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Version: Accepted Version

Book Section:

Shephard, T. orcid.org/0000-0003-4053-8916 (2023) 24. *Venus*. In: Borghetti, V. and Shephard, T., (eds.) *The Museum of Renaissance Music: A History in 100 Exhibits*. Epitome musical . Brepols , Turnhout , pp. 119-124. ISBN 9782503588568

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24. *Venus*

Tim Shephard

Baccio Baldini(?), Florence, ca. 1464

Engraving, 32 x 21.5 cm

Inscribed: VENERE; TORO; BILANCE; OMNIA VINCIT AMOR; AMES DROIT

The British Museum, London

Photo ©XXXXXX

At the top of this engraving Venus, simultaneously a goddess and a planet, rides through the heavens accompanied by her son Cupid. Upon the wheels of their car are the constellations over which Venus rules, Taurus and Libra. In the landscape below, young women drop flowers from a castle of love upon a group of courtly revellers, who sing, dance, feast, and flirt. Further back on the right, in the shade of a tent, three figures bathe together in a frankly erotic embrace. An inscription above the entrance to the castle declares that “Love conquers all.” At the foot of the page a further inscription explains that:

Venus is a feminine sign placed in the third sphere and [of] cold and moist temperament, which, because of these properties, loves beautiful clothes ornamented with gold and silver, and song and festivities and games, and is lascivious. She is sweet in speech and beautiful in the eyes and face, and of graceful body full of flesh and of medium height, given to every work concerned with beauty.

There follows a summary of the times and circumstances under which her influence holds sway.

This image, together with the other six in the same set, arose within a Europe-wide vogue for so-called Children of the Planets images, many of which are closely related in their design (Blume 2004). Essentially such images represent the characteristic activities and behaviours of those living under the influence of each sphere in turn, as a concise and accessible astrological guidebook. The same information, given in much more detail, could be found in a standard astrological encyclopedia such as Guido Bonatti’s *Decem tractatus astronomie*; indeed, the 1506 Venetian printed edition of Bonatti’s tome borrows elements from the Baldini engravings as decoration (Bonatti 1506). Of course, in this period astrology was a legitimate science, indistinguishable from astronomy, and entirely compatible with Christian doctrine—it was considered an effective means of discovering the will of God, who moved the heavens (Dooley 2014).

A useful point of comparison in many respects is provided by the enormously popular geographical encyclopedia entitled *The Globe (La sfera)*, written around 1400 by Florentine merchant Gregorio Dati, which circulated in hundreds of manuscript copies and also ran through many printed editions during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy (Dati ca. 1475). In *The Globe*, astronomical/astrological information on the heavenly spheres is presented alongside explanations of the elements, topographical features, the weather, tides,

the seasons, the four humours, continents, rivers, cities, and countries. Each topic is allotted one or two stanzas of *ottava rima* in Italian, not Latin, a concise format that certainly meets the needs of accessibility—Gregorio himself, although a very capable man, was not highly educated. The geography of *The Globe* shows a leaning toward topics and regions that might be relevant to the interests of a Florentine merchant engaging in trade on the Mediterranean. However, the nautical information provided is not accurate enough to use, suggesting that the book was intended as a coffee-table compilation of general knowledge—the kind of trivia that one might aspire to have on the tip of one’s tongue in order to appear well-informed in conversation. In all respects, our engraving, and the set from which it is taken, should probably be understood in the same way.

The engraving is attributed to the enigmatic Florentine artist Baccio Baldini, identified by Giorgio Vasari as a student of the “inventor” of engraving, Maso Finiguerra. Baldini is credited today with the authorship of a large number of mid-fifteenth-century engravings, although direct contemporary evidence is lacking. Accepting, for the sake of argument, that the engraving is at least Florentine, its viewers would have immediately seen a similarity with Garden of Love scenes, popular on Florentine wedding chests (*cassoni*) and birth trays (*deschi da parto*) in the first half of the fifteenth century (fig. 24.1; Watson 1979). Such scenes find their origins in a literary topos deployed most famously in the French thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, a dream narrative in which the protagonist, Amant (Lover), enters a walled garden owned by Déduit (Pleasure), and falls in love with a rose (see exhibit 42). An Italian paraphrase of the *Rose*, *Il Fiore*, has been attributed to Dante, and the influence of the French original is obvious in some of the most enduringly popular of all Italian verse: Brunetto Latini’s *Tesoretto*, Petrarch’s *Trionfo d’Amore*, and above all Boccaccio’s *Amorosa Visione*, *Teseida*, and *Decamerone*.

Boccaccio specifically connects Venus with feasting, dance, and music in his mythographic compendium, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, a work which enjoyed a print circulation throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the addition of a useful index by Domenico Bandini. Citing as his sources the widely-read medieval Persian astronomer Albumasar (Abu Ma’shar al-Balkhi), and his own teacher of astronomy Andalò di Negro, Boccaccio writes:

Venus signifies the beauty of the face, attractiveness of the body, and an adornment for every thing, and so the use of precious unguents, fragrant aromatics, games of dice and calculation, or of bandits, and also drunkenness and feasts, wines, honeys, and whatever seems to pertain to sweetness and warmth, equally fornication of every kind and wantonness and a multitude of coition, the guardianship of statues and pictures, the composition of wreaths and wearing of garments, weavings with gold and silver, the greatest amusement in song and laughter, dancing, music by stringed instruments and pipes, weddings, and many other things (Boccaccio 2011, 382-55).

Also citing astronomical authorities, Mario Equicola gives a similar summary in his *Book on the Nature of Love*, printed in 1525, noting that Venus “Loves games, feasts, songs, pictures, perfumes, cheerfulness, and lovers’ tokens” (Equicola 1525, fol. 63^r).

For Equicola, as for other Italians, the relationship between Venus and music was an aspect of a broader connection between music and love. In his *Compendium of the Effects of Music*, written around 1470 in Naples, the musician and cleric Johannes Tinctoris lists music's capacity "to attract love" as the seventeenth in his catalogue of 20 characteristic effects. In support of this contention he cites Ovid:

So Ovid advises girls desirous of attracting men's love to learn singing. Indeed, in *Ars amatoria* [3.315-16] he says:

"Song is seductive: girls should learn to sing (her voice,

And not her face, has many a girl's procuress been)."

That is why poets record that when Orpheus strummed sweetly on his lyre, many women were fired with love for him (Cullington 2001, 64).

Ars amatoria (*The Art of Love*), essentially a guidebook for seduction, was one of the most popular classical texts in Italy, and one of the first to be printed in Italian translation. At its opening Ovid elegantly disowns the poet's usual patrons—rational, virtuous Apollo and the Muses—invoking instead the assistance of Venus and her son in crafting what he repeatedly calls his "song," the purpose of which is to teach others how to achieve their erotic desires. In a neat conundrum, he names himself Venus' *vates* (meaning a poet in receipt of divine inspiration), whilst in the same line citing his experience as the source of the work—implying, of course, that his experience in love was itself inspired divinely, by Cupid's arrows.

The circulation of a quote from a popular text which suggests that musicianship makes women sexually available is obviously in conflict with the contemporary requirement that women remain chaste. Baldassare Castiglione notes with regret in his famous *Book of the Courtier* that

we ourselves, as men, have made it a rule that a dissolute way of life is not to be thought evil or blameworthy or disgraceful, whereas in women it leads to such complete opprobrium and shame that once a woman has been spoken ill of, whether the accusation be true or false, she is utterly disgraced for ever (Castiglione 1967, 195).

In a rather conservative treatise on education written by the Vatican administrator Maffeo Vegio in 1433 and printed in 1491, the same quote from the *Ars amatoria* is used to caution parents against letting their daughters associate "with unknown girls ... who indulge in singing love songs with passion, so that your daughters do not follow their example" (Lorenzetti 2011a, 10). The first printed guidebook on young women's conduct, the *Decor puellarum* of 1471, warned similarly against allowing daughters to acquire a reputation for "singing and playing like a whore" (*Decor puellarum* 1471, fol. 57^r).

Although moralists found the association of music with love troubling, to poets it was a gift, providing a range of elegant metaphors for amorous attraction. Most popular was the analogy of reciprocal love to the musical phenomenon of sympathetic resonance.

Players say that, when two lutes are tuned well and to the same pitch, whoever plucks one, where the other is close by and facing it, both respond in the same way; and that sound which is made by the plucked lute, the same sound is made by the other which is not plucked by anyone,

explains Pietro Bembo in his *Gli Asolani* printed in 1505. “Oh Amor, what lute or what lira could respond to one another more harmoniously than two souls of yours that love one another?” (Bembo 1961, 120). In a sonnet of the 1480s, Lorenzo de’ Medici uses sympathetic resonance to describe the effect upon him of a portrait that calls to mind his beloved. Just as a plucked string will excite another tuned to the same note, so the sight of a similar face will echo in his heart as the face of his beloved (Medici 1913-14, 1:205). Blending the preoccupation with amorous subject matter with Ovid’s Venereal poetics, on the title page of a 1510 poetry edition the author, the famous poet and musician Serafino dell’Aquila, is represented singing his *strambotti* whilst assailed by Cupid’s arrows (fig. 24.2). A contemporary biography claims that Serafino learned to compose verse and sing specifically in order to “better enflame the breasts of beautiful young women” (Calmata 1959, 69).

If Venereal musicianship used music’s affective power to seduce, the metaphor of sympathetic resonance also relied on music’s parallel identity as a rational discipline founded in the Pythagorean mathematics of proportion, an earthly imitation of the proportional harmony of the heavenly spheres. Owners of Baldini’s *Children of the Planets* engravings could find music exemplified in its mathematical guise under the patronage of Mercury (fig. 24.3). The inscription at the foot of the image explains that Mercury is “eloquent and inventive” and “loves the mathematical sciences and the study of divination.” His children pursue activities appropriate to this characterisation: on the left are a painter, a goldsmith, and a sculptor; on the right, writers, an engineer, and an organist; and in the centre a group of astrologers. The different lengths of the organ’s pipes, required to produce the different pitches, are a neat demonstration of the principles of harmonious proportionality identified by Pythagoras.

Although the Pythagorean mathematics of harmony, a system that embraced not only sounding music but the inaudible music generated by the movements of the heavenly spheres, created a clear connection between music and astrology, most astrologers made little explicit use of it. The key exception to this rule is represented by the Florentine priest Marsilio Ficino, famous for his translations and studies of Platonic philosophy. Ficino built upon the connection a sophisticated strategy for arousing beneficial celestial influence through song, and brought it to a broader public in his *Three Books on Life*, first printed in 1489. “Tones first chosen by the rule of the stars and then combined according to the congruity of these stars with each other,” he explained, “make a sort of common form, and in it a celestial power arises,” which “wonderfully arouses our spirit upwards to the celestial influence and the celestial influence downwards to our spirit.” To prompt such celestial beneficence one must

sing the right song, at the right time, in the right spirit—for the musical character of each sphere is different. Jupiter’s music is “deep, earnest, sweet, and joyful with stability,” whilst the songs of Venus are “voluptuous with wantonness and softness.” Songs that are “reverential, simple and earnest” belong to the Sun (Apollo), whilst those of Mercury are less austere, but “vigorous and complex” (Ficino 1989, 362-63).

Additional references: Blažeković 2003; Dennis 2010; Mirimonde 1977; Shephard 2015; Shephard et al. 2020; Tomlinson 1993; Trottein 1993; Voss 2002.