

Shakespeare's Philosophy of Music

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Abstract

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

Keywords: Shakespeare, Music of the Spheres, Music in Literature

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare is one of the most important figures in literary history. During the course of his lifetime, he authored over thirty-seven plays and 150 sonnets, and in accordance with this extensive output, nearly everyone in the Western world has at least a passing knowledge of his works. However, while a large percentage of people study Shakespearean drama in literature courses, it is rare for these classes to address the musical aspects of staging a Shakespearean production or the attention to music philosophy that Shakespeare gives. As a result, it is surprising to see just how big a factor music plays in Shakespeare's works, especially because his use of it reveals a wealth of information regarding music's influence in his time. As evidenced by the dialogue and sung songs in his plays, Shakespeare was highly influenced by the philosophy of the music of the spheres. This influence shows itself in most of his plays, from *The Tempest* to *Hamlet*, and, among other things, it is used to highlight characterization, plot, and aspects of the supernatural and unknown.

Shakespeare was born in 1564 in England and died in 1616, which places the span of his life near the end of the Renaissance. Although it came from several centuries earlier, one of the most prominent ideas about music at this time was originated by Boethius, a Roman philosopher who lived in about 500 AD. According to Nadezhda Prozorva, Boethius outlines three types of music in his *De institutione musica*, or *The Principles of Music: musica mundana, musica humana, and musica instrumentalis*. He defines *musica mundana* as the "objective music of the cosmos," while *musica humana* may be understood as the "subjective music of the soul."¹ These ideas reflected the theory of the

music of the spheres, which was originated by Pythagoras around 600 BC. Pythagoras discovered that musical intervals were based on mathematical ratios and that the same ratios could be found in astronomy. In his time, the prevailing belief was that there were literal, concentric, clear spheres that held the observable universe. Each of these spheres completed a rotation in each twenty-four hour day, and their movement caused sound, one tone for each sphere. As each sphere moved, their individual tones harmonized, though humanity could not hear this harmony because they were imperfect and therefore not in harmony with the perfect spheres.² As time went on, prevalent thinkers began editing and adding to the theory, but in his book, Boethius works from the theory that the ratios among the heavenly spheres mirror musical intervals. In contrast to *musica mundana* and *musica instrumentalis*, then, Boethius defined *musica humana* as a “reflection of the indivisible human essence and... the expression of man’s inner world.” Music was related to order in both the universe and humanity, and this order was another major part of the theory. Since philosophers believed the entire universe was constructed of the same mathematical and harmonious ratios that caused the music of the spheres, every aspect of the universe was ultimately meant to be ordered. As a result, many works of art and literature reflected balance and symmetry. This includes Shakespeare’s plays. Though he wrote over a thousand years after Boethius, Shakespeare was highly influenced by the theory, and in his works, he uses music to emphasize plot, character, and departures from the natural order. Therefore, a trust and belief in order and ultimate simplicity can be found alongside the idea of the spheres in many of Shakespeare’s works.

2. Application Within Plays

2.1. Merchant Of Venice

According to Claudia Olk, music and language were considered by late medieval and early Renaissance writers to be “two manifestations of one harmonic language of creation.”³ This is evident in *The Merchant of Venice*, and Olk goes on to state that like “the music of the spheres that is based on numerology and proportion... [*The Merchant of Venice*] creates an unheard music of musical ratios.” However, the way that Shakespeare draws such connections can be missed easily. Many lines are framed in such a way that the audience can see echoes of the same motif throughout the play, and while this at first seems to simply be a literary device that many authors use, it is greatly influenced by the theory of the spheres. For example, the line, “since you are dear bought, I will love you dear,” (3.2.311) is contrasted with Gratiano’s earlier statement that “They lose it that do buy it with much care” (1.1.75).⁴ In the first line, Portia states that she will love Bassanio because he has been bought, and in the second line – which occurs earlier in the play – Gratiano states that if one buys something with care, – as Portia has with Bassanio – they will lose it. Despite their distance within the play, these two lines play off each other in such a way that when Portia vows to love Bassanio, listeners remember Gratiano’s warning and understand that everything will not necessarily be well. As mentioned by Olk, “the relative absence of referential meaning leads the listener to a more active role in the perception of patterns of similarity and difference [like in a musical performance].”³ Though the lines do not reference each other internally, the viewer can connect deeper threads if they are paying attention. The inclusion of these lines – as well as the patterns of similarity and difference mentioned by Olk – in the play reflect quite clearly the theory of the music of the spheres. Because the entire cosmos was believed to be greatly ordered, taking the time to weave intricate callbacks throughout the play and ensure that similarities in phrasing could portray larger themes reflected the common belief in ultimate order. Harmony could be found in all areas of life. This idea is especially poignant because language and music were considered to be different manifestations, or dialects, of one language, as Olk explains. For Shakespeare to use language to portray what were believed to be musical truths only emphasizes this point.

2.2. Pericles

Shakespeare’s use of music theory and philosophy is evident throughout *The Merchant of Venice*, reflecting a common belief in the idea that harmony could be found in all areas of life. However, there is also a deep reliance on the music of the spheres in his other works. Catherine Dunn explains that this is the case in *Pericles*, where life seems peaceful when the world is “in tune,” or as it should be, but falls apart when the world is “out of tune,” or not as it should be, especially as it relates to psychological states.⁵ In this work, madness is seen as the state of being “out of tune,” while sanity is seen as the state of being “in tune.” Dunn goes on to explain that in *Pericles*, Shakespeare primarily references *musica humana*, or the “subjective music of the soul.”¹ The allusions to *musica humana* within *Pericles* show one of two details: “the harmonious or inharmonious tuning of the bodily elements and humours to produce a certain character” or the ability of music to provide cures to ailments both physical and mental, often by tuning the body to

the spheres.⁵ The first can be seen in a remark from Antiochus to Pericles: “Yet hope, succeeding from so fair a tree / As your fair self, doth tune us otherwise” (1.1.114-115).⁶ Antiochus is describing the idea that hope will tune his body differently and therefore put him into harmony with the universe, causing him to act differently. This idea flows easily from the musical theory of the time – those living in Shakespeare’s era believed that one’s body or life could be tuned harmoniously or inharmoniously to the cosmos. Similar allusions to the theory are contained throughout the rest of the play, often in relation to madness. However, an example of the second use of the philosophy, to cure ailments, can be seen in multiple scenes as well, including one where dancing is offered as a remedy to Pericles when he is feeling “moody and silent.”⁵ In this scene, Shakespeare reflects the idea that being exposed to music, even in the form of dance, has the power to “retune” someone to the harmony of the cosmos. In this case, after dancing, Pericles would, theoretically, cease to be “moody and silent,” an idea that links forward to the doctrine of affections beginning to emerge at the time of *Pericles*’ writing.

However, the most important use of music in *Pericles* occurs in the climax. Pericles is insane and therefore thought to be out of harmony, so Marina is asked to sing for him because she is perfectly in tune with the spheres. As she does so, Pericles is cured of his madness, and the only example of *musica mundana* in the play can be found: “Most heavenly music! / It nips me unto listening, and thick slumber / Hangs upon mine eyes. Let me rest” (5.1.233-236). As can be seen in this climax, Pericles can only hear the music of the spheres when his soul is in balance with the universe, and according to Dunn, Shakespeare almost suggests this as a solution to man’s problems. The only time *musica mundana* is evoked in the play is when Pericles is healed, so it seems clear that Shakespeare is supporting the idea that music can be used as a cure for ailments, psychological as well as physical. Shakespeare was clearly reflecting the ideas regarding music of his time in this scene; the spheres are in tune with each other, and one must be in tune with the cosmos to hear their music. When someone, such as Marina, can do so, he or she is healthy.

2.3. Supernatural And The Strange

Shakespeare emphasizes the music of the spheres both through his selective use of the types of music and his decisions regarding the structure of his plays. However, he also emphasizes this philosophy through other means, most notably through themes, references to music, and characters that appear throughout the play.

Although it does not seem tied to the philosophy of the music of the spheres at first, Shakespeare used music to signify the supernatural and the strange, from fairies and ghosts to madness and love.⁷ Percy Scholes explains that because changes in lighting and color were not feasible in Elizabethan theatre, Shakespeare instead used music to change the mood and lure in his audiences when the play turned to the unfamiliar and supernatural. Scholes cites *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as an example of this. In this work, the fairy queen’s “good-night revels” are introduced through music.⁸ Shakespeare follows the fairy queen as she goes to bed, which would have been a difficult thing to portray believably onstage. Instead, Shakespeare utilized music to make his audiences more involved in the scene. Later in the play, music is also used when a spell needs to be removed from mortals who have passed through the forest, as well as when a blessing is “bestowed upon the happy lovers” by the fairies. As seen in these examples, music does not signify fairies and their actions only in the case of the fairy queen’s “good-night,” but throughout the play. By using music repeatedly throughout many of his plays when the supernatural – fairies, in this case – appears, Shakespeare tied the two phenomenon together. This, ultimately, was to encourage his audience to be engrossed in the presentation of the supernatural, but is also an important thematic connection between most of his works.

Shakespeare also uses music in connection to witches, but according to Scholes, music’s connection to ghosts is even stronger. Scholes gives several examples of this, beginning with *Cymbeline*, in which “solemn music” is heard before Posthumus’ family’s ghosts appear before him.⁹ A similar example occurs in *Julius Caesar*, in which a young boy is asked to play his instrument for another character.¹⁰ He plays until he falls asleep, and immediately afterwards, Julius Caesar’s ghost enters their tent. Finally, in *Henry VIII*, Queen Katharine asks for music to be played, and when her request is granted, “spirits of peace” appear in a vision.¹¹ Although there are other examples, it is clear that Shakespeare links music with ghosts, another symbol of the supernatural. However, even while he ties music to the appearance of fairies and ghosts, Shakespeare does not limit the supernatural to strange creatures, but afflictions of the human mind and body, including madness and love.

As seen in *Pericles*, Shakespeare associates music and being “out of tune” with madness. This is also evident in *Hamlet* in Act IV, where Ophelia is seen singing constantly, and the things she is saying make little sense.¹² After interacting with her for a few moments, Claudius and Gertrude come to the conclusion that she has been driven mad by grief following her father’s death. Since madness was connected to a wrong tuning with the spheres in both philosophy and other works by Shakespeare, it is easy to see why he made this connection between singing and madness. Ophelia’s insistent singing only emphasizes her insanity. It is also important to note, as Scholes does, that

Shakespeare associates music with characters who are pretending to be insane, as well as those who are drunk. These characters lack the ability to act responsibly, and often burst out into song. While Scholes does state that Shakespeare is not using music to draw his audience in to a “supernatural” experience with drunkenness as he does with madness, Scholes believes that the effect is similar. Drunkenness is still a departure from the natural state, and with the background of the spheres, Shakespeare is emphasizing this when he associates the state of drunkenness with music. Scholes uses similar examples to discuss the idea that music represents the act of choice and death, among other things. While it is not practical to discuss all of these, Scholes makes a familiar case for all of these states of being. Each is considered supernatural or strange on some level, and each is associated – throughout the course of Shakespeare’s works – with music. As these conditions can be seen as a departure from the normal balance of the universe, it is understandable why Shakespeare would have introduced them with music. By doing so, he suggests, as Dunn mentioned in her essay about *Pericles*, a solution to man’s problems, a phenomenon that can even be seen in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Scholes discusses the idea that music is tied to love, but he neglects to mention it in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*. As this is perhaps Shakespeare’s most famous romance, it is important to understand music’s place within the play. While associated with discussions between Romeo and Juliet toward the end of the play, music is first and most significantly tied to love in Act II, Scene II. Romeo and Juliet are speaking to one another and Romeo exclaims, “How silver-sweet sound lovers’ tongues by night, / Like softest music to attending ears!”¹³ Here, he compares the speech of lovers to music. Later, in Act IV, several characters hold a witty exchange regarding why the sounds of instruments are called “silver-sweet,” and the musicians cannot quite give a compelling explanation. In the same way that describing music as “silver-sweet” is inexplicable, describing the speech of lovers in the same way is inexplicable. As these two sounds are linked in the next line – “Like softest music to attending ears!” – Shakespeare strongly connects lovers’ speech to music. Love is seen as a departure from the normal state of the universe and is tied to an unexplainable descriptor just as music is. For these reasons, *Romeo and Juliet* reflects the music of the spheres in two ways. First, it reflects the earlier idea that by connecting phrases throughout the play, Shakespeare mirrors the balance and order integral to the worldview brought about by a belief in the spheres. By connecting the two statements of “silver-sweet” sound, he creates an order to reflect that of the cosmos. Secondly, by comparing the speech of lovers to music, Shakespeare reflects the idea that love or infatuation is a departure from the normal state of being. Like madness, choice, and death, it is different from one’s normal balance, and the infusion of music reflects this, because as Dunn mentions, the inclusion of music suggests a cure – one, if heeded, that would have prevented tragedy in the case of Romeo and Juliet.

2.4. Characters

In a similar fashion, Shakespeare uses music to comment on his plot and characters and reveal truths about them to his audience. As has already been seen in *Pericles*, Shakespeare uses music to narrate the idea that one character may be in tune with the spheres while another is not. In this case, only music can bring the second character into tune. However, Shakespeare also uses music to add layers to his characters. Erin Minear analyzes this phenomenon in *Hamlet*.¹⁴ She discusses the idea that Hamlet’s sung songs are “in some ways more disconcerting” than Ophelia’s, because in Hamlet’s case, actors and readers alike have a hard time telling the difference between what is meant to be sung and what is meant to be spoken. It is quite clear when Ophelia moves from thinking logically to thinking musically, but Hamlet’s movement is far more subtle: for example, in a discussion with Polonius, he quotes a chanson. When Polonius assumes that this quotation is relevant to their discussion and that Hamlet is responding through it, Hamlet points out that his reasoning is flawed.¹⁵ Polonius then asks what would follow logically in their discussion, and Hamlet responds with the next line of the song. According to Minear, this “suggests that a world of orderly and logical causation has given way to a world where one event comes after another for no other reason than that it does.” Understanding Shakespeare’s philosophy of music, this example is telling because through much of the play, Hamlet is believed to be mad. The fact that Shakespeare uses music to both underscore Hamlet’s madness and hint that order and logic has fallen away links back to the idea that madness occurs when one’s mind is not tuned in the same frequency as the music of the spheres, or that which constitutes order.

Described by John Cutts as taking place on “an island that resounds continually to music in the air, which is, I believe, equivalent to music of the spheres,” *The Tempest* is a strong example of Shakespeare’s use of character to represent the philosophy.¹⁶ The music in this play is integral, and Joshua Cohen describes it as a metaphorical, even “metaphysical principle.” In his article, Cohen argues that Ariel, one of the spirits in *The Tempest*, is portrayed as the living embodiment of music. This is evident because every time that Ariel makes an appearance, it is underscored with music.¹⁷ In addition, Ariel lives in the air of the island, which is described as being “alive with

music.” This is seen near the beginning of the play, when Ferdinand reflects on the fact that an unseen music has helped to soothe his grief regarding the death of his father. The music he hears in the air is the song of Ariel, which more firmly cements his role as the embodiment of music and draws a comparison between Ariel’s song of the air and the spheres’ song of the cosmos. Cohen states, “So much is music a part of the air of the island, and Ariel a part of both, that we come to realize that music is somehow intrinsic to Ariel’s nature.” This alone reflects the idea of the music of the spheres: the island and the air surrounding it are nature. According to Shakespeare’s contemporaries, this would mean that the island and air should be highly ordered and should contain the same proportions as the spheres. The fact that the air is filled with music reinforces this idea by showing that the island is in tune with the spheres. Ariel is then aligned with the music of the air, which associates him with the spheres and the heavens. This concept reflects back to the idea that Shakespeare used music to signify the supernatural and unusual. According to Cohen, Ariel is seen in his interactions with humanity to be a link between the heavenly realm and the earthly realm, which is similar to the role of the music of the spheres as a heavenly force signifying order on earth. Finally, as Ariel ultimately teaches Prospero to control his anger, while also gaining more empathy for humanity himself, Shakespeare seems to again reflect the idea that the music of the spheres can be a solution to humanity’s problems. Only with the influence of Ariel could Prospero become better.

2.5. Staging

It is important to note in all of these plays and examples the way through which Shakespeare often introduces music. Michael Witmore discusses the idea that since Shakespeare’s plays incorporate music from offstage, they often include moments where the characters suddenly become aware of music being played.¹⁸ In these cases, the source of the music is obscured, and to the characters, it is a mystery as to where any sound is coming from. In his book *Shakespeare and Music*, David Lindley writes that Shakespeare uses offstage music to represent “magic and the unworldly,” similar to how Scholes discusses music as a representation of the supernatural and strange.¹⁹ Shakespeare’s practical use of the music makes this clear. For example, in *The Winter’s Tale*, music may have been used to “create an audible “push” that sets the music-box figure of Hermione into animated motion,”¹⁸ and can even be seen in one character’s command that the music awaken Hermione.²⁰ Witmore goes on to explain that Shakespeare seems to hide the source of the music from those characters most affected by it. In the case of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare ensures that as Ferdinand comes out of the sea, encouraged by Ariel’s music, he cannot see this source, while the other characters on stage can. Though it does not seem to connect to the music of the spheres at first, this use of music is highly influenced by the philosophy. The idea that music symbolizes the strange and supernatural has already been seen to reflect the idea of the spheres because it shows that such things are a departure from the order assumed by Shakespeare’s contemporaries. The idea that Shakespeare purposely obscured certain characters from seeing the source of music that ordered the events of their lives draws a distinct parallel to the spheres. Because the music of the spheres was seen as perfect and was produced by ratios that ordered the entire universe, imperfect humanity could not hear it. In a similar fashion, Shakespeare ensures that characters are kept from seeing the source of that music which orders their lives by encouraging them to go certain places or take certain actions. In the end, both the philosophy of the spheres and Shakespeare’s decision to prevent Ferdinand from seeing Ariel emphasize the fact that humanity cannot sense that which orders their lives. It is clear, then, that Shakespeare used music in practice in the same way he wrote about it – to underline the philosophy of the music of the spheres.

3. Conclusion

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

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