elsewhere called "affects", which can be combined with words to have a great power.

And hence the genuine Charm of Music, and the Wonders which it works, thro' its great Professors. (Footnote: Such, above all, is George Frederick Handel...) A Power which consists not in Imitations, and the raising Ideas; but in the raising Affections, to which ideas may correspond.

(James Harris, *Three Treatises*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1765, p99)

The effect of the music is transitory but the ideas of the words are retained in the memory.

(Is this true? Do we forget the music?)

This combination of expressive music and words is the key feature of baroque opera. An opera aria matches words with a musical expression of the feeling behind the words.

Baroque opera began around 1600 as an attempt to revive the supposed power of ancient Greek drama. By Harris's time opera had grown more and more stylised, with complex plots and the emphasis on vocal performance – though, in spite of the artificiality, great baroque opera could still be powerful drama.

Music, when alone, can only raise Affections, which soon languish and decay, if not maintained and fed by the nutritive images of Poetry.

(James Harris, *Three Treatises*, 1741)

Music itself, without words, in the Preludes and Symphonies (the instrumental introductions to an aria), can raise "the very affections" which the poet "would most desire", so that the words can be absorbed by an audience in a mood or affection prepared for them by the music.

Harris's comments drew attention to the power of music and words combined, and, even though this was a statement of the obvious, Harris's discussion inspired further thought. Harris seems to be the starting point of a continuing debate about the way in which music and words should be most effectively combined. This question, which was largely about how to return opera to its dramatic roots, continued through the writings of Algarotti (his *Essay on Opera*, 1755), Rousseau, Tartini and Benjamin Stillingfleet. The most outstanding musical products of this discussion were the operas by Gluck which had a new dramatic simplicity and integration, beginning with *Orfeo ed Euridice* in 1762.

There is no consideration in Harris's work, or that of his followers, for how it is that music actually has this expressive power. This is surprising as there was an answer, given by Plato and known in the Renaissance. To the Platonist or Pythagorean, whether ancient or relatively modern, even as modern as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the expressive power of music was due to its relationship with the Music of the Spheres. Music could convey the characteristics of the planets and their gods, as Harmony derived from the mathematical order which the planets displayed.

This was common knowledge until the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the Copernican view of the universe replaced the ancient image of a cosmos with the Earth at its centre. It is curious that classicists like Harris could be devoted to ancient wisdom and yet dismiss this essential concept of the ancient worldview, and one which was important to Plato (in his *Timaeus* and *Republic*), presumably because it was obsolete, a worldview proved wrong by modern scientific reason. Harris and his circle did not turn their backs on Newton and the recent discoveries of science.

This is understandable, but it meant that a concept that could have led to a new understanding of how Music works as a language was disregarded. I would say that this was a mistake. The ancient image of the cosmos may not be physically true but Harmony is still true. The ancient view of the cosmos was derived from the discovery of the mathematical law of Harmony (traditionally associated with Pythagoras but far more ancient) rather than the observation of the stars, which, by curious chance, seemed to reflect that law.

Music can express feeling but can it have meaning? Harris suggests that music has very little power to imitate nature, but what of music as language? Does it have meaning in itself? What about instrumental music? Is it that just a decorative sound? If so a Platonist should value music as a source of Beauty.

Harris's discussion of music was written at a time when the subject of the power and meaning of music was in the air.

Handel's *Alexander's Feast, or the Power of Music*, first performed in 1736, is an important work in his career for several reasons. It is an oratorio in English, setting words adapted from

John Dryden (1697), and it marks his move away from Italian opera to oratorio in English. This move was as much a financial move as an artistic one. Opera was expensive and limited in performance, due to the strict theatrical licensing law. English oratorio was cheaper, could be performed in a wider range of settings, and could appeal to a new audience, including the rising middle classes who might not have understood Italian, the traditional language of opera due to its Italian origins.

*Alexander's Feast* is a work about music.

The oratorio cannot help but raise the question of what value or power music has. Can it be expressive? Can it represent things? Can it have meaning? Handel asks these questions and attempts to answer them through the music itself, and in doing so asks much deeper questions than Harris's language could have found words for.

The oratorio sets words by John Dryden telling the story of a feat in which the poet Timotheus entertained Alexander the Great. This story has been referred to over the centuries as the locus classicus of the power of music. When Timotheus sings of war Alexander is roused to a passion. When the poet sings of love the king is calmed.

This is an example from the ancient world of music's power. Many sources specify that the warlike song was in the Phrygian mode. This was the mode associated with Mars. The ancient Greek modes were more complex than the diatonic modes which became the basis of western church music, nevertheless in the ancient world and in medieval and Renaissance Europe it would have been understood that the Phrygian mode was the mode of Mars. (On the white notes of the piano this mode is a scale on E.) The connection of the modes with the planets was demonstrated by the apparent proportionate relationships of the planetary spheres.

Western music had lost the use of the various modes with their planetary associations during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries with the development of the harmonic system. The modes are melodic rather than harmonic. The use of harmony tended to favour the major and minor scales rather than eight different modes.

(The eight modes were associated with the eight spheres – Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and the Celestial sphere of the zodiac. The nine muses (Plato calls them sirens) were associated with the eight spheres and their musical mode and with Thalia as muse of Earth - because, like Comedy, over which she presided, the material world is formed from the mixture of the qualities of all the other spheres.)

By the time Handel wrote his *Alexander's Feast* it would have been accepted that music could create a martial mood, but the idea that a particular mode could convey the quality of Mars itself had been lost with the loss of the ancient image of the cosmos.

Handel was, though, with aid of the rather stilted words of Dryden, affirming the power of music to convey mood or affect. This supported the views of James's Harris's *Three Treatises*.

What Harris was unable to accept was the possibility that the music could imitate a conflagration. This was a power of music that Harris's Treatise (published in 1741 but in existence some years earlier) would not support.

A letter from Harris's cousin, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Shaftesbury on 15<sup>th</sup> (?) April 1737 to James Harris in Salisbury refers to

...the complaint many persons even of judgement have made that Mr Handel has fallen short of the spirit of the Ode in setting it to music.

(Donald Burrows and Rosemary Dunhill, *Music and Theatre in Handel's World*, Oxford, 2002, p.24)

The cause of this criticism was Handel's apparent attempt to describe in music things that were beyond music's power to describe. Shaftesbury is writing about this, it appears, in response to the "ingenious performance" which Harris had enclosed in his previous letter – almost certainly a draft of his *Treatise on Music, Painting and Poetry*.

Harris's reply (19 April 1737) agrees that

Your Lordship's observation on the Ode is certainly very just. People came with an expectation that music was to give them a prospect of Persepolis on fire. But this was indeed to expect pomegranates from an orange tree.

(Burrows and Dunhill, *op. cit.*, p.25)

Harris writes that music can convey ideas but these can only be the affections.

Tis in the affecting part only that music should be cultivated.

(*ibid*)

Harris is, therefore, disagreeing with Handel.

Handel's oratorio, a turning point in his career, declares the power of music in these two ways –

As a power to raise feelings (though Handel and Harris do not consider the Platonic theories of how this can be)

As a means of conveying ideas or images (which Harris does not consider valid)

...and there is a third way in which this one work affirms music's value.

This is the inclusion of purely instrumental music. When Theodosius plays his lyre Handel includes a complete harp concerto. The original performances also included an orchestral concerto grosso and an organ concerto in which the composer himself could show his power. Handel had no false modesty.

What, then, is the meaning and power of this kind of music? It has form, it has a language, it has ideas -but not necessarily ideas of anything but itself. What it does have is Ideas in the Platonic sense.

In spite of his criticisms Harris seems to have seen the importance of *Alexander's Feast*. Over the next few months he was involved in negotiations to obtain instrumental parts for a performance in Salisbury which took place 1738. On 16<sup>th</sup> May 1738 James Harris's brother, Thomas, wrote to him that Handel's assistant, J C Smith, did not have parts available for *Alexander's Feast*. In the same letter Thomas mentions that the philosopher Floyer Sydenham was planning to visit Harris at Salisbury

(Hampshire Archives. [9M73/G306/12](#))

Handel visited Harris in his home in the cathedral close at Salisbury at some point in the late summer of 1739. Burrows and Dunhill date the visit at some point between July or September. A letter to Harris from Katherine Knatchbull dated 29<sup>th</sup> August wishes Harris "joy of Mr Handel's Company." There is no record of the visit itself, or what took place, but it is a reasonable assumption that the serious questions of the nature of music would have been discussed. Harris does not appear to have changed his views. Lord Shaftesbury had read a version of Harris's treatise in 1737. It was not published until 1741.

Handel's visit to Harris had a direct effect, and one that I feel is Handel's riposte to Harris, in an astonishing series new works, all concerned with the nature and effect of music. At least one of these was composed at Harris's suggestion.

On September 15<sup>th</sup> 1739, which must have been within days of his leaving Salisbury, Handel began a setting of Dryden's Ode to Cecilia, again a celebration of music.

Dryden's words are wooden and heavy, unlike the simple words by Nicholas Brady which Purcell set for his St Cecilia Ode in 1692. But the work is a marvellous hymn to music in the Platonic or Pythagorean sense.

From harmony, from heav'nly harmony

This universal frame began...

The ode uses biblical imagery rather than classical. The aria "What passion cannot music raise and quell" speaks of Jubal's lyre rather than Orpheus and the final chorus is about the last trump, bringing an end to the world –

The trumpet shall be heard on high

And music shall untune the sky...

Handel composed his 12 Concerti Grossi Op. 6 in five weeks in late September and October 1739. (The manuscripts of all but one of the set have completion dates.) This must have been a matter of weeks after Handel's visit to Harris in Salisbury. This set is a major statement of the value of instrumental music. The form of the Concerto Grosso, which was usually a work in several movements for string orchestra with soloists, had been established by Corelli in

1700 with his own set of 12, Opus 6. Handel had contrived make his title and opus number a deliberate allusion to Corelli.

These concertos show an enormous variety of form, mood and content. A purely instrumental work not only demonstrates the expressive qualities of music, but it makes us aware of the importance of Form. Each work is a thing in itself - It has unity in itself – but it is formed from contrasting parts, which themselves are formed of many smaller elements or Ideas. By contemplating the nature of such works we can begin to understand the Platonic concept of Form and Ideas.

Handel had been planning to abandon opera and concentrate on oratorios in English, for which *Alexander's Feast* had been a prototype. It was James Harris who suggested to Handel that he made an oratorio out of Milton's twin poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. These poems are pictures of the cheerful and melancholy moods. They are rich in natural imagery. What Harris had provided Handel with was an opportunity to celebrate music by setting words which covered an enormous range of mood and also a wide range of opportunities to convey other ideas, including the imitation of Nature.

The work contains portraits of the mirthful or contemplative character, but Milton's words place these characters in natural settings. There is a long movement imitating birdsong, "*Sweet bird that shuns the noise of folly*". There are rippling streams, which Harris would have accepted as within the limited range of music's imitative powers. There is a variety of atmospheric scenery. The contemplative asks to be taken

To arched walks of twilight groves  
And shadows brown that Sylvan loves...

And

Then, as I wake, sweet music breathe,  
Above, about or underneath,  
Sent by some spirit to mortal's good,  
Or th'unseen Genius of the wood.

Milton's imagery, from a century earlier, would inspire romantic artists years later, such as Samuel Palmer. The text itself is a key work in the story of the English Imagination. Handel even finds himself setting...

O let my lamp, at midnight hour,  
Be seen in some high lonely tow'r,  
Where I may oft out-watch the Bear,  
With thrice-great Hermes, or unsphere  
The spirit of Plato...

There is, of course, a lot of jollity too, including a chorus showing off a new kind of carillon, a keyboard of bells.

Handel suggested that work should end with a section depicting "*Il Moderato*", a balance of feeling. Though this contains some of Handel's most beautiful music its philosophical point is questionable. Perhaps a life oscillating between Delight and Melancholy is more satisfactory than a life of moderation? Handel later sometimes omitted this section.

The result of this philosophical debate, in which Harris has an important part, is a set of works that form part of the canon of 18<sup>th</sup> century musical philosophy...

*Harris's Three Treatises*

*Handel's Alexander's Feast, L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato, Ode to St Cecilia and Concerti Gross Op. 6*

...to which we might add his oratorio *Saul*, which features the biblical story of the power of music - David's healing of Saul's madness by playing the harp. This was composed a year earlier, in 1738, and also featured what his librettist, Jennens, called Handel's "maggot" or hobbyhorse, the carrilon.

Handel demonstrates in music what Harris is unable to explain in words.

There is a sequel to this.

Floyer Sydenham had been a university friend of Harris's. Harris supported him financially all his life. Though Sydenham was based in London he can be placed in Salisbury with Harris on at least three occasions – and this is from very limited evidence. There are no letters from Sydenham to Harris in the enormous Harris archive and no mention of Sydenham in any of Harris's surviving letters. The clues we have are from letters from their mutual friend John Upton and the precise dating of Harris's *Treatise on Happiness*, which appears to be based on a genuine conversation at Wilton in 1741.

The earliest reference to a journey of Sydenham to Harris in Salisbury has a Handel connection. To what extent was Sydenham part of Harris's musical world?

This reference is in a letter from Thomas Harris to his brother James on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1738.

I believe Sydenham will come as mentioned, or (as I fear no coach goes on Monday) on Tuesday at farthest. By him I send Handel's print &c.

(Burrows and Dunhill, op. cit., p.51)

"Handel's print &c" were additional items published to go with the printed score of Handel's most recent opera, *Serse*. The same letter from Thomas Harris also mentions the music for *Alexander's Feast* which Harris was trying to obtain for a Salisbury performance.

John Upton, a very lively and entertaining correspondent, is the principal source of information on Sydenham. He was in regular contact with the philosopher in London. It was

Upton who encouraged Sydenham to begin his English translation of Plato in the 1750s. There is a manuscript of notes on Plato in the British Library which are probably by John Upton. (BL Add Ms 38809) Upton's most important literary work at this time was an annotated edition of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Sydenham is thought to have assisted in this edition.

Upton knew Handel. He became acquainted with the composer in Tunbridge Wells. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1737 he wrote to Harris that he had dined with him "every day in the week."

(Burrows and Dunhill, op. cit., p.36)

During May 1738, when Sydenham was taking the Handel items to Salisbury, John Upton was writing to Harris about the reactions to *Serse*, which was seen as a new style of opera for Handel, though not, as some called it, a "ballad opera."

These fragments of evidence suggest that Sydenham had close connections two of Harris's most important musical correspondents, Thomas Harris and John Upton and that he was a regular visitor to Harris at Salisbury.

Sydenham does not seem to have been at Salisbury at the time of Handel's visit, but he was planning to travel to Salisbury soon after. On October 30<sup>th</sup> 1739 Thomas Harris wrote to his brother that Sydenham's visit had been "put off." This at least shows that Sydenham was, or hoped to be, a regular visitor to Salisbury. There are no letters from Sydenham to Harris in the Harris archives even though he was a close friend over many years. Perhaps they were too personal and controversial and were destroyed at Harris's death. Of course, during the Spring Harris, Sydenham, Handel and their friends would have been within easy reach of each other in London.

(Hampshire Archives. [9M73/G306/25](#))

Forty years after this debate about the power and effect of music Sydenham published his last and most personal book *Onomasticon Theologicum* (1782). In discussing "the names of God" Sydenham expounds his own view of the Platonic philosophy. He writes about the development of language and of the possibility of language

...the Sound of which may have, like Handel's Musical Compositions, the Power of raising in the Soul Ideas, or Images...

(Sydenham *Onomasticon Theologicum* 1782, p.288)

This passing remark reveals that Sydenham understood music in a way for which other 18<sup>th</sup> century philosophers seem incapable of finding words. It is interesting that it directly contradicts Harris's statement in *Three Treatises*, quoted above:

A Power which consists *not in Imitations, and the raising Ideas*; but in the raising Affections, to which ideas may correspond.

And when Sydenham uses the word "Soul" he means what he says. The Soul is the essential person, an image of the Soul of the World.

That music can raise emotions had was a commonplace, and a matter of common experience. Music had some ability to imitate nature – though perhaps not a conflagration. But Sydenham, I am sure, means exactly what he says. He is thinking of music as a language that can, indeed, raise both Images and Ideas in the Soul (or mind if you wish) – and can do this as music in itself, not only in combination of poetry.

Experience, surely, shows us that music can raise images in the soul by summoning a memory – but is this purely subjective? Can music, pure music, raise an Idea?

Firstly, the question of whether the Images or memories raised by music is subjective is by no means simple. We might each be reminded by the same music of different images from our own experience - but it might be a case of each of us translating one musical idea into our individual language. The meaning or Idea of the music might be the same but our memory and imagination clothes it in many images.

The Ideas conveyed by music are not necessarily ideas of other things. If we think of music as a language we need to think of it as a language that conveys Ideas which have a reality apart from the musical language which conveys them and which have an existence apart from any images or feelings we might associate with them.

We might, if we are very skilled composers, write music that translates an external idea into sound, but what we would be doing would be translating the essential quality of that external thing (an object, a person, a landscape) into music. The music might not communicate that object but it can convey what that object means – what it actually is!

When we hear music which is inspired by a place, for example, we may not be inspired to imagine that place as it actually is, but we can imagine a place with the same quality as the original place – the same meaning.

A musical work might be composed as pure music, with no intention to communicate anything beyond itself – but that music will have Form, character and meaning as itself. We can enjoy the music in its own terms, and in doing so we can find ourselves translating that music into other images and feelings which have the same Idea as the music,

I wonder if it is actually possible to separate the images with which imagination or memory clothes the music from feeling. Do we, in fact, remember entirely in terms of feeling? Is it possible that we may not remember what a person, object or experience looked like but that we remember what their essential quality was like, remembered as feeling?

Things can remind us of things of a quite different kind. A piece of music might remind us of a person. A colour might remind us of an emotion. What we are remembering is the quality of something – remembered as a feeling - and synaesthesia, as an everyday experience rather than as a psychological condition, allows us to convert that memory into different images, or a different language.

Therefore, a large part of music's ability to communicate ideas is inseparable from its ability to communicate emotion.

It is as if the emotional quality carries the ideas – in way parallel to Harris’s notion of music carrying the ideas expressed in words. Memory, too, carries ideas and images in emotion. We can probably think of dreams where the images in the dream have been conjured up by a feeling. We are dreaming about an anxiety, not about the images that particularly dream attached to the feeling of anxiety. Contrariwise, an experience, an encounter with a person, or place or object, can have an emotional effect because it reminds us of something else that was attached to the same feeling. In these cases the feelings are the hidden music, the thread of language which the images reflect or translate.

Music is a complex language that can convey complex Ideas. It is not merely a matter of the mood or affect of an individual musical Idea. Even the simplest piece of music combines many Ideas. An Idea might have a different meaning depending on its context. Form in a musical work is the same as Form of a story or drama. Many Ideas are combined in succession in time to create a larger Form with its own quality and effect as a whole.

Music is the most accurate translation we have of the Hidden Music that communicates meaning in Nature and guides its forming. The energy which draws things to form (we might call it Love) is inseparable from, or is the same thing as, the language of that Hidden Music. This Forming principle or power is inseparable from the law of Harmony. The Law of Harmony springs from Unity.

(Herman Hesse’s Glass Bead Game imagines an abstract language that represents the Hidden Music in symbols which can be arranged to show the processes of forming and meaning in an abstract way. In the novel music is seen as a close parallel to this symbolic language. I would say that it is the same language expressed in a different set of symbols.)

Yes, music can raise Image and ideas in the soul – but Floyer Sydenham can only say this because he sees everything that exists in terms of the working of Ideas which flow from the same source, the One or the All Alone.

## THE PLATONIC PHILOSOPHY OF FLOYER SYDENHAM

Sydenham’s philosophy, as found in his writings, is a personal interpretation of Platonism. He is remembered as a translator of Plato, but his influences were far wider. His personal attitudes are also influenced by later Platonists.

He has a positive attitude to Nature, as a revelation of Truth, which opposes the materialism of the period and prefigures the romantics of fifty years later. His philosophy has an unusually positive attitude to Imagination, which it sees as the world in which experience and memory combine with the divine Ideas to form new works – but, as far as I know uniquely, the Imagination also works in the world, as if the muses are guiding the formation of works in Nature, including myths and sacred places. This is thrilling!

The majority of Sydenham's publications are the volumes of his unfinished edition of Plato. His notes to these texts occasionally allow his personal voice to be heard.

His last book, *Onomasticon Theologicum*, or the Names of God (1782), is a more personal account of his philosophy, and this shows that he is an enthusiast for the late Platonist Proclus (412?-485AD). Proclus's system was complex and involved hierarchies of reality between the One and this world which could accommodate all the Greek deities, an idea which was adapted into the hierarchies of angels by his probable student Pseudo-Dionysius. A distinctive feature of Proclus's philosophy is the emphasis on the value of individual things

Proclus sees the Unity of the One reflected in many "henads", unities which are present in individual things. It is by being individual unities that all things approach Unity itself.

This affirmation of the value of works (as I tend to call things, as they include stories and sonatas as well as flowers and stones) made Proclus favoured by some Christian philosophers, in the Middle Ages by way of Pseudo-Dionysius and sources which came into Europe from the Arab world, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, through his own writings which had eventually been re-discovered and were read by English Platonists of the century before Harris and Sydenham.

I believe this concept of "henads" is a major influence on Sydenham.

The clearest explanation of Sydenham's personal philosophy is to be found embedded in his unpublished epic poem *Truth, or the Nature of Things*.

(The manuscript is British Library Add MS 45181-45182.)

Sydenham has a clear and coherent vision of the working of the Platonic universe. It derives from Plato, Plotinus and Proclus but it is reduced to a very simple scheme.

Everything that has being flows (or emanates) from the One, the Source of All Being. The source of all things is "the All Alone" (a phrase from Plotinus used by Floyer Sydenham), the absolute Unity. The One is absolute Goodness. Goodness cannot be self-contained. To be Good it must have an object of Goodness. The Cosmos comes into Being as an object of Goodness and Love. It is this desire flowing from the One which composes or forms everything - and gives everything a desire to become a Work. It is this outpouring Goodness which gives us the desire to form Works - which are never our Works. We are humble participants in the creative outpouring of the One.

The One is

...the *Oneness* also of every *Individual* Being, and every *Whole*, or Thing composed of *Parts*;

(Floyer Sydenham, *Onomasticon Theologicum*, 1782, pp15)

He also includes what is often forgotten, but which is essential to this investigation of the Language of Music, Things “composed of Parts.” In this world everything is, in fact, composed of parts. Nothing exists on its own. A flower depends on its environment and its inherited nature. A story or symphony is composed of many elements.

From Unity or the Source of All Being shines the “Ray of Truth”. This Ray shines through all the worlds, drawing things to Unity.

This “Ray of Truth” makes Sydenham’s Platonic cosmos dynamic and creative. The concept of the Ray comes, I believe, from Marsilio Ficino, particularly from his commentaries on Plato’s *Symposium*.

For Sydenham it is...

...That Ray

Of Unity, the Fountain-Head of Light;

The Principle of Form, the Source of Mind:

(Sydenham, Truth. Book 18, Lines 112ff)

This Ray is also inseparable from the Law of Harmony which springs into existence as soon as that Ray enters what we might call, if we wish, Creation. (It is misleading to think of the world being made. This process is continuous.) Truth, entering Creation creates (or in itself is) the desire for Unity (or Concord) and the Laws of Harmony within everything that allow Works to form freely as infinitely varied expressions of Unity.

Sydenham’s notes on Plato’s Banquet (or Symposium) comment on the work of Love as Concord.

Sydenham writes:

But such as have a Taste for Philosophic Poetry may be obliged to Us for informing them, that they may see this Subject finely illustrated in a very elegant Poem, intitl’d CONCORD, inscribed to the late *Earl of Radnor*, about ten years since...

(Plato, The Banquet, translated by Floyer Sydenham, 1767, p.74, fn. 52)

James Harris published his poem, “Concord”, which looks at the idea of harmony both socially and cosmically, in 1751.

Ere yet creation was, ere Sun, and Moon,  
And Stars, bedeck’d the splendid Vault of Heav’n,  
Was GOD; and GOD was MIND; and MIND was *Beauty*

And *Truth*, and *Form*, and *Order*: for all these  
 In Mind's profound Recess, and Union pure.  
 Together dwelt, involv'd, inexplicate.  
 Then Matter (if then Matter was) devoid,  
 Formless, indefinite, and passive lay;  
 Mysterious Being, in one Instant found  
 Nor any thing, nor nothing; but at once  
 Both all and none; none by *Privation*, all  
 By vast *Capacity*, and pregnant *Pow'r*,  
 This passive Nature th'active Almighty Mind  
 Deeming fit Subject for his Art, at once  
 Expell'd *Privation*, and pour'd forth Himself...  
 (Clive T Probyn. *The Sociable Humanist. The Life and Works of James Harris 1709-1780*,  
 OUP, 1991)

As Harris says, at the beginning (if a beginning can be imagined) Truth, Form and Order were "involv'd, inexplicate", simply aspects of MIND, which was GOD, or the Source of All Being. God, or the One, pours himself into formless Matter and the Law of Harmony comes into existence, inseparable from the One or Mind and a guiding Law within Nature, reflected in the Form of the Cosmos as a whole.

(Sydenham, following Proclus, also argues against the idea of a creation from nothing, "ex nihilo". This concept of Creation is outside time and more about the relationship of Creation with its Source, which is eternal.)

The Cosmos, which is the whole of what is, is a Unity in itself, a whole, harmonious Unity, formed according to Harmony.

In order for the Cosmos to have Form the Source of All Being (or God) first created Harmony, as the Law which guides the Formation of all Things. This Harmony, as Plato explains in his *Timaeus*, is the structure of the Soul of the World, the living Soul of the Cosmos, and is also the Law or structure of our own Souls, which are images of the whole.

We can imagine the Form of the Cosmos as the harmonious system that was happily contemplated by philosophers until the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This system, with the material world surrounded by planetary and angelic spheres, is an image of the Law of Harmony, which is eternally true. Before the scientific revolution this seemed to be the actual Form of the Universe as observed from Earth. Of course we know now that our solar system is one very small part of a larger whole – but if we think of the material world in that ancient image as the whole material creation and avoid the error of imagining "Terra" to mean only this small planet Earth, we can still hold this image of the Harmonious structure of the Cosmos in our minds.

Floyer Sydenham's poem "Truth" begins with an address to the Syrens. These are not the deceptive singers who lure sailors to the rocks, but, as described by Plato in *Timaeus*, the Muses in their guise as the singers of the music of the Spheres. They, together in their song, inspire Nature to form they are also present, singing, in our Soul.

(Book 1. Lines 43ff)

Come all ye Muses, lead the song; not ye  
Parnassian, vulgar, various, of your Aid  
To every Rhymer liberal; but ye  
Celestial, sitting on the radiant Spheres;  
Who rule in Rhythm their Motions, as they roll,  
Now leading, & now following, each by turns;  
Who tune them, as they sound, for Consonance;  
And with their varying Motions while they change  
Their Sounds, form All one perfect Melody,  
Grateful to the Ear of Intellect, compose;  
Ye Syren-Sisters Nine, whom at a Birth  
The Abyss of Things, pregnant by Truth, produc'd;...

(The phrase "Abyss of Things" may be a relic of the poet's enthusiasm for the mystical writings of Jacob Boehme.)

Come joyn with Me, to celebrate your Sire;  
To celebrate of all-victorious Truth  
The Triumphs; of fair Truth the Beauty bright  
To blaz'n; of blissful Truth to sing the Joys,  
That from his own Life-giving Well spring up,  
Ceaseless supply'd to Those who ceaseless draw.

Truth, the Source of All Being, or the One, ceaselessly pours joys into Creation. At the moment (though any thought of time is misleading) Truth enters "the Abyss of Things", which is the unformed world, the biblical Chaos, the Law of Harmony comes into existence.

Harmony is inseparable from Truth. It is more than a product of Truth. It is the effect of Truth in Creation.

The Syrens or Muses pass these joys into Creation as music. They sing with the different songs of the Planets, which are the various archetypal modes or qualities which weave together in all things, and, like the fundamental colours, weave and mix to form the individual Soul.

I would add that it is important for any composing mortal to remember that the Muses, the musical modes which are associated with them and the mythological planets are all images of archetypes which are not to be defined. Even the law of musical harmony is only one image of the true law which can be known in many images.

It is also essential to remember that in Creation we know these Muses, or Modes, in combination, never individually.

Their Sounds, form All one perfect Melody...

We may, if we wish, study the individual qualities of the Muses or Planets but it is knowing their music, the Language of Creation (my phrase) that we are able to form new works, to become a work ourselves, and to approach Unity.

This is, indeed, a MUSICAL philosophy.

But – always remember that the Language of Music is not a code or the cipher of magical spells but a manifestation of the invisible and indefinable archetypal law of Harmony in all Nature.

Music itself is sacred. Music is an aspect of the Harmony in all Nature which flows from the muses. In a lengthy footnote in his edition of Plato's *Philebus* Sydenham explains that the music sung by different voices, or produced by different instruments, has an effect on all human listeners because we have Harmony within us.

*For Harmony and Mind are con-natural: whatever Beings therefore partake of Either, partake of the same time, of Both. – Hence it is that Musical Sounds, uttered by Human Voices, or issued from any Musical Instrument of Man's Contrivance, proceed from what is of Divine Origin within him; and the Force of them is felt only by what is of the same Origin in Others, namely Harmony and Mind. – Sound is nothing more than the (hule) or Subject-Matter of Musick, in the partial and modern Meaning of the word Musick: it is Harmony, which gives Form to this Matter, and makes Sounds to be Musical....*

(Plato, *Philebus*, edited by Floyer Sydenham, printed for the author, p. 136)

Sydenham reveals that he has deep understanding of the relationship of Music and Nature. The many works of Nature are formed of Harmony and together form one single work in which Concord and Discord are necessary parts:

*For Nature's Self (as it were) sings continually whilst she operates; putting Rhythm into her Motions, Measure into her Materials, and Harmony into all her Forms; tempering the lulling smoothness of Concords with the rousing Roughness of well-timed Discords; framing many Systems, correspondent to each other, and composing and composing all of them in One stupendous Whole (panharmonion), comprehensive of all Harmonic Numbers. – But farther; the Human Nature, by partaking of Mind, partakes of Truth, as well as Harmony.*

(Plato, *Philebus*, edited by Floyer Sydenham, published for the author, 1779. P. 173)

“Panharmonion” refers to an instrument mentioned by Plato in his *Republic* which is able to play all the various modes of music. Nature's music combines all the modes, the songs of the “siren-sisters” into one complex symphony.

This is a critical matter which Sydenham, following Proclus, would have understood. To try to imitate the Music of the Spheres is an illusion. It is the earthly Music, the mixed music of

Nature, which is sacred to us. We know the Unity through the Unity of Works – and even imperfect works can declare Truth by being what they are, and we know the Unity or Source of All Being by the Harmony within us. There are mysteries here.

The fundamental law which the Muses represent is a Unity, they are individuals as the colours of the rainbow are apparently individual aspects of one pure light, and from this flows Knowledge. The pursuit of knowledge, to Sydenham, is unified. The Seven Liberal Arts flow from the Muses.

The Liberal Arts are, at their heart, the study of the fundamental Harmony in its various forms.

Sydenham, in *Truth*, describes the Quadrivium, the four Arts based on number:

- Of the essential Forms - Numbers... (ARITHMETIC)
- The Science of Forms as shapes and dimensions (GEOMETRY)
- The Science of celestial Forms (ASTRONOMY)

And MUSIC –

*(Sydenham, Truth. Lines 89ff)*

...So in Sounds;  
Their several Combinations, & what Sounds  
Agree in Concord; of what Sounds the Train  
Makes Harmony; & what Harmonious Parts,  
In Sequel, the harmonious Tunefull Whole  
Lead up, bring on, or close, to comprehend;  
Of Musick is the Science: & in Sounds,  
Sameness & Difference together joyn'd:  
For Difference unmix'd with Sameness makes  
Discord; & Sameness sole is Unison,  
Nought other in Effect than Simple Sound.  
And Form, Identity and Diversity,  
Were of all Science the sole Principles...

Music, to Sydenham, is not simply the study of Harmony, but the study of Formation.

what Sounds the Train  
Makes Harmony; & what Harmonious Parts,  
In Sequel, the harmonious Tunefull Whole  
Lead up, bring on, or close, to comprehend...

This is clearly not just the study of Music but also the study of the way in which all things form, according to Harmony. And in this world things form in time - the combination of “harmonious parts in sequel.”

We could imagine an 18<sup>th</sup> century student of the Liberal Arts spending many days poring over the score of Handel’s Concerti Grossi Op.6 as a textbook of Form.

I know of no other 18<sup>th</sup> century writer who thinks like this.

This is, indeed, the study of the Hidden Music, the Language of Creation.

## IDEAS

Everything that is flows from the One. Everything is an expression of an Idea in the Mind of God. It is as if the pattern of everything that is is that one Unity. Everything comes from Unity, inspired by the Ray of Truth, seeks Unity as a sunflower seeks its source, the Sun. (An image from Proclus.)

It is as if in God’s Mind there are Ideas, or patterns of things, and every individual thing still has within it the original Idea, and the Unity which is its source.

Everything has its Source within it and this gives it its life and love.

But there is only One Idea...

It feels to us as if there is pattern of our work, or ourselves, in the Mind of God, drawing it forward, which we try to envisage and replicate - but we know that there is only one pattern – the One itself. The pattern for all our works is that one pattern, which is also the desire to create works which embody it.

Sydenham imagines Truth, the One, as a sphere, or globe. From within Creation this is seen as a world of multicoloured globes, the archetypal ideas of things, which might also be the archetypal qualities the muses represent. These merge and separate forming ever new globes – but they are all only emanations of one pure globe of light – just as Newton demonstrated that white light can be split by the prism into rainbow colours, and those colours combine into countless colours and images.

This imagery of souls as globes or spheres might possibly derive from the late-Platonist Iamblichus, who describes souls, all taking their being from the World Soul, as having the perfect form of a sphere.

(Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul. The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*. Angelico Press, Sophia Perennis, 2014.)

Sydenham was familiar with Iamblichus. He does occasionally refer to the philosopher in his footnotes. Iamblichus is an important source for the traditions of Pythagoras, but he was also famed for his interest in theurgy, not exactly magic, but the work of attuning the soul to the

the divine. For Iamblichus, unlike Plotinus, Nature was sacred and contained Truth, or, as Christian theology would say, was sacramental.

Everything in Nature is an expression of the One. Everything expresses the One in its own Unity, or what Duns Scotus, possibly influenced indirectly by Proclus, calls its Quiddity.

Plato's philosophy, says Sydenham, teaches that...

...the whole created *Universe* is a *Manifestation* of the *Divine Mind*, a distinct *Declaration*, or as it were an open *Evolution* of those *Ideas*, which at the same time abide in that Mind, inwardly inwrapped and comprehended as having there their natural and eternal Seat.

(Floyer Sydenham, *Onomasticon Theologicon*. p.1)

Or, as James Harris put it –

The WHOLE VISIBLE WORLD exhibits nothing more, than so many *passing pictures* of these same immutable archetypes.”

(James Harris, *Hermes*, 1751, Second edition, 1765 pp 383-4)

Towards the end of *Onomasticon Theologicon* Sydenham talks of the process of learning how to find Unity with Nature.

Nature has seeded in us natural affections, and these inspire sympathies with other people and things. Man can follow these sympathies in the world, through the Pursuit of Virtue, and in contemplation...

...and then, finding himself *related* to all *Corporeal Nature*, he will consider Himself as a Part of the Creation; personally interested in the *harmonious Order* of the great *Whole*...

(p.330)

The Created World has two parts – the material world, or world we experience through the senses, and “that upper realm, adjoining, where Imagination Rules the Sceptre” - the world of Imagination. Imagination is closer to the World of Ideas, or the Mind of God, and is therefore more True. The human mind can work in the World of Imagination, making new Forms, from experience of the world of sense combined with the higher truths of the World of Ideas -

(Book 4. Lines 260ff)

From there retiring inward, oft to hold  
Converse with Forms Ideal, mental Beings,  
Which, with his Essence, he derives from Mind  
Eternal: for in Mind they always are;

But in Man's Mind, lye dormant, till awak'd  
 By her fair handmaids, Sciences & Arts;  
 The prime, the fundamental Sciences  
 Of Number & Figure, those sole Founts  
 Of Harmony and Beauty; the fine Arts,  
 Which, on the Basis of those Sciences,  
 Raise rude Materials up to beauteous Forms  
 Of the Mind's own Conception; or select  
 From every Part of Nature what is found  
 In each the fairest, in the Artist's Mind  
 Assemble them, still following Nature's Rules,  
 And copying thence, exhibit fairer Scenes  
 Than Nature ever yielded, fairer Forms  
 Than Nature e'er created;...

The first works of the union of Imagination and Nature which spring to Floyer Sydenham's mind are gardens, both literary and real. This is a philosophical justification for the 18<sup>th</sup> century idea of "improving" landscapes. If the mind can participate in Universal Forms through the Arts it follows that it is possible to work with Nature to draw things closer to the Ideal.

...Spencer's Bow'r,  
 Virgil's Elysium, Milton's Paradise,  
 Alcina's gardens, or the Groves of Stow;  
 Forms, for Pembroke's or for Orford's Hall,  
 Forms, that would Badminton or Blenheim grace.  
 That Radnor, Bruce, & Richmond would admire;...

Spencer's "Bower of Bliss" has first mention. In a cancelled line the poet calls Spenser "my own great master", who "plundered fancy" and left the world of fancy empty. Elsewhere, in his footnotes to Plato, he praises Spenser's Platonic hymns, in which Spenser describes "Sapience", who appears as Wisdom in Sydenham's poem, and the "mutability cantos" of the Faerie Queene.

"Alcina's gardens" are the gardens of the sorceress in Ariosto's epic poem *Orlando Furioso* but I wonder if the author is thinking of Handel's opera of *Alcina*, performed in 1735. The magic gardens of the opera house are part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Platonic imagination and must surely have influenced the "groves of Stowe", designed by William Kent, which were begun that same year, in 1735.

"Pembroke's Hall" is Wilton, once home of Mary Sidney, Countess of Pembroke, where Sydenham and Harris seem to have strolled and conversed on such matters. "Orford" is Robert Walpole, not his son Horace, who did not inherit the title until 1791.

Poets can bring these things to Earth, sometimes combining these things of Imagination with things from the world of Memory, as is the case with the works of Homer, or the epics of Charlemagne. But these fancies should not be used for the purpose of (as he writes in cancelled lines) “scaring mind, with priestly chains to fetter its freedom...”

In the past the “Muse spoke truth through well-fram’d fictions, prophetic”, but these words were corrupted by sophists, and, as he writes in his last book, religious fanatics.

The World of Imagination and the World of Memory (our experience of the Material World) are not detached from each other. The worlds are all inter-linked. Imagination can be brought to earth in art and gardens, but whole worlds of Imagination itself can also be brought to Earth...

*(Book 2. Lines 341ff)*

Nor only have great Bards the pow’rful Skill,  
With Beings of Fancy-Land to people Earth;

...

The mighty Magick of the Muse can draw  
Down from the Sky this Fancy Land itself;  
Can seat it where she pleases; or in  
Parts divide, & scatter like the Cyclades,  
O’er the vast Ocean: Like Latona’s Isle,  
The floating Delos; where the Goddess’ Womb,  
After long Wandrings & much Labour, oped  
And gave to smiling heav’n & joyous Earth  
A Phoebus & a Diana...

These are places in which the material world is united with Imagination. Mythic characters can be brought to places on Earth, such as the stories of Bacchus and Calypso.

## COMPOSING

Inspiration comes from the muses. The artist or composer is not “inventor” but a medium, as Plato explains in his *Io*, which was the first of Sydenham’s translations to appear, in 1759.

For they (the poets) assure us, that out of certain Gardens and flowery Vales belonging to the Muses, from Fountains flowing there with Honey, gathering the Sweetness of their songs, they bring it to us, like the Bees; and in the same Manner withal, flying.

Nor do they tell us any Untruth. For a poet is a Thing light, and volatile, and sacred: nor is he able to write Poetry, till the Muse entring into him, he is transported out of Himself, and has no longer the Command of his Understanding.

Composing, as with any artistic creation, is a sharing in the creative process of Nature. We are drawn by Love, or the Ray of Truth, to create – not to express ourselves - but to use our imagination, reason and feeling to bring together new works, and in doing so to attune ourselves more and more to the working of Love and the Law of Harmony within of Nature – which are, when known, expressions of the One from which the Desire flows.

Andrew Baker

8<sup>th</sup> July 2020