

Jacomien Prins and Maude Vanhaelen, eds. *Sing Aloud Harmonious Spheres: Renaissance Conceptions of Cosmic Harmony*. Warwick Studies in the Humanities. New York: Routledge, 2018.. xii + 294 pp. \$155.00. Review by EUGENE D. HILL, MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE.

The notion of “world harmony” can mean very different things in different learned contexts. When Leibniz talks about a “preestablished harmony,” he has in mind the relation between body and soul in accordance with which the doings in both realms always correspond with one another.<sup>1</sup> Altogether divergent is the account given by Leo Spitzer in what for readers of this journal will be the most familiar study: *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony* (1963), in which Spitzer’s “Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word ‘Stimmung’” (the subtitle) develops a vast Pythagorean pantheistic tapestry of Western thought from the pre-Socratics through the Romantics and beyond. The German, in exile from Cologne (via Istanbul) in Baltimore, made it his project “to unravel what in ancient and medieval thought was woven together: the ideas of the ‘well-tempered mixture’ and of the ‘harmonious consonance,’ [of the well-tuned soul] which fuse into the one all-embracing unit of the world harmony.”<sup>2</sup>

Spitzer’s memorable book was published after his death by a colleague at Johns Hopkins as an expanded version of a pair of journal articles (*Traditio* 1944-45) and must be read as a product of the war years. Of course the German Romance philologist had been working for decades on undercutting national and linguistic as well as temporal boundaries. (He once characterized his “procedure” as one “of antedating semantic phenomena by about 1500 years.”<sup>3</sup>) But there is something quite moving in the heroic scholarly effort to create a unified field of philosophical and literary texts in which well-tuned souls

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1 Rudolf Eisler, *Kritische Untersuchung des Begriffes der Weltharmonie und seiner Anwendungen* (Berlin: Calvary, 1895), 27.

2 Leo Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony: Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word “Stimmung”* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1963), 7.

3 Leo Spitzer, *Essays in Historical Semantics* (New York: S.F. Vanni, 1948), 8.

across two and a half millennia vibrate in sympathy. How gratifying indeed to cherish the fond illusion (if such it be) that, to quote Spitzer from 1948, “in regard to fundamentals, there has been less cultural change than is commonly supposed ... in our *Greco-Roman-Judeo-Christian*-civilization, which has been allowed to continue without any too-drastic interruptions” (Spitzer 1948, 8-9).

The valuable collection of consistently able new papers offered by Prins and Vanhaelen, originating in a conference sponsored by the University of Warwick at a Palazzo in Milan, bespeaks a changed learned world. Thirteen scholars from nine countries address individual areas of specialization ranging from the ancient Greeks to the Newton-inflected mathematical acousticians in the decades around 1700. As with Spitzer, much of the material under discussion is Platonic in nature, but here the material is frequently viewed through an Aristotelian lens. In Book Two of *On the Heavens*, the Stagirite formulated what Francesco Pelosi in the lead paper calls “the most authoritative refutation of the existence of cosmic harmony” (20). Aristotle blandly (Pelosi says “ironically”) investigates the physics that must underlie such notions as Plato’s fable of tuneful cosmic Sirens and concludes that none of it can be true—that is literally the case. For subsequent thinkers discussed in the collection under review, the issue became to tease apart the Platonically metaphorical from the literal. The question of the literal and the metaphorical of course did not arise for Spitzer, for whom to interrogate the responsive *Stimmung* or entunedness of a good reader—an Aeolian harp of a soul—would be altogether beside the point, and in itself would constitute evidence of deficient aesthetic culture.

Literalness of a qualified sort can be found in in the Neoplatonists: “Both Porphyry and Iamblichus attribute to Pythagoras the experience of listening to the cosmic harmony, linking the theme to practices of music therapy”; “each stresses the contrast between” the “extraordinary man . . . and his disciples . . . common men who cannot hear the world harmony” (Pelosi, 23). A sixteenth-century rabbi named Judah Moscato agrees that “purification of the sense of hearing will ultimately lead to an experience of the music of the spheres,” though Moscato is also to be found “attacking Pythagoras, whom he says ... ‘used to glorify himself with the pretention’” of hearing these sounds

(55). Earlier in that century, Isaac Cohen held that “the harmony of the spheres belongs to the realm of speculation, and as perfect ‘harmony’, it is devoid of any physical reality.” Indeed, “Cohen argues that belief in the music of the spheres is indefensible ... it is merely a projection of ideas about earthly music onto the heavens, and thus has nothing to do with the archetypal harmony of God’s Creation” (53). (These passages from Jewish thought come from the fine paper by Amnon Shiloah, which also treats Arabic sources.)

The center of the collection, devoted to several philosophers of the Italian Renaissance, will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. Editor Maude Vanhaelen provides a most valuable account of Ficino’s adoption of the intermediate beings of Neoplatonic theurgic lore—“angels, demons heroes” (102)—through whose mediation “religious rituals, including prayer, song, and music” (113) can effect a purification of the soul. She explains: “By adopting Iamblichus’ conflation of the doctrines of cosmic harmony and recollection Ficino could describe music as a trigger for the soul to remember the cosmic harmony it heard before entering the material world.” So “the notion of the world as a musical scale is more than an image; it functions as a powerful tool to describe instrumental music as a gift from the gods that can be used to ascend the ladder of beings” (113).

Similarly, cosmic music is neither quite literal nor entirely metaphoric in welcome essays on Francesco Giorgi (by Leen Spruit); Francesco Patrizi (by editor Jacomien Prins); and Andrea Torelli (by Concetta Pennuto). We are shown how “Giorgi’s interpretation of *musica humana* as the belief in the harmonic creation of the soul and the accompanying belief in the divinity of man” (133) exposed him to vigorous censorship from the Roman Congregation for the Index. We find that while “Patrizi no longer believes in the real existence of the harmony of the spheres, he deliberately uses it as a metaphor in the context of his aesthetics of music to evoke all kinds of associations with traditional conceptions of world harmony” (152). Patrizi may be said to transfer “the concept of the harmony of the spheres from the realm of the mathematical sciences to the realm of the rhetorical arts” (146). A similar aestheticizing move is made by Torelli in his 1627 volume *Orphei lyra sive De harmonia triplicis mundi . . .*, according to which “the Orphic lyre is to be understood as a speech (*oratio*) deal-

ing with the three types of harmony present in the universe: divine, ethereal, and elementary" (185).

With a collection of this sort, the temptation to jump to papers nearest one's own areas of specialization may prove irresistible. But there are fascinating materials in nearly every chapter, one good example being Linda Báez-Rubí's well-illustrated discussion of cosmologically symbolical games and automata in seventeenth-century New Spain. Let me conclude rather by commenting on the title the book carries. One might, upon a quick initial glance, think: that sounds like Milton. It does. But it comes in fact from a contemporary poem sometimes ascribed, though uncertainly, to a minor poet of Royalist affiliation named William Strode, who died in 1645. What interests the present reviewer however is the manuscript from which the song setting (by an unknown composer) of the poem is taken.

The learned musicologist whose edition Prins and Vanhaelen cite identifies the manuscript as a typical product of English musicians working at the midcentury French court, many English musicians having taken refuge on the Continent during the Civil War and beyond.<sup>4</sup> The delicate lyric moves in its three seven-line stanzas from the "old lessons" of the spheres to which "lays" the "gods do listen ... As they are passing,/Over the Milky Ways" (first verse); through the middle air purged of "unwholesome creatures" to maintain "passage fair" as "ye blest spirits,/Wander in the air" (second verse); through the reverently invoked appearance of the deities which concludes the poem: "I hear their fluttering sound,/And now, now, now;/They touch the ground." This could well be the climax of a ceremony at court in honor of a young royal prince. At the same time, it might also well be a fantasy of the return of exiled monarchy—the same fond exilic longing at work in Spitzer's book. In brief comments on the poem, our editors say only that "when the prayer is answered and the gods approach, nothing more than a 'fluttering sound' is heard. As soon as the heavenly harmonious sound 'touches the ground' mortal beings are unable to hear, recognize or understand it" (2). That would be the long-view Aristotelian reading, altogether correct in its own terms.

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4 Gordon J. Callon, ed., *Songs with Theorbo (c. 1650-1663)* (Madison: A-R Editions, 2000), xii; see also pp. xvii, 35-36, 86, 92.

Readers of this journal are however permitted to suspect that, for the English performers c. 1650, a local contemporary political application was very much in mind.

Abraham Stoll. *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ix + 216 pp. \$99.99. Review by MARGARET J. OAKES, FURMAN UNIVERSITY.

Parsing a term as abstract as “conscience” has obvious limitations and hermeneutic problems, and could cover centuries of thinking and dozens of writers, even if only limited to Western European Christianity. The size of Abraham Stoll’s *Conscience in Early Modern English Literature* immediately indicates that this must be a focused examination; the title does not reflect the analytical scope of the book, and the author struggles to be both sweeping in his conclusions and specific in his examples. Further, a reader should not approach this text as a developmental argument, as it posits itself to be. Stoll arranges the discussion of conscience in roughly chronological terms but then often finds himself redefining phases in an intellectual, theological, and political overhaul of this concept, as the few writers he has selected do not show a movement or consistent avenue of change in their thinking. This attempt to show a progression of thought is flawed; furthermore, it is unfortunate because unnecessary and limits an authentic examination of the subject.

Stoll sets out a hermeneutic based in St. Jerome, threading up through Aquinas and St. German, to set out a distinction that he later wants to dissolve: that of the higher, perfect faculty of *synderesis* (which is discarded by Luther in Stoll’s argument) for a faculty which he terms “destructured,” requiring a constant process of self-reflection. He argues that in William Perkins’ theory of conscience it is a thought process: “Such imperfection cannot be summarized, but must be won anew for each person, and in successive moments of each person’s life” (43). A number of characters in *The Faerie Queene* and *Macbeth* are loosely addressed through this interpretive lens; the somewhat disjointed and tangential feel to these chapters may result from their being portions of separate articles published elsewhere.