Musica mundana from Boethius to Keith Jarrett

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Music

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Abstract

Boethius's theory of *musica mundana* connects music to astronomy in the way both harmonize diverse elements. Chapter One begins by examining Pythagoras who recognized mathematical similarities between planetary motion and musical tuning; an explanation of Cicero follows, who added government as a third parallel. Boethius is reprised as a bridge between these ideas and later theories synthesizing cosmic and divine influence. Chapters Two and Three interrogate Handel and Keith Jarrett respectively as case studies to test for the possibility of influence in their work. Despite claims of stellar or religious connections for Handel, he fails the test when it comes to any kind of transcendent influence. Jarrett champions his own "tapping" of sources which, whether true or not, contributes to the systematic wholeness of his musicianship. The Conclusion invites a *musica mundana* "effect" based on coincidences between macrocosms and microcosms yet requiring no communication between them.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract i

Acknowledgments ii

Chapter 1: The Janus of Musicology: Boethius and His Precursors 1

Chapter 2: Handel’s Truth-Bearing Muse: Interrogating Starry-Eyed Handelians 20

Chapter 3: Keith Jarrett in the Zone: Music as Tapping Sources 44

Conclusion 58

Appendix: Hasty Writing and Correcting in the Manuscript of Handel’s Messiah 60

Bibliography 62
Chapter One:

The Janus of Musicology: Boethius and His Precursors

Near the beginning of his seminal treatise on music theory, *Fundamentals of Music* (a translation of *De Institutione Musica*), Ancius Manlius Severinus Boethius (ca.480–525 CE) introduces three different kinds, or levels, of music that humans can experience. To the English-speaking student of musicology, these three classifications are as familiar in Latin as they are, or more so than, in translation:

Principio igitur de *musica* disserenti illud interim dicendum videtur, quot musicae genera ab eius studiosis comprehendis essa noverimus. Sunt autem tria. Et prima quidem *mundana* est, secunda vero *humana*, tertia, quae in quibusdam constituta est *instrumentis*, ut in cithara vel tibiis ceterisque, quae cantilenae famulantur.¹

By a simple shift in syntax and declension, then, his three kinds of music can be rendered "*musica mundana,” “musica humana,” and “musica instrumentalis.” A cursory translation would provide "cosmic music,” "human music,” and "instrumental music,” respectively. Here is the same passage translated by Calvin M. Bower:

Thus, at the outset, it seems proper to tell someone examining music what we shall discover about the number of kinds of music recognized by those schooled in it. There are three: the first is cosmic, whereas the second is human; the third is that which rests in certain instruments, such as the kithara or the aulos² or other instruments which serve melody.³

Boethius's treatment of the three kinds of music occupies only about one-and-a-half pages of Bower's 179-page translation of the text. As a perusal of the book illustrates and as Bower

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²An alternative could be "*tibiae.* See John G. Landels, *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4–7, 198–199, for a discussion of and illustrations showing differences between the Greek "aulos" and the Roman "tibiae." Boethius clearly refers to the Roman "tibiae" here.

informs readers in his footnotes, Boethius never adequately treats the first two of these in his text. An examination of the Table of Contents of Bower's translation will illuminate the topic of the last of these, *musica instrumentalis*, which comes closer than the other two in occupying the bulk of the book. Boethius describes this kind of music as that which rests "in various instruments. Thus music is governed either by tension, as in strings, or by breath, as in the aulos or those instruments activated by water, or by a certain percussion, as in those which are cast in concave brass, and various sounds are produced from these." With the exception of one short section, entitled "To What Heavenly Bodies the Strings Are Compared," which broaches the topic of *musica mundana* and will be reprised below in the discussion of Cicero, the rest of the book treats such areas of music fundamentals as the ennobling powers of music, pitches and pitch relationships, the ratios for devising various tuning systems, definitions of dissonance and consonance, the classification of voices and their ranges, and the naming of musical notes. In a footnote in his translation of Boethius's book, Bower remarks that books 2 and 3, which are devoted to the demonstration of "abstract musical principles," stray slightly afield of the concerns of instruments and even further from the realm of human or cosmic music. Had Boethius been writing at a later time, it might represent something akin to a 19th-century musicological analysis of tuning systems of Asia or Africa with tables denoting frequency ratios between various pitches in terms of "cents."

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4Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, 10 n. 38, n. 42, and n. 44.

5Ibid., 10.

6Ibid., 46–47.

7Ibid., 10 n. 44.
Boethius's albeit brief exposition of *musica mundana* (cosmic music) not only reflects previous conceptions of the "Music of the Spheres" (also referred to as "Celestial Harmony" or in Latin as "harmonia mundi"), it also anticipates "stellar" theories of musical reception studied by Boethius's predecessors and approaches which will be revived by future thinkers. For those receptive to a possible cosmic connection in music, Boethius thus represents a kind of Janus among the musicologists. Janus, the two-faced god—one face looking forward, the other backward—is one of the rare Roman deities who has no counterpart in the Greek pantheon. He has been aptly described as the "god of beginnings, doors, gates, and passageways." In more recent times (such as in his use as a logo for a multinational corporation), he has come to symbolize one who has attained wise foresight by having thoroughly studied the past. January, the month named after him, likewise looks backward to the past year and forward to what remains of the current year. Boethius, although on a more modest level, mirrors Janus in several ways. No matter how one responds to a reading of his treatise, one can hardly ignore Boethius's erudition regarding earlier music theories. If his work errs on the side of a lack of original ideas in places, it more than makes up for this deficiency in providing a recapitulation of prior musical knowledge. In those areas of his work where his originality does have a chance to emerge, such as in his preamble of future cosmic theories, he seems to be on eerily familiar ground with some music-minded people of today. In this sense, Boethius serves as an emissary of "beginnings, doors, gates, and passageways" toward future possibilities for discussions of musical comprehension without ever stinting the past.

In his translation of Boethius's treatise, Bower divides the description of *musica mundana*, into two paragraphs, each suggesting one of Janus's two faces. Boethius begins by offering a variation of the old-world conception of the "Music of the Spheres":

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Cosmic [music] is discernible especially in those things which are observed in heaven itself or in the combination of elements or the diversity of seasons. For how can it happen that so swiftly a heavenly machine moves on a mute and silent course? Although the sound does not penetrate our ears—which necessarily happens for many reasons—it is nevertheless impossible that such extremely fast motion of such large bodies should produce absolutely no sound, especially since the courses of the stars are joined by such harmonious union that nothing so perfectly united, nothing so fitted together, can be realized. For some orbits are borne higher, others lower; and they all revolve with such equal energy that a fixed order of their courses is reckoned through their diverse inequalities. For that reason, a fixed sequence of modulation cannot be separated from this celestial revolution.  

Many of the details in this paragraph would serve as a tidy summary of Pythagoras's more elaborate system described below. Boethius's account contains no reference to parallels between the ratios of the planets in their motions relative to earth and those ratios of diatonic tones in a scale relative to the tonic; Pythagorus labored greatly over these problems. Furthermore, Boethius is not entirely consistent with Pythagoras, the latter of whom was reluctant to admit that the celestial tones emitted by the motions of the spheres would fail to "penetrate our ears."

The second part of Boethius's description of musica mundana has been rendered partly cryptic due to an unfortunate lacunae between the first and second sentences. Nevertheless, what is coherent in the remainder of the paragraph offers nothing less than a prolegomena for a future musico-cosmology:

If a certain harmony did not join the diversities and opposing forces of the four elements, how could it be possible that they could unite in one mass and contrivance? But all this diversity gives birth to variety of both seasons and fruits in such a way that it nevertheless imparts one structure to the year. Whence if you imagine one of these things which supply such diversity taken

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10In a footnote, Bower speculates about how this obvious omission might have occurred and how it might be bridged: "Given the opening question of the paragraph, a discussion of harmony and the diversity of the elements should follow; but the text skips abruptly to a discussion of the diversity of the seasons. Thus a development of a harmony of the elements and an introduction of the harmony of the seasons are missing. Some scribe may have jumped from one 'diversity' to another" (9 n.37). If Bower is correct in his conjecture, this idea of transferring musical meaning from the macroscopic level of heavenly spheres to the microscopic level of elements is important to this study.
away, then all things would seem to fall apart and, so to speak, preserve none of their consonance. And just as, on the one hand, adjustment of pitch in lower strings is such that lowness does not descend into silence, while, on the other hand, adjustment of sharpness in higher strings is carefully monitored lest the excessively stretched strings break because of the tenuity of pitch, but the whole corpus of pitches is coherent and harmonious with itself, in the same way we discern in cosmic music that nothing can be so excessive that it destroys something else by its own intemperance. Everything is such that it either bears its own fruit or aids others in bearing theirs. For what winter confines, spring releases, summer heats, and autumn ripens, and the seasons in turn either bring forth their own fruit or give aid to others in bringing forth their own.\textsuperscript{11}

In this rich passage several points are worth further consideration. A whole range of phenomena, from elements to planets, are seen here to participate in one and the same vast ordering principle. If it weren’t for “a certain harmony,” however, to supply a well-rounded tension all about, everything would default to a state of chaos. In this model—at least as it pertains to cosmic phenomena—one also finds a self-correcting mechanism which prevents any part of the system from faltering beyond repair and, thus, collapsing ultimately in upon itself. Instruments, however, need our help. A thousand years after Boethius completed his treatise, the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal remarked that “the springs in our brain are so adjusted that he who touches one touches also its contrary.”\textsuperscript{12} In a similar fashion, the “springs” in the cosmos are “so adjusted” that where too much tension temporarily resides in one place, a return to normalcy is inevitably secured by a temporary slacking of tension elsewhere. To the extent that \textit{musica mundana} conveys its code to \textit{musica humana} everything can be shown to effect everything else in this tightening and slackening process.

It is tempting at this point to superimpose modern notions of triads, chords, progressions and the like onto Boethius’ usage of the word “harmony.” Any study of the instruments of

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{11}Boethius, \textit{Fundamentals of Music}, 9–10.
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Boethius's day and their tuning will reveal the kinds of tuning systems available to early medieval musicians. The scales used by Boethius and his contemporaries were similar to a modal variation of our modern scales except that two (or more) notes of the medieval scale (the third and sixth notes of the hypolydian mode, for instance) were tuned slightly flatter than those same two notes were rendered after the great tonal shift of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. It is those very notes which allow users of modern, equal temperament tuning to create the most consonant major and minor triads. In the early days of just intonation the intervals of the third and the sixth were perfect intervals whose sound was as hollow as our modern perfect fourths and fifths. One who replicates these sounds on a modern sine-wave diode generator will notice that any attempt to create a triad will result in a chord that sounds as dissonant as the tritone does to the modern ear acclimated to equal temperament tuning. Until composers such as John Dunstable (ca.1390-1453) of England and some of his contemporaries started experimenting with the altering of selected pitches, triads were rarely employed. Harmony for Boethius, therefore, consisted more of monophonic notes played one at a time and, hence, sequentiality of tones superceded tones played simultaneously. The etymological roots of the kind of harmony with which Boethius was familiar will become clearer in the next few paragraphs about Pythagoras. A short recounting of the Music of the Spheres will immediately follow the Pythagoras segment, after which some final remarks on Boethius will follow.

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13 Some popularly disseminated theories have attempted to establish the origin of blues harmonies as an attempt to synthesize ("creolize") these two disparate cultural systems into a single yet practical and satisfying, third form of harmony. Apparently, African slaves in North America, having been acquainted with one tuning system (variations of just intonation), were thrown suddenly into a white culture whose instruments were tuned according to another system (varieties of equal temperament). Accordingly, the "blues note," properly performed, would offer a compromise between the divergent pitches.

Pythagoras (ca.570-ca.500 BCE) is credited as the first Western thinker to establish a theory of \textit{musica mundana}. Although he did not leave any written documents, many ancient authors—who were closer in time to Pythagoras and who had access to his students’ writings and to the work of later members of his school—have written about Pythagoras and his ideas extensively.

A significant portion of Pythagoras's teachings are devoted to music; however, music is but a single branch of something more fundamental in the Pythagorean cosmological picture: Number. In modern cosmology, number is recognized as a component of mathematics as well as an abstract principle for making mathematical calculations and helping students of science and mathematics better understand their world. In Pythagoras's time, Number was likewise recognized as a principle, but it was also perceived as something much more real—much more concrete—than the way number is understood today. For Pythagoras, Number was something divine and its primordiality in the order of things, second only to that of Unity, underpinned the working of the cosmos. Prior to and even more foundational than Number is this other Pythagorean principle of Unity. Unity represents the state of oneness and purity in the universe before the advent of Number. In fact, in Pythagorean number theory, "One," in the words of David R. Fideler, is not viewed as "a number at all, but as the principle underlying number," and if "One represents the principle of Unity from which all things arise, then Two, the Dyad, represents Duality, the beginning of multiplicity, the beginning of strife, yet also the possibility of logos, the relation of one thing to another"\(^{15}\) Accordingly, Number for Pythagoras and his

contemporaries was synonymous with plurality. Thus, any quantity expressed by integers or degrees of integers greater than one (one-point-one, two—the dyad—a million, or infinity) would constitute Number. Because, for Pythagoras, Unity and Number are both universal and divine, these principles were seen to operate in both the sensorium of science and the sensorium of spirituality. In fact, "for Pythagoras the scientific and religious dimensions of number were never at odds with each other." Thus, with regard to Unity and Number, arithmetic would comprise the most basic science (logos) for understanding problems involving matters of degree and quantity (enumeration). For problems involving enumeration and space—the first three dimensions of which are "line," "plane," and "solid"—one must use the logos of geometry. If one is to comprehend the problems of enumeration and time, one must deploy the logos of music. Finally, Fideler suggests a fourth logos, astronomy, which deals with problems concerning enumeration and space combined with time.

One who is trained in these sciences (or logoi) and is able to solve problems pertinent to them will have learned at an early stage the principle of "harmonia." As mentioned above, this word's English cognate today is "harmony," which refers to the sequential or simultaneous relation of pitches. In the parlance of Pythagoras's day, as observed by Henry Chadwick, "'[h]armonia' in Greek never loses its root meaning of the fitting together of disparate, potentially conflicting elements." Philolaus of Croto, who was a Pythagorean of the fifth-century BCE, offers a very clear explanation of harmonic relation:

16Ibid., 21.
17Ibid., 34.
Things that were alike and of the same kind had no need of harmony, but those that were unlike and not of the same kind and of unequal order—it was necessary for such things to have been locked together by harmony, if they are to be held together in an ordered universe.19

Along these lines, and in a discussion of the Pythagorean Music of the Spheres, Aristotle defines this kind of harmony as "a mixture and combination of opposites."20 To translate this word into modern English as harmony, therefore, risks blurring or altogether missing its etymological association with "opposition," or "contrariety." Thus when harmony is juxtaposed alongside Unity and Number, the notion of opposition implied in it is seen as a divine and universal ordering principle of the cosmos. One can find variations of this idea in different epochs and cultures. In a discussion of harmony and the sacred, Rudolf Haase notes that "It is well known that the construction of the world on the basis of two antithetical principles is an age-old concept: it is best known as the yang and yin of Chinese tradition, but also forms an important element of Pythagorean philosophy."21 For Pythagoras, then, harmony denotes relationships not only between musical phenomena, but a mirroring of those same relationships between celestial bodies.

To understand the similarities—in fact, the direct connection—between patterns of order in the cosmos and patterns of order in music it is necessary to interrogate "the Pythagorean view of the kosmos, literally 'world-order' or 'ordered-world,' a term that Pythagoras is credited with first applying to the universe. The word kosmos, in addition to its primary meaning of order, also means ornament. The world, according to Pythagoras, is ornamented with order. This is another

21 Haase, 103.
way of saying that the universe is *beautifully* ordered." The idea of the beautiful, then, is inseparable from such geometrical qualities as proportion, symmetry, ratio, and coherence. Part of the beauty inhering in both levels involves their correspondences to each other. The properties of planetary motion and the properties of the tuning of the scale (the diatonic variation of the just intonation scale of Pythagoras's day, based loosely on the natural overtone series) and the ratios expressed by the planets in relation to earth and the tones of the tonic scale were seen as so seamlessly conjoined that the planets themselves were reported to emit specific musical tones. J. A. Philip explains the relationship between the two provinces:

> From Aristotle's reference it is clear that for the Pythagoreans their universe was an ordered one in which the heavenly bodies moved of their own motion . . . at determined velocities and intervals. It would appear that anterior to their astronomical theory was a knowledge of the mathematical ratios obtaining in the musical scale and that they argued from this knowledge (rather than *vice versa*) that the intervals between the heavenly bodies produced sounds corresponding to the notes of the musical scale, the more distant bodies producing higher notes, the bodies nearer to the earth producing lower notes because their velocity was less.^^

To arrive at these mathematical ratios in the musical scale, Pythagoras made use of the "monochord"—a one-stringed musical instrument whose string can be stopped at any point along its length. Careful listening combined with precise measurements of which lengths of the string correspond to which tones helped Pythagoras discover the overtone series.^^ Through some clever mathematics the pitches of the overtone series were shown to be identical to the tones emitted by the eight celestial objects known at the time: the moon, the sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and the starry vault.

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^^Fideler, 22.


^^Fideler, 25.
Besides these considerations of the cosmological aspects of music theory, we have information from many ancient sources about the way music was practiced day to day by Pythagoras and his followers. We know that performing, studying and listening to music were taken very seriously. In addition, music was used in therapeutic roles in a way that anticipates a kind of Boethian *musica humana*. John Strohmeier and Peter Westbrook describe this Pythagorean musical culture:

Pythagoras taught that music should never be approached simply as a form of entertainment. Rather, he recognized that music was an expression of *harmonia*, the divine principle that brings order to chaos and discord. Thus music has a dual value. Like mathematics, it enables men and women to see into the structures of nature. And further, if utilized correctly, it can bring the faculties of the soul into harmony with these structures, composing and purifying the mind and body, and thus restoring and maintaining perfect health.²⁵

With music so central to daily life within the Pythagorean communities, it is no wonder that later writers would embrace the Music of the Spheres as something that ennobles human beings. In modern times, too, some physicists are framing their questions about the cosmos in terms of a Pythagorean dialectic of music. Fideler cites several scientific findings in mid-century which share parallels with Pythagorean conceptions of order and ratio. In more recent times, Brian Greene, in his best-selling book about string theory, *The Elegant Universe*, acknowledges the uncanny similarities between Pythagoras's interpretation of the phenomenon of sympathetic vibration of adjacent strings in musical instruments and the vibrations between superstrings which constitute the infinitesimal building-blocks common to matter, energy, particles, forces, fields, vibrations, and waves within the cosmos.²⁶


Before leaving Pythagoras, one may justifiably ask the obvious question: If, as Pythagoras claims, the planets make music, why do we fail to hear that music? Pythagoras himself, according to Aristotle, acknowledged that not everyone is privy to that sound. Aristotle surmises that the ability to hear the Music of the Spheres requires special refinement, cultivation, and powers of discernment. He also speculated that Pythagoras had developed these powers in himself before Pythagoras himself was able to hear it. Later authors will alternate between a literal theory of planetary music and a more figurative explanation, such as the one Aristotle offers, the latter of which suggests a kind of music, or music principle, encoded in the cosmos that special people in the right circumstances can "tap into." This second interpretation of Pythagoras's doctrines will figure into later discussions of this study, and in the present chapter will briefly re-emerge in the ongoing discussion of Boethius.

Certainly one of the most literary versions of the Music of the Spheres is that which comes at the end of Cicero’s *Republic*. Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BCE), who succeeded equally in politics, law, letters, and philosophy was one of the most renowned writers of the Republican era of ancient Rome. As a philosopher, Cicero was widely eclectic. He spent his student days at the Athenian Academy studying Greek language and philosophy. While there, he also assimilated the Platonic and Neo-Platonic doctrines then current. His early exposure to Stoicism also informed his philosophical thinking, especially regarding his theology and political philosophy. Like Plato three centuries earlier, Cicero was attracted to the dialogue form as a means of communicating his philosophical ideas. However, unlike Plato, who chose a single character to embody his central protagonist and veritable mouthpiece—Socrates—Cicero chose to disseminate his doctrines through several historical champions. Among his several philosophical treatises in

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dialogue form is Cicero’s very patchy *Republic*. Named as a tribute to Plato’s book of the same name—as with Cicero’s *Laws*—*The Republic* is missing many parts as a result of having been lost for centuries, and until portions of it could be deciphered from a poorly preserved parchment copied during the late middle ages, the work as a discreet whole was virtually unheard of. This copy along with other misplaced fragments only came to light between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although many sections are missing, the portions which have reached us intact give an adequate sense of the scheme of the book as well as numerous samples of Cicero’s literary flourish and aphoristic flair.

The choice of Scipio Aemilianus as the central prolocutor in Cicero’s dialogue reflects the kind of sterling character Cicero wanted to body forth in his idea of a utopian state. Scipio, who lived a century before Cicero, had led an impeccable life as a compassionate military leader and an equally caring public servant. With its choice of character and utopian theme, Cicero’s book is first and foremost a work of political philosophy.

The book’s crowning achievement is its sixth and last book which contains the famous "Dream of Scipio." This portion of the work has never been lost, thanks to its inclusion in Macrobius’s commentary, and was well-known during the Middle Ages and after; hence it’s contents are believed to be essentially uncorrupted. Although consisting of only nine pages in Rudd’s translation, “The Dream of Scipio” has been discussed extensively by commentators since the Middle Ages and it has been anthologized often in manifold contexts. The early medieval commentary by Macrobius (ca.400 CE)—which only deals with this capstone section of Cicero’s book—runs to over two hundred pages in a modern translation. Because “The Dream of Scipio”

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has led a life of its own decapitated from the other five books of *The Republic* for so many centuries, the work is often read in ignorance of its intended political context. On most levels this is excusable considering how effectively the work does indeed stand on its own. Hopefully, it will be made obvious that any musicological analysis of the text will be much more thorough if one understands the bigger political import of the whole book.

Even though designed as the culmination of his political manifesto, "The dream of Scipio" constitutes the first version in a long succession of versions of the Music of the Spheres to appear in Latin. Cicero had studied Pythagoras extensively\(^{30}\) and cites Pythagoras's ideas in many places in his writings. It comes as no surprise therefore that several parallels obtain between the Pythagorean version and Cicero's rendition; but Cicero adds some curious twists. Simply put, what Pythagoras perceived as the cosmic parallels between the motions of the planets and the tuning of musical pitches, Cicero envisioned also. But in Cicero's narrative (like in Plato's *Republic*, in a more limited way) a third, political, dimension is added. In "The Dream of Scipio," those parallels between order in the cosmos and order in music provide a model for laying the foundations of the state and establishing its constitution. The principles of Unity and Number, Proportion and Symmetry, as well as geometrical simplicity and beauty which adhere, according to Pythagoras, in celestial and musical phenomena can also be built into the very cornerstone and framework of government.

In Cicero's dialogue, the vision that impels Scipio's discovery of this necessary three-way connection between the cosmos, music, and government comes to him in a dream. In that dream, Scipio is temporarily reunited with his beloved, long-since deceased grandfather, Scipio Africanus—another favorite historical exemplar of noble Roman character. That part of the

\(^{30}\)Fideler, 40.
conversation between the younger Scipio Aemilianus (in the first person) and his grandfather (in the third person) most relevant to the Music of the Spheres is worth quoting at length:

I gazed at all these things in amazement. Then, pulling myself together, I said "What is this sound, so loud and yet so sweet, that fills my ears?"

"That," he said, "is the sound produced by the impetus and momentum of the spheres themselves. It is made up of intervals which, though unequal, are determined systematically by fixed proportions. The blend of high and low notes produces an even flow of various harmonies. Such vast motions cannot sweep on in silence, and nature ordains that low notes should be emitted by one of the boundaries and high notes by the other. From the uppermost of the heavenly orbits (that which carries the stars) comes a high note with frequent vibrations, in that its cycle is more rapid. The deepest note emanates from the lowest orbit, that of the moon. The earth, which is the ninth sphere, remains fixed and immobile in one place, filling the central position of the universe. Those eight rotating spheres (of which two [being an octave apart] produce the same effect) give out seven distinctive sounds according to their intervals. That number is more or less the linchpin of everything. By imitating this system with strings and voices experts have succeeded in opening up a new way back to this place, as have others who, in their life on earth, have applied their outstanding intellect to heavenly subjects. Filled with this sound, people's ears have become deaf to it. Hearing, in fact, is the most, easily impaired of all your senses. For instance, where the Nile comes hurtling down from the mountain peaks at a place called Catadoupa, the local inhabitants have lost their sense of hearing because of the loudness of the roar. The noise of the whole universe, then, revolving as it does at an enormous speed, is so loud that human ears cannot take it in, just as you cannot look straight at the sun because your sight and vision become overwhelmed by its rays."

Though listening to all this with astonishment, I kept turning my eyes repeatedly back to earth. Thereupon Africanus said "I notice you are still gazing at the home and habitation of men. If it seems small to you (as indeed it is) make sure to keep your mind on these higher regions and to think little of the human scene down there. For what fame can you achieve, what glory worth pursuing, that consists merely of people's talk? Look. The earth is inhabited in just a few confined areas. In between those inhabited places, which resemble blots, there are huge expanses of empty territory. Those who live on earth are separated in such a way that nothing can readily pass between them from one populated region to another. More than that, in relation to your position, some people stand at a different angle, some at right angles, and some directly opposite. You certainly cannot expect any praise from them."^1

Of key importance in the second paragraph of this poetic excerpt is the phrase, "opening up a new way back to this place." That thought alone—that our vocal and instrumental music, when imitating the patterns of the higher cosmic system—is seminal to several later theories invoking the stellar muse. With the exception of the pitches of the tones being in the reverse planetary order ascribed to Pythagoras's system by some of his commentators, Cicero's "Dream of Scipio" is steadfastly loyal to Pythagoras's Music of the Spheres. Cicero's added contribution, however, consists in showing a connection between musica mundana and musica instrumentalis that Pythagoras never adequately develops. Perhaps in making his model a tripartite one—cosmic, musical, and political—Cicero was compelled to foresee the inevitability of being transported musically since this is the only kind of relationship that can adhere between the ordering of the cosmos and the ordering of social structures: the only way to test the success or fallibility of one's laws, offices, and public welfare is to make sure that its public servants, through the patterns of their body politic, can obtain an occasional glimpse of the arch-patterns on high.

Besides Macrobius, who devotes a book-length study to this nine-or-so pages from Cicero's pen (in which Macrobius concludes that Cicero's musical and celestial observations triumphantly supplant those of Pythagoras and that Cicero was on a sure path to spiritual—possibly Christian—truth\textsuperscript{32}), more recent fiction writers have also paid tribute to this short work. In the form of an amusing but touching short story, Howard Schwartz furnishes a modern Jewish retelling of Cicero's "Dream of Scipio." In that part of Schwartz's version in which his main character (Reb Nachman), hosted by the angel Raziel rather than by a grandfather, becomes enraptured over his encounter with the Music of the Spheres, the images and situations acquire a faint Ciceronian and more decidedly Jewish weltanschauung:

\textsuperscript{32}Macrobius, passim.
Reb Nachman realized that the wonderful structure he saw must be the Celestial Temple, after which the Temple in Jerusalem had been modeled, and with which it was identical in every respect, except for the fire surrounding the heavenly sanctuary. For the marble pillars of this heavenly miracle were illumined by red fire, the stones by green fire, the threshold by white fire, and the gates by blue fire. And angels entered and departed in a steady stream, intoning an unforgettable hymn to a melody Reb Nachman heard that day for the first time, but which he recognized as if it had been familiar to him all the days of his life.33

This melody, so seemingly familiar to Nachman, provides for him an ingress into arcane knowledge that will supply a hitherto missing key to a special understanding of the Torah:

[At that moment Reb Nachman was willing to believe that the world only existed so that those secret harmonies could be heard. And he turned to the angel Raziel, who had never left his side, and once more the angel knew what he wished to know, and said, "The score of this symphony is the scroll of the Torah, which commences with the letter Bet, endless and eternal, and continues with each instrument playing in turn as it appears on the page, holding its note until the next letter has been sounded, and then breathing in and out a full breath."
And when Reb Nachman listened to that music he arrived at a new understanding of the Torah and realized that among its many mysteries there was one level on which it existed only as pure music.34

Nachman's discovery of the connection between music and the Torah (Scipio's cosmos) is one that will secure in him the ability to retain a devotional posture (Scipio's political equanimity) on Earth.

In his critically acclaimed 2002 novel, The Dream of Scipio, British writer Iain Pears places copies of Cicero's document in the hands of three male characters from three distinct historical periods from Europe's past: late antiquity, the high middle ages, and between the two world wars of the twentieth century. All three characters are depicted at several stages of their personal development, and each, for his own reason, in times of crisis and in times of joy, forms a bond with Cicero's short work which subsequently becomes an essential guide and comfort for each.

34Ibid., 115.
One of those characters, tutored by a medieval lord named Monsignor Ceccani, muses over his first stealthy childhood reading of "The Dream of Scipio":

There was not such a wide range of books available; some Aristotle, in a Latin translation of an Arabic version of the Greek; the church fathers; Boethius, whom he had loved for his wisdom; Augustine, whom he had admired for his humanity. But it was the day he discovered Cicero that changed everything. The beauty of the prose, the noble elegance of the ideas, the lofty majesty of the conceptions were like draughts of strong wine, and when he first discovered, then read, the one manuscript Ceccani possessed, he wept with joy for a full twenty minutes before immediately starting again.^^

Pear's auspicious inclusion of Boethius in this excerpt, besides revealing Pear's own erudition and his underscoring the cosmic nature of several music scenes interspersed throughout the book, is significant in understanding Boethius's conception of *musica mundana*. Pear's characters flourish when they pay heed to the cosmic order as outlined in Cicero's short work, and they falter when they do not.

Evidence suggests that Boethius was very aware of Cicero's version of the Music of the Spheres. Besides having written an entire commentary on Cicero's approach to logic,^6^ Boethius devotes his most ostentatious discussion of *musica mundana* to an examination of "The Dream of Scipio." After arguing in favor of Cicero's planetary order and their corresponding musical pitches, which is the reverse of that of Pythagoras, he assigns precise pitch names to those planets:

Tullius [Cicero] thus regards the earth as silent—that is, immobile. Next after the earth he assigns the lowest sound to the moon, which is closest to silence, so that the moon is the proslambanomenos, Mercury the hypate hypaton, Venus parhypate hypaton, the sun the lichanos hypaton, Mars the Hypate meson, Jupiter the parhypate meson, Saturn the lichanos meson, and the highest heaven the mese.^7^

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Such detailed attention to Cicero's writing invites one to imagine a much younger Boethius being deeply moved—like the character in Pear's novel—by his reading of "The Dream of Scipio." To try to understand Boethius's doctrine of *musica mundana*, which is sketchy to begin with, without factoring in Cicero's version of the Music of the Spheres, is to leave Boethius's ideas seemingly vapid.

Although Boethius supplies fewer words on *musica mundana* than either Pythagoras or Cicero, and although some of his ideas about *musica mundana* are partially indebted to these predecessors, what Boethius offers is extremely valuable for its few additions. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, those contributions include his threefold categorization of music, a theory that efficiently places previous theories in a workable context, and he paves the way for future musicologists to continue their conversation about a *musica mundana*. Chapters 2 and 3 of this study attempt to test the last of these contributions by looking at individual case studies.
Chapter Two:

Handel’s Truth-Bearing Muse: Interrogating Starry-Eyed Handelians

Beethoven dying, pointed to the Arnold edition of Handel’s works, which were piled up in a corner of the room, and exclaimed: “There lies the truth!”

When it comes to looking at the Music of the Spheres as an actual explanation for the musical production and originality of some musicians, the case of George Frideric Handel (1685–1759) is a puzzling one. On the one hand, many of Handel’s outspoken contemporaries as well as a host of his admirers over the centuries have regarded what they perceive as the high quality and the sheer fecundity of his compositional output as evidence that his ideas were transcendentally influenced. On the other hand, a close scrutiny of the evidence surrounding Handel’s actual compositional practices, motivations, and habits could easily suggest other explanations for his musical creativity. This chapter examines both possibilities in light of competing items of evidence. As this investigation will hopefully show, the final word on this issue will involve irony. For it will be argued that neither position is entirely wrong. Just as Pythagoras valorized Unity and Number as universal and divine principles operating both macrocosmically and microcosmically, Handel exalted a kind of worldly truth to guide his musical composition. Handel’s relation to this truth is not overwhelmingly obvious, but a convincing case can be made for it. Because this truth is an ordinary flesh-and-blood truth, Handel’s appeal to it can only constitute—at most—a *musica mundana* “effect.”

A fairly recent document that underscores Handel’s possible relation with this truth as a principle in guiding his musical production is a forty-five-minute film which fictionally recreates the three-weeks Handel spent in Dublin, Ireland, composing his best-known oratorio, *The

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*Messiah.* The film, *Handel’s Last Chance,* starring Leon Powell as Handel, was broadcast on HBO in 1996. As one installment of a multi-part series on the lives of famous composers, each film, to cater to a family audience, fabricates a child who temporarily interacts with the composer. Hence, a boy, in this case, and several other characters in the Handel film are fictional constructs, as is the dialogue (including the speeches of Handel) and day-to-day events which transpire in the three weeks during which the film is set. Historical accuracy, in such cases, is easy for viewers to dismiss, and many viewers do the dismissing knowingly. What one hopes for, as in any fictionalization of a historically real composer or musician (such as the more famous *Amadeus* and *Hilary and Jackie*), is some verisimilitude regarding physical likeness and personality traits. After his visit to the wardrobe and makeup department, Leon Powell very convincingly presents the physical Handel so familiar from the portraits. His personality also impressively matches the impatience and cantankerousness one finds in letters, diaries, newspaper accounts and other documents produced by people who knew the composer. For these reasons and several others the film is well worth viewing for those who are curious about what Handel was like as a person. The problem emerges, however, in several speeches Handel delivers to the boy on the subject of truth as a guide to the child's welfare (and by extension a compendium to Handel's own compositional integrity). The theme of truth in the screenwriting of the film—arguably based on actual facts about Handel—makes it one of the few documents to adequately explore that theme. Most of the literature about Handel treats other topics, such as his being influenced from without.

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A cursory skimming of Otto Erich Deutsch’s giant *Documentary Biography of Handel* will quickly reveal how in the many paeans dedicated to Handel during his lifetime, themes of transcendental inspiration abound. One unnamed poet whose rather amusing work appeared in the *Post Boy* on March 7\(^{th}\), 1723, made a direct reference to the Music of the Spheres shortly after the premiers of Handel’s operas *Flavius* and *Julius Caesar*:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Crown’d by the gen’ral Voice, at last you shew} \\
\text{The utmost Length that } \textit{Musick’s} \text{ Force can go:} \\
\text{What Pow’r on Earth, but Harmony like Thine,} \\
\text{Cou’d } \textit{Britain’s} \text{ jarring Sons e’er hope to join?} \\
\text{Like } \textit{Musick’s} \text{ diff’ring Sounds we all agree,} \\
\text{Form’d by thy skilful Hand to } \textit{Harmony}: \\
\text{Our Souls so tun’d, that } \textit{Discord} \text{ grieves to find} \\
\text{A whole fantastick Audience of a Mind:} \\
\text{The Deaf have found their Ears,—their Eyes are Blind. . . .}
\end{align*}
\]

To please this vitious Taste, what Arts were try’d?  
Our *Beaus* have scolded, and our *Belles* have cry’d,  
And famous *Op’ras* reign’d their Day,—and dy’d:  
Tho’ crowded Theatres your Numbers grac’d,  
To sooth the tastless Fews, you were displac’d;  
Pleasure too exquisite ‘cause we enjoy’d,  
Some eminent old Women they imploy’d;  
Whose fine-spun Notes, like *Music* of the Spheres,  
Quite out of reach, were lost to mortal ears.\(^4\)

Although this anonymous laudation is not exceedingly flattering to mere mortal ears, its speaker does make it clear that those who have been supernally cultivated will be in for an “exquisite” treat.

The remainder of this chapter will examine several specimens of lore that have arisen around the countenance of Handel—some during his lifetime and some after—which, like this poem, comprise a Handelian mythology. Against these writings several details about Handel’s quotidian habits of composing will be contrasted. Hopefully, the results of this comparison will bolster the

\(^4\)Ibid., 158–159.
thesis that Handel’s musical production operated without muses or heavenly spheres, yet when it comes to the ideal of truth to which Handel attached himself, a kind of *musica mundana* "effect" can be seen to operate.

One of the ways in which Handel is perceived as a receptacle of ideas by his star-struck contemporaries and later by his most romantic-thinking critics is the way in which people conveniently categorize him as a “genius.” Once it is granted that a person is a musical genius (or, by extension, a “talented” or “gifted” musician, or in more recent parlance, one who is “genetically predisposed” with an aptitude for music), one has already taken a shortcut through the complexities of that same person’s musical education. Although it is obvious that some children (and adults) “catch on” to musical ideas (or mathematical concepts, athletic skills, hobbies, and so forth) more readily than others, much anecdotal evidence for actual musical skill and proclivity consists in the time spent learning music and practicing one's instrument or voice and the quality and efficiency of the musical instruction one receives.

In the way of example, biographies of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart contain many anecdotes about Mozart’s early precociousness as a performer and budding composer. But when one realizes that much of Mozart’s early instruction came by way of his father, Leopold, who was himself an accomplished performer and an able composer, and when one considers the many hours per day that the Mozart children were required to practice, it is less surprising that early signs of remarkable skill emerge. Similarly, Franz Liszt spent ten hours a day practicing piano and would later, as a keyboard pedagogue, become an ambassador of the “practice, practice, practice” approach to musical progress. Handel is no exception to this pattern. Although his elderly physician father, who would die while Handel was a young teen, discouraged Handel from pursuing his interest in music, the child would nonetheless secrete himself to the attic while
his father was making house calls to practice his clandestinely smuggled-in clavichord. Before long, with his father’s reluctant permission after the latter had been coerced by the local baron, Handel would be allowed to study privately with a remarkable teacher by the name of Zachow.\(^5\) Handel, like Mozart and Liszt, was a child prodigy whose musical abilities are more easily explained by an intense immersion in music than by \textit{musica mundana}.

Before Handel was out of his teens he would become a professional musician, playing organ at church services and composing cantatas every week. He would spend time working and studying in Hamburg, then several years in Italy where he would learn the craft of composing Italian opera.\(^6\) Roman Rolland thematizes his biography with Handel’s eclectic approach by declaring, "who can fail to see that the conception and practice of Handel, and indeed the very essence of his genius, was the absorption of a hundred different styles!"\(^7\) Handel’s apprenticeship, therefore, is one of sheer industry, with no opportunity to listen to the Music of the Spheres. Such a source would not even have to exist for Handel to compose his music.

Having established that Handel had, at an early age, like Mozart and Liszt, begun his career with an expansive education, with the need to perform and compose frequently and professionally, and with an assimilation of diverse styles, it would be fitting to examine what we know about Handel’s actual compositional practices. One of the reasons, I believe, why so many of the champions of Handel’s music are inclined to explain his compositional fecundity in terms of external inspiration is the sheer magnitude of his output. A simple mathematical division of his life-span by the number of works he produced reveals the necessity of composing at an


\(^7\) Rolland, 6.
astonishing speed with little or no time between compositional projects for rest or diversion.

Handel himself, on more than one occasion, admitted that he composed "like the devil." Rolland goes on to say:

[H]e wrote as one speaks, he composed as one breathes. He never sketched out on paper in order to prepare his definite work. He wrote straight off as he improvised, and in truth he seems to have been the greatest improvisor that ever was. Whether extemporising on the organ at the midday services in St. Paul’s Cathedral, or playing the capriccios during the entr’actes of his oratorios at Covent Garden—or improvising on the clavier in the orchestra at the opera, at Hamburg or in London, or “when he accompanied the singers in a most marvelous fashion, adapting himself to their temperament and virtuosity, without having any written notes,” he astounded the connoisseurs of his time; and Mattheson, who may hardly be suspected of any indulgence towards him, proclaimed that he had no equal in this. One can truly say that “he improvised every minute of his life.” He wrote his music with such an impetuosity of feeling, and such a wealth of ideas, that his hand was constantly lagging behind his thoughts, and in order to keep pace with them at all he had to note them down in an abbreviated manner.

This discussion of baroque improvisational practices helps one realize the great advantage electronic recording has brought to modern improvisation—especially with regard to jazz. Nowadays, one can “capture” an improvisational session on vinyl, tape or digital memory without having to try to notate the stream of music into something that other musicians can play. To understand periods of musical history prior to the advent of recording, one needs to consider (1) how much actual music—of a dynamic and organic nature—has been lost due to the need to interrupt periods of musical creativity so that one can “jot down” as best one can that which one can hold in memory for the required few minutes, and (2) how magnificently composers endowed with the proper craft could nevertheless inscribe so much in the notation. If, indeed, as Rolland reports, Handel’s “hand was constantly lagging behind his thoughts,” one is inclined to

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8 Quoted in Rolland, 14 n.3.
9 Rolland, 115.
understand Handel as one who yearned to preserve that which was improvised but who was constantly challenged by the decay of musical memory necessitated by the sluggish process of writing out one's dictation. Even the most efficient system of notational shorthand—one system of which Handel devised for his own composition\(^\text{10}\)—could not hope to capture the entire free flow of musical ideas. Had Handel, like some composers—Wagner, Verdi, Sibelius, and Berg, to name a few—mastered the craft of composing without the intervention of an instrument, his writing of notes would, perhaps, have been slightly more rapid than they already were. But both his improvisational sessions and his compositional sessions relied heavily on his use of a keyboard instrument. In order for his compositional ideas to flow in the most non-interrupted fashion, he would have needed to practice on his instrument very frequently. The evidence indicates that this is exactly what he did. Handel “is said to have practised so much on his harpsichord that the keys were worn hollow.”\(^\text{11}\)

According to those who have most closely analyzed Handel's approach to composition, it is his method of improvisation that wins the most consensus as Handel's starting point in the creative process. One very well-known analyst is Winton Dean:

Handel’s habit of improvisation was linked with his composition method. He worked fast. While his careful dating of autographs indicates that nearly all his major works were committed to paper within an astonishingly short space of time (the three weeks spent on Messiah is the most famous of many examples), he undoubtedly worked out ideas in advance, both in his head and in sketches; a number of the latter survive, and they sometimes show a single idea subjected to repeated polishing almost in the manner of Beethoven. The autographs themselves often continue the process; but the initial impulse came from his fingers on the keyboard, or the aural associations of verbal imagery, or both together. Morell left a revealing account of Handel at work on Judas Maccabaeus. As soon as the librettist suggested the text of the chorus "Fall’n is the foe" he sat down at the harpsichord and began to improvise on a theme.

\(^{10}\) Rolland, 115. See appendix for pictures of some of Handel’s hastily-written notation.

\(^{11}\) Stanley Sadie, Handel (London: John Calder, 1962), 175.
clearly suggested by the image in the words, "and immediately carried on the composition as we have it in that most admirable chorus." A year later, when Morell gave him the words of Cleopatra’s air “Convey me to some peaceful shore” in *Alexander Balus*, he cried out "Damn your iambics!” Morell offered to change them to trochees and went into the next room to do so, only to find about three minutes later that Handel had set them as they stood.\(^\text{12}\)

In these and other anecdotes Handel is depicted as the non-temperamental craftsperson who is capable of composing under nearly any circumstances. If for no other reason than that of logistical awkwardness, the likelihood of communication from the beyond, here, is preempted; obviously, when he is cursing the libretto for its rigid metrical structure, he is neither in cahoots with the muses, nor in communion with his truth-engendering daemon; nor is he tapping into a stellar code in some placeless, timeless realm. To create music on demand through the craft of improvisation requires neither an external source nor an infinitely large immanent well of information. There are many approaches to improvisation, and Handel’s approach seems to have been a spontaneous act during which his thought experiments worked out on the keyboard led to the—often accidental?—creation of new material. “[I]f we ask whether Handel composed spontaneously,” says David Ross Hurley, “we must answer ‘yes.’”\(^\text{13}\) But there are conditions pertaining to the material that Handel would keep. Handel’s operas, oratorios, and instrumental works contain elements of the unexpected and a good deal of dramatic flair. Even in works as familiar as the *Messiah*, the *Royal Water Music*, or his three-and-a-half-hour opera *Tamerlano*, Handel’s irregular phrasing, his ever-shifting timbres and his kaleidoscopic harmonic textures

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\(^\text{13}\)David Ross Hurley, “Handel’s Compositional Process,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, ed. Donald Burrows (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 144. Hurley goes on to say that “if we ask whether composition for Handel involved forethought and planning, we must answer ‘yes’; if we ask if Handel’s revisions alter musical form while maintaining essential melodic content, we must answer ‘yes’; if we ask if Handel abandons his original melodic ideas in the course of revision, the answer is ‘yes’. The fact that our brief overview of Handel’s compositional processes have revealed differing tendencies merely reflects the multiplicity of techniques and styles at Handel’s fingertips” (144).
allow his works to remain relatively surprising throughout. In his use of driving rhythms (such as in the opening movement of the *Royal Fireworks Music*), in his fashioning of thin, diaphanous, gossameric passages (such as in the counter-tenor arias in *Tamerlano*), as well as in his superb treatment of motivic development, Handel’s music possesses a ubiquitous dramatic quality only partially developed in the music of his contemporaries, such as Bach, Vivaldi, and Alessandro Scarlatti. Because the majority of Handel’s musical compositions can be characterized as dramatic, he either sought to create music with these features, or he selected out and retained such music from an originally larger body of musical raw material. Some of these features have been identified by other listeners:

Handel was a master of the unexpected on every level; not only where a dramatic context required an element of surprise but in manifold details of line, harmony of rhythm, and especially in length of phrase. It is this that articulates and imparts energy and expression to his melodies, which are often unsymmetrical and extended longer than the ear expects. He could be plain and foursquare, especially in ceremonial works designed for large forces in public buildings or the open air, where intimate subtleties would be wasted.14

As tempting as it is to imagine “pure” music or some kind of musical code flowing into the consciousness of a composer and possessing the composer’s pen to produce this music, it would be nearly impossible to apply this picture to Handel who wrote (sometimes without subtlety) to accommodate particular venues. Composers who supposedly receive their ideas from the beyond would spend little or no time revising a composition. Copy editing for typographical errors would be necessary of course, but to delete or add notes, or to change the basic shape of a phrase would be tantamount to corrupting the message whose initial reception would never be open to alteration. In the case of Handel, we find much evidence that revision of his music—often serious revision—was a matter of course. Alluding to the Handelian scholar, Winton Dean, Graham Cummings articulates discreet stages in Handel’s revision strategy:

Winton Dean has identified two, or possibly three, stages in Handel's normal working procedure. It would seem that the first stage was to produce a draft or a "skeleton score," comprising bass line and top part (first violin or voice) only, of a whole act and sometimes of a whole oratorio, adding dates generally at the beginning and end of each act and always at the end of the oratorio. . . .

The second stage, which Dean has suggested occurred "without [an] [sic] appreciable interval", would consist of finishing the detail of individual movements, and probably included the completion of the remaining instrumental parts, and the addition of occasional dynamics and articulation marks. Possibly a third and final stage was to write the music of the recitatives, though it is more likely that this was done as part of the second stage.15

As this and other evidence indicates, Handel's compositional procedure was often piecemeal. According to Edward J. Dent, Handel's early works show signs that his compositional method for creating effective phrases often involved "thinking upwards from the bass rather than downwards from the melody."16 As it turns out, in those rare times "When Handel fails to revise, we are sometimes left with careless workmanship."17

One aspect of Handel's compositional method which has become legend is that of his frequent borrowing of musical themes from other composers. Many critics find Handel's borrowing as redemptive and innocuous since in his treatment of the music he often transformed mediocre music into music that was rich and attractive;18 but as Sealey Taylor points out, despite recent myths to the contrary, "plagiarism was regarded by educated musicians in the eighteenth century exactly as it is regarded by them in the twentieth."19 For this reason and others, some


19Taylor, 176.
musicologists have proposed other explanations for Handel's borrowing. John Roberts has gone so far as to suggest that Handel "had a basic lack of facility in inventing original ideas." This possibility has prompted Andrew Porter to characterize Handel "as a Great Arranger rather than a Great Composer." Since the majority of Handel's music was not plagiarized, however, and since most of that music shows the same attention to craft as that of his borrowed music refurbishings, one may partly pass off these remarks as somewhat exaggerated. Nevertheless, it is well documented that Handel borrowed profusely and borrowing—to any degree—further subverts the likelihood of such music having its origins in the beyond (unless one considers the preposterous idea that the original composer's material was inspired and Handel had a knack for only borrowing music in which he identified inspiration). Furthermore, if it is even partly true that Handel occasionally, or frequently, struggled to invent new raw musical material, the free flow of musical reception would have been, at least during those times, prohibited.

Despite all these details about Handel's composing techniques that thwart the plausibility of external influence from the beyond—cosmic or otherwise—the number of people who have felt otherwise is legion. In addition to the panegyric cited above, several other people in Handel's London sang Handel's praises in verse. One of those hymns compares Handel to Orpheus, one of the figures in Greek mythology who symbolized musical creativity. No less than the notorious Cardinal Benedetto Panfili submitted these lines:

\[\textit{Aria}\]

Orpheus with music and with lay
Made pause the prowling beasts of prey
And charmed birds on the wing;
Stones, tree-trunks rooted in the ground,

\[20\] Quoted in Ellen T. Harris, "Integrity and Improvisation in the Music of Handel," \textit{Journal of Musicology} 8, no. 3 (summer 1990): 305.

\[21\] Quoted in Harris, 302.
All moved at his Lyre’s compelling sound,  
But he never made them sing.

Recitative
O greater, then, than Orpheus, thou  
Hast from my Muse such inspiration wrung . . . 22

Not only does Handel come out the winner in this comparison between he and Orpheus, he is also acknowledged to draw his inspiration from at least one of the proverbial muses. Orpheus is an interesting comparisand here since he was able to play beautiful music on his lyre only if he was in touch with the muses. Another symbol of music for the ancient Greeks is Apollo, the patron god of music who could tame wild beasts with his lyre. "To Mr. Handel, on His Admetus," attributed to Henry Carey, mentions this god:

Hail unexhausted source of Harmony!  
Thou Chief of all Apollo’s tuneful Sons,  
In whom the Knowledge of all magick Numbers,  
Or Sound melodious, is concentrated!  
The Envy, or the Wonder, of mankind  
May terminate, but never can the lays:  
For, when absorb’d in Elemental Flame,  
This World shall vanish, Music will exist;  
Then Thine, first of the rest, shall mount the Skies,  
Where, with its Heav’n born Parent soon commixing,  
It breaks through Trumps of Seraphims and Angels;  
And falls the heav’n with endless harmony. 23

In this poem, Carey describes music as existing in a cosmic state which is not affected by human time. Mortals may vanish, but the music will remain in the ethers. The place where music is born operates according to the Pythagorean principle of Number to which Handel alone of all composers holds the key enabling the music to fall from heaven and enter human ears. Invoking Apollo here crystalizes Handel’s calling, making him the musically chosen and blessed one. The


23 Attributed to Henry Carey, British Journal (March 25, 1727), in Deutsch 206.
language of this laudation is similar to other poetic descriptions of artists and their artworks, but
the degree to which Handel is praised in this poem is rare, showing how much the English in the
1720s and 1730s had adopted this composer as their own. As in other eighteenth-century
artforms that employ gods, these poems are not intended to be read completely literally; but the
authors of such works still wanted to make a point, so even if a small degree of this poem's
fiction were endowed with serious intent, the notion of star-born music would win credulity with
some eighteenth-century readers.

If ancient gods were approached skeptically in the eighteenth century, the Christian Deity
was much more than metaphor. During the baroque era, mythology provided a safe avenue for
works of drama and art to explore or comment upon social situations; the scriptures of
Christianity, on the other hand, which were never perceived as myth, were treated as sacred. One
unsigned poem published at the time of Handel's death speaks of Handel's divine connection
made in his music:

To melt the soul, to captivate the ear,
(Angels his melody might deign to hear)
T'anticipate on Earth the joys of Heaven,
Was Handel's task; to him the pow'r was given!24

Although this poem could be approached by people from diverse denominational backgrounds
and even though Handel retained his Lutheran ties for life, his main English audience was made
up of Anglicans. Members and clergy within the Anglican Church had developed their own
version of the sublime in art that was nearly doctrinal in its application. Alexander Shapiro,
citing Nicholas Brady, characterizes the eighteenth-century sense of the religious sublime which
many English people of Handel's time and later interpreters of his work—but never Handel
himself—involed to explain Handel's music:

24"On George Frederick Handel, Esq. Who Performed in His Celebrated Oratorio of Messiah, on the 6th, and Dyed
the 14th Instant." Originally published in the Gazetteer (April 17, 1759), in Deutsch 817.

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The ecstasy that the Anglicans associated with church music was essentially the sublime experience of God and his Church Triumphant. As Nicholas Brady rhapsodized, by praising God man is "entertained with the employment of angels . . . We have an intercourse, as it were with those heavenly inhabitants . . . This divine art [of music] has such an admirable secret of uniting earth and heaven together, that scale of musick appear to me, to be the exact counterpart of Jacobs ladder." This sense of the sublime figures into dedicatory poems and other places. Although similar to the notion of the sublime developed centuries earlier by Longinus (first century) and the concept of "intellectual beauty" by Plotinus (third century), the religious sublime in an artwork consists in a recognizable codification of divine grace. One anonymous poem which takes on the form of an acrostic on the letters of Handel's name, again commemorates Handel's passing in 1759:

He's gone, the Soul of harmony is fled!
And warbling Angels hover round him dead.  
Never, no, never since the Tide of Time,  
Did Music know a Genius so sublime!
Each mighty Harmonist that's gone before,  
Lessen'd to Mites when we his Works explore.

Besides poets, many of Handel's contemporaries characterized his music as sublime. The music historian and personal acquaintance of Handel, Charles Burney, for instance, called Handel the "architect of the sublime." Mainwaring, Handel's first biographer and contemporary, described Handel's music by saying that "the ear is filled with such a glow of harmony, as leaves the mind in a kind of heavenly extasy."29


27 "An Acrostic," from *Public Advertiser* (April 17, 1759), in Deutsch 818.


29 Mainwaring, 191. Incidentally, Mainwaring's book is the first full-length biography of a composer.
At this juncture where poetry, harmony and heaven inhabit the same plane of discourse, it must be kept in mind that the notion of the Music of the Spheres has since its Pythagorean beginning been subject to evolution. Thus, in the words of J. A. Philip, "We may find some confirmation for the suggestion that it [the idea of a Music of the Spheres] was a poetic insight in the fact that it outlived the musical and astronomical theories on which it was based." Cicero had applied the mathematical commonalities between the movements of the planets and the tuning of musical notes to a third phenomenon: government. Boethius’s conception of *musica mundana* would synthesize the Pythagorean and Ciceronian models, and it would embrace such phenomena as the cycle of the seasons. By the time of Jacques de Liège (ca.1260–ca.1330), the “spheres”—the “mundana” in the Music of the Spheres—would encompass more than the stars and planets. The heaven of celestial bodies will start looking like the heaven where the god of Christianity resides:

[C]elestial or divine music considers the category of transcendent things . . . .
Now transcendent things are metaphysical things.
Metaphysical derives from *meta*, which means “beyond,” and *physis*, “nature,” because it deals with things transcending natural, i.e., movable things . . .

If . . . anyone wishes to learn more of the things that celestial or divine music has to compare, he should frequent the schools of sacred Theology, become a humble and diligent student there, acquire that knowledge by which he may be prepared to obtain celestial life, and thus perfectly pursue this type of music of which we have been speaking.

This type of music may not unsuitably be included under *musica mundana*, since every creature enclosed by the bounds of the world as a whole, existing as finite and limited, find itself encompassed and defined here.

Notions of the sublime had not been around as long as the Music of the Spheres, but by the time Boethius codified the latter under the rubric of *musica mundana*, the sublime had already become

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fully established. If *musica mundana* had already, three-and-a-half centuries before Handel’s birth, become associated with the divine, then the sublime would be nothing more than a quality that adheres in an object of art that allows those who come into contact with it to see, hear, feel, or otherwise recognize, to a lesser or greater degree, an “imprint” in it of the heavens (whether cosmic or divine).

Handel’s so-called “heavenly” music, says Mainwaring, "coming purely from Nature, is the more strongly, and the more generally felt."32 These remarks supply a good period description of a this kind of religious/cosmic sublime. If composers literally recreate a sense of this sublime in their music or if their compositions materialize directly out of Nature, such music would have to be heaven-sent or at least cosmically-grounded. The number of scholars who still use words like "sublime," "genius," "talented," or "gifted," to describe Handel or his music—too numerous to mention by name—implies that some of them accept some form of transcendent inspiration to describe Handel’s music.

At this point and in light of the evidence—or lack thereof—it would seem that the only valid explanation of Handel's creativity is one that does not allude to external influence. Such a thesis could not be final, however, without taking into consideration one aspect of Handel's music that clearly invokes something at times seemingly close to the cosmological. Throughout Handel's life and career, one particular theme, that of truth, recurs frequently.

The theme of truth is something that figures prominently in discussions of Handel and his works, but except for comments in passing no single study has made a primary focus of these observations. A cursory view of this literature shows that this truth for Handel is rooted in the earth; it is a no-nonsense truth that shows an affinity for what was the "common person" of the

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32Ibid., 191–192.
time. In fact, Percy Young, describing this aspect of Handel's music in his oratorio writing, proclaims that "his mind rarely moves outside the ambit of the common. But his imagination isolates the salient and enshrines it in permanency." This region of the common is more real, more true, for Handel than just about anything else and it is this truth that most commonly figures into his music. Perhaps David Schulenberg has in mind some of Handel's numerous starry-eyed critics when he remarks that "One attends to the music, not some encoded 'message,' even if the latter was (ostensibly) the music's original purpose, what the composer thought it was his task to convey." Instead of trying to grapple with, then translate, some cosmic code, Handel, accordingly, tried with his music to convey a sense of the commonplace—an extraordinary commonplace to be sure, but one that was in keeping with a modest worldview regarding humans and their relationships. Along these lines, even a biographer as romantically-inclined as Rolland makes this rather surprising observation:

Handel was not an artist lost in introspection. He watched all around him, he listened, and observed. Sight was for him a source of inspiration, hardly of less importance than hearing. . . . It has been remarked that his blindness (which should have rendered his hearing still more sensitive, his creative powers translating everything into sonorous dreams) soon paralysed his hearing when its principle source of renewal was withdrawn.

If this is true, and much of Handel's music highlights visual imagery as mentioned here, we see a man who was mesmerized by the \textit{a posteriori} world of the senses more than by some transcendent (or immanent) \textit{a priori} otherworld.

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33 Percy Young, \textit{The Oratorios of Handel} (London: Dennis Dobson, 1949), 37.


Handel's truth is seen by these and a minority of other observers as obtaining in the domain of realism. His realism, especially as depicted in his operas and oratorios on classical themes, often made him as sympathetic toward the realist virtuous heathens in his dramas as, or even more so than, his more idealistically-bent Christians. Sadie sees this as an important aspect of Handel's composing persona:

He was essentially a realist rather than an idealist. His attitude to heathens in the oratorios can be linked with this sympathy: clearly he found them more consistently interesting and stimulating than he did their adversaries. They may be savage, but only because they know no better; their music depicts their gay, pleasure-loving irresponsibility as opposed to the nobility and high purpose of the Israelites or Christians. Handel does not condemn; he understands.36

The last part of Sadie's remark, very consistent with contemporary descriptions of Handel, that the composer was committed to understanding what he observed, may help explain how and why Handel could compose at such utter, breakneck rapidity. His world, eighteenth-century London, provided a bounteous reservoir for a composer who sought the truth—realism—of the streets to fuel his compositions.

What Handel transcribed into his music was his understanding of and passionate interest in the human condition. In describing Handel's acute perspicacity of things human, Dean says that "it is clear that Handel's insight into the vicissitudes of human nature was subject to no identifiable limit."37 The human condition, or "human nature," as Dean calls it, receives particularly deft treatment in Handel's operas, and it is in human relationships that one sees that condition of nature emerge. In Tamerlano, one sees musical treatment of human pettiness, desire, power-struggles, and nonsentimental instances of father-daughter love. Young is not the first scholar to observe that "He wrote not only with more certainty of style [than 'his lesser

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36 Sadie, Handel, 173.
contemporaries’], but also with conviction about the thing he most valued: human relationships.^^ There is a sense in which Handel's operas constitute a fairly precise compendium of eighteenth-century humanism.

If Handel's operas reveal human conditions by focusing on relationships between persons, many of his oratorios portray humans apropos their relationships to their religion. It should be noted, however, that even in his most sacred oratorios, Handel focuses more on the human than on the divine—a stance that is altogether removed from Boethius's *musica mundana*. Citing Edward Fitzgerald (who championed non-Western poetry in his translations), Dean is emphatic about this distinction in Handel's professional personality:

> Although it was a Victorian, Edward Fitzgerald, who with sure insight called him 'a good old pagan at heart' (a judgment that in no way impugns the sincerity of his Christian beliefs), this prince of public entertainers, a pantheist and hedonist who loved to depict the sensual pleasures, not least when they transgressed the stricter ethical principles, and who was repelled by the barren negativity of the Puritan, was by a singular irony transformed into a marble monument of respectability, a moral lawgiver clad in a massive wig with his finger pointing at the heavens.^^

The irony here is that as all of these scholars make clear, Handel was the very antithesis of the starry-eyed composer as depicted in the most famous statue of him. He was indeed religious, but his religion was one of concentration as opposed to contemplation, of hard work rather than sporadic inspiration. Jonathan Keates ponders these aspects of Handel's approach to his work, and sees Handel as one who helps provide for our own understanding of ourselves:

> What in the end can we take from him? His virtues are hardly modish ones in our own age. His spirituality is essentially human, rooted in an experience of the world and linked with an awareness of individuals in relation to one another. He does not ask us to grovel and cringe, imbued with a sense of our own pettiness, either before his achievements or those of a divine power. Instead he invites us

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^^Young, “Handel the Man,” 5.

to look at ourselves as we are, noble and preposterous, dignified and vile, to understand the complexities of our nature and what it is truly capable of. The operas and oratorios, thus considered, represent the most comprehensive illustration of human sensibility ever achieved by any composer.40

It is implied here that Handel was concerned at least as much about the audience for whom he wrote his works as he was about the characters in his operas and oratorios who received his musical mold. Young sums up this very human aspect of Handel’s oratorios nicely: “We notice [in Handel’s religious works] that the divinity of Christ seldom appears, whereas the humanity of Christ does . . . . The via dolorosa in Handel’s thought is a human way . . . . He loved his fellow men.”41 Besides loving his fellow humans, it becomes apparent in his work and in studies of them that he loved the kind of truth that’s conducive to this earthy, no-nonsense human love.

As a side-note, this truth/realism that Handel was always close to in his work could operate satisfactorily even if he had been oblivious of working with it and incorporating it in his music. But there is evidence that before Handel died he was aware of his connection to this truth. During his last few months, Handel started becoming blind, which for him, as Rolland and others argue, was more devastating for his composing than losing his hearing. Nevertheless, with the help of his librettist and out of the ashes of several of his previous works, Handel created the phoenix of an oratorio on the subject of this earthy kind of truth. If the work has its weaknesses, being too didactic would be one of them. Ruth Smith describes this work, The Triumph of Time and Truth (1759), as an example “of eighteenth-century moral psychology, defining and discriminating between differing states of mind and emotion and forms of behaviour in order to


41Young, “Handel the Man,” 9.
assist listeners to the propitious ordering of their own lives." With the Triumph of Time and truth, Handel, perhaps because he was forced to by his health, finally laid down his pen.

At this point it is necessary to briefly broach the topic of Boethius's second type of music, *musica humana*. In order for musicians to perform or compose music at the most elementary level of Boethius's three types of music, *musica instrumentalis*, it is first necessary for the musician to serve as the "processor" or "assimilator" of musical information. In Boethius's musical worldview that "processing" activity occurs at the intermediary stage of *musica humana*.

In the majority of recent theories of music-making and musical comprehension, that human stage is treated as no more than an end-all for musical production. Accordingly, musical influence for the so-called "end-all" theoretician would be restricted merely to environmental assimilation (music the person has been exposed to; the type and quality of musical instruction he or she has received, and the imbibing of other environmental/cultural factors) in combination with the craft of creating new musical interpretations or compositions based on the incorporation of information from the reservoir of learned musical ideas along with the deployment of accidental or experimental juxtapositions. What end-all theories do not allow for or account for are musical influences based on a precipitous transmission of information from a formidably transcendent source to an immanent locus in the musician's mind.

Boethius's *musica humana* hypothesis see the human level as an intermediary position between an external source (*musica mundana*) and the actual musical end-product (*musica instrumentalis*). Such words as "medium," "vehicle," "middle-person," "vessel," "channel," or "conduit" figure into the vocabulary of adherents of this interpretation. Such theorists see the musician (or as Keith Jarrett who is the subject of the next chapter depicts himself) as a kind of

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radio receiver or antenna that picks up signals from some external source (the cosmic energy, codified information strands, spirits of the dead, God, telepathic messages from a live sender, auras, and so on). Once this information is received, it is up to the musician to decode, translate, transcribe, or transpose this information into a format suitable to his or her voice, instrument, baton, or musical score.

From the evidence we have about Handel's beliefs and attitudes about his own compositional methods, he would no doubt summarily dismiss any suggestion that he ever served in the role of medium between a transcendent source and his musical scores as outrageously superstitious and blatantly egomaniacal. There is, however, another possible interpretation of musica humana, one very much in keeping with Boethius's scant remarks on the subject that retains some aspects of a middle-person kind of role, but one in which direct communication with sources from the beyond is de-necessitated.

While it is true that Pythagoras claimed to be able to actually hear the Music of the Spheres, implying that he was in some way in direct communication with cosmic phenomena, Boethius, on the other hand, suggests that what happens at the level of musica mundana and what happens at the level of musica instrumentalis merely coincide. Thus, for Boethius, musica mundana does not require one to be in direct communication with the "beyond" in order to operate at the level of musica instrumentalis. His theory only requires that what one does at the microcosmic level(s) (musica humana and musica instrumentalis) imitates, consciously or not, what happens at the macrocosmic level (musica mundana).

In his book, Grammatical Man, about information systems across several levels, Jeremy Campbell provides compelling evidence that what happens in one informational system may mirror or resemble what happens in another system. Citing Robin Lakoff, Campbell compares
historically and geographically disparate languages which, despite their isolation from each other, still have "about the same number of rules" and "about the same amount of syntax." Extending this idea, whether one studies Sanskrit, English, or Haussa, one will discover in all of these languages that its words can only be classified as nouns, verbs, pronouns, adverbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, articles, and so forth. This latest example is not Campbell's, but he does go on to compare informational structures between paradigms in physics, chemistry, biology, neurology, psychology, linguistics, art (including a plethora of musical examples), politics, history, sociology, computer science, and religion to show similarities between the size, ordering, and structuring of these various informational systems. If and when Handel makes truth an operant impetus in the making of some of his music, he would not be required, according to Campbell's model, to "tap into" or be in communication with other systems sharing similar informational structures. Hence, it is possible to observe a musica mundana "effect" in Handel's composing that requires no "tuning in."

This chapter began with a discussion of truth as it is treated in the short film Handel's Last Chance. In that film, truth is specifically shown to mean (a) clear-sighted lucidity, (b) honesty about what is in one's own heart and mind (one's deeper voice, or daemon), and (c) a desire to dignify that which is both real and special about one's world and those who inhabit it. Truth, as thusly delineated, and as it is explored in this chapter, could be argued to originate from some cosmic or divine source. But a simpler explanation would recognize the scaffolding of this truth as structurally similar to the scaffolding of other structures in other places. On a less abstract note, one sees that truth for Handel relies on components common to alertness for the Buddhist, lucidity for the logician, impartiality for the judge, concentration for the athlete, clarity for the

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mathematician, and focus for the saxophonist. No two of these people need to be in communication with each other, nor do any of these people have to be "tapped into" an archetypal, cosmic, or supernatural truth resting in tranquility in some remote or transcendent Elysium.
Chapter Three:
Keith Jarrett in the Zone: Music as Tapping Sources

Trying to identify Handel's muse is made challenging partly since Handel provides no direct claims to defend the thesis that his musical activities are influenced by external forces; a handful of Handel's contemporaries and three centuries of scholars have argued on his behalf, but Handel is silent about any purported musica mundana in his work. With Keith Jarrett, the problem is reversed. Jarrett's muse, acknowledged by Jarrett himself as quite real and cosmic,\(^1\) is sometimes discounted by his commentators and critics.\(^2\)

Jarrett, with constant reinforcement from his mother and father, suspected his capacity for inspiration at an early age. Born in Allentown, Pennsylvania in 1945, Jarrett traces his heritage on his father's side to Ireland and Scotland and his mother's side to Hungary.\(^3\) It would be no exaggeration to describe Jarrett's interest in music and in performing it as extending as far back as his infancy. In his full-length biography of Jarrett, Ian Carr reports that "His mother recognized his prodigious musical talent immediately and on her insistence, Daniel Jarrett bought an old piano for fifty dollars at an auction sale. The infant Keith took to it instantly. He would play along with melodies on the radio and it was soon apparent that he had perfect pitch and a natural ability to improvise."\(^4\) The family would never have much money and the father would

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\(^2\) John Rockwell, *All-American Music: Composition in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 182. Rockwell thinks highly of Keith Jarrett as a musician, but argues that he is no medium. Rather, he is "a genuinely romantic artist misplaced in a cynically unromantic time." Rockwell's skepticism is reprised below.

\(^3\) Rockwell, 177. This information is relevant to Jarrett's ultimate distinction as a jazz musician since, as Rockwell explains, "so many people assume that he is black. That assumption is a comment on racial stereotypes in jazz—and, perhaps, despite his own apparent annoyance at the confusion, on his own willingness to exploit such stereotypes, since he wore his hair for years in what looked like an Afro." For further discussion of Jarrett's mistaken blackness, see Solomon, 229.

eventually desert his family (the Jarretts had four sons, Keith being the oldest). Nevertheless, before and after the father left, Keith's parents always assured the young pianist that one room in the house was set aside for musical nurturing. Besides providing a room and moral support, Jarrett's parents possessed a religious worldview which was open to the idea that musicians could tap into sources of inspiration outside themselves. Young Keith's father arrived at this view through his affiliation with Christian Science:

While he [Daniel Jarrett, Keith's father] was away he studied the Bible and went to Christian Science services, eventually becoming converted to that belief, which emphasizes spiritual healing and the unreality of matter and considers disease to be an error of the mind which may be cured, without medical treatment, by the sufferer's Christian faith alone.\(^5\)

Daniel Jarrett would refer to Keith's early success at the piano as evidence of "the scope of his son's gift."\(^6\) The choice of the word "gift" in descriptions of musical ability, or any other ability—a common ascription still used today—implies more than an ability obtained through diligent practice and outstanding instruction. If two children practice equally hard and receive the same instruction from the same teacher, and one student surpasses the other in musical ability or expression, a common explanation for the difference is that one is endowed with a gift while the other is not.

Another word often found alongside "gift" is "talent." Accordingly, some kids have talent, some don't. "Talent" implies a mental (and possibly partly physical) predisposition to the processing of music. "Gift" implies talent that has been instilled into the musician's mind or soul by the cosmos, by the Divinity, or by some other source. Such phrases as "Thank God Almighty for your precious gift!" or "Your talent is written in the stars," are typical of people who

\(^5\) Ibid., 2.

\(^6\) Ibid., 3.
subscribe to a doctrine of transmitted or innate abilities. The word "instinct," which resides closer to the biological or DNA aspect of ability, is often used interchangeably with gift and talent. Yet another word in the parlance of musical inspiration is "calling." Looking back on his early childhood, Carr, in one of his many interviews with his biographical subject makes an apt disclosure:

Keith Jarrett, the eldest son, is perturbed about the influence his example may have had on his brothers: "I had a calling to music. I think I knew that when I was a young kid because of how strong that was and my mother was supportive of that, but I think she treated my brothers as if they would naturally do that too . . . I don't think that all my brothers had such a natural musical reason / [i.e. such a strong calling] and I think they're all confused about the music."?

It should be noted that, except for Keith's brother Scott who has had a brief recording career, his other brothers would not attain anything more than an amateur level of musicianship. "Calling," here, denotes something akin to one's task, mission, purpose, or destiny, and such words can exert great pressure on a child whose elders insist that such a vocation is divinely or cosmically mandated. The word "natural" also figures into this discussion, a word often paired with "born," as in "natural-born" musician, painter, teacher, physician, politician, and so on. This vocabulary and the mixture of popular belief that gave rise to it constituted a significant strand in the young Jarrett's cultural matrix—enough so that teachers and administrators at Jarrett's various elementary schools adopted some of these terms:

The local public (state) school did not want to differentiate between children who were very gifted and those who were not and so Jarrett's parents decided to send him to a private school. There his IQ was tested and found to be at genius level, and so the six-year-old boy, instead of starting in the first grade, was put into the third grade. He remembers: "I was two years younger than everybody else; it wasn't that much fun!"*

7Ibid., 9–10.
8Ibid., 5–6.
Alongside "gift," "talent," "instinct," "calling," and "natural," the word "genius," helps round out this lexicon of stellar, divine or essentialist terms people had used to describe Jarrett's early musical abilities. Jarrett's mother's belief went beyond this vocabulary and appealed directly to God for an explanation of her son's ability: "His mother says: . . . He said to me one time that he didn't like it when people fussed over him, and I said, "Tell you what you do, we believe this talent comes from the Creator through you. When somebody praises you, you send the praise back through you to the Creator."

In his interviews and in references to him in the musicological literature, the adult Jarrett rarely mentions God ostensibly. His own religious proclivities will tend more toward mysticism, especially mystical movements popular during the 1960s and 1970s—Jarrett's halcyon days. David Ake sees the kinds of mysticism to which Jarrett was attracted as reflective of the kinds of ideas that were popular during this period. "[T]rue to his 1960s roots," writes Ake, "with that period's penchant for things mystical, Keith Jarrett seeks to enter a state of inner being that is simultaneously reflected in and shaped by the manner in which he plays." Although Ake doesn't say it directly, that "state of inner being" and "the manner in which he plays" arguably describe Boethius's conceptions of musica humana and musica instrumentalis. If Jarrett's state of inner being during the solo piano concerts is grounded in something "out there," just as, according to Boethius, the cycle of the seasons and the tempering of musical strings is grounded in the motions of the planets, then Jarrett would be in communication with a kind of musica mundana. If, on the other hand, what Jarrett produces at these concerts and what he communicates to his audiences is the result merely of what Ake calls

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9Ibid., 9.

10David Ake, Jazz Cultures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 110.

"a stance reflective of the 1960s ‘counterculture’ milieu from which he and many of his listeners emerged,” then, to the extent that this exposure involves socially-constructed ideologies, Jarrett’s communion with a *musica mundana* is possibly put in doubt. Several listeners and scholars who are skeptical of or unsure about an external source for Jarrett’s inspiration still admire the music he produced during these improvisational concerts. Although Ake agrees that Jarrett’s music originates from an outside source, he is thoughtfully ambiguous about whether that source is environmental or something else. In that chapter of his book devoted to Keith Jarrett (and to the “deep-performance” styles of Bill Evans), Ake declares:

> I have not raised these issues here to “debunk” the deep-jazz performance styles of Keith Jarrett and Bill Evans. Rather, I have hoped to show that an “inner life”—our own or others’—not only is formed by the “outside” but in many ways gets displayed there and continually shapes the ways we understand ourselves and our world.

As one more closely examines the career of this enigmatic musician, that ambiguity about the nature of Jarrett’s influences remains problematic.

By the age of three, Keith Jarrett had already launched into his concertizing career. Condensing several chapters of Carr’s biography into the barest of a sketch, it is apparent that as Jarrett grew into a seasoned musician he would become increasingly interested in these mystical movements, during which time he devoted most of his performing attention to the classical repertoire and to compositions of his own. All the time Jarrett was performing in recitals and practicing on the piano, he was simultaneously, from his earliest playing days, as indicated earlier, honing his improvisational skills. During those times when he was exposed to jazz, he realized more and more that this was the venue best suited for an expansion and further exploration of his improvisational interests.

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12 Ake, 109.

13 Ibid., 111.
To further abridge Carr, by his mid-teens, Jarrett was learning jazz well enough that he became involved in occasional gigs. After a year at the Berklee College of Music in Boston and another in New York "starving," and with a new spouse to boot, Jarrett started to become noted for his improvisational style. Jarrett's interest in mysticism at this time increased dramatically:

It was . . . from his time with Lloyd that Keith Jarrett became profoundly interested in the Armenian mystic [George Ivanovitch] Gurdjieff. This came almost in the form of a revelation. Charles Lloyd was interested in esoteric literature, and was, to quote Jarrett, 'on a Gurdjieff kick' when they were doing one particular tour. Jarrett found a 1200-page book on an aeroplane seat during one of the quartet's flights. It was Gurdjieff's *All and Everything* . . . . On another occasion, Jarrett says: 'I can tell you truthfully, I don't know what I thought about before that day. I have no idea what was in my head . . . . I can trace back to that day the involvement in what I consider a deeper and deeper process. First it was the process of being into this man [Gurdjieff] and then it was the process of being into this man's work, then it was the process of being into the work's relationship to other work, and then of seeing that there was a work greater than that, that was really responsible for all that . . . and that brought me to Sufism.'

Between the beliefs and vocabulary of the culture of Jarrett's youth regarding musical influence and this newfound interest in Gurdjieff, Sufism, and other avenues of mysticism (such as the Transcendentalism of Emerson, Thoreau, and Charles Ives, a philosophy that has already had several revivals during Jarrett's lifetime), Jarrett began to assume an even more radical interpretive stance about the transcendental source of his music than he did formerly. The lexicon of his youth will now grow to encompass key words and concepts from diverse mystical traditions. To his thoughts Jarrett will add actual spiritual exercises. Based on Jarrett's conversations, Solomon reports that "Jarrett often speaks of his solo piano work in the same vocabulary he uses to speak of his meditation—he is an intense spiritualist who has been much

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14 Carr, 41.


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influenced by G. I. Gurdjieff, the Armenian mystic.\textsuperscript{16} The solo piano concerts, to which Solomon refers here, would not only become Jarrett's main musical focus during the 1970s, they would also provide him the venue that would define his contribution to music and the concerts he gave during those years would comprise to this day that which has made him most famous.

These preparatory practices involving spiritual exercises and meditation is reminiscent of how Pythagoras and his followers would prepare themselves for the reception of ideas from the Music of the Spheres. According to Strohmeier and Westbrook, "Pythagoras taught that music . . . has a dual value. Like mathematics, it enables men and women to see into the structures of nature. And further, if utilized correctly, it can bring the faculties of the soul into harmony with these structures."\textsuperscript{17} But to become such a pure reed, Pythagoras prescribed many spiritual preparations, some of which were similar, perhaps, to those practiced by Jarrett during his solo piano years.

Of the 600-or-so solo piano concerts Jarrett gave during the 1970s and early 1980s, a concert he recorded in Köln, Germany would become the most popular recording of all his music.\textsuperscript{18} Solomon offers a very subjective description of the kind of improvisational music Jarrett produced in these concerts:

> Listening to these concerts is like watching the tide come in, or like seeing a great heap of wood consumed by flame. There is a brooding quality to the whole procedure—phrases that repeat, shapes and colors in rolling mimicry and infinite variety, outbursts of passionate playing that subside back into steady harmonies. Melodies come in and disappear; tension builds and collapses, builds and collapses. The notes seem to be choosing one another and not to be chosen from outside—but vast structures, subconscious and abstruse, unite them: the solo

\textsuperscript{16} Solomon, 229.

\textsuperscript{17} Strohmeier and Westbrook, 78.

\textsuperscript{18} Keith Jarrett, \textit{The Köln Concert}, 2 LPs., ECM 2-1064. Solomon reports that the "recording of his 1975 concert in Köln, Germany, is the best selling solo piano album ever (more than three million copies)." Solomon, 229.
concerts, abstract as they are, seem to proceed in movements as orderly as any Mozartean theme and variations.\(^{19}\)

A small recording label in Germany, ECM, would record several of the live concerts Jarrett gave in Europe, and Solomon's description could easily describe what one hears in person as well as what one hears in one of the many solo recordings. Besides hearing Keith's playing on these recordings, one also hears vocalizations of Jarrett singing, moaning, and groaning. This, of course, is not new to pianists and their recordings. Glenn Gould and many others have contributed vocal sounds to their recorded performances. What makes the live concerts most different from the recordings, however, is the visual aspect of these concerts. Since it is these live solo piano recordings to which Jarrett alludes most directly in describing his role as medium, every aspect of these concerts must be seen to be part of the transcendent message he was aspiring to communicate. Often, in fact, what one remembers best about these concerts or televised productions of them is Jarrett's physical movements at the piano. These include crouching over the keyboard, playing from a standing position, gyrating his hips, and so on.

Solomon offers a graphic description of what many concertgoers have seen:

> During his solo improvisation concerts of the 1970's, he would go into a state of what appeared to be ecstatic pain. While playing the notes urgently and self-referentially, he would slide off the bench so that he was sometimes on top of the piano and sometimes beneath it and most often wrapped around it. His face could not possibly have gone through a more anguished and peculiar range of expressions; he grunted and groaned audibly, periodically shaking with spasms and shivers. He looked as though he were giving birth to a square baby.\(^{20}\)

In an interview with Ted Rosenthal, Jarrett explains the vocalizations by saying that “I think the singing comes from the fact that the subject matter is being dictated to me, and I have to quickly ‘transcribe’ it and then decide how to play it—in what dynamic, and which finger, and all...”

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\(^{19}\)Solomon, 229.

\(^{20}\)Ibid., 229.
that—so it's an explosive process."²¹ That "explosive process" of processing information from the *musica mundana* requires the conversion of data in its pristine, cosmic form to its form as expressed by the piano. Jarrett maintains that these extra activities added to his playing result from trying to make the piano relate something for which it is not necessarily the best medium. His vocalizations and gyrations constitute an effort, therefore, to allow for a more accurate transformation of the incoming data. In retrospect, in an interview with Edward Strickland, Jarrett admits that "I hate parts of my albums because I know I'm hearing something that doesn't translate to piano—in fact I'm being dishonest by playing piano at all."²² In response to this problem, Jarrett has been known to perform fairly proficiently on other instruments (including guitar, drums, and saxophone). During his whole career several of Jarrett's recordings include performances by him on instruments other than piano and recordings of compositions by him of others playing his works. Jairo Moreno, in his in-depth study of both Jarrett's vocalizations and his bodily movements in his solo piano concerts, offers an aesthetic and ontological interpretation of Jarrett's intention in deploying these musical techniques. Moreno sees massive consequences for Jarrett's performing style when he concludes his study by declaring that "In Jarrett’s pianism, communication is aural, oral, visual, and kinetic; it encompasses poiesis and esthesis, logos and pathos."²³ Such observations make one wonder how much of the "whole" work is missing for one who only hears the recordings of these concerts and therefore misses the visual aspect of Jarrett's playing. Although this is a problem for any performance of music, it is


especially emphatic to musicians like Jarrett whose gestures are so integral to their playing.

Despite these visual facets of Jarrett's playing, or in light of them, it is in some of the subjective descriptions of the improvisational process where one comes closest divining the *musica mundana* connection in his music. Referring to his solo piano concerts, Jarrett says that "one of the bad raps that improvisation is always going to have is that it is an off-the-top-of-your-head, pattern-related, non-intellectual thing. *Whereas in reality, with consciousness, improvisation is a much deeper tapping of something than any other process.*"24 "Tapping" is admittedly broad in its possible scope here. Jarrett could be simply talking about tapping the imagination, his emotions, his musical memory or some kind of Jungian unconscious. Nothing about tapping necessarily implies tapping something from the beyond. In his interview with Solomon, however, Jarrett points at a more external source by claiming that “When you’re improvising you’re bringing this stuff up, literally bringing it up, like you’re vomiting the music. You don’t sit still when you’re nauseated and throwing up. My body’s in the way. Get it out of there!”25 If the body is something that gets in the way during moments of improvisation, then that same body by necessity is in an intermediary position between the mind and something altogether outside the body.

In order to make his whole person a receptacle of this "stuff" he will be "bringing up," Jarrett says he undergoes "the de-honing, the erasure of anything but perception."26 In Doerschuk's well-known interview with Jarrett, the latter describes that state and his relation to the piano while in that state:

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25 Solomon, 229.

26 Strickland, 16.
The ideal state to be in, just before I make a sound, would be a state where there would be nothing to lose and nothing to gain, no ideas to purge. Because the piano sound itself is instructive. If you take everything else out of your system and all you've got is the sound, you have to reconstruct your system from that sound. That's really what I'm doing in a solo concert; I'm rebuilding myself from a point of awareness.\textsuperscript{27}

With "no ideas to purge," Jarrett-the-go-between will be in a state less likely to be contaminated by his own imperfect thoughts. Rockwell, who is doubtful of such a thoroughgoing cleansing, admits that "Jarrett has faith in the uncontaminated purity of his original inspiration. Hence, his way to ever purer work is to leave himself ever more open to inspiration. And although sequential listening to several of his solo piano improvisations reveals all sorts of recurrent mannerisms that he hasn't yet purged, those improvisations as a whole remain mightily impressive."\textsuperscript{28} The same Rockwell offers a much more detailed description of the inspiration process he mentions here:

\begin{quote}
When he approaches the piano, he tries to make his mind as blank as possible, in order to clear himself to be a channel for inspiration from the beyond. Just how he thinks of "the beyond" he guards as his jealous secret. But he is known to have pursued study of such mystics as Gurdjieff and pop philosophers as Kahlil Gibran, and his album of music Gurdjieff composed in collaboration with his Russian composer-follower Thomas de Hartmann attests to those inclinations.

He discusses the music that results from his inspirational raptures as if it were something entirely separate from himself: "I'm not in a position to describe in words where it comes from," he once said. "I've been letting it happen all by itself so much that I'm looking at it as something completely independent of me, which it really is. I'm just transmitting it. The one thing that has governed what I've done, throughout my musical career, has been not to identify with something I did. The minute I would identify with what I'm playing, I wouldn't hear the next thing, and that's particularly true of solo playing. You just cannot go and improvise music if you're hearing what you do and considering it to be yours. The music is so much stronger than the person who's playing it that you have to be very, very careful. It can destroy you or it can enrich you, and if it enriches you and you get stronger, it gets that much stronger. So you're never in a secure
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{28} Rockwell, 182.
position, you're never at a point where you have it all sewed up. You have to choose to be secure and like stone, or insecure but able to flow.”

This trance state, so tied to mystical movements of the 1960s (alluded to earlier in this chapter), where Jarrett "tries to make his mind as blank as possible," is more like a zone whence ensues his most significant musical material. "That's where the core of my work lies," he says, "—the state I need to be in to do that as honestly as possible and with the greatest amount of awareness. When I began Spirits I had no idea it was going to be anything. There was no future. It was a nothing, a nonentity. And it only became something out of a decision to stop something" (the solo concerts which he gave up in the mid 1980s). Since giving up his demanding solo piano concerts in 1984, Jarrett, in Spirits and other later recordings, has changed the way he plays, but he still subscribes to the idea that his musical ideas are revealed to him by an external source. As evidence of the cosmic purity of the music produced in those earlier solo piano concerts, Jarrett tells several stories about discussions with individual audience members immediately after a concert whose feelings, thoughts and anticipations precisely paralleled those that Jarrett had experienced while performing the improvisations.

Although Jarrett is either vague or secretive about the actual transcendent source of his musical ideas, he has admitted in many interviews that such a source exists and that he is a medium between that source and his audience. In whatever kind of informational structure that

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29 Ibid., 181.

30 See Ake, 109–110.

31 Strickland, 17.

32 Jarrett performs solo piano in The Melody at Night, with You (ECM 1675, 1999), and has recorded live with Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette in such recordings as Keith Jarrett at the Blue Note (ECM 1577, 1994), and Whisper Not (ECM 1724 & 25, 2000). The raw material for these later recordings consists mostly of arrangements of Tin Pan Alley tunes.

33 Doerschuk, 267; Strickland, 15, 19.
original source data is codified, it is in a state, as Pythagoras's principles of Unity and Number are, anterior to music. As Rockwell explains, "Sometimes, he has even talked about his playing as if it transcended music altogether, and about how perilously open he feels in the midst of it: 'What I do isn’t about music. It’s about an experience beyond sound.’ And he worries that as the frail reed of the music, he may be destroyed."\(^\text{34}\) About this source, which also informs his performances of classical music, Jarrett insists that it is something “the cosmos is offering me.”\(^\text{35}\) Is this cosmic stuff, which exists in a place without precise location, in a time devoid of temporal coordinates, this information which, in Jarrett's hands becomes music—is this an authentic, dynamic example of \textit{musica mundana}? In his interview with Jarrett, Strickland asks this question bluntly. Says Strickland, "You wrote once, 'I believe in Music to the extent that it was here before we were.' Is this a new version of the music of the spheres?" After some digression, Jarrett admits, "That’s almost how I feel about my position in music."\(^\text{36}\)

When the Egyptian astronomer (of Greek ancestry) Ptolemy, in his book \textit{The Almagest} (second century CE),\(^\text{37}\) supplied reams of convincing mathematical evidence to demonstrate conclusively that the earth was at the center of the solar system, he had provided an explanation that would remain the commonly accepted one for nearly a millennium and a half. His theory provided for the pragmatic needs of astronomers and mathematicians and, during the middle ages and early renaissance, it agreed with the official position of the Church regarding the earth's position in the cosmos. During those hundreds of years, Ptolemy's geocentric model would

\(^{34}\text{Rockwell, 182.}\)

\(^{35}\text{Solomon, “229.}\)

\(^{36}\text{Strickland, 32.}\)

become a cornerstone in all the prevailing European worldviews. It was something akin to what Plato, four centuries before Ptolemy, in his use of the city of Atlantis possibly as a hypothetical—fictional?—example, called a "likely story." From the vantage point of later history, we know that Copernicus would come along and disrupt Ptolemy's likely story and provide a new one. Is Keith Jarrett's cosmic explanation for his musical production a "likely story"? Whether or not some musical Copernicus will come along to disrupt Jarrett's trance, there is for now a kind of systematic neatness in the *musica mundana* whose code—whether real or imagined—Jarrett and his kind will continue to unravel before our ears.

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Conclusion

When the research for this study began and even during the early writing phases, there was no sense of a final outcome. To cast my line further, in my search for a musica mundana, I feared that I was departing from the shores of metaphysics and entering the waters of theology. I now realize that such fears were unnecessary. In several places in this thesis, the idea of a "blind" musica mundana has emerged, which allows for many of the conditions of what Boethius deems the highest level of music to materialize, while such productions retain a very local, terrestrial stake in musica instrumentalis.

Handel's commitment to truth does not require that Handel enter into communion with some Platonic ideal of Truth. Handel’s truth—his stark realism, his celebration of humanity, his earthy concern for the details of the commonplace—provides for him an approach to his art that need not be tethered to some celestial Truth in a transcendent, cosmic empyrean. Keith Jarrett may be tapping sources from the beyond, but no listener need be entertained by that idea to enter into communion with Jarrett and his music. His music may indeed consist of his own codification of raw data streaming in from the beyond, but most likely the mere idea of a Music of the Spheres—or Music from the Spheres—is sufficient for fueling Jarrett’s imagination during those times when he pulls back to the zero degree of composing.

In this study, improvisation is seen to operate at the center of both Handel’s and Jarrett’s musical worlds. While Handel had to interrupt his spontaneity to transfer his notes to paper, thus partially thwarting the free flow of ideas, Jarrett could preserve the moment thanks to the electronic recording apparatus which affords an emancipation from interruption. In either case, improvisation requires thinking on one’s feet. The process is so swift, that one wonders if such propagation is even possible on the plane of musica humana. By default of the very nature of
Nature, patterns of motion and patterns musical frequency seem to echo each other during some of these fleeting periods. Through blind necessity, an appeal to a kind of *musica mundana* “effect” may proffer the best available explanation for this admittedly otherworldly curiosity.
Appendix: Hasty Writing and Correcting in the Manuscript of Handel’s Messiah

Handel composed his Messiah in just three weeks. The notes photocopied on this page represent places in the manuscript where hasty writing is very evident. According to John Tobin:

When corrections were necessary, and they were often necessary, he could not spare the time to make clean alterations. He smudged out a thickly inked minim with his thumb; he dismissed unwanted music with thick ink-strokes; he crossed out notes and wrote other notes over those already crossed out until in some places it is exceedingly difficult to decipher at all . . . . But study of the Autograph shows that in spite of this haste Handel was particular about the smallest thing that had musical significance, changing the direction of a passage while actually writing it, going back to make some material alteration while still at work on the same Air, or having a second thought for the ending of a chorus and then discarding it in favor of his first thought.¹

¹John Tobin, Handel at Work (New York: St. Martin’s Press), 1964, 2; photos, 4–5.
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