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Musicianship and the masteries of the stars: music and musicians in the Liber Nativitatum

OLIVER DOYLE 

The *Liber Nativitatum*, *De Nativitatibus* or *Albubather* (Venice: Alovsius de Sancta Lucia, 1492; Venice: Giovanni Battista Sessa, 1501) represents the first printed edition of the first-known Latin translation of the *Kitāb al-mawālid*, or Book of Births, of Abu Bakr al-Hassan ibn al-Khasib, a Persian astrologer writing at the end of the ninth century.¹ In 206 chapters it outlines how any number of personal traits, tendencies and the manner of an individual's death are defined by the movement and positioning of the celestial bodies throughout the native's gestation period. These cover a vast range of characteristics and eventualities – from the likelihood of baldness to the threat of a violent end – but no characteristics feature so prominently as those linked to the voice and the ear. Indeed, four chapters are devoted to loquacity, hearing and musical professions, and there are no fewer than twenty-three other instances in which speech, hearing or music are mentioned with regard to the various 'masteries' – those skills associated with a certain star – and perceived moral valence of the planets, sun, moon and constellations. While it is not unusual to find music linked wholesale to Venus or Mercury in texts and images of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the level of detail found within the *Liber Nativitatum* pertaining to music and related disciplines is comparatively more nuanced, and less noted by musicologists. Its dissection of the level of ability a rhetorician, professional musician or amateur might have, thanks to celestial influence, makes it possible to draw detailed links between the connotations – moral and otherwise – each celestial body bore at the turn of the sixteenth century, and the traits and skills requisite for good musical performance.

THE *LIBER NATIVITATUM* AND ITS TRANSMISSION

The *Liber Nativitatum* is one of several 'Books of Births' that had been translated from Arabic into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and were published within a half century of the advent of the commercial printing press. Although far from unknown to scholars, modern mentions of the text

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¹ Martin Gansten, 'Samarasimpha and the Early Transmission of Tājika Astrology', *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History*, 1 (2018), 79–132, at 101. The frontispieces of both the 1492 and 1501 editions name the text the *Albubather*, evidently a corruption of its author's name in a similar vein to 'Almansore' but name the text the *Liber Nativitatem* in the *explicit*. The Nuremberg edition of 1540 gives the title of the work as *Albubatrīs... sive De Nativitatibus*.

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are often fleeting, dispersed across almost a century of academic writing, and limited to studies on the transmission of scientific texts from the Arabic world to the Latin. With this in mind, it seems sensible to collate that information here, as well as examining how the printed text might have been experienced and understood by readers and non-readers at the turn of the sixteenth century, before delving into its musical contents.

The *Liber Nativitatum* was first translated around 1218 by Canon Salio of Padua, one of a number of scholars who travelled to Toledo in the early thirteenth century, evidently in order to benefit from the aid of Arabic readers there; both he and the more famous scholar and translator Michael Scot completed their work with help from Jewish residents of the city.² The Arabic text from which Salio of Padua worked, and any Persian versions also created, have yet to be identified. Francis Carmody notes the survival of seven Latin manuscripts predating the first printed edition, with a common *explicit* stating that the work was translated by Salio.³ Lynn Thorndike points out that one manuscript, Vienna MS. 8124, states that the work was completed in a Jewish quarter with the help of a Jewish scholar named David.⁴ The first printed edition of 1492 was edited by Antonius Laurus and printed by Alovisius de Sancta Lucia in Venice. It was anthologised alongside two other astrological texts: the *Centiloquium Divi Hermetis*, a collection of one hundred aphorisms derived from the Hermetic tradition, translated from the Arabic by Stephen of Messina during his time at the court of King Manfred of Sicily between 1258 and 1266; and a similar summary, the *Almansoris Judicia seu propositiones*, translated by Plato Tiburtinus sometime after his arrival in Barcelona in 1116.⁵ Somewhat like Salio of Padua, Tiburtinus travelled to Barcelona in order to work on Arabic texts, and collaborated with the Jewish mathematician Abraham bar Hiyya ha-Nasi in producing translations – most likely with Abraham acting as an intermediary, translating from Arabic to the vernacular, which Tiburtinus would then translate into Latin.⁶ The three texts were reprinted, alongside Laurus' preface, by Giovanni Battista Sessa in Venice in 1501.

² See José Chabás, 'Interactions between Jewish and Christian Astronomers in the Iberian Peninsula', in Gad Freudenthal (ed.), *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 147–54, at 149; and Wolfgang Hübner, 'The Culture of Astrology from Ancient to Renaissance', in Brendan Dooley (ed.), *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance* (Brill: Leiden, 2014), 17–58, at 17.

³ F. J. Carmody, *Arabic Astronomical and Astrological Sciences in Latin Translation: A Critical Bibliography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 136–7.

⁴ Lynn Thorndike, 'A third translation by Salio,' *Speculum* 32.1 (1957), 116–17, at 116. This is omitted from the printed editions of 1492 and 1501 however, which simply state that the translation was completed in Padua in 1218.

⁵ On the translation of the *Centiloquium Divi Hermetis* see Paolo Lucentini and Vittoria Perrone Compagni, *I testi e i codici di Ermete nel Medioevo* (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2001), 27. On the work of Plato Tiburtinus, see Charles E. Butterworth and Blake Andrée Kessel (eds.), *The Introduction of Arabic Philosophy into Europe* (New York: Brill, 1994), 11.

⁶ Jean Delisle and Judith Woodsworth, *Translators Through History*, rev. edn. (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2012), 123. If the *explicit*s identified by Carmody are to be trusted over that given by the printed editions of 1492 and 1501, this process may well have been the same way in which the Latin version of the *Liber Nativitatum* was completed.

Very little information pertaining to Antonius Laurus himself survives, though there is some testimony to his interest in astronomy and astrological texts, and the regard in which he was held. The *De rebus Congregationis* lists a comet sighting recorded by ‘Antonius Laurus, a Venetian priest’ on 6 January 1491.⁷ He credits himself with having selected the primary sources for the first printed edition of another ‘Book of Nativities’, Julius Firmicus Maternus’ *De Nativitatibus* (Venice: Simone Bevilacqua, 1497); and a prognosticon written by the Moravian scholar Augustus Moravus, *Iudicium anno Domini 1494* (Padua: s.n., 1494), ends with an epistle to Laurus, in which Moravus apologises for abandoning his astrological studies to a young apprentice, but identifies Laurus as the impetus behind a swansong publication in the field.⁸ Even this fragmentary evidence is enough to build a picture of the editor: a priest and humanist scholar, and part of a wide-reaching network of scholars with similar interests.

Both the 1492 and 1501 editions of Laurus’ collection were printed in folio format. Such a text was not necessarily costly: transactions preserved in the *Zornale* of the Venetian bookseller Francesco de Madiis show that a book of a similar length in folio format could be bought for under 10 soldi, less than a day’s wages for an unskilled labourer living in Venice around the year 1490.⁹ However, its format and language make it likely that such a text would have had a relatively small readership; the *Zornale* lists 62 sales of Michael Scot’s *Liber physiognomiae* and only 33 sales of an *Ars ciromantie* between 1484 and 1488, compared to 252 copies of Guarino da Verona’s classroom text the *Grammaticales Regulae*.¹⁰ The chief market for texts such as the *Liber Nativitatum* was likely composed of a small number of learned enthusiasts, and a greater body of scholars – both lecturers in and students of judicial and medical astrology. Two surviving copies of the text illustrate this aptly: a copy of the *Liber Nativitatum* is bound in a volume once belonging to Domenico Maria Novara, who taught astrology at the University of Bologna from 1483 to 1504; and another, preserved in the Wellcome Library in London, is signed by one ‘Jo. Mariae Gambaruti’, a physician from Alessandria in Piedmont.¹¹ Its

⁷ Frere Jo. Fran. Bernardo Maria De Rubeis, *De rebus Congregationis* (Venice: Jo. Baptiste Pasquali, 1751), 146. ‘Antonius Laurus sacerdos venetus 6 idus Ianuarii 1491 finivit primaque vigilia noctis cometa crinita apparente sereno celo spectantibus omnibus.’

⁸ Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science: Volume IV* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1934), 463.

⁹ Cristina Dondi, ‘From the Corpus Iuris to “psalterioli da puti” on Parchment, Bound, Gilt... The Price of Any Book Sold in Venice 1484–1488’, *Studi di storia*, 13 (2020), 577–99, at 587.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 598–99.

¹¹ Novara’s copy of the 1492 edition of the *Liber Nativitatum* is bound with a copy of the *Liber Quadripartiti Ptholemei* (Venice: Boneto Locatello for Octaviano Scotto, 1493) and is preserved at the Biblioteca Universitaria, Bologna, shelfmark A.V.KK.VI.26.4. While it is the *Liber Quadripartiti* that bears Novara’s signature, the *Liber Nativitatum* also bears amendments to the table of contents in his hand. The volume is the only text out of 26 books from Novara’s library to have been identified. Robert S. Westman, *The Copernican Question: Prognostication, Skepticism and Celestial Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 96–7. Gambaruti’s copy is preserved at The Wellcome Library, London, shelfmark EPB/D/151.

contents, therefore, had three chief avenues of dissemination beyond its readership. The first, and most limited, was through university lectures. The second, with a considerably wider reach, was prognostica – predictions for the coming year – covering anything from the likelihood of wars to the fortunes of artisans, students, musicians, merchants and labourers. The University of Bologna had enshrined the need for an annual prognostication, to be produced by a lecturer on spherics and theorics, in its statutes of 1404, and from the mid-1480s these were routinely printed in Latin and also in simplified vernacular translations, a practice adopted across northern and central Italy.¹² These commonly take the form of chapbooks of no more than six leaves, but required the assimilation of large amount of astrological literature to produce. In 1452, an astrologer in the service of the Sforza, Antonio da Camera, wrote that he would be unable to create an *operetta* (presumably a prognostication) and calculations for Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta without travelling from Milan to Ferrara and then to Mantua in order to consult books.¹³

The final way in which the contents of the *Liber Nativitatum* were disseminated was through consultations. These were given in a consultation room in much the same manner as a modern doctor.¹⁴ Indeed, in the dedication to his *Iudicio sopra la dispositione de l'anno 1501* (Bologna: Andrea de Bellacorda, 1501), Marco Scribanario mentions such a space, and Pietro Bono Avogario's *Prognosticatio de anno 1496* ([Ferrara: Lorenzo Morgiani and Johann Petri] c.1495–1496) was printed with a picture of an astrologer in his studio, surrounded by the books and tools of his trade (Fig. 1).¹⁵

This was perhaps the most common means by which a non-Latin reader could have encountered the *Liber Nativitatum*. Records from the late sixteenth century show that the astrologer Simon Forman in London gave some 10,000 consultations between 1596 and 1601.¹⁶ The reasons for wishing to consult an astrologer, preserved in Forman's casebooks, were many, from wanting to know the chances of finding love, to the likelihood of retrieving a lost object. For those wishing to know how the stars would affect an unborn child, or wanting a retrospective horoscope for themselves, texts like the *Liber Nativitatum* provided the means for an astrologer to add any amount of descriptive depth to the birth charts they might draw up on

¹² Westman, *The Copernican Question*, 90.

¹³ Monica Azzolini, *The Duke and the Stars: Astrology and Politics In Renaissance Milan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 248.

¹⁴ William Eamon, 'Culture and Society,' in Dooley (ed.), *A Companion to Astrology in the Renaissance*, 141–91, at 150.

¹⁵ 'Et considerando al ponte mi a niuno modo poterte giovare me son reducto al mio delectenole studio della Astrologia.' Marco Scribanario, *Iudicio de Marco Scribanario da bologna sopra la disposition de l'anno 1501* (Bologna: Andrea de Bellacorda, 1501), fol. 1r.

¹⁶ Eamon, 'Culture and Society', 157.

Allo illustrissimo & excellentissimo prince Duca Hercules di
Ferrara di Modena/ & di Regio Duca inuicissimo pronostico di
Pietro Bono aduogario dell'anno .M.CCCCLXXXVI.



Remissa la configuratione delli corpi celesti liquali delle cose future,
danno a noi notizia: a me cresce gran cura di enarrare quello che gli
mori minacciono dover uenire. Et chi nō spauerebbe le cose future signi-
ficare: di quelle nō essēdo terminata uerita? Ma pche molti di questo seco-
lo agl'isupiori aspetti sono subiecti: & certi effecti p certo moro nascere ue-
diamo: al gran circolo del zodiaco sono significatione/ come laereo sopra
laere: laqueo sopra laqua/ dice el figliuolo di Ameto negli capitoli presen-
tati al gran Re de saracini. Et p tanto per gl'imoti prenotata la figura puo-
l'astrologo securante/ ma nō precisante dire: ma come quello che dal
giacolo uede non puo dire esser necessario dover uenire: pche gli giudici

Fig. 1 The astrologer's studio. Pietro Bono Avogario, *Prognosticatio de anno 1496* (Ferrara: Lorenzo Morgiani and Johannes Petril, c.1495–96), fol. 1r. London, British Library, IA.27808. Photo © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved

commission.¹⁷ William Eamon posits that the popularity of astrology lay in that it gave people some sense of agency in uncertain times, and prognostica printed in Italy around the turn of the sixteenth century focus overwhelmingly on predicting the possibility and outcome of conflict, a chief preoccupation for people living in a region torn apart by the Italian Wars, and under the threat of Ottoman incursions.¹⁸ In an age of high maternal mortality rates, poverty and violence, Books of Nativities such as the *Liber Nativitatum* gave astrologers some authority in assuaging the uncertainty of everyday life, and the methods of their transmission – from short, vernacular prognostica to *viva voce* consultations – meant that elements of their contents reached a wider audience than their scholarly Latin might initially imply. Through these means, the writings of Ptolemy and his Arabic imitators – including our text – informed the worldview of those living centuries later.

THE NATURE OF THE CELESTIAL SPHERES

The schema of characteristics for each celestial body contained within the *Liber Nativitatum* largely follows that found in Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, a debt acknowledged throughout the text and by the frontispiece to the 1501 edition, which depicts Ptolemy seated on a throne, canopied by the zodiac, and flanked by the figures of Astronomy and its Muse, Urania (Fig. 2).¹⁹ At the simplest level, two of the four qualities of matter – hot, cold, moist and dry – are assigned to each planet, and govern whether each is considered beneficent, granting positive qualities, or maleficent, actively harming the individual influenced by them. Due to their moderately hot or moist nature, Jupiter, Venus and the Moon are beneficent, while the excessively hot and cold natures of Mars and Saturn and their shared dryness, qualities considered destructive, make them maleficent.²⁰ Thus, according to the *Liber Nativitatum*, while children born in the seventh month of pregnancy, ruled by the Moon, are considered complete, miscarriages are common in the eighth month due to the inhospitable nature of its ruler, Saturn.²¹

¹⁷ A compendium of such charts can be found in Johann Engel's *Astrolabium Planum* (Augsburg: Erhard Ratdolt, 1488; Venice: Johannes Emericus de Spira for Lucantonio Giunta, 1494 & 1502), and a more opulent example, painted by Baldassare Peruzzi c.1511 and possibly depicting the natal chart of Agostino Chigi (1466–1520), adorns the ceiling of the Sala di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina, Rome. For a detailed study of the latter, see Kristin Lippincott, 'Two Astrological Ceilings Reconsidered: The Sala di Galatea in the Villa Farnesina and the Sala del Mappamondo at Caprarola,' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 53 (1990), 185–207.

¹⁸ Eamon, 'Culture and Society', 144.

¹⁹ The association of Urania with the sphere of Fixed Stars, or 'Celum Stellatum', positioned above all the celestial bodies, adds weight to Laurus' claim that astronomy is 'prince of the liberal arts' ('Astronomie: Omnium liberalium artium Principis') – *Albubather. Et Centiloquium Divi Hermetis* (Venice: Giovanni Battista Sessa, 1501), fol. 1v – and can be seen in the frontispiece of the first edition of Gafori's *Practica Musicae* (Milan: Guilielmus Le Signerre for Johannes Petrus de Lomatio, 1496).

²⁰ Claudius Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, trans. F. E. Robbins, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 39 (I.5).

²¹ 'Et frequenter multi illo mense nascuntur: et statim moriuntur'. *Liber Nativitatum*, fol. 2v.

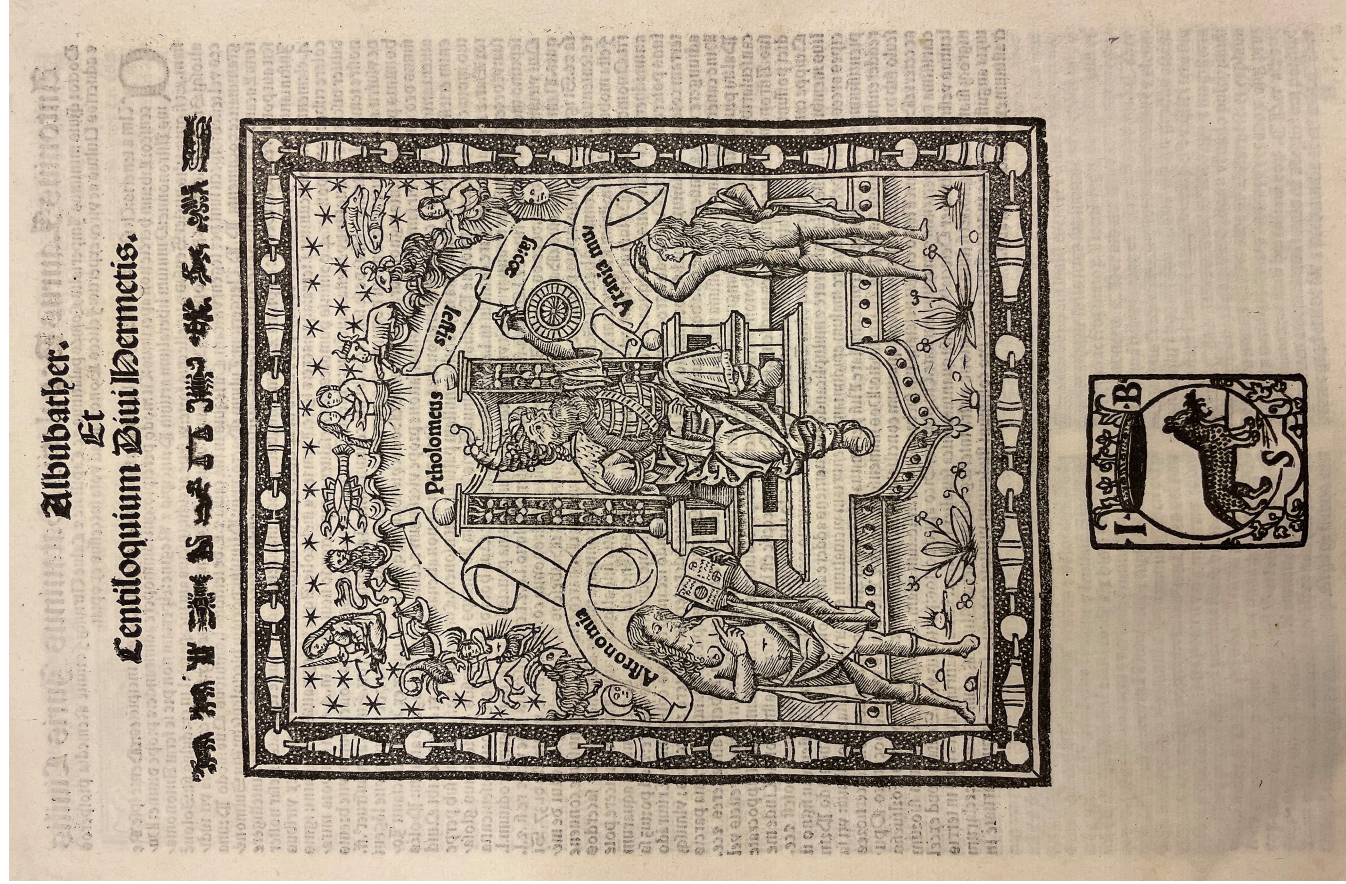


Fig. 2 Frontispiece of the 1501 edition of the *Liber Nativitatum*. London, Wellcome Library, EPB/D/151

The potential impact of these beneficent and maleficent forces is modified considerably by the position of the relevant planet in the sky, with the characteristics of a newborn enhanced or diminished depending on whether a planet is in ascent or descent, is aspected by another beneficent planet, or is positioned in a favourable 'House' (the signs of the zodiac, of which each planet rules two).²² The properties of the celestial bodies not yet mentioned – Mercury and the Sun – are deemed particularly mutable, making them neuter, and especially susceptible to conferring positive or negative characteristics depending on their position.²³ Each body is also gendered, and assigned a diurnal or nocturnal nature along gender lines: Venus and the Moon are feminine and nocturnal, Jupiter and the Sun masculine and diurnal.²⁴ Mercury again receives aspects of both. Mars and Saturn, although masculine, are assigned nocturnal and diuturnal natures respectively in order to moderate their inhospitable natures: the moist night balances Mars' excessive dryness, and the heat of the day Saturn's frigidity.²⁵ With this mutability in mind, the astrologer Abū Mašār, whose writings were circulated in Europe from the twelfth century onwards, cautioned against considering planets purely as good or evil.²⁶ However, in the *Liber Nativitatum* this does not prevent their natures from making Saturn and Mars inimical to musical ability, and indeed to communication in general. Saturn's influence is commonly conceived as detrimental to the native, with few exceptions, and this is no more evident than in passages in which the voice, hearing and musicianship are discussed, and where the favourable positioning of the more temperate and mutable planets grant the most desirable traits.

ELOQUENCE, HEARING AND THE MUSICIAN

Jupiter and Mercury are the planets most positively associated with hearing and eloquence, and in consequence with intelligence and musicality of varying levels. Their powers broadly follow those that can be inferred from their roles within the Greco-Roman pantheon – Mercury is associated with loquacity and wit, and Jupiter with a higher 'faith, sense, intellect and knowledge' befitting the king of the gods. In his ascension, Jupiter's beneficence extends elements of each of these to the native, culminating in prophetic powers:

²² The 'aspect' is the angle planets make between one another in a horoscope. Those angles used by Ptolemy were the conjunction (0°), sextile (60°), square (90°), trine (120°), and opposition (180°). Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 73 (I.13).

²³ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 39 (I.5).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 43 (I.7).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Richard Lemay, *Abū Mašār and Latin Aristotelianism in the Twelfth Century: The Recovery of Aristotle's Natural Philosophy through Arabic Astrology* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1962), 97–8.

[Jupiter] will dispose the native's sense and their simplicity, intellect and understanding, and according to his ascension and elevation, he will dispose in them understanding and faith in their speech, and will give them knowledge of that which they did not hear, nor that they have been taught. And if also he is in his apogee, it signifies that he will be a reciter of things which others know not; and he will put the root of this in himself: he will speak with providence, and will be reputed to be like a prophet.

Iuppiter habet dispositionem mensis secundi a casu seminis in matricem et ipse significat fidem: sensum: intellectum: et scientiam. CI Cum ergo in mense secundo fuerit fortis ac in sua ascensione id est ascendens in circulo suo: et addens in numero: disponet sensum nati et eius simplicitatem intellectum et sapientiam: et secundum eius ascensionem et elevationem disponet in eo sapientiam et fidem in dictis suis: et dabit ei scientiam quam non audivit: nec aliquis docuit sibi. CI Et si cum hoc in auge sua fuerit: significat quod erit recitator rerum: quas aliis nesciunt: et ponet in eis radices a se ipso: loquet[ur] cum providentia: et quasi propheta reputabitur.²⁷

Mercury's qualities are no less beneficent. However, his traditional role as messenger of the gods manifests itself in a prediction of the native's servility, and predilection for pleasing others:

[Mercury] is the planet of teaching, eloquence, and knowledge. When therefore in the sixth month Mercury were in his ascension, the native will be of good eloquence, and his words will please men, and he will be secretary to great and powerful men.

[Mercurius] est planeta doctrine eloquentie: ac scientie. Cum ergo in mense .6. mercurius in ascensione sua fuerit: natus erit bone eloquentie: ac hominibus verba eius placebunt: eritque magnorum virorum ac potentum secretarius.²⁸

The characteristics of both planets are then elevated or lessened depending on their position in relation to the other celestial bodies and the zodiac. When Jupiter is in the house of Mercury – either Gemini or Virgo – the native will be 'born of amenable and keen words that attract men to him'.²⁹ A similar melding of characteristics occurs when Mercury is aspected by or in the house of Jupiter:

If Mercury, so disposed, were aspected by Jupiter, he will be wonderfully eloquent: well-read and a marvellous speaker, and many words over few will he prof fer. And if Mercury is in the house or bound of Jupiter, he will be well-spoken, knowledgeable and of a keen mind.

²⁷ *Albubather*, fol. 3r.

²⁸ *Albubather*, fol. 3v.

²⁹ 'Et si in domo vel termino Mercurius fuerit: natus amenitate verborum ac sagacitate eorum attrahet homines ad se.' *Albubather*, fol. 3r.

Et si mercurio sic disposito Iuppiter ipsum aspexerit: erit eloquentissimus: in libris sapiens et mirabilis sermocinator: ac multa super uno verbo proferens. Et si mercurius in domo vel termino Iovis fuerit: erit eloquentie bone: sapiens ac subtilis ingenii.³⁰

In contrast, when Jupiter is in descent, ‘it signifies the detriment of the native and the paucity of his intellect; neither will he do or say that which he has heard or seen in others’.³¹ Mercury’s descent, meanwhile, signals one who ‘will be almost mute, especially so if he is in a sign without a voice’.³² Throughout the text eloquence is portrayed as the most valued product of intelligence, and a lack of the former is often followed by a paucity of the latter, a continuation of ideas from antiquity linking civic virtue and utility with rhetorical prowess.³³ Indeed, the *Liber Nativitatum* effectively stratifies society based on eloquence in a single sentence:

Therefore know that there are those who have majesty in voice and speech; and others who work with the hand, such as a writer; and others who work in the calculation of sales and purchases; and those who are lazy and without instruction. Preterea sciendum est quod aliqui sunt qui habent magisteria in loquela uoce et lingua: et alii qui operantur manu sicut scriptor: et alii qui operantur in computationibus venditionibus et emptionibus: et alii sunt qui sunt pigri sine magisterio.³⁴

The influence of the other planets and their houses on eloquence varies, though the effects imposed by Venus and Saturn’s influence are mentioned most frequently. In discussing the month of gestation ruled by Venus, she is given charge only over beauty and happiness. However, her positive influence serves to further ornament eloquence and beautify the voice: when Mercury is in the house or bounds of Venus, the native will be ‘a wonderful speaker, of gentle words’.³⁵ Saturn’s influence is perhaps more complex. In his *De vita libri tres* (Bologna: Benedetto Faielli, 1501 – among other editions), Marsilio Ficino considered Saturn, as highest of the planets, to be that which ‘carries the investigator to the highest subjects’.³⁶ Aligned with

³⁰ *Albubather*, fol. 3v.

³¹ ‘Et si Iuppiter in eius descensione fuerit: significat detrimentum nati et paucoitatem sui intellectus nec facit aut dicit quicquid ab aliis audivit ac vidit.’ *Albubather*, fol. 3r.

³² ‘Quando si mercurius sic dispositus in descensione sua fuerit: natus erit quasi mutus maxime si in signis voce carentibus collocent.’ *Albubather*, fol. 3v. Those signs without a voice are described in fol. 10r as Pisces, Cancer and Scorpio.

³³ Most notably in Cicero and Quintilian, but following a chain of political thought extending back to Plato. For an extensive discussion of civic utility and rhetoric in Renaissance Italy, see James Hankins (ed.), *Renaissance Civic Humanism: Reappraisals and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁴ *Albubather*, fol. 11v.

³⁵ ‘Si mercurius in domo vel termino veneris fuerit erit i sermone et lingua mirabilis mansuetus verbo.’ *Albubather*, fol. 3v.

³⁶ Marsilio Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, ed. and trans. Carol V. Kaske and John R. Clark, *Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies* 57 (Tempe: The Renaissance Society of America, 1998), 121.

this view, the *Liber Nativitatum* states that the native will still be of ‘sound intellect and good intelligence’ should Mercury reside in Saturn’s house six months after conception.³⁷ However, Saturn’s cold, dry nature also afflicts the native with ‘a speech impediment, so that he will not express himself well.’³⁸ When in descent, Saturn’s influence also contributes to impediments of hearing; in a chapter entitled ‘on ailments of the ear’, two separate dispositions of Mercury and Saturn result in the deafness of the native.³⁹ In ascent, Saturn’s influence portends an equally negative interest in the arcane. Jupiter’s residence in Saturn’s house in the second month after conception is described as influencing an ‘experimenter, who will seek to work marvels upon men and will trouble them by their wonder, both by lying and his art.’⁴⁰ Contemporary conceptions of the iniquitous nature of Saturn’s power are exemplified by Scribanario’s *Iudicio* for 1501, where he writes that Saturn in the house of Gemini signifies those who are ‘prudent in the dark arts ... and that which makes man sad.’⁴¹ Scribanario goes on to equate the study of dark arts with misfortune:

Students of every faculty will not be fortunate. One will see those who recite incredible things – that are but fiction, and malicious – and they will lose documents ... and the secrets of black magic and fascinations will be discovered. Li studenti de ogni facultade non saranno fortunati: et vederassi alcuni: liquali recitaranno cose incredible: lequale saranno fincte: et dolose: et mancharanno li documenti: et boni costumi: et li secreti de nigromantia et fascinationi se scopriranno.⁴²

The persistent connection made in the *Liber Nativitatum* between Saturn and that which might cut off the native from their fellow human in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century – a lack of ability to communicate verbally, trickery and deceit,⁴³ hardness of hearing, and esotericism – are strongly tied to the contemporary association of Saturn with melancholy.

³⁷ ‘Erit tamen sane cognitionis ac boni intellectus.’ *Alubather*, fol. 3v.

³⁸ ‘natus erit impeditur lingue: Ita que verba sua explicare bene non poterit’. *Ibid.*

³⁹ In both cases Mercury’s misfortune or retrograde movement causes Saturn to exert its most malign influence. *Alubather*, fol. 10r.

⁴⁰ ‘Et si in domo vel termino Saturni fuerit experimenter: et queret facere mirabilis super homines et offendere eos mirabilis: tam mendacio: quam arte sua.’ *Alubather*, fol. 3r.

⁴¹ ‘Elquale Saturno essendo nel signo di Gemini monstra questi tali essere traditori. ingannatori. malefici. perivrii. prudenti ne le male arte: et ne le sciente dannate essere perspicari como nigromantia et fascinationi et simile lequale fanno l’omo tristo.’ *Iudicio de Marco Scribanario*, fol. 1r.

⁴² *Ibid.*, fol. 4r.

⁴³ In a chapter on the birth of a *hystrio*, Saturn’s influence on an otherwise favourable disposition leads to an actor who will ‘cheat’ (truffabit) his audience: ‘When Mars and Mercury are in the house of Saturn and falling from the angles, but with the moon increasing in fortune and light aspecting them, they will be a hystrio for the people, and the people will be amused, and he will cheat them’ (Quando Mars et Mercurius in domo Saturni fuerint et ab angulis cadentes necnon luna fortunata ac lumine crescens ipsos aspexerit natus erit populi hystrio et popolis ludet cum eo truffabit.) *Alubather*, fol. 8v.

This connection is well-documented, not least because Ptolemy's Saturn shares the same humoral qualities as the black bile causing melancholy, from which Ficino diagnosed himself as suffering.⁴⁴ As such, Saturn's miserly qualities set his influence directly against those planets which have a bearing on the voice. Indeed, Ficino sought to address this imbalance with music, an activity sharing much more in common with the beneficent planets than Saturn, who is wholly at odds with an art for which beauty and expression were deemed essential.⁴⁵

The connections drawn between music, eloquence and rhetoric are ancient. Quintilian suggested that music's expressivity made it a model for the orator, and Raffaele Brandolini traced its lineage back to ancient Greece in his *De musica et poetica* (1513), describing Archytas and Aristoxenus as teachers of both grammar and music, one subject being reliant on the other.⁴⁶ This connection also exists in the *Liber Nativitatum*. Venus is the only planet discussed as signifying any sort of music without the additional influence of other celestial bodies, her mastery signifying the birth of a 'light singer' (cantor letus).⁴⁷ Air signs – Aquarius, Gemini, and Libra – are also described as signifying 'singers, jongleurs and fowlers', presumably as each profession relies on the air respectively for vocal production and as a hunting ground.⁴⁸ In every other case, the birth of an individual exhibiting any musical tendency relies on the influence of those planets governing eloquence: Mercury and Jupiter.

The most sustained discussion of music is in Chapter 100, 'On the birth of jongleurs [Ioculatores]' upon which Mercury, Venus, Mars and the Moon all exert an influence:

When the Moon and Mercury are with Mars and Venus, and one to the others has showed its power: the native will be a cithara player or rotta player.⁴⁹ And if the said planets are receding from the angles: they will be born one who jokes while dancing. And if Mercury and Venus are in their bounds: the native will be a dancer, especially if one of them is in Capricorn. When Mars and Mercury are in the angle of the earth: the native will be one of those who goes upon the

⁴⁴ Angela Voss, 'Diligentia et divina sorte: Oracular Intelligence in Marsilio Ficino's Astral Magic', in Georgina D Hedesan Rudbøg and Tim Palgrave (eds.), *Innovation in Esotericism from the Renaissance to the Present* (London: Macmillan, 2021), 33–62, at 43. See also Melissa Meriam Bullard, 'The Inward Zodiac: A Development in Ficino's Thought on Astrology', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 43.4 (1990), 687–708.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 700.

⁴⁶ On Quintilian's reception in the field of music see Patrick McCreless, 'Music and Rhetoric', in Thomas Christensen (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 847–79, at 847. For Brandolini's discussion of music and grammar in a modern edition, see Brandolini, *On Music And Poetry*, trans. Ann E. Moyer and Marc Laureys, (Tempe: Arizona Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), 37.

⁴⁷ *Albubather*, fol. 11v.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ By 1501, *rotta* was an ambiguous term that referred loosely to stringed instruments.

strings.⁵⁰ When Venus is with Mercury in her house, and in the angles: the native will be a mime or jongleur such as play instruments with the hand and tongue.⁵¹ When Mercury and Venus have firmed themselves in turn in the angles or in the fourth house, or Mercury and Venus appear in another's bound or orient, exaltation or triplicity: the native will be a comic, a dancer, and a clapper of the hands.

Quando Luna et Mercurius cum Marte et Venere fuerint et unus alteri vim suam prebuerit: natus erit citharizator aut rotator. Et si dicti planete ab angulis recedentes fuerint: natus ioculando saltabit. CI Et si Mercurius et Venus in terminis suis fuerint: natus erit saltator maxime si unus eorum in Capricorno fuerit. CI Quando Mars et Mercurius in angulo terre fuerint: natus erit de illis qui vadunt super cordas. CI Quando Venus cum Mercurio in doma sua fuerit, ac in angulis: natus erit mimus aut ioculator talis quod instrumentum manibus et lingua tanget. CI Quando Mercurius et Venus ad invicem se firmaverint et Venus in angulis fuerit aut in 4 domo a Mercurio et Venus in termino alterius aut orientalis existens in domo exaltatione vel triplicitate sua fuerint: natus ioculator vocis et saltator ac palmarum percussor erit.⁵²

The benefit of finding such performers discussed in relative detail through the lens of an astrologer lies in their stratification: it is relatively safe to presume that those influenced by the celestial bodies in their most favourable dispositions are considered the most artful. Thus, with the beneficial disposition of the similarly nocturnal and feminine Moon on Venus, balanced by the dryness of Mars and enhanced by Mercury's intellect and eloquence, the entertainer is an instrumentalist. When Venus and Mercury are receding from the angles (in astrological terms, losing their influence on the native), basic musicality and eloquence recede too, the native losing this skill and instead becoming one who merely 'makes jokes while dancing'.

The influence of Mars in this chapter is seemingly linked to the more visual aspects of performance. Ptolemy describes Mars as a lover of dance when allied to Venus,⁵³ and the planet plays a crucial role in the birth of the enigmatic performers who 'go upon the strings'. Mars plays an equally important role in a chapter describing another entertainer: the *hystrio*. The term is ambiguous, often translated simply as 'actor', and Mars' ability to

⁵⁰ 'Vadunt super cordas'. This seems to refer to a *funambulus*, or tightrope walker. In a letter to Isabella d'Este, reporting on the performance of an eclogue at the Ferrarese court in 1508, Bernardino de' Prosperi mentions that Cardinal Ippolito d'Este had such a performer in his retinue. For the full text of the letter in translation, see Giuseppe Gerbino, *Music and the Myth of Arcadia in Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 63–4.

⁵¹ This seems to imply wind instruments played with both 'hand and tongue', rather than two distinct families of instruments.

⁵² *Albubather*, fol. 12v.

⁵³ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 355 (III.13).

signify one skilled in imitation when positively disposed with Venus, as also described by Ptolemy, would seem to confirm this.⁵⁴ However, both Livy's account of a performance in Book VII of the *Decades* (from whence the term *hystrio* derives) and subsequent uses in the Middle Ages suggest that these could be any manner of performers, and most likely hybrid actors, singers and instrumentalists, perhaps better expressed by the more ambiguous term 'player'.⁵⁵ Whether confirming this tradition or in reference to Livy, Johann Engel's *Astrolabium Planum* depicts one born a *hystrio* as a walking man, armed with a spear (cuspidem) and holding a shawm (fistulam) (Fig. 3).

The depiction of the *hystrio* walking perhaps ties into another part of Livy's account, and to the one who 'goes upon the strings' in the *Liber Nativitatum*. Livy describes a *hystrio* troupe as having been Etruscans, and the peregrine status of Mars in the discussions of both the *hystrio* and the 'one who goes upon the strings' could denote both trades specifically as travelling entertainers.⁵⁶ Mercury's commonality to all of these performers is perhaps threefold. As we have seen, Mercury is the planet of knowledge and science, and thus requisite for a theoretical understanding of music, built upon the base musicality provided by Venus. It is also the planet of pleasing and entertaining others. Mercury's notable role in the Greco-Roman pantheon as god of commerce plays no overt role until chapter 107, when the birth of various merchants is discussed, but in the chapters on the *ioculator* and *hystrio* Mercury affirms that these performers, however skilled or unskilled, are very much professionals, performing to make a living. Although 'good' music and performance is inherently linked to the eloquence and intelligence embodied by Mercury, so too is its servile nature as a profession.

Jupiter has so far been conspicuous by his absence in passages pertaining to music. In Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, the positive disposition of Jupiter and Venus is said to produce natives who are 'pure, pleasure-loving, lovers of the beautiful, of children, of spectacles, and of the domain of the Muses, singers, fond of those who reared them, of good character'.⁵⁷ The musicality of the native influenced by such a disposition is described twice in the *Liber Nativitatum*:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, VII.2: 'Accepta itaque res saepiusque usurpando excitata. Vernaculis artificibus, quia ister Tusco verbo ludio vocabatur, nomen histrionibus inditum; qui non, sicut ante, Fescennino versu similem inkompositum temere ac rudem alternis iaciebant sed impletas modis saturas descripto iam ad tibicinem cantu motuque congruenti peragebant.' Livy was also printed in 1501 in Italy. For a detailed discussion of cases in which 'hystro' and its variant spellings have been used to explicitly denote a musician, see Abigail Anne Young, 'Plays and Players: The Latin terms for performance', *Records of Early English Drama*, 9.2 (1984), 56–72.

⁵⁶ Planets are considered 'peregrine' when outside of their own bounds or triplicity.

⁵⁷ Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, 349 (III.13).



Fig. 3 The *Hystrio* as an armed man holding a shawm. Johann Engel, *Astrolabium Planum* (Venice: Johannes Emericus de Spira for Lucantonio Giunta, 1494; repr. 1502), fol. 59v. Bethesda, National Library of Medicine, 9410623. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine. The *hystrio's* tools – a shawm and spear – would seem to allude to the influences of musical Venus and peregrine, warlike Mars

And if [Jupiter] is in the house or bound of Venus: he will be born a giver of sermons and a preacher; he will speak beautifully and be a singer; so that by his song and words men will be moved to tears.

Et si in domo vel termino Veneris fuerit: natus erit sermocinator et praedicator: pulchriter loquens erit et cantor: ita quod per cantum et verba sua homines ad lachrymas provocabit.⁵⁸

And if Jupiter rather than Mars aspects [Venus and the Moon], it indicates legal books and their teaching, as well as sweet songs in matters of faith, with voices almost weeping, beseeching God. And if Mercury aspects them [instead of Jupiter] it portends the construction of musical instruments.

Et si loco Martis Iupiter eos aspexerit libros legis ac eorum lecturam necnon dulces cantus in rebus fidei atque voces quasi flentium et orantium dominum indicat. Et si Mercurius eos aspexerit compositionem instrumentorum musicalium portendit.⁵⁹

In both instances, the explicit description of a native's ability to prompt tears in the listener is an addition of the *Liber Nativitatum* not present in the writings of Ptolemy. That such a power is absent from other passages referring to musicianship suggests that it is a combination of Jupiter's intellect, faith and gravitas, and Venus' beauty that renders a musician capable of producing such music. Interestingly, the substitution of Mercury for Jupiter in the second passage signifies the birth of an instrument maker. That this occupation was considered Mercurial is testified by several *Children of the Planets* engravings created in the second half of the fifteenth century and first half of the sixteenth.⁶⁰ These popular images, first evident in the West in the fourteenth century, ascribed every element of human life to one of the stars, and a common musical element of many is the presence of a man playing or tuning an organ under Mercury (Fig. 4). Music occurs under Venus' auspice too, however in prints by Baccio Baldini and others, the instruments depicted with Venus are the harp and lute, played in scenes of courtly love.⁶¹ The *Liber Nativitatum* blurs these distinctions considerably through its complex litany of cosmic influences. An alliance between the god of scientific pursuits (scientie) and goddess of beauty results in the construction of beautiful objects manufactured with a high degree of mathematical precision, but not necessarily the ability to play them in a way which moves the soul. This is something only a deeper sense and higher power, that of Jupiter, can imbue.

With this in mind, it is possible to see a tripartite division of music in the *Liber Nativitatum*: light music and base musicality, influenced by Venus;

⁵⁸ *Albubather*, fol. 3r.

⁵⁹ *Albubather*, fol. 12v. I am grateful to Leofranc Holford-Strevens for offering helpful comments on the translation of this passage.

⁶⁰ On this image type see Dieter Blume, 'Children of the Planets: The Popularisation of Astrology in the 15th Century', *Micrologus*, 12 (2004), 549–63.

⁶¹ On Baldini's Venus print see Tim Shephard, '24. Venus', in Vincenzo Borghetti and Tim Shephard (eds.), *The Museum of Renaissance Music: A History in 100 Exhibits* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2023), 118–23.

competent musicianship and musical understanding, such as is required for the skilful playing and construction of instruments, influenced by Mercury; and a ‘higher’, more affective musicianship, influenced by Jupiter. This matches Ficino’s division of music as given in the third book of *De triplici vita*, also printed in 1501, almost exactly, where he writes that ‘solemn music belongs to Jupiter and the Sun, merry music to Venus, and the middle sort to Mercury.’⁶² Read alone, Ficino’s comments might seem arcane and esoteric, but here the *Liber Nativitatum* provides valuable elaboration, and a gateway to drawing on a wider context of astrological sources to understand how music might have fallen into each category, as well as who might have performed it. Venus’ music is most commonly encountered, not least as music is often placed entirely under her auspice in less detailed astrological texts and literature touching only briefly on the subject.⁶³ A commentary on Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’ popular treatise on women, *De Secretis Mulierum*, also printed in Venice in 1501, states that Mercury’s role in the development of the throat and lungs renders those influenced by him in the sixth month of gestation ‘good singers’, but the original text grants all other musical talent, including dancing, to Venus.⁶⁴ The *Astrolabium Planum* is more nuanced, depicting musicians in several guises throughout, but it is outwardly condemnatory of the *cantor letus* described as being Venus’ mastery in the *Liber Nativitatum*, termed by Ficino as ‘merry music’ (*musicam ... levem*). Depicting an unfortunate Jupiter as the third decan of Venus’ house of Libra, the accompanying caption reads: ‘The third face is Jupiter, and [symbolises] gluttony, sodomy, light song, and following bad tastes’ (Fig. 5).⁶⁵ Many contemporary prognostica assign music to Venus and poetry to Mercury, creating an implied social distinction between the lettered poet and ‘merry singer’. One such example, Moravus’ aforementioned *Iudicium Anno Domini 1494*, assigns a broad spectrum of musical disciplines to Venus’ influence, while simultaneously following the *Astrolabium Planum*’s association of Venus’ ‘merry music’ with wantonness; lute and lira players, bagpipers, singers and even music teachers are mentioned in the same breath as pimps.⁶⁶

Whilst it is not surprising that echoes of the *Liber Nativitatum*’s musical framework can be found in other astrological products, it is interesting to note

⁶² Ficino, *Three Books on Life*, 255. Ficino’s accordance of music with the Sun, absent from the *Liber Nativitatum*, would seem to derive from links between Apollo and the Sun.

⁶³ Several examples are discussed in Tim Shephard, Sanna Raninen, Serenella Sessini, and Laura Ștefănescu, *Music in the Art of Renaissance Italy 1420–1540* (London: Harvey Miller, 2020), 223–43.

⁶⁴ Henricum de Saxonia and Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *De Secretis Mulierum Cum Commento* (Venice: Giovanni Luigi Varisio, 1501), fols. 18v (Mercury’s influence on a newborn) and 25r (the influence of Venus). The original text ran to 14 editions before 1560, and was in wide circulation in manuscript form from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century onwards. For a critical edition, see Helen Rodnite Lemay, *Women’s Secrets: A Translation of Pseudo-Albertus Magnus’ De Secretis Mulierum with Commentaries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992).

⁶⁵ Engel, *Astrolabium Planum*, fol. 69r.

⁶⁶ ‘Secta Venera. Citharedi Cantores Phonasci Utricularii Lenones Mechi Mirobrecharil Phrigiones’. Augustus Moravus, *Iudicium Anno Domini 1494* (Padua: s.n., 1494), fol. 2r.

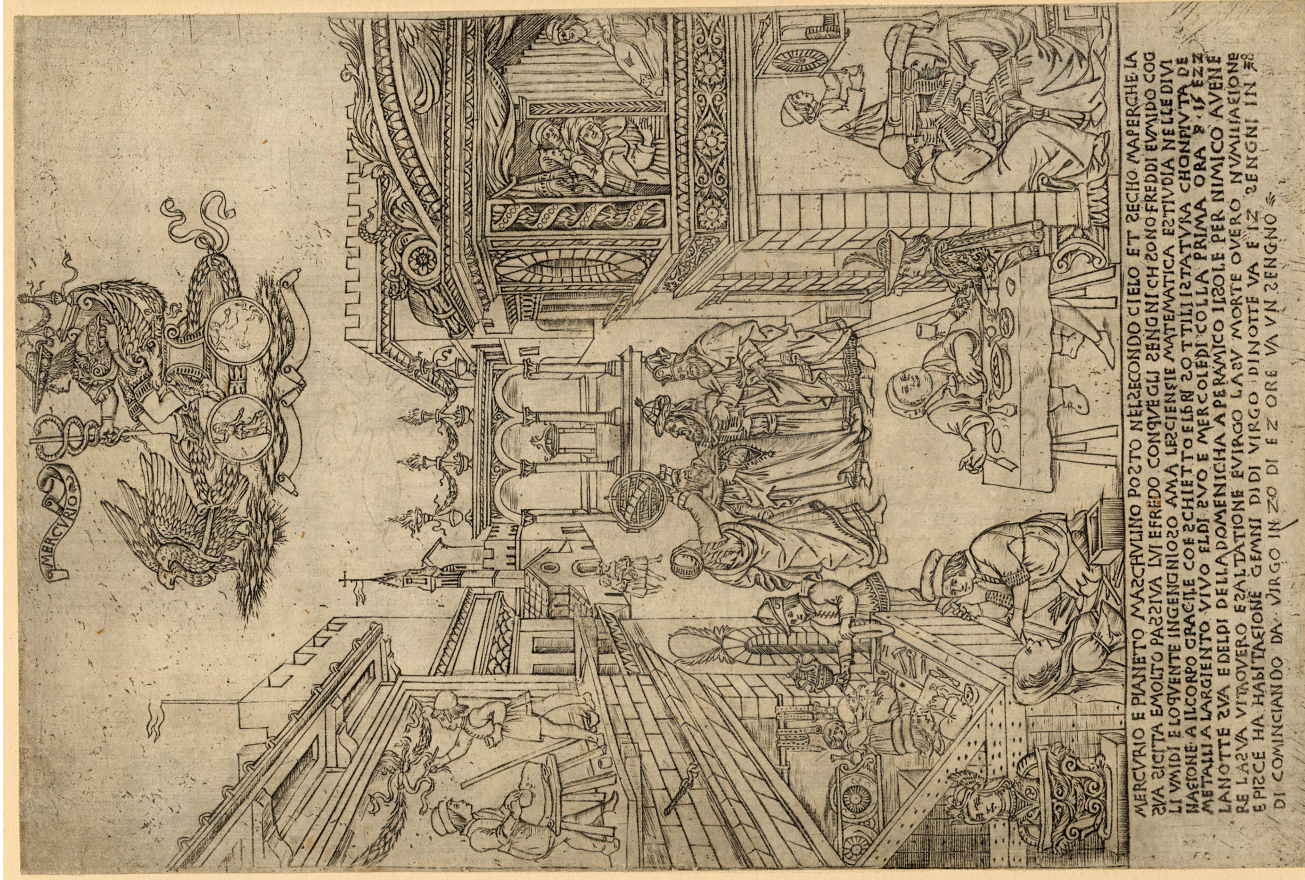


Fig. 4 'Mercury', from *The Planets*, att. Baccio Baldini, Florence, 1464. London, British Museum. The organist, organ-maker or tuner can be seen in the upper room, right of centre. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum

that its inflections can also be detected in other kinds of writing about music. In particular, the contrast between Venus' lascivious *cantor letus* and Jupiter's serious, affective musicianship helps to shape the vigorous debate over the morality of musical practice in the period. Concern over the potential for musical pastimes to corrupt morals was widespread. In a letter to Cecilia Gonzaga penned in 1443, celebrating her intention to enter a convent, the Venetian patrician Gregorio Correr compares the soundworld of the court in which she was raised with that of the convent where she had hoped to be cloistered:

Jesters, parasites, seductive lutenists, and such unworthy members of human-kind have no place in your home, such people as, I am ashamed to say, are considered to be delights in most princely houses, and domestic vices are considered to be inescapably human. But since even in well regulated princely homes it is not considered improper to dance in elaborate rings to the music of flutes and to sing frivolous songs, you will hear of these things also in your father's house, even if you don't see them. Far be it from me to suppose that a virgin devoted to God in so modest a home is invited to view such things – which appeal to many shameless members of my own class as well. I speak of churchmen. Flee, Cecilia, virgin of Christ, flee, cover your eyes, cover your ears. Flee, if you can, to where neither song nor symphony are heard.⁶⁷

Correr's view leaves no room for gradation: music is a gateway to sin, and complete avoidance is the best course for a virtuous life. In Paolo Cortese's *De Cardinalatu*, this view is treated as an entrenched misunderstanding:

many, estranged from the natural disposition of the normal sense, not only reject it [music] because of some sad perversion of their nature, but even think it to be hurtful for the reason that it is somehow an invitation to idle pleasure, and above all, that its merriment usually arouses lust.⁶⁸

A partial refutation of this argument is taken up as the basis for Raffaele Brandolini's *De musica et poetica*, formulated in ways that imply a casual familiarity with the principles described in the *Liber Nativitatum*. Like his brother Aurelio, Raffaele was first and foremost a scholar, but well-known in humanist circles for his performances of Latin verse *all'improvviso* to the accompaniment of the lira da braccio.⁶⁹ He addresses his oration to the apostolic protonotary Corrado Stanga, whom he recalls admonishing him to abandon the practice:

⁶⁷ Margaret King and Albert Rabil Jr (eds.), *Her Immaculate Hand: Selected Works By and About the Women Humanists of Quattrocento Italy*, rev. edn. (Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 2000), 98–9. For the letter in full see 93–105.

⁶⁸ 'multi a communium sensuum natura auersi non modo earn praua quadam nature peruersitate respuunt, sed earn etiam inutilem esse opinantur. Prop tereaue ea quedam sit ignauae uoluptatis inuitatrix, maximeque eius iucundi tate soleat libidinum excitari malum'. Paolo Cortese, *De cardinalatu libri tres* (San Gimignano: Simone Nardi, 1510), fol. 72v. Quoted with translation in Tim Shephard, 'Constructing Isabella d'Este's musical decorum in the visual sphere,' *Renaissance Studies*, 25.5 (2011), 684–706, at 689.

⁶⁹ *On Music And Poetry*, trans. Moyer and Laureys, xxviii.

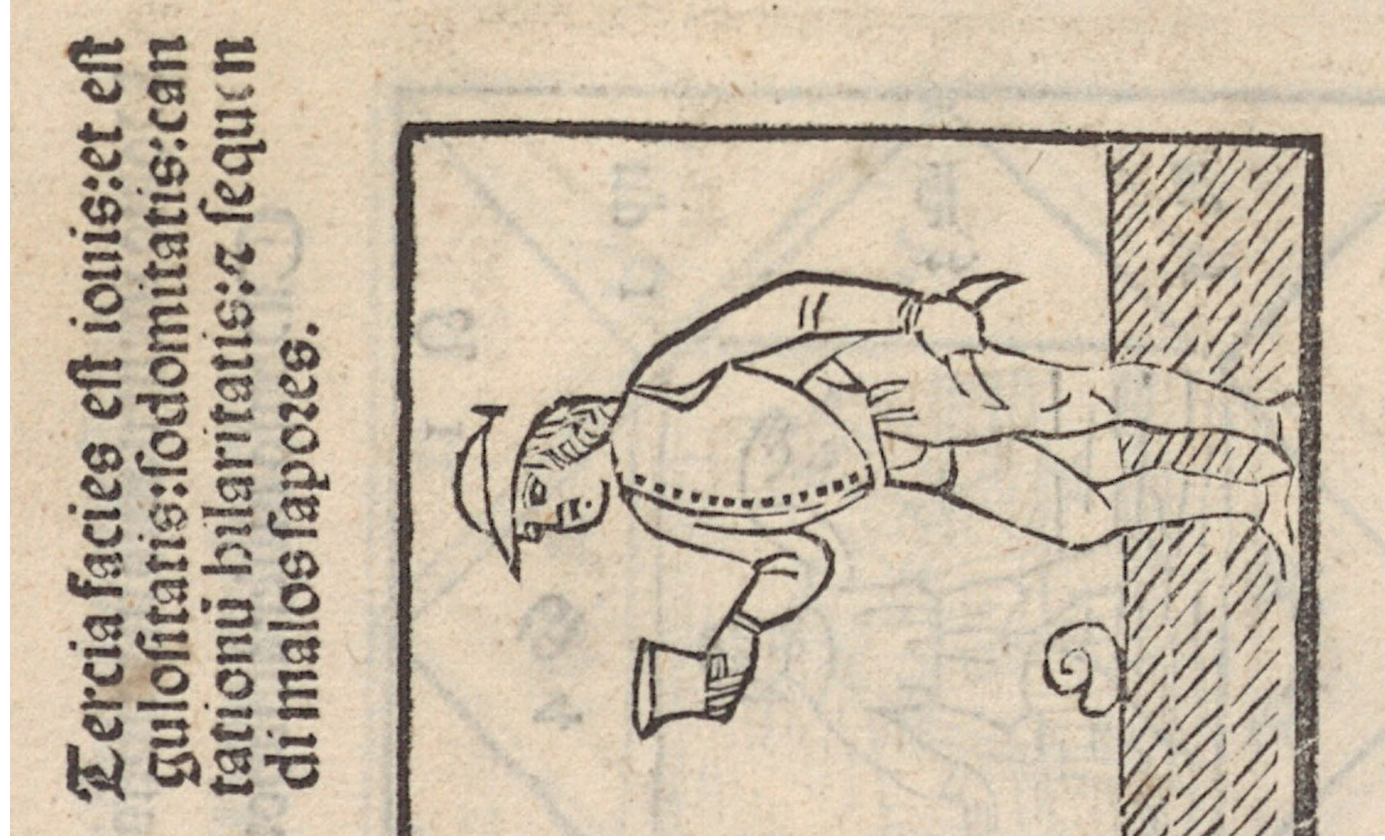


Fig. 5 Decan of Jupiter unfortunate in Libra. Engel, *Astrolabium Planum*, fol. 69r. Bethesda, National Library of Medicine, 9410623. Courtesy of the National Library of Medicine

You admonished me in a recent conversation not to employ the lyre and Latin meters at the banquets of high prelates, as things fit only for buffoons, parasites, and men of no intelligence or judgement, those, in fact, whom the poet Aquino [Juvenal] calls abominable beggars, who beg for sustenance and cultivation of the body with the pandering of words.⁷⁰

That Raffaele's refutation is only a *partial* defence of music becomes apparent as his oration progresses. Unlike the near-contemporary defence published by Carlo Valgulio, *Contra vituperatorem musicae* (Brescia: Giovanni Antonio Bresciano, 1509), which celebrates music wholesale, in discussing music's place at banquets Raffaele takes pains to distance himself and the style of his musical performances – that of the humanistic *cantare ad lyram* tradition – from the other forms of entertainment one might have witnessed over the course of an evening in the years around 1500:

But if you condemn this manner of taking enjoyment [hearing improvised Latin elegies], of which one, I ask, could you approve? Clowns and Mimes, or drums and cymbals, or trumpets and horns, or none of these, but the meretricious songs and attractions that are employed so frequently at today's banquets? That hardly seems likely to me, when I consider how learned you are. But these are incentives to prodigality, depravity, drunkenness, and lust; not only do they weaken flimsy characters, but they destroy firm ones.⁷¹

Raffaele continues to present his *cantare ad lyram* practice in opposition to that of the 'mime', whose talents and practice are clearly synonymous with those of the *Liber Nativitatum*'s *Ioculator*; Raffaele's song 'restrains the emotions of the soul that run wild at banquets' whereas the mime enflames the passions with 'effeminate gestures and obscene words'.⁷² He goes on to address the sound of his song, another point of contention for Stanga, and in doing so draws another parallel between the music of his day and that described by the *Liber Nativitatum*:

perhaps someone faults the quality of the song and the practice of extemporaneous speaking, claiming that elegiac song, which I have been accustomed to use often with the lyre, is by nature mournful and soft, and not appropriate for the cheerfulness of banquets; and that improvised song is not capable of capturing notice and attention. I claim that elegiac song arose from the soul's strongest and most troublesome emotions, that is, from its pity and tears; further, that an extempore song unquestionably merits greater credit and admiration than one carefully composed.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 11. Juvenal was also printed in 1501; his views on music and those of his commentators are discussed in O'Flaherty and Shephard's essay.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 33 and 36 respectively.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 81.

In explaining that ‘pity and tears’ are the soul’s strongest emotions and the foundation of his song, he elevates them, and with them his craft, above that of the *Ioculator*, and draws his practice into line with that described as bestowed by Jupiter, the greatest of the beneficent planets, in the *Liber Nativitatum*. The link between Jupiter and Raffaele’s music is made explicit in a discussion of music’s power in the hands of Orpheus and Amphion:

Do you not understand from these inventors of the lyre – whom we have shown to be outstanding – and the highly important reasons for its discovery, which were not earthly but celestial, that no instrument can be played that is more noble and suitable for praise and enjoyment? For it moved stones and forests, made rivers stand still, raised broad city walls, tamed the wild spirits of peoples. And only those born of the gods, or those few whom fair-minded Jupiter loved (as the poet says), of ardent virtue lifted up to heaven, employed it so honourably on earth and carried its image back amongst the stars.⁷⁴

Raffaele clearly sees himself among that happy company beloved of Jupiter who employ the lyre honorably on earth.

One final, discernible link between Jupiter’s power (as described in the *Liber Nativitatum*) and Raffaele Brandolini can be found in his dedication of *De musica et poetica* to Giovanni de’ Medici, a well-known lover of music. Raffaele had completed an oration, *De laudibus musicae et poesos*, in earlier life, returning to expand it at Giovanni’s behest.⁷⁵ Giovanni was elected pope before its completion, giving Raffaele the opportunity to write that Giovanni’s elevation was something he had foreseen long ago.⁷⁶ As a poetic conceit, this foresight reads like any number of stock commendations that pepper the letters of fifteenth century humanists, but as we have seen above it is also one of the gifts the *Liber Nativitatum* describes as given by Jupiter. If Raffaele *did* write this with the influence of the spheres in mind, it suggests a conscious self-fashioning as a child of Jupiter – prophetic, eloquent and intelligent to the point that he can claim descent from the great mythical poets of antiquity, and far-removed from the obscenity of the *Ioculator* class, not blessed by Jupiter’s influence.

CONCLUSIONS

Musicologists are most familiar with Venus, Jupiter and the other spheres as components of a system dubiously aligning spheres, Muses, and musical modes, developed by music theorists in Italy across the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries and most famously represented in the frontispiece to

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23. Orpheus, of course, moved the stones and forests, and Amphion the walls of Thebes. The passage of Virgil referenced here is Aeneid 6.129–30.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, vii. The date of this now lost treatise is unknown.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

Franchino Gafori's 1496 *Practica musicae*.⁷⁷ The *Liber Nativitatum* has little to offer such efforts to bridge the gulf between the ancient Greek and the church modes. What it offers instead is an opportunity to think about how astrological views of musical skills and qualities may have inflected the broad conception of the domain of music, and the practical operations within that domain of those considering or preparing for a career in music, for themselves or their children.

The importance placed on eloquence and hearing – together comprising the skill of effective *viva voce* communication – and judgement – which effectively amounts to having something worthwhile to communicate, is striking, both in general and in forming the musician specifically. In the *Liber Nativitatum* eloquence is a highly-prized trait – a singular mark of intelligence, and through that, of civic value. The influence of several favourably-disposed planets might bestow beauty (governed by Venus) and judgement (governed by Jupiter) to enhance it further. By contrast, difficulty in communicating – epitomised by a lack of eloquence and difficulty hearing – made an individual miserly, ignorant, and, if spared a complete dearth of intelligence, fascinated by dangerous and esoteric arts. At the heart of the birth of a fortunate individual is the importance of balance, linked inextricably with humoral theory: the most fortunate are well-balanced between hot, wet, moist and dry, and those least able to communicate are made so by the excessive cold of Saturn or excessive heat and dryness of Mars. The moderate, eloquent and insightful individual is the most likeable and valuable in society. The cold of heart, ignorant and abstruse are consigned to its fringes.

The attributes of the planets Venus, Mercury and Jupiter apply similarly to music, binding music closely to those virtues of eloquence, intelligence and judgement. Venus' base musicality is not necessarily beneficial – personified by the *cantor letus*, it represents music at its most contemptable, a frivolous gateway to debauchery. The intelligence of Mercury elevates it to a degree necessary for commendable skill, though through Mercury's servile nature it is also a trade. Only the influence of Jupiter is capable of making a musician who, through erudition, judgement and sincerity, can move the listener to tears. Here Raffaele Brandolini's comments are invaluable: they clarify that while base music may lead an audience to lascivious behaviour, the power of Jupiter's music to move an audience to tears is a signifier of its foundation in the soul's worthiest emotions. For Raffaele, the lofty morality of this music is tied to a similarly lofty artform: the improvised Latin elegy. Other musical

⁷⁷ See especially James Harr, 'The Frontispiece of Gafori's *Practica Musicae* (1496)', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 27.1 (1974), 7–22; and Claude V. Palisca, 'Mode Ethos in the Renaissance', in Lewis Lockwood and Edward Roesner (eds.), *Essays in Musicology: A Tribute to Alvin Johnson* (Philadelphia: American Musicological Society, 1990), 126–39.

participants who were motivated to valorise different musical practices may have associated the same prestige with different genres.

Through a clear, threefold division of music between the light song of Venus, the affective music of Jupiter, and the professionally competent middle ground influenced by Mercury, the *Liber Nativitatum* adds context and colour to Ficino's comments on music in *De Triplici Vita*, the theory behind which is otherwise obscure. Although it is tempting to analyse links between the planets and modes to try to decipher how the sound of these three styles differed from one another, the labyrinth of possibilities and contradictions posed by mode *ethos* would seem to point towards a simpler solution. Were the dividing lines drawn, rather, by erudition, eloquence and the sincerity of the performer – rooted in 'faith and sense' – as posited by the *Liber Nativitatum*? For a performer such as Raffaele Brandolini, appropriately-chosen metre, subject matter, gesture, a sound memory and divine *furor*-inspiration attributed variously to Apollo, the Muses and Jupiter- would have been the hallmarks of the highest music, performed in Latin *all'improvviso* and *ad lyram*. But neither does he totally condemn love poetry, which we might naturally assume to be Venus' realm, and thus 'light music', praising its ability to move the soul and win the acclaim of the audience, which he posits as the aim of all performance.⁷⁸ As such, in calling Latin Elegy the highest music, it might be too simplistic to consign a poet-performer of vernacular love poetry – a Serafino Aquilano or Marchetto Cara – to the lowest bracket alone.⁷⁹ Based on Raffaele Brandolini's remarks about song with obscene words, we could more safely assume that some of the more bawdy songs of the fifteenth century, such as *Meschine su chut chiru*, or *E d'un bel matin d'amore*, fall within that realm, and thus some of the output of the most respected composers of the day.⁸⁰ If not in the refined company of Jupiter, it is perhaps among the *Liber Nativitatum*'s *ioculatores* that we find most professional music-making: the most fortunate, gifted with eloquence and intellect, represented by polyphonists, frottolists and instrument makers; below them civic players of wind instruments; and below them the least fortunate, and by the *Liber Nativitatum*'s standards least skilled, namely comics and dancers. Scattered across this wide bracket, we might also place *cantimpanchi*, fortunate or unfortunate depending on their skill, but all influenced by Mercury in that they sing for pay.

⁷⁸ *On Music And Poetry*, trans. Moyer and Laureys, 83.

⁷⁹ On the style of Serafino Aquilano, and potential fragments of his performance practice, see Anne MacNeil, "A Voice Crying in the Wilderness": Issues of Authorship, Performance, and Transcription in the Italian Frottole, *The Italianist*, 40.3 (2020), 463–76.

⁸⁰ Bonnie Blackburn has identified *Meschine su chut chiru*, a setting of which is attributed to Jacob Obrecht in a copy of the *Odhecaton*, as a garbled transcription of the Flemish song *Meskin es u cutkin ru*, or *Miss, is your cunt dry?* See Blackburn, "Two 'Carnival Songs' Unmasked: A Commentary on MS Florence Magl. XIX. 121", *Musica Disciplina*, 35 (1981), 121–78. *E d'un bel matin d'amore* is seemingly a call to action aimed at an unwilling lover: 'Meti la sella al vostro bon roncin/e doi sulla gran zoggia, traditoria' (Saddle your favourite horse and mount for great joy, traitor).

One wonders how these considerations might have affected the deliberations of a parent in receipt of a horoscope certifying the potential for musical skill in their offspring. For parents of a daughter, the prediction of a penchant for lascivious song, thanks to Venus, without the ameliorating judgement of Jupiter, might easily seem a recipe for scandal, prompting the decision to avoid instruction in music and dance altogether. A family of lower or middling status might view the influence of Mercury's professional competence as a career opportunity for their son, prompting a search for a piper or instrument builder who might take on the child as an apprentice. The same horoscope might strike a higher status family quite differently, prompting parents to steer their child carefully away from music and instead to lean into Mercury's eloquence as a purely verbal discipline, in the hope of a career as a lawyer, a secretary to the great, or a senior administrator in business or government. Meanwhile, the combination of Venus' beauty and innate musicality with Jupiter's gravitas and authenticity might be thought to create a talent too conspicuous for any family to ignore, and so compelling as to make questions of status seem irrelevant. Perhaps the parents of such a lucky child might consider the church a suitable destination, providing vocal training to discipline Venus' raw musicality, and Latin learning to furnish Jupiter's good judgement with a store of knowledge, ultimately harnessing the child's abilities to the objective of moving hearts to feelings of piety and devotion.

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Abstract

This article signs a light on the musical contents of a “book of births”, the *Liber Nativitatum* or *Albubather*, written by the Persian Astrologer Abu Bakr al-Hassan ibn al-Khasib in the ninth century, translated into Latin at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and published in Venice in 1501. “Books of births” served to show how an individual’s fortune and personal traits could be ascertained from the position of the celestial bodies throughout the individual’s gestation period. A significant portion of these traits pertain to loquacity, hearing, musical skill and the likelihood of a musical profession. Thanks to the connotations each celestial body bore – positive and negative – and the traits they are described as imparting, the *Liber Nativitatum* makes it possible to identify the skills and traits requisite for good musical performance, as well as those traits which might inhibit it.