

William Shakespeare, Francesco Giorgi and the Harmony of the Spheres*

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I. DAME FRANCES YATES AND THE MERCHANT OF VENICE

Dame Frances Yates wrote several immensely influential books about the esoteric traditions that lie behind the art and politics of the Renaissance. She popularised ideas that had been almost unknown outside academic circles and hardly thought of even there.

Yates's *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* was published in 1979.¹ There are several interesting themes in the book, but one that has haunted me since I first read it forty-five years ago was her discussion of Francesco Giorgi and his *De Harmonia Mundi* ('The Harmony of the World'), a vast study of the divine Harmony within all things, uniting Platonism, Christian theology, and very remarkably, Jewish mysticism—kabbalah.

Could this book, published in Venice in 1525, have been an influence in Elizabethan England and an inspiration for Shakespeare—in particular *The Merchant of Venice*, a play set in Francesco Giorgi's own city, with its Jewish characters, Shylock and his daughter Jessica, and with Lorenzo's great speech on the Music of the Spheres?²

These lines are so familiar that we might hear them without noticing how very peculiar they are:

Sit Jessica—look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins:
Such harmony is in immortal souls,
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.³

* This essay is based on a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy, 27 January 2025.

1. Frances Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in Elizabethan England* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 131. 3. Shakespeare, *Merchant of Venice*, V:1:65–73.

This speech, at the beginning of the final act, with its scene of reconciliation, justice and mercy, seems to reveal the entire play to be a study of Harmony in the widest sense. Lorenzo adds a little later:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,
And his affections dark as Erebus.
Let no such man be trusted. Mark the music.⁴

In the context of an Elizabethan England where some Puritan factions were opposing music in church, or music anywhere, this is almost intemperate language. Did the anti-Puritan audience stand up and cheer? Lorenzo's speech is not simply beautiful poetry; it is about deadly serious matters.

Frances Yates, following an American researcher, Daniel Banes,⁵ sees the possible influence of the Jewish mystical tradition of kabbalah in *The Merchant of Venice*. An important feature of kabbalah is the concept of the Sephiroth, ten aspects of God which are woven through all creation. Could the characters in the play represent these divine emanations, performing a ritual drama in which Harmony is restored?

Before examining the mysteries of Shakespeare's play and Giorgi's possible influence on its ideas of Harmony, and the possible influence of kabbalah, it is necessary to understand who Francesco Giorgi was and what his book is about.

De Harmonia Mundi is over 900 pages of Latin. There is a 1578 century French translation, but none in English. I have not read the whole book (how many have?), but I have looked at recent research on various aspects of Giorgi. The book is well indexed and can be downloaded from Google Books and from Gallica, the website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, so it is easy to search for words or topics.⁶ In what follows, the translations are my own.

4. *Ibid.*, V:1:91–6.

5. Daniel Banes, *Shakespeare, Shylock and Kabbalah* (Silver Spring MD: Malcolm House Publications, 1978).

6. *L'Harmonie du Monde divisée en trois cantiques. Oeuvre singulier . . . premierement composé en latin par François Georges . . . & depuis traduit & illustré par Guy Le Fevre de la Boderie . . . plus l'Heptaple de Jean Picus comte de la Mirande, traduit par Nicolas Le Fevre de la Boderie.* (N.p., chez Iean Macé, 1578).

II. FRANCESCO GIORGI

Francesco Giorgi (1466–1540) was far from being an eccentric occultist studying kabbalah in an obscure Venetian garret. He was a leading figure in the Franciscan Order.

De Harmonia Mundi is a profoundly Franciscan book. Even when Frances Yates wrote, in the late 1970s, very little was known about the intellectual and mystical aspects of the Franciscans. The true nature of Franciscan thought had been obscured even before the Reformation and Counter-Reformation when it was quietly put aside, and the quite different theology of Thomas Aquinas became dominant in the Roman church. It is only in the last thirty years that the original Franciscan vision has been rediscovered.⁷

Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226) inspired his movement soon after 1200, preaching poverty, simplicity and a Christ-centred life. Almost immediately his positive attitude to the goodness of Creation inspired intellectuals and early scientists to join the order: If God could be known in Creation it was important to find out how Nature worked. For example, the nature of light became a scientific study in the thirteenth century, pursued most famously by Roger Bacon (1220–1292). Bacon also pursued alchemy in search of the Elixir which would perfect body and soul.⁸

From the very beginning music was central to St Francis and his followers. There is a story of Francis singing, dancing and playing an imaginary fiddle made of sticks, like a new Orpheus.⁹ Another story tells that when he was very ill he longed to hear the music of a *cithara*, usually translated as *lute* but more like an ancient lyre.¹⁰ His brothers refused to bring a musician to his sickbed, so an angel appeared and played for him. This is a much more serious story than it seems. Later versions make the angel a viol or violin player.¹¹

7. Andrew Baker, *Hidden Music: A Franciscan Musical Theology* (Stafford, AJB Publications, 2023).

8. Zachary M. Matus, *Franciscans and the Elixir of Life* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017).

9. For Francis and the early Franciscans and music, see Peter Loewen, *Music in Early Franciscan Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

10. Roberto Cobiainchi, 'Cithara Angelica: Experiencing God Through Music in Franciscan Imagery', in *Aesthetic Theology in the Franciscan Tradition: The Senses and the Experience of God in Art*, ed. X. Seubert and O. Bychkov (London: Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 163–85.

11. *The Little Flowers of Saint Francis*, trans. T. W. Arnold. (London: J. M. Dent, 1898), p. 185.

St Francis's famous *Canticle of the Creatures* is a statement about the Cosmos and our place in it.¹² Francis sings praises of God *with* Brother Sun, Sister Moon, the stars and the four elements, which were believed to have been formed from chaos by Harmony, and also with Sister Death. He sings *with* the harmonious creation.

The new basilica built in Assisi in his memory was the first place to have specially composed polyphonic music, by Julian of Speyer (d. 1250).¹³ This was the beginning of a long tradition. Assisi was a centre of sacred and instrumental music for centuries. There were important Franciscan teachers and composers into the eighteenth century, including Joseffo Zarlino (1517–1590) and Padre Martini (1706–1784), a teacher of Mozart.

Francesco Giorgi was an important figure in the Franciscan world, theological and political. Theologically he followed the greatest thirteenth-century Franciscan philosopher and theologian, Bonaventure (1221–1274). Bonaventure like Giorgi was a follower of Plato, and deeply distrusted Aristotle and his Arab commentator Averroes. Giorgi's writings show his knowledge of that other great Franciscan thinker, Duns Scotus.

Francesco was born in Venice on 7 April 1466. It is not known when he entered the Franciscan Order. He probably studied at the Studio del Santo, the school of the Venetian Franciscan Province. According to Giulio Busi, he 'was considered the most eminent preacher of the city . . . in the basilica of San Marco.'¹⁴ In 1500 he became the guardian of the Monastery of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice. He famously proposed a ground plan of the church of Francesco della Vigna according to trinitarian geometry. He was confessor to the Poor Clares, the female wing of the Franciscan movement, and he became the amanuensis and biographer of an important visionary, Chiara Bugni.¹⁵ (The Blessed Chiara was a joyful stigmatic. She heard angelic melodies.) Giorgi had a wide knowledge of Platonic philosophers, thanks to Marsilio Ficino, who made many works known that had been unavailable in the West throughout the Middle Ages. He also studied Jewish traditions, and knew the scholars of the Venetian Jewish community.

12. *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1: *The Saint*, ed. R. J. Armstrong *et al.* (New York: New City Press, 1999) p. 113–14.

13. 'Julian of Speyer', in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, 15 vols (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907–1912).

14. 'Francesco Zorzi: A Methodical Dreamer', in *The Christian Kabbalah: Jewish Mystical Books and their Christian Interpreters*, ed. J. Dan (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 97

15. Gabriela Zarri, 'Living Saints: A Typology of Female Sanctity in the Early Sixteenth Century', in *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Rusconi (University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 219–303 (p. 265).

Busi further says of Giorgi:

After Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola, who was the founder of the Christian kabbalah, [Giorgi] can claim the second place, that is to say that he is certainly the Italian 16th century author who left the most comprehensive and well documented presentation of Jewish symbolism.¹⁶

He retired to the monastery of San Girolamo in 1517 but was elected Provincial Minister of the Franciscans in 1523. His book was published two years later.

De Harmonia Mundi, published in Latin in 1525, is a product of Franciscan tradition. The harmonious Cosmos is an essential part of the Franciscan positive view of Nature as Good, as revealing God. As Joscelyn Godwin writes: ‘The scope of the work almost beggars description: not only is it full of the most encyclopaedic learning, but every page shines with Giorgi’s own Franciscan piety.’¹⁷

De Harmonia Mundi is divided into three books called Cantos, or songs. Each Canto is divided into eight Tones, making a musical octave. The Three Cantos explore, in immense detail, firstly the Harmony of Creation, secondly, Christ at the centre of all things, and thirdly, how the human soul and body can be attuned to God.

Like Bonaventure, Giorgi sees God as the absolute Unity from which all things flow, Everything *emanates* from God, from Love rather than necessity as Plato thought. Nothing is separate from God. Everything has God within it, its own Unity. Giorgi writes:

All things created and divided into many portions contain harmonies and dissonances unless they are restored to unity by Harmony. Consonance (as Boethius and Nicomachus explain) is a concord of similar and different reduced to one. The source of the consonance of this worldly organ is an accordance of things similar and different related to the primary Unity, so that all things are said to rejoice in unity as was learnedly and profoundly discussed by Plato and Parmenides. As Orpheus teaches, God is One in himself, but all other things are called one by diversity, dependence, participation and association with the true One, which is God.

16. Busi, ‘Francesco Zorzi’, p. 98

17. Joscelyn Godwin, *The Harmony of the Spheres* (London & New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), p. 185; Godwin presents a selection of passages from *De Harmonia Mundi* in English translation on pp. 186–95.

Giorgi adds:

(God) now fashions matter in multiple species and then sometimes combines them . . . into one creative Idea. And in the end, refolding them and fully embracing the principle from which they are derived, pushes and pulls them to unity.¹⁸

Everything is being composed. Individual works are drawn to Unity. They can come together to become larger forms, and finally as one great symphony. All things are drawn by Love to Unity. Harmony is that law within Creation that guides everything in its formation in infinite variety.

Giorgi explains that there are three worlds, just as Bonaventure had defined them in his *Soul's Journey into God*:¹⁹

- I. The Heavenly Hierarchy, the nine order of angels which communicate their influences to:
- II. The Cosmic Hierarchy (the celestial spheres), which are the source of Harmony and which communicates its influences to:
- III. The Corruptible (or physical) World.

The familiar idea of the nine orders of angels, though derived from biblical references, was decisively formulated by the fifth-century CE writer known as Pseudo-Dionysius.²⁰ Giorgi writes:

In addition to what has been said before of the correspondence of the stars with the Angels, it seems to me that this point must still be considered . . . that the Angels themselves are the Father's servants, who is the Fountain and the origin and the first mover of all things. This is why Saint Dionysius says: The moving Father, guides them. These move the heavens for the sake of God, and these dispose our bodies and the things below to the consonance commanded by the prime mover of all things.²¹

18. *L'Harmonie du Monde* I.v.8, pp. 163–4.

19. Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St. Francis*, trans. E. Cousins (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 64.

20. He presented his doctrine of the angels in his work *The Celestial Hierarchy*: Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. C. Luibheid (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 143–91.

21. *L'Harmonie du Monde* I.viii.20, p. 327.

The Middle Ages knew the story of the Harmony of the Spheres from commentaries on Plato's myth of Creation in his dialogue *Timaeus* and from Macrobius' commentary on Cicero's *Dream of Scipio*, which elaborated Plato's Myth of Er, a vision of the form of the cosmos told at the end of Plato's *Republic*, a text that was not available in western Europe until the Renaissance.²²

Each of these moving spheres emits a musical note. Plato in his Myth of Er says that on each one sits a syren singing.²³ Giorgi writes:

But there are symphonies which are no less signs of heaven, such as those (as Plato tells) that are presided over by the various Syrens, who are said to be singers to God, who, placed in the firmament, make its influences harmonious.²⁴

We know the cosmos is not really like that: it seems the Earth revolves round the sun. The cosmos may not be literally made of sounding spheres, but this is an image of the Harmony which guides all things and passes on the music of the angels to this changing world. The cosmos *appeared* to reflect the proportions of a musical scale, to our ears a diatonic (white note) scale from A (the Moon) to G (Saturn).

The separate notes of the planets, or their syrens, together make a perfect Harmony, but we are unable to hear the sound due to the heaviness of matter (whatever that is) or sin. The celestial harmonies weave the infinite variety of Creation, but certain creatures, plants, stones, belong to each particular planet. Giorgi has chapters which tell us which things sing with the Sun or Phoebus; which things share their delights with Venus ('of the stones beryl is principally dedicated to her . . . it consoles the mournful . . . prevents sighing and all the infirmities of faith'); which things sound with Mercury ('Mercury has no particular element . . . he has no perfumes or colours . . . other than those which are mixed, like the rainbow . . . he favours the philosopher who studies the scriptures, deeply researching the enigmas . . . poetry, geometry, arithmetical controversy, painting . . .')²⁵

The concept of the three worlds and the qualities given to the planets are aspects of a conventional medieval view of Creation, but there is

22. Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, trans. D. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp. 42–51; Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W. H. Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Plato, *The Republic*, trans. D. Lee (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007²).

23. *Republic* X 617B; p. 364 in the Penguin translation.

24. *L'Harmonie du Monde* III.III.6, p. 650. 25. *Ibid.* I.IV.28–9, pp. 147–9.

another dimension to Giorgi's view of Creation: the Sephiroth of kabbalah.

The highest Sephirah, *Kether*, the Crown, is closest to God. From the Crown the emanations flow down through Intelligence, Wisdom, Judgment, Strength, Mercy, and so on, with *Tiphereth*, Beauty, at the centre. These Sephiroth are reflected in the celestial spheres—*Tiphereth* in the Sun, for example—but they are above and beyond the cosmos, the Harmony beyond Harmony.

Giorgi's second Canto places Christ, who brings all things together, at the centre. The third Canto looks at the Small World, the human soul (and body), the microcosm, a cosmos in miniature, and how it can be attuned to God. The hope is that all three worlds will sing together, as in Renaissance polyphony in which three parts have their own music and, as Giorgi writes:

As in harmonised music the cantors, sub-cantors, and contra-cantors do not enter with the same notes yet come together in the same consonance, so the three Worlds, which we assume follow their diverse tones, come together in the same Harmony.²⁶

In the end:

... we will sing perfectly harmonious songs in which the instruments of both body and spirit are well tuned, and our souls will give powerful praises to God. . . . By the grace of God, we will sing perfect and accomplished hymns when together with the angels we will give him praise, resounding with the choir and the assembly of the blessed, not only with the voice but also of the spirit, of the soul and of all the members, to the praise and honor of the sovereign worker, to whom all things owe glory and thanksgiving forever. We will complete the perfect consonance of the Eight-Tone Diapason . . .²⁷

III. SHAKESPEARE AND GIORGI

Frances Yates ends her chapter on Giorgi and *The Merchant of Venice* with the observation: 'It would seem from *The Merchant of Venice* that Shakespeare . . . found the Christian Cabalist philosophy of the Friar of

26. *Ibid.* I.I.14, p. 36. 27. *Ibid.* preface to Canto III, p. 593.

Venice congenial.²⁸ In the light of what we know about Francesco Giorgi and his world we can look again at Lorenzo's speech.

Sit Jessica—look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patens of bright gold.

This is intriguing imagery. Patens are the small plates which carry the communion bread in the eucharist and often act as covers for the chalice of wine. Then come the lines about the Harmony of the Spheres:

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.

This is very strange. The Harmony of the Spheres belongs to the traditional planets but Shakespeare's lines leap beyond the planets to stars and angels. The stars are singing to the Cherubim, not to us on earth. 'Young-eyed cherubins' might make us think of sentimental cherubs, but these angelic beings were powerful and alarming. Ezekiel describes them as having four faces,²⁹ though the cherubim who guarded the Ark of the Covenant,³⁰ perhaps the same two angels found in Christ's tomb,³¹ may not have appeared like that.

Angels communicate with Creation timelessly and immediately without the need of language, but their song can be heard only on very rare occasions when the three worlds—angelic, celestial and earthly—come together, as at the nativity:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.³²

Shakespeare is not using the commonplace idea of the Harmony of the Spheres, but is using the imagery of Giorgi. In *De Harmonia Mundi* Giorgi explains that each order of angels influences a particular celestial sphere. The Cherubim are the angels who rule the sphere of the stars. Thus Canto 1, Book 4, Chapter 2 examines 'how the cherubim relate to

28. *Occult Philosophy*, p. 133. 29. Ezekiel 1:6–7. 30. 1 Kings 6:23.

31. John 20:12. 32. Luke 2:13–14 (KJV).

the celestial heaven', the sphere of the stars and zodiac. Giorgi's language, as usual, is poetic and obscure. He writes that 'Cherub' can be a name for a Phrygian embroidery, mentioned in Homer. He continues:

But what more beautiful painting is there in the whole machine of the world than the eighth heaven? This is not an image made by Indians, Phrygians, or by the Lydian Arachne, but by Pallas and divine wisdom, which paints this heaven with living figures, full of virtue. In these as with Cherubic Thoughts (*pensées cherubiques*) she has depicted the species of Ideas. . . .

For in them is knowledge multiplied; and the forms of things enveloped as in many folds. (This) is a painting without stain and indelible, which will never be consumed by any filth of envious time . . . because the images . . . are filled by the Fountain of Ideas by which also, as by exemplary forms, this great Earth is decorated with living ornaments of herbs and flowers. . . .

For, just as the Earth is adorned with flowers, the sky with stars, Cherubic Thought is adorned with various forms in which the sciences shine. . . .³³

From the Cherubim we receive the light of thought, or the highest images or figures we are able to contemplate. I will return to this idea of Ideas in Heaven later.

A few lines later in *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's Lorenzo says that our body, 'this muddy vesture of decay', prevents us from hearing the heavenly music. Giorgi writes:

Man being therefore washed and tempered, and his instruments being well understood and in harmony, he desires to render harmonious motets and hymns, but at first sight he feels a difficulty; for (as Plato says) our soul coming from God, and enclosed in the body, suffers dissonance.³⁴

Giorgi explains that in Christ, through the seven sacraments (seven, matching the seven notes of a musical scale), Man makes himself perfect and 'sonorous with God'.³⁵

Even without considering the possibility that there are subtle reference to the mysteries of kabbalah in *The Merchant of Venice*, Lorenzo's lines

33. *L'Harmonie du Monde* I.IV.2, p. 106. 34. *Ibid.* III.VI.12, p. 698.

35. *Ibid.* III.VI.9, p. 696.

could be read as an encapsulation of the whole of *De Harmonia Mundi*, and they are part of a final Act which demonstrates the working of divine Harmony and Justice.

Frances Yates had doubts about Daniel Banes's identification of the characters in the play with the ten Sephiroth, but she clearly liked the idea.³⁶ Banes, who was a former director of the US Food and Drug Administration's Office of Pharmaceutical Sciences,³⁷ and responsible for the rejection of the use of thalidomide in the USA, published a revised version of his work as *Shakespeare, Shylock and Kabbalah* in 1978.³⁸ He found several apparent echoes of kabbalah in *The Merchant of Venice*, but these come from many sources besides Giorgi. If all the echoes are genuine, Shakespeare would have had to have been a deep student of Jewish mysticism.

One echo which Banes does trace to Giorgi is the use of rain and dew as symbols of mercy—as in Portia's comment that mercy 'droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven'.³⁹

Portia is a striking example of a character *seeming* to assume the role of one of the Sephiroth. To Banes she is the image of *Tiphereth*, the central Sephirah, beauty, which is associated with the sun. Portia says in the final act:

This night methinks is but the daylight sick;
It looks a little paler, 'Tis a day.

Bassanio replies:

We should hold day with the Antipodes,
If you would walk in absence of the sun.

Portia answers jokingly:

Let me give light, but let me not be light;
For a light wife doth make a heavy husband.⁴⁰

The Sephiroth lie behind Giorgi's book but are rarely named. The most direct summary of their influence describes them as intelligences.⁴¹ The

36. *Occult Philosophy*, p. 129. 37. Obituary, *Washington Post*, 30 April 2013.

38. See note 5 above.

39. *Merchant of Venice*, IV:I:193; cf. Giorgi, *L'Harmonie du Monde* IV.11, pp. 247–9.

40. *Merchant of Venice*, V:I:124–30. 41. *L'Harmonie du Monde* III.11.7, p. 631.

term is *intellectus* in the original Latin and *entendement* in the French translation. The term intelligences comes from the kabbalistic text the *Sepher Yetzirah*. *Tiphereth* is the sixth intelligence: Giorgi calls it ‘magnified intelligence’. The *Sepher Yetzirah* says it is ‘the Intelligence of Mediating Influence’.⁴² Giorgi is being secretive here. He writes that the lower intelligences below it are ‘the degrees of deeply hidden wisdom’.

Tiphereth, however, is discussed in detail in *De Harmonia Mundi*. *Tiphereth* is virtue and glory; *Tiphereth* represents the Holy of Holies, which only the high priest can enter and which, in the supramundane world, is the place of Jesus the eternal priest.⁴³ Portia, standing in the place of *Tiphereth*, appears to be the ‘Mediating Influence’.

‘Let me give light, but let me not be light.’ Is this simply a joke—a pun? Banes thinks not and omits the line that follows.⁴⁴ Portia is not the Sun, the Sephirah of *Tiphereth* or the eternal priest, but she can give light—as she does.

IV. HOW COULD SHAKESPEARE HAVE KNOWN DE HARMONIA MUNDI?

It was only after Giorgi’s death that his work was censored: principally his later book *Problemata*,⁴⁵ which brings together Christian and kabbalistic imagery, Plato, Orpheus, Hermes Trismegistus and alchemy. Alchemy, like astrology, was a speciality of the Franciscans.⁴⁶ The influence of Jewish thought was criticised, but it was Giorgi’s belief in universal salvation which led to his work being suppressed.

In the Counter-Reformation the Franciscan tradition, with its emphasis on the goodness of Creation, was put aside and the more Aristotelian theology of Aquinas, promoted by the Dominicans, became dominant. Only in the late twentieth century did the authentic Franciscan tradition begin to re-emerge.⁴⁷

42. Waite, A. E.. *The Holy Kabbalah* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 214.

43. *L’Harmonie du Monde* II.vi.6, p. 511. 44. *Shakespeare, Shylock and Kabbalah*, p. 41.

45. See: Leen Spruit, ‘Francesco Giorgi on the Harmony of Creation and the Catholic Censorship of His Views’, in *Sing Aloud Harmonious Spheres: Renaissance Conceptions of Cosmic Harmony*, ed. J. Prins and M. Vanhaelen (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 123–38.

46. Matus, *Franciscans and the Elixir of Life*.

47. For the retrieval of Franciscan tradition within the Order, see: Brenda Abbott, *Eric Doyle OFM: Hidden Architect of the Retrieval of the Franciscan Charism* (Darlington: Franciscan Press, 2021).

The Roman censorship of Giorgi's work led to a curious development. It moved out of the sphere of the Roman church and was taken up in Protestant countries.

There were, however, further reasons why Giorgi might have been seen in a favourable light in England. In 1530 Giorgi worked with Richard Croke, who was sent to Italy to gather evidence in Henry VIII's case that his marriage to Catherine of Aragon was not valid and should be annulled.⁴⁸ Henry argued that it was not permissible in biblical law for someone to marry his late brother's wife. Giorgi drew on the wisdom of his many Jewish scholar friends in Venice, including Marco Raffaele, a convert to Christianity, to support the case that Henry was right. He was summoned to Rome to discuss the case with Pope Clement VII—the dedicatee of *De Harmonia Mundi*. Clement was a Renaissance man. He commissioned Michaelangelo's *Last Judgement* and accepted Copernicus' theory that the Sun was the centre of the cosmos.

Henry and Giorgi, and all his Jewish advisors, might have been right but Clement could not accept the argument because of the influence of Spain. He was not in a position to dismiss Henry's Spanish queen. If the Pope had been free to follow Giorgi's judgement, the history of England and the world would have followed a very different course. This exceptionally dramatic event might have supported the reception of Giorgi's work in England. It has been suggested that Giorgi came to England himself in 1530–31. His friend, the Jewish convert Marco Raffaele, certainly did so.⁴⁹

Some years later *De Harmonia Mundi* became known in France through the 1578 French translation by Guy Le Fèvre de la Boderie. What is inescapably a very Catholic work was taken up by Huguenot intellectuals. Some Calvinists in both France and England had a very affirmative view of Creation echoing Giorgi's Franciscan attitudes. Calvin himself thought of Creation as the 'Theatre of God's Glory'.⁵⁰

The Parisian 'Académie de poésie et de musique', at the end of the sixteenth century, was founded by the poet Jean-Antoine de Baïf and composer Joachim Thibault de Courville. Frances Yates writes:

48. Yates, *Occult Philosophy*, p. 31.

49. *Calendar of State Papers, Spain, Volume 4 Part 2, 1531–1533*, ed. P. de Gayangos (London: Stationery Office, 1882), pp. 728, 761.

50. *Institutio Christianae Religionis* I.v.8; translation in John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

In the French Renaissance, the influence of Giorgi was very strong. . . . The philosophical theorist of the Academy was Pontus de Tyard upon whose writings the influence of Giorgi is obvious.⁵¹

The Academy was inspired by the Neoplatonic Academy of Marsilio Ficino a hundred years earlier. Their aim was to use music and poetry to ameliorate the soul and society. Baïf proposed a new way of setting words to music which followed the metre, or rhythm, of the words. The poetry of Baïf, and *musique mesurée* composed by the Huguenot composer Claude le Jeune, would perfectly combine with a magical intention and, perhaps, effect.⁵²

Giorgi's influence in England in the late sixteenth century is harder to detect. As Frances Yates tells us, Doctor Dee certainly owned a copy of the 1540 Latin edition of *De Harmonia Mundi*.⁵³ John Dee, a puzzling and complex character, was partly mathematician and scientist and partly magician. His most famous activity was his communication, over decades, with angels. This was done by using various methods of divination, including stones and mirrors, and depended on a medium or scribe to read or speak on behalf of the angels, as they rediscovered the angels' language, Enochian.

As Deborah E. Harkness has explained, Dee's motive was to restore the corrupted language of nature, to obtain from the angels the true Cabala, the original language of Adam, so that the corrupted world could be restored:

. . . the angel conversations confirmed Dee's belief that the natural world was analogous to a text, but the book of nature was not a reliable text. It was an imperfect, corrupt and decaying text that could not be read properly.⁵⁴

If this was Dee's attitude it would seem to put him at odds with the world of Giorgi, with its optimistic Franciscan view of Nature. We can leave him to break his staff and drown his books.

Frances Yates mentions an interesting anonymous book as a possible influence on Shakespeare: *The Praise of Musicke*, published in Oxford

51. *Occult Philosophy*, pp. 64–5.

52. Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 152–5.

53. *Occult Philosophy*, p. 80.

54. Deborah E Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 4

in 1586. This book brings together classical and biblical evidence in favour of the value of music—its ‘Antiquity’, ‘Dignity’ and ‘Suavity’, as some of its chapters are titled—and in favour of its use in both secular life and worship.

The book is forceful, even intemperate. This was a time when severe Puritans were arguing against the use of music in church, even condemning music itself or, at least, condemning the sinful and unwholesome lives of musicians. This was a very serious issue which concerned the Queen, a great supporter of music. Lorenzo’s speech in *The Merchant of Venice* is a distinctly powerful attack on such Puritans.

The *Praise of Musicke* includes a quote from Ficino, who himself pretends to be quoting St Augustine: *Non est harmonice compositus qui Musicâ non delectatur*⁵⁵ (‘He is not harmoniously composed who does not delight in music’). Following this quotation, Nature says: ‘If I made any one which cannot brook or fancy music, surely I erred and made a monster.’⁵⁶

To the author such monsters are presumably the anti-musical Puritans, some of whom might be in positions of power. Is this the same thought that lies behind Lorenzo’s lines?

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not moved with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils. . . .

There might have been some readers of *The Praise of Musicke*, and some in the audience of *The Merchant of Venice*, who knew exactly whom Lorenzo was talking about. Perhaps cheering at this point might have been rather dangerous.

In the past *The Praise of Musicke*, which was published in Oxford in 1586, has been ascribed to the Oxford academic John Case, but the new edition suggests the author was John Bull: an important and often astonishing composer, particularly of keyboard music, who had become a Bachelor of Music at Oxford in July 1586.⁵⁷ The same quotation from Book VI of Ficino’s letters cited above appears in the manuscript *The Dow Partbooks*, copied in Oxford, which includes works by John Bull.⁵⁸

55. *Marsilii Ficini Opera omnia . . . una cum Gnomologia . . .* (Basel, Henric Petri, 1576), p. 822.

56. *The Praise of Musicke, 1586: An Edition with Commentary*, ed. Hyun Al-Kim, *Music Theory in Britain 1500–1700: Critical Editions* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 117.

57. *Ibid.*

58. Discussion in Katherine Butler, ‘In Praise of Music: Motets, Inscriptions and Musical Philosophy in Robert Dow’s Partbooks’, *Early Music* 45:1 (February 2017) 89–101.

Bull was prevented from taking his doctorate at Oxford by ‘Clowns and rigid Puritans who could not endure Church music’.⁵⁹ He later took his doctorate at Cambridge. In 1591 he was an organist at the Chapel Royal in London. That year he was appointed the first Reader of Music at Gresham College.⁶⁰

Bull was an intemperate character. He may have travelled in Europe as a spy and may later have had to leave England. There is some doubt whether it was his licentious activities or his Catholicism which led to his flight to Brussels and his later work in Antwerp.⁶¹ His lengthy set of variations on the tune *Walsingham* (MB85)⁶²—one of the songs sung by Ophelia in her madness, and also used by the undoubtedly Catholic William Byrd—might be seen as a sign of covert Catholicism and nostalgia for the place of pilgrimage,⁶³ but his meanings and motives are always hard to discern.

The *Praise of Musicke* includes a summary of the qualities or ‘affects’ of the modes ‘which are answerable to the 7 planets’, to which is added an eighth ‘which is called Hypermyxolydius, sharpest of them all and attributed to the firmament’. The modes of the Sun, Jupiter, Mars and Saturn are described thus:

Modus Dorius, beeing a grave and staied part of musicke, aunswereth to that which I called chast and temperate. *Modus Lydius* used in comedies, in former times, being more lighter and wanton than Dorius, aunswereth to that which I termed amarus and delightsome. *Modus Phrygius* distracting the mind variably, also called Bacchicus for his great force and violence aunswereth to that which I called warlike. And *Myxolydius* most used for tragedies expressing in melody those lamentable affections which are in tragedies represented. . . .

The case for John Bull as the author of *The Praise of Musicke* might be supported by the fact that, as well as pieces which identify their modes by the numbers of the Gregorian classification (e.g. mode 3, mode 8), he wrote pieces with the Greek mode names, demonstrating their *affect*.

59. *Praise of Musicke*, p. 41.

60. John Bull, *Keyboard Works I*, ed. J. Steele and F. Cameron, with additional material by T. Dart, *Musica Britannica* 14 (London: Stainer & Bell, 1975²), p. xxii.

61. *Ibid.*, p. xxv.

62. John Bull, *Keyboard Works II*, transcr. and ed. T. Dart, *Musica Britannica* 19 (London: Stainer & Bell, 1970³), p. 46.

63. This has been argued by Gary Waller, in ‘Ophelia, the Walsingham Ballad, and the Dis-enchantment of the Early Modern World’, available at <<https://www.academia.edu>>.

There are several ‘Dorick’ pieces (MB57–61);⁶⁴ and there is also the bizarre, and presumably humorous, *A Battle, and no Battle, Phrygian Music: for two players* (MB108).⁶⁵

Bull stands at the brink of a new musical world, exploring new dimensions of harmony. There is an expressive *Chromatic (or Queen Elizabeth’s) Pavan and Galliard 87a 87b*.⁶⁶ His fantasy *Ut re mi fa sol la* (MB17) sends its tune (the scale C to A) through all twelve of the keys which eventually replaced modal thinking.⁶⁷ This is theoretically impossible on a keyboard without equal temperament. Amongst his more esoteric pieces is a puzzle canon, *Sphera Mundi*, representing the movement of the celestial spheres.⁶⁸

Joseph Ortiz, who refers to earlier work by Janet Pollack, writes of the esoteric implications of Bull’s music in his *Broken Harmony: Shakespeare and the Politics of Music*.⁶⁹ Pollack herself has written about Bull’s association with Princess Elizabeth and her marriage to Frederick of Bohemia in 1612, which was celebrated by the publication of *Parthenia*, a collection of 21 keyboard pieces by William Byrd, Orlando Gibbons and John Bull.⁷⁰ Bull had been a musician to Prince Henry, who died in 1612, and composed an anthem for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Frederick.⁷¹

There is nothing in *The Praise of Musicke* that suggests any direct influence from Giorgi—there are no angels. The mysteries of the angelic world might have seemed controversial in England in 1586; though we have seen that Shakespeare, extraordinarily, seems to touch on esoteric angelology in *The Merchant of Venice*. If John Bull was not the author of *The Praise of Musicke*, he was certainly an Oxford contemporary of the true author with similar interests and attitudes.

In Shakespeare’s time the network of musicians in London, working in court and theatre, included Venetians. From about 1540, Henry VIII brought several Venetian musicians to England—five brothers of the Bassano family as a recorder consort, and several members of the Lupo family as viol players. Descendants of Lupos and Bassanos were leading royal musicians into the seventeenth century. A candidate for

64. John Bull, *Keyboard Works I*, pp. 153–7.

65. John Bull, *Keyboard Works II*, pp. 111–119. 66. *Ibid.*, pp. 66–72.

67. John Bull, *Keyboard Works I*, pp. 53–5.

68. Joseph M. Ortiz, *Broken Harmony: Shakespeare and the Politics of Music* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 189.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 184ff.

70. Janet Pollack, ‘Princess Elizabeth Stuart as Musician and Muse’, in *Musical Voices of Early Modern Women: Many-Headed Melodies*, ed. Thomasin LaMay (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 399–424.

71. John Bull, *Keyboard Works I*, p. 25.

Shakespeare's Dark Lady, Emilia Lanier, was a Bassano.⁷² There seems to be no evidence that, as some have suggested, the Bassanos were Jewish converts.

This community of composers, players, singers and poets, meeting in taverns, seems a more likely setting for Shakespeare to have engaged in discussions about the value of music and Giorgi's musical mysticism than a supposed occult coterie around Dr Dee.

V. SPENSER'S SAPIENCE

Another writer discussed by Frances Yates, as a possible medium between Giorgi and Shakespeare, is Edmund Spenser, with his extraordinary *Fowre Hymnes*.

The *Fowre Hymnes* are in Praise of Love, Beauty, Heavenly Love and Heavenly Beauty. Spenser's introduction suggests the latter two respond to the youthful indulgence of the first two, but that might be a conceit. The sacred and secular hymns echo each other.

The fourth, *An Hymne of Heavenly Beautie*, traces the beauty of Creation through the celestial and angelic worlds to its source.⁷³ Though Spenser calls this world 'base' he sees all things in the Cosmos as beautiful—a very different tone to Dr Dee's negative view. We ascend and see God's creatures.

Thou canst not count, much less their natures aim;
All which are made with wondrous wise respect,
And all with admirable beauty deckt.

The most striking parallel with Giorgi is that Spenser has a place in the incorruptible heavens for the world of Platonic ideas, the perfect forms of things, which we have seen that Giorgi places with the Cherubim.

Fair is the heaven where happy souls have place,
In full enjoyment of felicity . . .
More fair is that, where those Ideas on high
Enranged be, which Plato so admired,
And pure Intelligences from God inspired.

72. A. L. Rowse, *The Poems of Shakespeare's Dark Lady: Salve Deus Re Judaeorum* (London: Cape, 1978).

73. *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. R. Morris (London: Macmillan and Co., 1920), pp. 602–5.

Does Spenser use the word ‘intelligences’ as a Neoplatonic term or, as Giorgi does, to refer to the Sephiroth?

The most extraordinary feature of this poem is that above these worlds Spenser places the figure of Sapience, or Wisdom, God’s creative assistant:

There in his bosom Sapience doth sit,
The sovereign darling of the Deity . . .

Spenser’s Sapience draws on biblical sources. For example, in Proverbs Wisdom says:

The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.⁷⁴

Is the biblical Wisdom an allegory, or a personification of an aspect of God? Wisdom, in Spenser, is Harmony herself—God’s first created thing, through which all other things are formed:

And in her hand a sceptre she doth hold,
With which she rules the house of God on high,
And manageth the ever-moving sky,
And in the same these lower creatures all
Subjected to her power imperial.

Both heaven and earth obey unto her will,
And all the creatures which they both contain;
For of her fullness which the world doth fill
They all partake, and do in state remain
As their great Maker did at first ordain.

Giorgi had placed the Platonic Ideas in the celestial sphere, under the influence of the cherubim, and the starry heaven was:

... not an image made by Indians, Phrygians, or by the Lydian Arachne, but by Pallas and divine wisdom. . . .⁷⁵

74. Proverbs 8: 22–3 (KJV). 75. *L’Harmonie du Monde* I.iv.2, p. 106.

Reading Spenser's *Fowre Hymnes* as a whole, we can see that Sapience is a parallel with Venus Urania, 'the Cyprian Queen', in his secular and Platonic *Hymne in Honour of Beautie*: a more ancient personification of Harmony and Beauty, but at heart the same thing.

Giorgi writes extensively in *De Harmonia Mundi* about *Sapientia*, or *Sapience* as it is the French edition, but as the wisdom of Christ rather than as a female personification. But in Giorgi Mary, as Queen of Heaven, has a similar role to Spenser's Sapience.

The twelve signs and all this circle and the planets are given to the Queen of Heaven, and for this reason, they are called the crown of twelve stars, according to the number of the signs. . . .⁷⁶

An entry in the index encapsulates this passage as:

The Virgin Mary is exalted over all the Angels, and is responsible for the movements of the seven planets . . .⁷⁷

Remember, Spenser's Sapience

. . . rules the house of God on high,
And manageth the ever-moving sky.

This was not too strange for a Franciscan. In the thirteenth century Bonaventure, in a sermon about the twelve stars which crown the Virgin, had called Mary

. . . the mother of the fabric of the cosmos⁷⁸ and the mother of angelic reparation. So Bernard (St Bernard of Clairvaux): 'Rightly then, O Lady, the eyes of every creature turn to you, through whom and in whom and from whom the kind hand of God created and recreated.

Such language would have been unacceptable in late sixteenth-century England.

76. *Ibid.* l.viii.20, p. 327.

77. *Ibid.* This phrase is in the index: 'La vierge Marie exaltée sur tous les Anges, et preposée au mouvement des sept Planetes.'

78. Bonaventure, Sermon on the Assumption 6. 'Cosmos' is a proper translation of *mundi* in the Latin. There is an English translation in Bonaventure, *Sermons on the Blessed Virgin Mary*, trans. Champion Murray OFM (Carmel IN: Tau Publishing, 2012), p. 214.

V. CONCLUSION—SHAKESPEARE'S FRANCISCANS

The echoes of Giorgi in Shakespeare might be accidental. They might be second-hand, transmitted through the musical community. There is, though, a possibility that the playwright would have been sympathetic to the Venetian's Franciscan worldview.

In Elizabethan England friars and monks were remembered either as figures of fun or as sinister and evil characters—as in Robert Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*:

I charge thee to return and change thy shape,
Thou art too ugly to attend on me.
Go, and return an old Franciscan friar;
That holy shape becomes a devil best.⁷⁹

In contrast, Shakespeare's plays include at least ten characters who are good Franciscans—most famously Friar Laurence in *Romeo and Juliet*.⁸⁰ *Measure for Measure* has a complex Franciscan background: the Duke is disguised as a friar, Isabella is a 'votarist of Saint Clare'.⁸¹

The common themes through this whole story are the belief, so important to the Franciscans, in the essential goodness of Creation, and a belief in Harmony as a divine inherent law in Nature. This was a deadly serious matter. In England some Puritans (not all), certain Deists and Materialists, would oppose such an optimistic view for the next two or more centuries.

The question of whether or not Shakespeare was directly influenced by Francesco Giorgi remains open, but what I believe can be said is that Shakespeare, Giorgi, Spenser, the author of *The Praise of Musick*, and even St Francis, belong to a very ancient but continuous and consistent tradition in the service of Harmony.

But what is Harmony?

Harmony is beyond number. The Sephiroth which lie behind Giorgi's *De Harmonia Mundi* might be reflected in planets or number, but they are beyond even the Harmony of this world—and yet present in all things. It is the same inherent law as the Harmony that brings individual

79. Christopher, Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays* (Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 146 (I:III:25–8).

80. Kenneth Colston, 'Shakespeare's Franciscans,' *New Criterion* 33:6 (2015) 19.

81. Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, IV:1:5.

things, works, or people to a state of peace, as Pseudo-Dionysius explained in his *Divine Names*.⁸²

In spite of the ‘muddy vesture of decay’ we sometimes seem to remember the heavenly music. The *Praise of Musick* says that Platonists and Pythagoreans think all souls

are at the recordation of that celestial Musicke, whereof they were partakers in heaven, before they entered into their bodies, so wonderfully delighted, that no man can be found so harde hearted which is not exceedingly allured with the sweetness thereof.⁸³

We can, then, at times recollect the celestial music, and composers can attempt to imitate it, but in Shakespeare’s time musicians like John Bull were discovering a new kind of music in which harmony and discord, delight and melancholy, similar and different, like characters in a drama, could be woven into complex unities. Perhaps, if we attune our souls, we can hear the same heavenly harmonies woven into the Music of Nature. Was it this that Caliban heard on his island?

Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.⁸⁴

82. Pseudo-Dionysius, *Complete Works*, pp. 89–90, 123. 83. *Praise of Musicke*, p. 105.

84. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, III:II:131.