

The harmonious soul and the defence of music in sixteenth-century England

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Around 1580, a particular conception of the soul and its affinity with music was becoming newly prevalent in sixteenth-century English thought, being cited by poets, composers and writers on music. This was the notion that the soul was a harmony. Physician John Case provides an example in his *Apologia musices* (1588):

The human soul [...] is naught else but a certain sweet harmony. So the soul [...] is moved because of its similarity and sympathy with musical voices and instruments, [...] for, just as we perceive that by means of sympathy the touched string of a viol is able to set a-tremble a like-tuned string of another instrument though itself untouched, likewise, with musical sounds sweetly striking the air and the ear, the strings of the internal senses are indeed moved, like the equally tuned ones of a viol or lute and when these are stricken and made akin the mind itself (inasmuch as it is divine) is wonderfully delighted.¹

This idea provided one explanation for how music was able to have such powerful effects on humanity. If the soul was a harmony, then musical sounds had a unique ability to produce sympathetic motions in the soul.²

The concept of harmony spanned multiple fields of early modern thought, being used as a musical theoretical and compositional term (related to rules of consonance and dissonance) while also having philosophical, religious,

¹ John Case, *Apologia musices tam vocalis quam instrumentalis et mixtae* (Oxford, 1588), 23. Trans. adapted from Dana F. Sutton, <www.philological.bham.ac.uk/music/> (accessed June 2023). 'Anima [...] est nihil aliud quam dulcis quaedam harmonia. Propter similitudinem ergo et sympathiam musicis vocibus ac instrumentis [...] movetur anima [...], nam quemadmodum in fidibus tacta chorda quapiam aequae tensa alterius instrumenti chorda propter sympathiam tremula moveri cernitur tametsi non tangitur, ita sonis musicis aerem aequilater dulciter pulsantibus, nervi internorum sensuum tanquam fides et chordae alterius cytharae aequaliter tensae moventur quidem, et iisdem sic pulsatis consortibusque factis mens ipsa (quantumvis divina est) mirum in modum delectatur'.

² This theory was just one of several explanations: for example, Catholic Priest and author of *The Passions of the Minde*, Thomas Wright listed the sympathy between music and the human soul as his first potential explanation for music's effects, followed by God's providence; the physical transfer of motion from the air stirring like motions in the heart, which in turn stirs the passions; and a somewhat confused explanation based on the idea that music's effects depend on the disposition of the hearer. *The Passions of the Minde in Generall. Corrected, Enlarged, and with Sundry New Discourses Augmented* (London, 1604), 168–72.

ethical and mathematical uses.³ Pinning down precisely what sixteenth-century English authors understood by ‘harmony’ therefore poses particular challenges due to the imprecision with which the concept was used, including tendencies to draw loose parallels across speculative and practical domains, or use the term interchangeably as a synonym for music or consonance. The term was seldom defined by its users as its meaning was taken as read, and so contemporary understandings of harmony must be inferred in context. Nevertheless, early modern thinkers inherited from the Ancient Greeks a notion that a harmony was the joining together of two or more distinct yet compatible entities to produce a new, higher level, ordered entity.⁴ As such, a dictionary could define ‘harmonie’ as ‘agrément of diuers sounds in musicke’, while a sermon on the subject of peace and unity could assert that ‘Musique is nothing else but harmony or agreement of disagreeing parts’, or a medical treatise could write of the heavens’ ‘sweete harmonie which proceedeth of the concords and agreements of so many diuerse motions’.⁵ All these in-passing definitions encapsulate the notion of disparate elements being brought into some form of order, compatibility or synchronicity.

Harmony was not a substance but it was a measurable quality in the form of numerical ratios or proportions. In musical terms, harmony was the expression of sonic intervals in terms of mathematical ratios (2:1 creating the octave, 3:2 the fifth etc.). However, the study of harmony was not only relevant to the combining of musical tones, but was regarded as an organising principle that was applicable throughout the terrestrial and celestial worlds. The classic example—written in the sixth century but still a standard university text in the sixteenth century—was Boethius’s threefold hierarchical concept of *musica instrumentalis* (audible music of instruments and voices), *musica humana* (the harmony of the human soul and body) and *musical mundana* (the harmony of the universe and the movement of the heavenly spheres).⁶ As such the theoretical study of music (as the audible, microcosmic reflection of inaudible macrocosmic harmonies) was considered a branch of the *quadrivium* alongside arithmetic, geometry and astronomy.⁷

Much has been written on the concept of *musica humana* in sixteenth-century thought, as it underpins much of the contemporary debate about the powers of

³ On sixteenth-century conceptions of harmony and their relationship with contemporary musical theoretical notions of harmony, see Robert M. Isgro, ‘Sixteenth-Century Conception of Harmony’, *College Music Symposium*, 19 (1979), 7–52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 9–12; Edward A. Lippman, ‘Hellenic Conceptions of Harmony’, *JAMS* 16 (1963), 3–35.

⁵ Robert Cawdry, *A Table Alphabeticall Contayning and Teaching the True Writing and Vnderstanding of Hard Vsual English Wordes, Borrowed from the Hebrew, Greeke, Latine, or French &c* (London, 1609), sig. E3v; Robert Wilkinson, *Barwick Bridge: or England and Scotland Coupled in a sermon Tending to Peace and Vnitie* (London, 1617), 26; André du Laurens, *A Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight* (London, 1599), 13.

⁶ Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1989), 9–10; Isgro, ‘Sixteenth-Century Conception of Harmony’, 15–7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12–5.

music, and the need for controlling its use in church, society and the home.⁸ Nevertheless, the idea of *musica humana* has tended to receive less investigation in its own right. Hyun-Ah Kim has undertaken the most extensive study, tracing the history of the concept through classical and Christian sources and showing how notions of *musica humana* shaped ideas about the ethical and spiritual influence of song during the Reformation period.⁹ Jacomien Prins's study of Marsilio Ficino—a major conduit for conveying Platonic ideas of harmony to the sixteenth century—illuminates his Platonic notion of the human soul as comprised of harmonic rotations, mirroring those of the universe at large and able to be tuned into concord with the divine through the practice of music.¹⁰ Related to this was the notion that music could ravish the soul, separating it from the body and thereby either elevating it to the divine or risking its dissolution in sensual pleasure (depending on the ethical or spiritual qualities of the music), a theme most recently explored by Linda Austern.¹¹ There is also a significant corpus of scholarship on music's healing properties that explores the relationship between music, body and soul. Penelope Gouk, Linda Austern and others have explored how music was particularly associated with diseases of the humours and passions such as melancholy and lovesickness, with music capable of both curing or exacerbating the illness depending on how it was employed.¹² Nor were such discussions of musical healing always separate from the religious, given the inseparability of spiritual and bodily health, and physical and supernatural causes or cures in sixteenth-century thought.¹³ Gouk's work in particular has focussed on charting

⁸ For examples of how the concept of *musica humana* underpinned discussion of music's place in sixteenth-century society, and religious debates of the period see: Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 48; Jonathan Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism in Post-Reformation England: Discourses, Sites and Identities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 15, 26–35; Linda Austern, *Both from the Ears and Mind* (Chicago, 2020).

⁹ Hyun-Ah Kim, *The Renaissance Ethics of Music: Singing, Contemplation and Musica Humana* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2015).

¹⁰ Jacomien Prins, *Echoes of an Invisible World: Marsilio Ficino and Francesco Patrizi on Cosmic Order and Music Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 119–213, especially 149–65.

¹¹ Austern, *Both from the Ears and Mind*, 73–85; on the ravishing of the soul see also Gretchen Finney, 'Ecstasy and Music in Seventeenth-Century England,' *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 8 (1947), 153–86.

¹² On music and melancholy: Linda Austern, *Both from the Ears and Mind* (Chicago, 2020), 217–68; Penelope Gouk 'Melancholy, Music and the Passions in English Culture around 1600' in Gouk, (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Music, Mind and Well-being*, ed. James Kennaway, Jacomien Prins and Wiebke Thormahlen (New York, 2018), 63–75; Kirsten Gibson, 'Music, Melancholy and Masculinity in Early Modern England' in *Masculinity and Western musical practice*, ed. Gibson and I. Biddle (Farnham, 2009), 41–6; Gouk, 'Music, Melancholy and Medical Spirits in Early Modern Thought' in Peregrine Horden, (ed.), *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy Since Antiquity* (Aldershot, 2000), 173–94; On music and lovesickness: Austern, 'Musical Treatments for Lovesickness: The Early Modern Heritage' in *Music as Medicine*, 213–45; Austern, 'No Pill's Gonna Cure My Ill': Gender, Erotic Melancholy and Traditions of Musical Healing in the Modern West' in Gouk (ed.), *Musical Healing in Cultural Contexts* (Aldershot, 2000), 113–36; Austern, 'For, Love's a Good Musician': Performance, Audition, and Erotic Disorders in Early Modern Europe' *The Musical Quarterly*, 82 (1998), 614–53.

¹³ Katherine Butler, 'Divine Harmony, Demonic Afflictions, and Bodily Humours: Two Tales of Musical Healing in Early Modern England', in Cornelia Wilde and Wolfram Keller (eds), *Perfect Harmony and Melting Strains: Transformations of Music in Early Modern Culture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 81–100.

the changing mechanisms and theories through which philosophers and physicians conceptualised music's ability to influence body and soul from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, as the explanatory power of *musica mundana* and *musica humana* for justifying the effects of vocal and instruments music on the human mind and body gradually waned in favour of mechanical and acoustic theories.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Jamie Kassler has shown the influence of the metaphor of the body as musical instrument (variously conceived as lute, bell or consort) even in later seventeenth-century philosophical thought.¹⁵

Apparent across this literature are the diverse notions of human harmony that might be grouped under this conceptual label. *Musica humana* could refer to the idea of physical or mental health as a concord of the bodily humours or passions of the soul (regarded as mutually influential).¹⁶ With this concept in mind, Thomas Wright Catholic Priest and author of *The Passions of the Minde* could write that: 'as musicke causeth mirth, ioy, and delight, the which abate, expell, and quite destroy their contrary affections, and withall, rectifie the blood and spirits, and consequently digest melancholy, and bring the body into a good temper'.¹⁷ Alternatively, *musica humana* could also refer to the harmony that united the rational soul with the body, as Boethius writes in *Institutione musicæ*: 'What unites the incorporeal nature of reason with the body if not a certain harmony and, as it were, a careful tuning of high and low pitches as though producing one consonance?'¹⁸ Or *musica humana* could encompass the notion of the body as an instrument played by the soul, as for example, Sir John Davies described in poetic terms in *Nosce Teipsum* (1599):

Thus the *Soule* tunes the *bodies* Instrument;
These harmonies she makes with *life* and *sense*;
The organes fit are by the body lent,
But th'actions flow from the *Soules* influence.¹⁹

A related concept of *musica humana* was the metaphor of the soul being tuned into a more virtuous state by God. Other theories used imagery that

¹⁴ Penelope Gouk, 'Some English Theories of Hearing in the Seventeenth Century: Before and after Descartes', in Charles Burnett, Michael Fend, Penelope Gouk, (eds), *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgement from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 1991), 95–113; Gouk, 'Clockwork or Musical Instrument? Some English Theories of Mind–Body Interaction before and after Descartes', in Susan McClary, (ed.), *Structures of Feeling in Seventeenth-Century Cultural Expression* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 35–59.

¹⁵ Jamie C. Kassler, *Inner Music: Hobbes, Hooke, and North on Internal Character* (London: Athlone, 1995).

¹⁶ Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism*, 30–1; Kassler, *Inner Music*, 33–6; John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of music in English Poetry, 1500–1700* (Norton: New York, 1970), 266–72; Gouk, 'Clockwork or Musical instrument?', 39–48.

¹⁷ Wright, *Passions of the Minde*, 160.

¹⁸ Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, ed. Palisca, 10; Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism*, 15.

¹⁹ Sir John Davies, *Nosce teipsum This Oracle Expounded in two elegies, 1. Of Humane Knowledge, 2. Of the Soule of Man, and the Immortalitie Thereof* (London, 1599), 49. On seventeenth-century theories of the body as instrument see also Kassler, *Inner Music*, 43–8 and Kim, *The Renaissance Ethics of Music*, 2–3, 18.

simply *likened* the soul to a harmony or argued that the soul had particular affinities with musical harmony.²⁰ Indeed, musical or harmonic metaphors were commonly used as models for explaining the workings of the mind or soul, as Kassler has described among later seventeenth-century English philosophers.²¹ My concern in this article, however, is not with any of these, but rather with the very specific notion that the soul was not merely comparable with harmony in its nature, but rather that the soul was itself a harmony.

While not unrelated to these other ideas of the soul's relationship to music, defining the nature of the soul as itself a harmony was a specific position with both philosophical and theological consequences. To describe the soul as 'a harmony' (noun) had stronger and more serious implications than describing the soul as 'harmonical' or 'harmonious' (adjective). The soul was not merely like a harmony or able to have the characteristics of harmony, rather the soul was defined by harmony. This harmony was not a distinctive substance, but rather used as an abstract noun for the result of the ordered and compatible joining of separate entities (the nature of which was another source of philosophical debate, as discussed below) that engendered the soul. This noun might be applied abstractly to refer to the soul having the form or structural properties of harmony or concretely to define the soul as a manifestation of harmony.²² Either way, using harmony specifically as noun, made it an essential and inseparable property of the soul, not merely a metaphor or likeness.

Focussing on this precise aspect of *musica humana* that regarded the soul as a harmony, this article explores how debates over music's morality in sixteenth-century England acted as a catalyst for theorising an increasingly strong affinity between music and the soul to reach a position where the idea that the soul was a harmony could be cited in music's defence. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, English writers valued music primarily for its recreational and restorative qualities or for its ability to teach and encourage men towards a virtuous and goodly life, notions akin to the place of music in Aristotle's *Politics*. Yet a Platonic view of music as able to shape the human soul directly gained ground as Protestants at the more radical end of the spectrum condemned music as able to corrupt and effeminate men. Music's defenders not only responded with a volley of Classical stories illustrating its ability to inspire virtuous affections, but also went further still in arguing that the soul

²⁰ Elena Laura Calogero, *Ideas and Images of Music in English and Continental Emblem Books 1550–1700*, *Saecula spiritalia* 39 (Verlag Valentin Koerner: Baden-Baden, 2009), 150–66; Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky*, 266–72.

²¹ Kassler, *Inner Music*.

²² On the abstract and concrete theories of soul harmony even within Aristotle's *De anima*, see Christopher Shields, 'In Dialogue about Harmony', in António Pedro Mesquita, Simon Noriega-Olmos, and Christopher Shields (eds.), *Revisiting Aristotle's Fragments: New Essays on the Fragments of Aristotle's Lost Works* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 141–62 (at 145–6, 149–50).

itself was a harmony. This was the closest possibly affinity between music and the soul that could be claimed. Such arguments claimed music as fundamental to the nature of man, his relationship to the divine and to his immortality, linking the soul's response to music to its memories of heavenly harmonies. Yet, the idea that the soul is a harmony was not unproblematic from either a philosophical or a Christian theological perspective.

THE SOUL AS HARMONY: THE CLASSICAL INHERITANCE

The idea of the soul as a harmony was not a new one, but had its origins in Ancient Greek philosophy.²³ The most significant sources—known to and cited by Elizabethan authors²⁴—were Plato's *Phaedo* and *Timaeus* (the latter known especially via Ficino's commentary), Aristotle's *De anima* and *Politics*, and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* (which attributed the notion to Aristoxenus). It was also common for Elizabethan sources to attribute the idea to the Pythagoreans as it was pupils of Pythagoras who raised the idea of the soul as a harmony in Plato's *Phaedo*.

Significantly, the majority of these ancient sources—Plato's *Phaedo*, Aristotle's *De anima* and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*—introduce the notion of the soul as harmony only to refute it. In *De anima*, the notion of soul harmony being critiqued by Aristotle is one in which the soul is a harmonious blend of contraries in the body. Aristotle argues that if the soul is merely a proportion of bodily elements then this is not compatible with the role of the soul's powers of originating movement. Moreover, there are many composite parts of the body made of different mixtures and ratios of elements. If each blend were considered a harmony, then there would be many souls in a body. Aristotle therefore argues that while it is appropriate to call the health of the body a harmony, this is not an appropriate description of the soul.²⁵

In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates also refutes the notion of the soul as a harmony of corporeal elements, but on different grounds.²⁶ Simmias has argued that 'our body is strung and held together by heat, cold, moisture, dryness, and the like and the soul is a mixture and a harmony of these same elements'; however, as Simmias recognises this would mean that 'when the

²³ H. B. Gottschalk, 'Soul as Harmonia', *Phronesis* 16 (1971), 179–98; Francesco Pelosi, *Plato on Music, Soul and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181–94.

²⁴ For example, John Case cites Plato's *Phaedo*, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Timaeus* and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*. The translation and commentary of Aristotle's *Politics* by Loys Le Roy, translated into English by I.D., cites both Plato's *Phaedo* and Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations* in relation to Aristotle's assertion that 'many wise men affirm that the soul is a harmony, or that there is a harmony in it'. *Aristotle's Politiques, or Discourses of Government*, trans. Loys Le Roy and I.D. (London, 1598).

²⁵ Aristotle, *De anima*, Book 1, Part 4; trans. J.A. Smith <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.html>> (accessed June 2023); H. Granger, *Aristotle's Idea of the Soul* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academy, 1996), 11–2, 23–5, 48.

²⁶ Plato, *Phaedo*, section 85e–95a. Trans. by Harold North in Plato in Twelve Volumes: Vol.1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966) <<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0059.tlg004.perseus-eng1:85e>> (accessed June 2023). Pelosi, *Plato on Music, Soul and the Body*, 181–3.

body is too much relaxed or is too tightly strung by diseases or other ills, the soul must of necessity perish' (86b–c). Socrates agrees that if 'the soul is a harmony made up of the elements that are strung like harp-strings in the body', it could not exist either prior to or after the body (92a). This would be incompatible with the previous conclusions drawn that the soul preceded the body, to which Simmias had not objected. The notion of the soul as harmony undermines the notion of the soul's immortality.²⁷ A similar argument was made by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*. Here the idea that the soul was a harmony of the body was attributed to Aristoxenus (a pupil of Aristotle), against which Cicero argues that if the soul is a musical harmony, then it shall be dissolved.²⁸

Returning to Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates goes on to refute the notion of the soul as harmony on several grounds. Crucially for the idea that the soul governed the body, Socrates argues that if the soul was a harmony set in the frame of the body, then it could only follow the body and its affections; it could not oppose bodily appetites and desires (93a, 94b–e). Moreover, while one can be more or less harmonious, one cannot have more or less of a soul (93b, d). Finally, Socrates switches to a different conception of soul-harmony in which virtue is perceived as harmony and vice as discord. Following this to its logical conclusion, he concludes that if the soul is a harmony, it can only be virtuous—a fact deniable by experience (93b–94b).²⁹

In later works, Plato did return to the idea of soul harmony. In *The Republic*, the soul is often described in musical terms referring at different times to the balance of two or three parts of the soul and elsewhere to the moral individual's well-tempered soul.³⁰ The latter would seem to fall foul of the argument from *Phaedo* that if a harmonious soul is a virtuous one, either all souls are virtuous or the soul perishes if it is immoral. The fluid use of the concepts suggests that the musicality of the soul tended to be used metaphorically as a useful image, rather than intended as philosophical definition of the true nature of the soul. It is in the *Timaeus* that the idea of the soul as harmony is truly revisited. As in *The Republic*, the soul is not a harmony of bodily elements, but a concord of its own elements that pre-exists the body. The human soul is a copy of the world-soul, created by harmonising the qualities of the 'Same' and the 'Other' added to 'Being', whose mixture is then subjected to a process of complex harmonic division, and the subsequent sequences are then combined into intersecting,

²⁷ Pelosi, *Plato on Music, Soul and the Body*, 182.

²⁸ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*; also, *Treatises on the Nature of the Gods, and on the Commonwealth*, ed. C.D. Yonge (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), 18–9.

²⁹ Pelosi, *Plato on Music, Soul and the Body*, 183.

³⁰ Pelosi, *Plato on Music, Soul and the Body*, 184–9. Plato, *The Republic*, Book 3 Section 411e; Book 4, Section 443d–e, trans. Paul Shorey, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 and 6* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969) <www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D3> (accessed June 2023).

rotating rings. While nevertheless created as harmony, in this conception, the soul is fragile and susceptible to losing its tuning, particularly when in contact with the corporeal body.³¹ The position reached by Plato in the *Timaeus*, then, is slightly different from the notion that the soul is by definition a harmony. The embodied soul is not a harmony, but endeavours to regain its harmony. This is a subtle difference, but one that avoids some of the concerns regarding immortality and souls that lose their harmony. Yet even the idea of the tuneable soul was not without controversy as later followers of Plato viewed the human soul as merely a part of the world soul, thereby challenging the idea of a personal immortal soul.³²

The grounds on which the theory that the soul was a harmony is repeatedly refuted by Aristotle, Plato and Cicero posed particular problems for the Christian belief in the immortality of the soul. The challenges of Ancient Greek philosophy for Christian notions of the immortal soul had already led to controversy in Italy earlier in the century, firstly leading to a decree by the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513 that obliged philosophers to demonstrate the immortality of the soul in line with Christian theology, and secondly, in the response to Pomponazzi's subsequent denial of a philosophical basis for the immortality of the soul in his *Tractatus de immortalitate animae* (1516).³³ Associating with such controversies and heresies (Pomponazzi's book was burned in Venice) would hardly seem to be beneficial to those seeking to defend music.³⁴ So why did this theory come to be widely cited by Elizabethan authors, and why in particular did those writing in defence of music turn to such a questionable theory to support their claims? Presumably this theory must have had some particular usefulness to the theorists, which enabled them to overlook its inadequacies. To understand this, we need to understand the idea within the broader debates concerning the nature and virtue of music taking place in sixteenth-century England.

THE CONTEXT OF MUSICAL DEBATES IN ENGLAND

Throughout the sixteenth century, almost all English authors recognise music's powerful effects on humankind, whether its ability to offer comfort to the melancholy, inspire mirth, recreate the mind, stir up courage or drive away

³¹ Pelosi, *Plato on Music, Soul and the Body*, 189–94. Plato, *Timaeus*, sections 35a–36d; 41d, 44b–c. Trans. by W.R.M. Lamb in *Plato in 12 Volumes: Vol. 9* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925) <www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0180:text=Tim> (accessed June 2023).

³² Leen Spruit, 'The Pomponazzi Affair: The Controversy over the Immortal Soul', in Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2017), 225–46 (225).

³³ Jill Kraye, 'The Immortality of the Soul in the Renaissance: Between Natural Philosophy and Theology', *Signatures*, 1 (2000), 51–68; Spruit, 'The Pomponazzi Affair'.

³⁴ While some early reformers and indeed Luther had questioned the notion of the immortal soul, John Calvin had firmly defended the soul's immortality and it was this theology on which the Anglican Church drew. Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1972), 7–41.

evil spirits.³⁵ Indeed throughout the period, there was an extensive group of mythological and biblical stories, typical exemplars and tropes that formed the basis for the typical 'praise of music' topos.³⁶ Yet the in first part of the century, English authors do not tend to assert any special affinity between music and the human soul in order to justify these effects.

To offer just one example of English thought in the early sixteenth century, Thomas Elyot opens his *Boke named the Governour* (1531) with examples that illustrate music's beneficial effects: David using his harp to drive out Saul's evil spirits, and Achilles using music to assuage his fury and return himself to a state of reason.³⁷ Nevertheless, as he assesses music's benefits for the training of would-be governors, Elyot's reasons for recommending music become rather more practical than moral. He knows and recommends Aristotle's *Politics* and Plato's *Republic* for study but does not employ their arguments concerning music's ability to instil knowledge of virtue and vice, or to mould the character. Instead, Elyot finds music useful in private for refreshing the wit, being commendably disposed in leisure (ideas important in Aristotle), as well as to give the governor an ability to judge the abilities of musicians.³⁸ Finally, a perfect understanding of music is:

Necessary [...] for the better attaynyng the knowledge of a publike weale, whiche [...] is made of an ordre of astates and degrees, and by reaso[n] therof conteineth in it a perfect harmony.³⁹

This last statement places the emphasis on speculative music knowledge rather than audible music as important for the would-be governor's development. In Elyot, there is little sense that music has any special affinity with the soul.

As the Reformation took hold in England in the mid-sixteenth century, questioning of music's appropriateness in both worship and moral living became more intense, and the rhetoric surrounding its effects on the soul became more exaggerated.⁴⁰ The views of Reformers were by no means all negative. Archbishop Parker, for example, prefaced his metrical psalter with a poem 'Of the Vertue of Psalmes', which claimed that these songs could cure

³⁵ See, for example, Marsh, *Music and Society*, 32–70; Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism*, Ch. 1.

³⁶ See James Hutton, 'Some English Poems in Praise of Music', *English Miscellany*, 2 (1951), 1–63; Katherine Butler, 'Origin Myths, Genealogies and Inventors: Defining the Nature of Music in Early Modern England', in Katherine Butler and Samantha Bassler (eds.), *Music, Myth and Story in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2019), 124–38.

³⁷ Sir Thomas Elyot, *The Boke named the Governour* (London, 1531), fol. 22r.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, fols. 23v–24r.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, fol. 24r.

⁴⁰ On the Reformation discourse on music, see for example, Willis, *Church Music and Protestantism*, Ch. 2; Jonathan Willis, 'Protestant Worship and the Discourse of Music in Reformation England', in Natalie Mears and Alec Ryrie (eds.), *Worship and the Parish Church in Early Modern Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 131–50; Rob C. Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe, 1470–1530* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 105–61.

bodily pains, stay the raging mind, be remedies for all cares, drive out wicked spirits, dull sin, instil virtue and act as mirrors in which a person could see the state of his soul.⁴¹ Not only are music's effects more extensively and hyperbolically catalogued, but music is regarded as having particular properties—'tune and tyme'—which enable it to 'sinkth more swéete: and déeper goth, in harte of mans delight'.⁴² David Chytraeus (a German theologian whose work was translated by Arthur Golding) took this explanation one stage further and ascribed these effects to the 'aliance' our souls have with 'harmonie and nu[m]ber, euen by nature'. This meant that through singing 'the holy woordes may sinke the déeper into the mindes of the héerers, and kindle more earnest motions in their hartes'.⁴³ Such statements come very close to asserting that the soul is a harmony.

While Parker and others promoted music's beneficial influences on the soul, another strand of Protestant writers expressed their strong concerns about its abuses and detrimental effects. While no one denied that music had positive effects, did the dangers outweigh the potential benefits? One primary concern was music's potentially detrimental effects on character, temperament and virtue of the soul. Protestant tutor Roger Ascham cited Galen's opinion that 'muche musike marreth mennes maners'.⁴⁴ He likened music to honey—sweet at first but unable to give strong nourishment and ultimately making man's wits smooth, tender, soft, queasy, dulled, unable to brook strong, tough study.⁴⁵ A few decades later, the rhetoric of critics of Elizabethan society like Stephen Gosson and Philip Stubbes was stronger. Stubbes attributed a catalogue of unsavoury qualities caused by a musical education: softness, effeminacy, bawdiness, whoredom and all manner of abominations.⁴⁶

While these authors emphasised music's long-lasting effects on the character, others were more concerned about its vain and transitory nature. Such was Protestant Reformer Thomas Becon's concern, particularly when music distracted people from more important matters, namely God. At one point, the character Cristofer accuses music of leading people towards vice, provoking the wrath of God and thrusting people down into hellfire.⁴⁷ This, however, is a rhetorical gesture to make a contrast with the benefits of the Holy Scriptures, and in several places elsewhere, other characters allow moderate

⁴¹ Matthew Parker, *The Whole Psalter Translated into English Metre* (London, 1567), sig. Aiiiir–[Biv]r.

⁴² *Ibid.*, sig. Bir.

⁴³ David Chytraeus, *A Postil or Orderly Disposing of Certain Epistles Vsually Red in the Church of God, vppon the Sundayes and Holydayes Throughout the Whole Yeere*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1570), 363.

⁴⁴ Roger Ascham, *Toxophilus the Schole of Shootinge Contayned in Two Bookes* (London, 1545), fol. 10r.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Phillip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses Contayning a Discouerie, or Briefe Summarie of Such Notable Vices and Imperfections, as Now Raigne in Many Christian Countreyes of the Worlde: But (Especiallye) in a Verie Famous Ilande Called Ailgna* (London, 1583), sigs. 03v–4r; Stephen Gosson, *The S[c]hool of Abuse, Conteyning a Plesaunt Inuectiue Against Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Iesters, and Such Like Caterpillers of a Co[m]monwelth* (London, 1579), fols. [7]r–[11]r.

⁴⁷ Thomas Becon, *The Jewel of Ioye* (London, [1550?]), sig. [Eviii]v. On Becon's arguments see Wegman, *The Crisis of Music in Early Modern Europe*, 106–8.

use of music. The character Philemon's main concern is that although music had beneficial effects, these had no lasting significance:

musicall instruments [...] for a tyme greatly exhilarate, chere, and co[m]fort our weried spirites, but in how short space do we loth them, if they be continuallye played vpon or exercised out of time? And though we delite neuer so greatly in the[m], doeth not the sownde strayghte waye perysh, and we receyue none other commoditie then losse of tyme?⁴⁸

The problem for the defenders of music was that critics like these did not deny music's powers and even potential benefits, but rather they saw music's potential abuses as too risky. Puritan clergyman John Northbrooke, for example, did not condemn church music in general, but when considering the possibility that people may attend church to be delighted by the music rather than attend to the word of God, he concludes:

we must rather abstaine from a thing not necessarie, than to suffer their pleasures to be cockered [indulged] with the destruction of their soules.⁴⁹

As none of music's benefits could be said to outweigh the risks of destroying one's soul, arguments for music as a source of vice could not be refuted convincingly simply with the usual catalogue of examples of its beneficial effects. The idea that the soul was a harmony, however, offered another possible line of defence.

THE ADVANTAGES OF THE HARMONIOUS SOUL ARGUMENT

The first use of the idea of the harmonious soul in an English defence of music came in Thomas Lodge's response to Stephen Gosson's criticism. He mentioned the idea only in passing as evidence of the high regard philosophers had for music.⁵⁰ Yet in works such as the anonymous *Praise of Musicke* (1586) and John Case's *Apologia musices* (1588), it became a more crucial part of their defence. At the same time, the idea was becoming more prevalent in wider society, infiltrating poetic responses to music.⁵¹

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, sig. Fi₁r-v.

⁴⁹ John Northbrooke, *A Treatise Wherein Dicing, Dauncing, Vaine Playes or Enterluds with Other Idle Pastimes [et] c. Commonly Vsed on the Sabbath Day, are Reproued by the Authoritie of the Word of God and Auntient Writers* (London, [1577?]), 85.

⁵⁰ Thomas Lodge, [A reply to Stephen Gosson's *The Schoole of Abuse* beginning 'Protogenes can know Apelles by his line though he se him not'], (London, [1579]), 30.

⁵¹ See, for example Davies, *Nosce teipsum*, 49; Edmund Spenser, *The Shepheardes Calender Conteyning Twelue Aeglogues Proportionable to the Twelue Monethes* (London, 1579), fol. 42v; John Davies of Hereford, 'A Ode in Commendation of Musick', in Wittes *Pilgrimage, (by Poeticall Essaies) Through a World of Amorous Sonnets, Soule-Passions, and Other Passages, Diuine, Philosophicall, Morall, Poeticall, and Politicall* (London, 1605), sig. [X3]r.

Various theories for how the soul might be a harmony co-existed, offering different advantages to the defender of music. The anonymous author of *The Praise of Musicke*, for example, put forward several interpretations.⁵² Firstly, the author referred to Herophilus and Aristoxenus who ‘thought that the soule was nothing else, but a *Musical motio[n]*, caused of the nature and figure of the whole body’.⁵³ This is certainly the summary of Aristoxenus’ views given by Cicero, though Herophilus is best known for his notion of the music of the pulse.⁵⁴ In this version of the theory, the soul is a harmony that arises from the body. This was the theory that raises most problems for Christian notions of the immortality of the soul, and that was most firmly criticised by Cicero, Aristotle and Plato.

In a later section of *The Praise of Music*, another theory of the soul’s harmony is put forward deriving from Plato’s *Republic*:

The symphony and concert of Musicke [...] agreeth with the interior parts and affections of the soule. For as there are three partes or faculties of mans soule, the first and worthiest the part *reasonable*, [...] the second *irascible* [passions] [...] and the last *co[n]cupiscible* [appetite] [...] so if we co[m]pare the symphony of Musicke, with these powers of the soule, we shal find great conueniencie and affinity between them. For looke what proportion is betweene the parts *reasonable*, and *irascible*, such is there in Musicke between that string which is called *hypate* [high], and that which is termed *Mese* [Middle], causing the melody called *diatessaron*: and looke what proportion is between the parts of *irascible* and *co[n]cupiscible*, such is there between *Mese* and *Nete* [Low] making that sound which is named *Diapente*: so that as those three partes of the soule consenting in one, make an absolute and perfect action: so of these three in Musicke, is caused a pleasant and delectable *Diapason*.⁵⁵

By viewing the soul as a harmony of its parts, this theory makes the soul less dependent on the body. This interpretation lessens concerns about how the soul might out-survive the body or how it might be capable of controlling the body. Yet, it does not avoid the problem of the soul’s potential dissolvability were, for example, desire to win over reason and thereby destroy the harmony. This is perhaps why in his *Sphaerae civitatis*—an exegesis of Aristotle’s

⁵² *The Praise of Musicke* has sometimes been attributed to John Case, but this now appears unlikely. Most recently Hyun-Ah Kim proposed John Bull as the author; however, the evidence is inconclusive. On this authorship debate, see H. B. Barnett, ‘John Case, an Elizabethan Music Scholar’, *Music and Letters*, 50 (1969), 252–66; J. W. Binns, ‘John Case and The Praise of Musicke’, *Music and Letters*, 55 (1974), 444–53; E. E. Knight, ‘The “Praise of Musicke”’, John Case, Thomas Watson and William Byrd’, *Current Musicology*, 30 (1980), 37–59. Hyun-Ah Kim, *The Praise of Musicke, 1586: An Edition with Commentary*, Music Theory in Britain, 1500–1700 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 27–49.

⁵³ *The Praise of Musicke*, 40.

⁵⁴ Herophilus, *The Art of Medicine in Early Alexandria: Edition, Translation and Essays*, ed. Heinrich von Staden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 276–9.

⁵⁵ *The Praise of Musicke*, 44–5. *The Praise of Musicke* cites Gyraldus, but the idea derives from Plato, *The Republic*, Book 4 Section 443d.

Politics written in the same year as the *Apologia musices*—John Case instead went with the image of the soul as ‘nature’s sweetest lyre made up of its potentialities like strings’.⁵⁶ Here, the soul not only has the potential for harmony, but also for discord. Yet now the soul is not a harmony in itself, but a musical instrument that might be well or badly tuned.

Regardless of the imprecision with which the philosophy was understood by its Elizabethan proponents, the idea of the soul as harmony had particular advantages in counteracting some of the key arguments of the critics. Firstly, it made music an essential characteristic of humanity rather than something indifferent that could be ignored for its potential dangers. *The Praise of Musicke* imagines nature declaring:

When I made man I gave him a soul either harmony itself, or at least harmonical [...] If I made any one which cannot brook or fancy Music, surely I erred and made a monster.⁵⁷

Delight in music was a natural part of humanity. To not have delight in music was to be not human, but a soulless monster. It followed from this that humanity’s use of music was instinctive:

the ploughma[n] and cartar, are by the instinct of their harmonical soules co[m]pelled to frame their breath into a whistle, thereby not only pleasing the[m]selues, but also diminishing the tediousness of their labors.⁵⁸

Asking people to forego music, was akin to asking people to deny their essential nature, as well as music’s beneficial effects.

A third quite different theory of the soul as harmony emphasised the soul-music’s divine origins. Although briefly touched on in *The Praise of Musicke*,⁵⁹ this theory was most central to John Case’s *Apologia musices*, where it was introduced at the beginning of the book:

Man’s mind arose from the First Cause and from music, that it is wonderfully captivated by music in its mortal journey and life, and that in the end it is perfected and blessed when returned to the First Cause and to Music.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ John Case, *Sphaerae civitatis* (Oxford, 1588), 709. Trans. Dana F. Sutton <www.philological.bham.ac.uk/sphaera/> (accessed June 2023). ‘Est enim anima [...] veluti dulcissima naturae cythera potentiis suis tanquam nervis ac fidibus compacta.’

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, [74]–5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁹ *The Praise of Musicke*, 41.

⁶⁰ Case, *Apologia musices*, 2. Trans. Dana F. Sutton <www.philological.bham.ac.uk/music/>.

‘mentem humanam a prima causa et musica ortam, musica in hac mortali via et vita mirifice captam, tandem ad primam causam et musicam reductam perfici et beari crediderunt’.

Although Case cites Plato's *Phaedo* and Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Republic* here (particularly anomalous as *Phaedo* denies the notion), his elaboration of the theory has more in common with Plato's *Timaeus*. As discussed above, the soul is in this case a harmony, though one that is distorted by its embodiment and in need of restoring to its perfect state. This theory was particularly advantageous because it could counteract music's reputation as vain, transitory and worldly. Instead, music became not merely an outward manifestation of the nature of the mind/soul, but a medium that united the mind with its heavenly origins and final destination. Music was not a worldly phenomenon or mere carnal delight, but captivated the soul as 'a memory of that music of which it was aware in heaven, and which it is destined to know after its separation from the body'.⁶¹

Furthermore, the notion that the soul was in need of perfecting turned music into a means of salvation. John Case described music as able to 'declare[] to the mind many secrets of future and celestial harmony'.⁶² In his *Sphaerae civitatis*—an exegesis of Aristotle's *Politics* written in the same year as the *Apologia musices*—Case considered Dorian music as the closest to this celestial harmony, and this would also equate to the 'grave and divine music' which he says enjoys a proportion with the human soul.⁶³ Indeed, he argued that Dorian music is 'able to entice us [...] from earth to heaven, from vanity to virtue, from the empty clamour of mortals to the glorious choir of heavenly spirits, from this indivisible point of time to the godhead's infinite circumference'.⁶⁴ In his choice of the Dorian mode, Case also follows Plato, who permitted only certain modes in his republic—the forceful Phrygian and the temperate Dorian.⁶⁵ Rather than merely stirring the soul to piety and recognition of its divine origins, music now acts as a bridle for steering and tempering the soul.⁶⁶ The soul is no longer essentially a concord, but rather, it is only the virtuous soul that makes a perfect harmony. Indeed, Case declares that 'the harmony of the soul is virtue',⁶⁷ which brings us back to the problem in Plato's *Phaedo*: either all souls are virtuous or not all souls are harmonies.

The notion that the soul was a harmony was perhaps more a convenient argument than a fully worked out philosophical position for authors writing in praise of music. Indeed, few Elizabethan authors actively engage with the

⁶¹ Case, *Apologia musices*, 26. Trans. Sutton <www.philological.bham.ac.uk/music/>: 'in hac vita musicis tonis ultra modum capitur, quia in corpus defert memoriam musicae cuius conscia in coelo fuit, compositusque post divortium suum a corpore futura est'. Case is citing Macrobius's *Dream of Scipio*, Ch. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 'ita musica animo per varios motus et sonos aeris multa arcana futurae ac coelestis harmoniae [...] effatur'.

⁶³ Case, *Sphaerae civitatis*, 724. Trans. Dana F. Sutton.

⁶⁴ Case, *Sphaerae civitatis*, 712; Trans. Dana F. Sutton 'quaeque nos nostrosque sensus et affectus a terra ad caelum, a vanitate ad virtutem, ab inani strepitu mortalium ad gloriosum chorum caelestium spirituum, ab hoc indivisibili puncto temporis ad infinitam circumferentiam numinis possit allicere, possit avocare'.

⁶⁵ Plato, *The Republic*, Book 3 Section 399a–c.

⁶⁶ Case, *Apologia musices*, 23; Compare also Case, *Sphaerae civitatis*, 722.

⁶⁷ Case, *Sphaerae civitatis*, 740. 'Et harmonia animae (ut definiunt philosophi) est ipsa virtus'.

debates surrounding whether and in what way the soul might be a harmony. It also appears to have remained a controversial position. Some Elizabethans were clearly sceptical. Composer Thomas Weelkes reveals in the dedication to his *Madrigals of 5 and 6 Parts* (1600) that debates on the issue had been taking place at Winchester College where he had ‘heard learned men say, that some Philosophers haue mistaken the soule of man for an Harmonie’.⁶⁸ Moreover, when clergyman Christopher Carlile considered the nature of the human soul in 1582, he quoted Cicero’s argument that the soul could not be harmonious because it would be dissolvable and hence not immortal.⁶⁹ Yet these refutations were in the minority. More typical was the treatment of the idea with some caution or equivocation. *The Praise of Musicke* at one point describes the soul as ‘either harmony itself, or at least harmonical’.⁷⁰ Poet John Davies of Hereford referred to ‘Our Soules (whome some suppos’d but Musicke were, Because they moued are as It doth steere)’, while theologian Richard Hooker hedges his bets by saying that music ‘so pleasing effects it hath in that very part of man which is most diuine, that some haue bene thereby induced to thinke that the soule itselfe by nature is, or hath in it, harmonie’.⁷¹

Considering the Elizabethan musical discourse in its breadth, it seems that arguing that the soul was a harmony was an extreme position within a more widespread belief in music’s affinity with humanity and its powerful influence on the soul. Many of the writers who referred to the soul as harmony more briefly than Case did so with limited conviction, preferring to attribute it to others rather than affirm their belief in it, and employing it primarily as a convenient argument with authoritative credentials from Classical Antiquity. Nevertheless, if one did not examine the notion too deeply, the idea of the soul as harmony did provide a powerful explanation for music’s effects and some useful counterarguments to music’s critics. Moreover, even as new models of mind and soul developed in the seventeenth century, by this point, the language of music and harmony had become so embedded in musical discourse that it continued to be pervasive and instrumental in conveying the new medical and cognitive theories of William Harvey, Thomas Hobbes, Robert Hooke, Roger North and others.⁷²

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⁶⁸ Thomas Weelkes, *Madrigals of 5. and 6. Parts apt for the Viols and Voices* (London, 1600), dedication.

⁶⁹ Christopher Carlile, *A Discourse, Concerning Two Diuine Positions The First [E]ffectually Concluding, that the Soules of the Faithfull Fathers, Deceased Before Christ, Went Immediately to Heauen. The Second Sufficentlye Setting Foorth vnto vs Christians, what we are to Conceiue, Touching the Descension of our Sauour Christ into Hell: Publicly Disputed at a Commencement in Cambridge, anno Domini 1552* (London, 1582), fol 161v.

⁷⁰ *The Praise of Musicke*, [74]–5.

⁷¹ Davies of Hereford, ‘A Ode in Commendation of Musick’, sig. [X3]r; Richard Hooker, *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiasticall Politie. The Fift Booke* (London, 1597), 75.

⁷² On which see Kassler, *Inner Music*.

Abstract

This article examines the history of the concept of the soul as a harmony—as opposed to merely being *like* a harmony—in sixteenth-century England, demonstrating how debates over music’s morality in sixteenth-century England were a catalyst for theorising an increasing affinity between music and the soul. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, English writers valued music primarily for its restorative qualities or its potential to instil virtue, akin to arguments in Aristotle’s *Politics*. As attacks on music intensified mid-century, defenders turned to more Platonic views of music, gradually going as far as arguing that the soul itself was a harmony. As I demonstrate, however, music’s defenders trod a fine line in using this concept, which had been challenged since classical times and caused problems for Christian theology and the notion of the immortal soul. Nevertheless, by the seventeenth century, the pervasiveness of the language of soul-harmony was such that it continued to be influential in the seventeenth century as a tool for conveying the emerging new medical and cognitive theories.