

MUSIC OF THE SPHERES:  
USING THE LANGUAGE OF HELLENISTIC ASTROLOGY TO EXPRESS  
CONTRARIETIES WITHIN MUSIC

by

ANYA GUADAMUZ

AN HONORS COLLEGE THESIS

ADVISOR

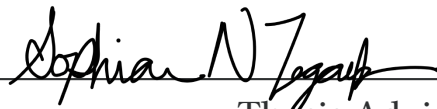
DR. SOPHIA TEGART  
WSU SCHOOL OF MUSIC

FALL 2021

**TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:**

As thesis advisor for: Anya Guadamuz,

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.



\_\_\_\_\_  
Thesis Advisor

10/30/2021

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## PRÈCIS

My personal discovery of the system of Hellenistic astrology happened during the height of the global pandemic in 2020. I was captivated by this system of interpretation that had such a solid philosophical and scientific grounding to the basis of its rationale. Early in my music history education, I learned of the *Musica Universalis*, a philosophical doctrine that theorized a frequency or a kind of music emitted by the movement of the wandering stars that was said to influence the natural flow of things. This ancient philosophy concerning music and the planets inspired me to find ways to bring the wisdom of Hellenistic astrologers to the modern day in order to promote discussions correlating music and astrology.

After beginning my initial stages of research, it was of immense help to receive the 2021 Emeritus Undergraduate Research Grant in Arts and Humanities. This generous offer challenged me to propel my research to make connections between music and astrology that I had not found previously.

The more I discovered how the practice of Hellenistic astrology functions, I began to realize the profound symbolic potential this system possesses to describe an array of experiences. These experiences could be portrayed through writing and art, but music was the most interesting medium to study this through because it relates back to that early idea of influential planetary music.

Hellenistic planetary symbolism is primarily based on a system of contrarities; that for one thing to have meaning, an antithesis must exist to oppose its natural tendencies. Viewing music through the lens of constant binaries proved to be a complex pursuit but a rewarding one to find these instances naturally occurring within music.

I had to stretch the scope of what “music” means. In this study I observed music from as many perspectives as possible. A bird’s eye view gave me a glimpse of the binaries that form between music and its audience in history while an exploration into the small and precise details of things spoke volumes about the entrails of a composition. Both perspectives are necessary in the interpretation and analysis of music. Hellenistic planetary language proved useful in explaining why it is important to study the places where these contrarities exist.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The system of Hellenistic astrology is a brilliant medium to understand the fundamentals of western music. This system functions as a language to understand the internal and external implications of music. At the dawn of astrology, its creators meant for this system to be universally useful and applicable so in theory, it is representative of all musics created on Earth. For the purpose of this research, I will be solely commenting on the state of western music. The biggest question I ask is: Why is it useful to use Hellenistic planetary symbolism to provide a rich understanding of music?

The planetary binaries that exist within Hellenistic astrology serve to show the intrinsic force of opposition that accompanies all things. In the context of music, many binaries can be formed if you isolate certain parts of the music-making process. The composer versus their audience, the value of one note on a staff versus the combined value of every note in a piece, and one we are most familiar with: consonance versus dissonance. These aspects do not exist to override each other but to give meaning to one another and encourage balance.

In the following chapters, I present the history and philosophical rationale behind planetary symbolism in the Hellenistic tradition. With a firm understanding of the rationale in mind, I then assign musical symbolism to each planet in accordance with their established (well-conditioned) natures. Unpacking planetary symbolism found within music will serve to locate vital binary systems to understand and appreciate the art further. The examples I give will go into specific detail but they are meant to be read as a framework to encourage the reader to drum up symbolic connections of their own. It is my hope that astrologers are able to apply their astro-

philosophical knowledge to gain a deeper understanding of music and that musicians or music enthusiasts are able to view their art through a fresh perspective from an ancient tradition.

### Creative Challenge

The purpose of this study is to reconcile the differences between the language of astrology and that of music to provide a richer understanding of both disciplines. My aim is to expand Hellenistic planetary symbolism to include qualities of music that behave in accordance to a planet's original significations, and to observe the conditions in place that allow those significations to be clearly and effortlessly realized.

### Method Of Analysis

The first step in this research project was to establish the original significations of the seven planets before beginning to realize their symbolic potential in music. In the Hellenistic introduction portion of this paper, I briefly elaborate on the major mechanisms behind the symbolism in astrology. Much of the information in the Hellenistic section references the work of traditional astrologers Christopher Brennan and Demetra George as their manuals on astrology are a trustworthy modern source. I also referenced Vettius Valens' *Anthology* which is the most trusted primary source in modern day to validate the symbolism ascribed to the planets by early astrologers.

The next step in my research was to compile various settings of music to explore this planetary symbolism. My results are divided into three sections that unpack one binary system in the context of music. The focus of this analysis extends from the value of a singular note in a large work to the cultural impact of a genre and its historical implications. It was important to match up facets of music that shared similar natures to those of the planets. If a planets nature was to be expansive, then I would select a piece of music that demonstrates expansion to some

degree so I could use Hellenistic rationale to validate the decision to expand. Examining the conditions that allow for a binary system to exist in music was at the crux of my research. After establishing the qualities in place that correlate planetary symbolism to music, I then went into more musical and at times historical detail to validate my claims.

It was hard to narrow down specific examples as it felt exclusionary with the more details I uncovered. Nevertheless, that is the true nature of astrology- it is a system that is cleverly assembled to be representative of the expansive and subjective scope of the human experience. The music that was analyzed in this study included: The historical significance of Black music, the compositional entrails of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Eroica*, and the moody nature of Billie Eilish's new release *Happier Than Ever*. The music I chose should showcase contrasting settings of music to create a wider spectrum of interpretation. When melding the disciplines of astrology and music, I discovered the volumes that planetary symbolism could speak about music and its reflection of the human condition.



## CHAPTER II

### BACKGROUND OF THE HELLENISTIC TRADITION

#### History In Brief

In Hellenistic astrology, significations given to the seven visible planets originate from a mixture of traditions over time as they were passed from early Mesopotamians to the Babylonians and eventually over to Greece where they gained global popularity in the west. Hellenistic astrology formed shortly after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. The conquered city of Alexandria became an important intellectual hub where Greek, Babylonian, Egyptian, and Jewish traditions mingled together.<sup>1</sup> Being a sea port, information was easily spread in and out of Alexandria. The Egyptian city quickly grew to become a home to many of the greatest astrologers that have contributed to the Hellenistic tradition of astrology.<sup>2</sup>

At the core of the Hellenistic tradition, the observation of the seven wandering stars (as the early astrologers called them) was used to predict the fate and fortune that would follow the birth of a person, country, or event. Astrologers would then study the conditions of the planets at the precise moment of a birth, to determine how much fortune, or misfortune, is guaranteed to come from that new life. Correlating events on Earth to the predictable movement of the planets is the essence of the study of Astrology.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher W. Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology: The Study of Fate and Fortune* (Denver, CO: Amor Fati Publications, 2017), 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> The term "Hellenistic" was ascribed to this tradition of astrology not because it was heavily practiced by the Greeks, but because Greek had become a common language that many non-ethnically Greek people used in their writings and research. This is why it is not labeled as "greek astrology" since that would negate the multiple cross-cultural influences that contributed to its popularity.

## Planetary Nature

Vettius Valens is the most trusted primary source regarding the significations of the planets in the Hellenistic tradition. Valens' series of nine (surviving) instructional texts, collectively titled *Anthology*, describes the natures of the planets and their functional symbolism. The natures of the seven planets are derived from the very simple appearance of these planets as seen by the naked eye on Earth. The seven traditional planets include the Sun and the Moon, who were often referred to as the two luminaries, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn.

The symbolic nature of a planet describes its function, similar to a job. The planets perform their job through the lens of whatever sign of the zodiac they are transiting. Since planets rule certain signs of the zodiac, a planet transiting the sign(s) it rules will behave better. Planets behave poorly when transiting signs ruled by planets whose nature is antithetical to their own. To summarize, the Sun builds, the Moon nourishes, Mercury communicates, Venus magnetizes, Mars energizes, Jupiter expands and affirms, and Saturn endures.<sup>4</sup> These planets are regarded as rulers of all things associated with their natures.

## The Twelve Signs

The seven planets move across the sky on a calculated schedule and distinguish themselves from the fixed stars that form constellations, thus promoting a closer study of their significance. To track their movement, astrologers using the whole sign house system would divide the sky into twelve equal parts of thirty-degree slices. Each slice of the sky was given to a

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<sup>4</sup> Demetra George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice: A Manual of Traditional Techniques* (Auckland, NZ: Rubedo Press, 2019), 47-50.

sign of the zodiac which acted as a dwelling place through which a planet could transit and manifest its significations. Depending on what sign a planet was transiting through, it helped define the condition of the planet.<sup>5</sup>

Considerations For Judgement of Condition

Zodiac signs are meant to be interpreted as archetypes of the human condition. Each sign represents a large overarching theme that exists on a spectrum to account for the high variation of human experience.<sup>6</sup> Each planet rules over one or two zodiac signs and the ones that they rule are called their “domiciles.”

Figure 1. Domicile Rulership<sup>7</sup>

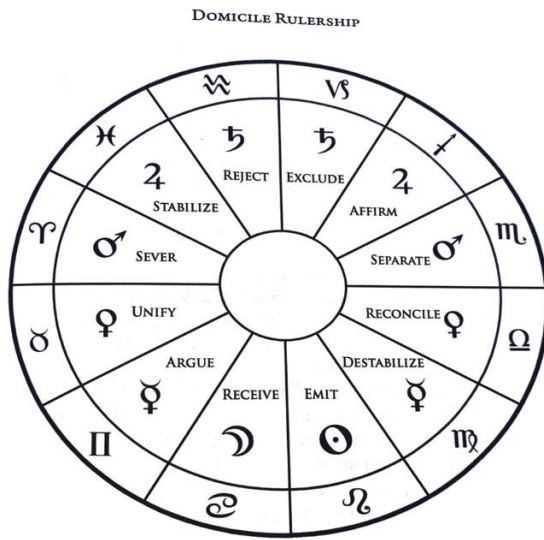


Figure 2. Legend for glyphs presented in Figure 1

Planet and Glyph	Domicile and Glyph
☉ Sun	♌ Leo
☾ Moon	♋ Cancer
☿ Mercury	♊ Gemini, ♍ Virgo
♀ Venus	♉ Taurus, ♎ Libra
♂ Mars	♈ Aries, ♏ Scorpio
♃ Jupiter	♐ Sagittarius, ♓ Pisces
♄ Saturn	♑ Capricorn, ♒ Aquarius

<sup>5</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 187.

<sup>6</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 239-240.

<sup>7</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 239.

A planet's domicile is the sign where it feels at home and where it functions best. "Exiles" are the opposite of domiciles and in turn act as places of extreme discomfort and unfamiliarity. "Exaltations" are where a planet is not at home, but rather royally elevated and given great honor to its nature. That nature of a planet is heightened and strengthened when in its exaltation. "Detriment" is the opposite of exaltation, and it is the sign where a planet cannot do its job due to lack of resources. Each sign has its own unique nature that is shaped by the character of its ruling planet.

To summarize the rationale behind planetary conditions: A planet will always do its job, but it must occur through the lens of a zodiac sign that is at the will of its own planetary ruler. Depending on how closely associated the nature of a planet is with the nature of the sign it is transiting through, will provide information regarding the outcome of the task at hand.

### Benefics Vs Malefics

As mentioned earlier, I mentioned the basic natures of the planets were derived from their appearance from earth. To distinguish the natures of the planets, they are classified into three categories: benefic, malefic, and neutral. These categories were meant to characterize each planet as "good-makers," "bad-makers," or "common."<sup>8</sup> Regardless of their status as a benefic or malefic, the natures of all planets are neutral. The execution of their natures will illustrate points of weakness or strength for the planet in question. The weakness or strength of a planet will determine if the outcome will favor beneficence or maleficence.

The title of "benefic" was given to the planets Venus and Jupiter. Venus and Jupiter appear as bright twinkling stars in the night sky. Their pale-yellow glow was seen as a good

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<sup>8</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 185.

omen in contrast to the more dim and dusky appearances of Mars and Saturn who were given the title of “malefic.”<sup>9</sup> Venus is referred to as the lesser benefic while Jupiter the greater benefic due to Jupiter’s greater luminosity and orbit time in comparison to Venus. Similarly, Mars was deemed the lesser malefic while Saturn the greater malefic. Although the luminosity of Mars is technically greater than Saturn’s, Saturn’s much slower orbit on the ecliptic gained her the title of the great Malefic. Mercury is considered a “common” or “neutral” planet as they are double-bodied in its nature.<sup>10</sup> Mercury rests at the bending of the poles meaning they can lean one way or another depending on his condition.

The Sun and Moon are a topic of debate as to whether they are malefic or benefic. For the purpose of this research, I will regard them as neutral bodies that have the capacity to behave with more beneficence or maleficence based on condition.<sup>11</sup> Undoubtedly, they are regarded as rulers of all things, the King and Queen of the cosmos. The symbolism of the luminaries is far more esoteric than the symbolism of the other planets simply because they are the closest bodies to earth and play a large role in how humans and animals alike measure time. I will delve more into their symbolism as “rulers of all” when I discuss their significations in the context of music.

### Planetary Atomic Qualities

To provide further support on the classification of benefic and malefic, Claudius Ptolemy (a contemporary of Valens) attempted to provide a solid philosophical foundation based on the

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<sup>9</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 185.

<sup>10</sup> Although it is widely understood in the astrological community that the planets are not causes of things, rather their movement is correlated with events on Earth, they are still spoken about in a very human way by assigning them genders and pronouns (he, she, they) as well as human titles such as “ruler” or “lord.”

<sup>11</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 189.

tenets of Aristotle's natural philosophy. Ptolemy assigned atomic qualities to each planet (hot, dry, wet, cold) that were all involved in the transformation of matter.<sup>12</sup> Jupiter and Venus are benefic because they thrive in the hot and moist, qualities conducive to the growth of life. Mars and Saturn are malefic because they thrive in the cold and dry, qualities that are destructive or hinder the growth of living things.

### Significance of Binaries

These binaries in astrology, malefic vs benefic, domicile vs exile, are couched at the ends of a spectrum. Interpretation occurs along the spectrum between those two poles. That is, for something to mean one thing, it must have a counterpart whose nature is antithetical.<sup>13</sup> This natural antithesis is as simple as the contrast between light and dark. The Stoic Chrysippus brilliantly commented on the necessity for these distinctions:

There is absolutely nothing more foolish than those who think that there could have been good without the coexistence of evils. For since goods are opposite evils, the two must necessarily exist in opposition to each other and supported by a kind of opposed interdependence... What else is justice, if not the removal of injustice? Likewise, what appreciation of courage could there be except through the contrast with cowardice?... They are joined to each other head to head, as Plato said. Remove one and you remove both.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 234.

<sup>13</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 186.

<sup>14</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 185. (Quoted in Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 7.1.1-13, from *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, trans. Long and Sedley, vol. 1, 54Q, p. 329).

## CHAPTER III

### REALIZING PLANETARY SYMBOLISM THROUGH MUSIC

#### The Two Luminaries and Saturn

The distinction between the creation of something and the boundaries it is limited to is an important detail to discuss when studying the historical implications of a musical work or genre. This dynamic is symbolized by the relationship shared between Saturn and the two luminaries. The contrasting nature between the brightest and dimmest bodies of our solar system is symbolic of the boundaries (Saturn) placed upon both flesh (Moon) and spirit (Sun). When studying the historical context of music, it is our duty to examine the conditions that both promoted and limited the expansion of new music. Observing the conditions that birthed and subsequently limited Black music in the west proves the importance of studying this distinction.

The African-American spiritual is one of very few genres of music that is native to the colonized lands of the American empire. The spiritual has roots in the tribal music of Africa.<sup>15</sup> This music, brought over to the cruel conditions of the colonized west, was one of the only ways enslaved Africans had to preserve their culture and identity. The oppressive systems of the west punished most forms of creative expression, but elements of African tribal music still survived during the emergence of spirituals. Spirituals retained the call and response nature of tribal songs as well as the improvisation of rhythm and pitch.<sup>16</sup> This music, developed by enslaved Africans, heightened energy during exhausting work days as well as served to form communities under the thumb of oppression. These work songs were quickly mingled with Christian stories as more and

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<sup>15</sup> African American Spirituals. Web.. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>.

<sup>16</sup> African American Spirituals. Web.. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197495/>.

more generations of slaves were converted to Christianity. The stories that were included in this music often reflected the real-life experiences of slaves; thus many spirituals primarily focused on the Christian tenets of mercy and eternal paradise. The segregated spaces of worship became places of refuge for slaves to gather and pray for a better quality of life. African-American spirituals were born out of the necessity for the human spirit to survive such barbaric conditions.

The Sun is the music itself; an intelligent extension of the spirit. When music is created, it is invoking the building and intelligent nature of the Sun. Traditional astrologer Christopher Brennan describes the Sun to be the “instrument of the perception of the soul.”<sup>17</sup> This is supported by Valens’ claims that the Sun is “nature’s fire and intellectual light.”<sup>18</sup> Early astrologers believed the spirit to be everlasting since the intellectual legacy of one is able to survive long after their passing. Even though the genre of spirituals has transformed into the delta blues, ragtime, and early forms of jazz, the intellectual roots of Black music in America are still tied to the original creators of these spirituals. The conditions present to form this new genre of music was the oppressive state of the west as this music acted as a sort of reaction to the cruel conditions of slavery. When the body was weakened by intense labor and poor living conditions, the spirit could still be nourished through the enjoyment of music.

The Moon is symbolic of the masses that gather for music and who are nourished by it.<sup>19</sup> This idea originates from the association of the Sun with the leadership of crowds and the Moon

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<sup>17</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 168.

<sup>18</sup> Vettius Valens, *Anthology Book I*, (Berkeley Springs, WV: The Golden Hind Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 169.



symbolizing the crowds that follow the lead of the Sun. The crowds have a tendency to change just like the weekly phases of the Moon. The needs of the people evolve with their physical circumstances and thus influence music to serve them in different capacities. If the Moon's nature is to nourish and promote the physical elements necessary for life, then like the Moon's reception of the Sun's light, a person's reception of music can serve to physically help one's life.<sup>20</sup>

Early spirituals were not only used to boost morale in work songs but also aided in the freedom of slaves. "Wade in the Water" was a common song used by Harriet Tubman to warn those she was helping to hide in water to avoid being seen while crossing rivers. Another song used by Tubman was "Sweet Chariot" as the lyrics hinted at a chariot (underground railroad) that would head south or "swing low" to bring slaves to freedom in the north, "carry me home."<sup>21</sup> Although spirituals have a nature to nourish the spirit, they also proved helpful in aiding in the improvement of living conditions for those who sought freedom. Abolitionist Frederick Douglass concurred with this idea and commented on the cathartic nature that he believed music provided to the slaves: "Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears."<sup>22</sup> This lunar symbolism is indicative of the physical healing power that music can possess.

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<sup>20</sup> Demetra George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice: A Manual of Traditional Techniques* (Auckland, NZ: Rubedo Press, 2019), 47.

<sup>21</sup> Harriet Tubman Historical Society, Songs of the Underground Railroad (<http://www.harriet-tubman.org/songs-of-the-underground-railroad/>, 2021).

<sup>22</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Boston: Anti-Slavery office, 1845), 14.

It has been established that the Sun and Moon symbolize the intangible and tangible forces of life. Within the context of music, it is the combined efforts of the creation and subsequent enjoyment of music by people. Saturn symbolizes the limits placed upon both music and those who gather to listen to it.

If the Sun is the spirit, then Saturn is the limits placed upon the spirit. Aquarius is the domicile of Saturn that is stationed in opposition to the Sun's domicile of Leo.<sup>23</sup> Aquarius represents intangible things which are established and not easily changed by society. This is due to Aquarius being a fixed (unmoving) air (people, ideas) sign. When change does occur, it does not happen for many decades unlike the frequent and predictable changing of the seasons led by the Sun's movement (Leo). Therefore, Saturn in Aquarius is symbolic of the societal reactions to the creation and enjoyment of Black music.

As Black music (in America) transformed from tribal music to spirituals to the early genres of blues, it produced powerful reactions in western society. Many of these reactions existed at the intersection of racism, misogyny, and classism. The development of Black music was heavily limited by the ideals of white society. Saturn rules over long-lasting punishments and restraints thus she represents those with authority to inflict chronic restraints on others. After the civil war, many Black artists and musicians began to gain recognition worldwide. Although free from chains, these artists were not free from the racial implications of the time. Many were banned from certain performance venues and even treated inhumanely by those who chose to attend their performances. Sheet music was even sold to Black people printed upside down and

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<sup>23</sup> Brennan, *Hellenistic Astrology*, 215.

with incorrect markings to hinder their independent musical success. At the height of his career, Miles Davis faced state-sanctioned police brutality for merely standing in front of the club he had just worked.<sup>24</sup> Titles such as “Unspeakable Jazz Must Go” and “The Jazz Problem” appeared in many mainstream publications at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>25</sup> When music is restricted by tenets in society, it is invoking the Aquarian archetype ruled by Saturn.

Saturn’s opposition to the Moon represents the boundaries to the physical body such as ailment and decay. The Moon’s domicile, Cancer, which represents the conception of life (body), and Saturn’s other domicile Capricorn, representative of death (limits to body), is the thematic realization of their relationship. In a musical context, this binary symbolizes the physical institutions that limit one’s access to music.

Under Jim Crow, many historic and highly regarded musical institutions denied access to Black artists. Today, racism and restriction remain entrenched within the global music industry. Take for example, the creation of form 696, a now-removed risk assessment form put forth by London’s Metropolitan police in 2005. This form required concert venues to provide details about the ethnic and racial audiences that were predicted to attend a certain concert. This primarily targeted fans of grime, rap, and other forms of underground Black music.<sup>26</sup> The restrictions did not stop there, many artists were denied performing at venues that anticipated

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<sup>24</sup> Mauren Anderson, *The White Reception of Jazz in America* (*African American Review* 38, no. 1, 2004), 135.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *The White Reception of Jazz*, 136.

<sup>26</sup> Grime music is a genre of music that was developed in the early 2000s in London. It is characterized by the use of electronic instruments and sonic textures. It draws influence from hip-hop and earlier genres of underground Black music.

<sup>27</sup> Lambros Fatsis, “Policing the beats: The criminalisation of UK drill and grime music by the London Metropolitan Police” (*The Sociological Review* Vol. 67, 2019), 1301.

Black or ethnically mixed audiences because of the prediction of alcohol sales that would take place. Thirty-five percent of Black Londoners are in a lower income bracket compared to their white counterparts of the same age.<sup>28</sup> After paying entrance fees and ticket prices, many could not afford to also consume alcohol at a venue. Dress code policies were also enforced at venues to restrict even more ethnically mixed audiences from supporting unconventional music and place the control of the arts in the hands of the government, enforceable by police. These classist defenses were at the front lines promoting the legitimacy of the form. Though the form was scrapped in 2008 and officially banned in 2017, the impacts of those restrictions left a lasting impression on the culture of underground Black music in the United Kingdom.

It is important to give attention to the factors that both promote and hinder the expansion of music because negating these truths only hinder one's scope of understanding. No matter how immoral and ugly we discover history to be, we have to acknowledge that it was because of that state of detriment that these brilliant extensions of the human spirit were forged. Undoubtedly, Black music still faces many restrictions in both the social and physical institutions of today. Continuing to give attention to these matters is of high importance when appreciating music. The historical and societal implications of music is crucial to understand why it was created and how it is limited by both tangible and intangible forces.

#### Mercury And Jupiter

Mercury and Jupiter turn our attention to the sonic mechanisms that give meaning to a musical work. Mercury is the communicator of thought, the messenger of the skies. Jupiter is the preacher of beliefs, the great benefic whose nature is to expand and affirm. These two forces act

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<sup>28</sup> Fatsis, "Policing the Beats," 1304.

in opposition due to the scalable difference of their capacities. Mercury is the micro, the smallest forms of transmission and language, while Jupiter is the overarching theme achieved by connecting many small ideas. Studying the first movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major, Op. 55 (Eroica)* serves as an excellent example to unpack the dynamic of this planetary duo.

Like their observable natures in the sky, Mercury is a fast-moving planet that stations retrograde (appears as backwards motion from us on earth) and backtracks on his trajectory three times a year as if critiquing his own work. Jupiter takes ten or so years to revolve around the Sun once, allowing his nature to slowly unfold.<sup>29</sup> Mercury and Jupiter are two very different expressions of intelligence, but nevertheless both are necessary to explore the strokes of genius that can be found in a piece of music.

Mercury's nature is to communicate.<sup>30</sup> Mercury rules over language, writing, and speech; essentially all mediums of communication. In Beethoven's *Eroica*, the notes serve as a language that a larger story is being told through. When Mercury is in good condition, he makes those successful in intellectual matters.<sup>31</sup> The alternation of even one note in this symphony during a performance can lead the entire story to go askew. There is an enormous responsibility placed upon performers of this symphony that they must operate flawlessly to communicate the story this symphony was written to deliver. If music is an intelligent extension of the spirit (Sun),

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<sup>29</sup> "years" are in reference to Earth years since Hellenistic astrology is calculated from our perspective on Earth.

<sup>30</sup> George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice*, 50.

<sup>31</sup> George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice*, 50.

Mercury symbolizes the forces in place that verbalize and announce that intelligence. The composition of *Eroica* is a brilliant expression of a well-conditioned Mercury.

This symphony also showcases Jupiter in a good condition. While Mercury handles the various entrails of the compositional matter, Jupiter is concerned with expanding upon those Mercurial details and connecting them to form larger overarching ideas. Not only is he representative of the expansive nature of this symphony, but also the lasting cultural impact it had on western musical society. Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* is arguably one of the most important pieces to come out of Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century. This work was the largest symphony written and performed by 1805 and pioneered a tradition of artistic excellence that characterized much of the music in the Romantic era that followed its premier. Everything was large about it from the sheer size of the orchestra to the epic drama achieved by tonal and rhythmic expression. Every part of the orchestration plays its own part to express the story, the instruments are now actors on a stage. Similar to the expansive and growing nature of Jupiter, this symphony has a natural sense of progress. Naivety leads to impulse which leads to regret and acceptance of defeat that eventually turns into joy when met with moments of success.

The main protagonist of this story is a courageous man who is met with considerable challenge and triumph throughout the symphony, experiencing moments of profound grief and overwhelming elation.

Jupiter's natural tendency to expand and affirm also associates him with the search for a noble truth.<sup>32</sup> Unlike Mercury whose nature actively challenges information in search of truth,

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<sup>32</sup> George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice*, 48-49.

the benefic nature of Jupiter allows truth to arrive to him through the emotional and physical experiences of life. Oftentimes, the protagonist of this story makes impulsive decisions before quickly being humbled into learning a lesson from challenge.

It is interesting that this search for truth was also a theme evident in Beethoven's life during the creation of this symphony. This symphony was originally dedicated to Napoleon Bonaparte, but after crowning himself as the emperor of France, Beethoven rescinded his support of Bonaparte since he no longer upheld the values of freedom and equality of man that once pervaded his campaigns.<sup>33</sup> Many scholars believe that the actual hero is Beethoven himself and this epic tonal drama paints his reality as a groundbreaking composer who was met with many physical challenges in his life. The *Eroica*, as many referred to it, was instead dedicated to "celebrate the memory of a great man."

The piece begins with two loud declamatory major chords, immediately grabbing the attention of the audience to prepare them for something new and unexpected. The principal motive appears in the cellos as a fanfare on an arpeggio of an Eb major chord. A very unassuming theme, this motive lands on a C# in the seventh measure of the piece which immediately contradicts the stability previously established in the first four bars. The opening motive is treated as the protagonist or "hero" who develops alongside the music. The inclusion of a non-chord tone in contrast to the bold opening remarks begins to tell the story of a courageous hero who is destined to face many challenges in his journey.

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<sup>33</sup> Peter J. Burkholder and Claude V. Palisca, *Norton Anthology of Western Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 336.



Figure 3. Main theme in the Violoncello e Basso line. First ten measures of *Eroica*.<sup>34</sup>

The assignment of the leading motive to a bassline instrument is one of the decisions, we see early on, that Beethoven made which distinguishes this symphony to be a completely different beast than the symphonies of his predecessors, Mozart and Haydn. This theme is then developed and explored until the striking *sforzandis* in measure 26 which push against a harmonic barrier before making an exhilarating breakthrough to the tonic. Already, we can connect these musical qualities to thematic expressions of challenge and triumph. The small notes and subtle figures are what communicate to the audience that something larger is happening at hand. These musical additions are made consciously and it is only after the realization of the full work that they are able to be pieced together to communicate the heroic story being told.

The development of the first movement expands the capacities of the sonata form in a way that had never been done before.<sup>35</sup> In the development we hear themes from the exposition appear in all sorts of dramatic variations. A fugato is introduced to lead us into the development of a leaping figure and moment of stark dissonance and rhythmic disruption, representing defeat

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<sup>34</sup> Burkholder, *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, 303.

<sup>35</sup> Sonata form is a compositional structure with three parts: exposition, development, recapitulation. This form was developed in the sixteenth century and popularized in the eighteenth century by composers like Mozart and Haydn.



for the protagonist.<sup>3637</sup> After this trial that the protagonist has just faced, a new theme is introduced in the development.<sup>38</sup> This is a crucial turning point for the story since themes are traditionally not introduced during a section of development and expansion in sonata form. Although this new theme provides tonal stability, it is in a key that is harmonically very far from the established home key. This new turn of the story in E minor symbolizes a period of reconciliation for the protagonist and his journey. He has accepted defeat and begins moving forward but in very unfamiliar territory.

The retransition prepares for the recapitulation over a lengthy sixty bars in anticipation for the end of the movement.<sup>39</sup> The retransition ends with a very soft passage from the strings that is interrupted prematurely by the horns establishing the main theme as if it cannot contain the excitement for the journey that lies ahead. The notorious C# reappears in the recapitulation but instead of resolving back to the D, it descends downwards to a C-natural which then outlines an E diminished chord that then resolves to a major II chord in F. This new resolution to the established theme signifies the protagonist being changed by his journey, learning from his past defeats. The secondary theme introduced in the development reappears in the coda and is brilliantly recapitulated in Eb minor, the parallel minor to the home key. The first movement

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<sup>36</sup> A fugato is a passage of music that resembles the style of a fugue.

<sup>37</sup> Burkholder, *Norton Anthology of Western Music*, 337.

<sup>38</sup> The development is the second section of sonata form where the main theme is composed in many variations and often in different keys in order to “develop” the piece further.

<sup>39</sup> The retransition leads our ear back to the main theme heard in the sonata form and prepares us for the ending section of the piece. The retransition often modulates back to the original key of a piece.

ends with more stable variations of the main theme, building upon themselves in a cyclical manner before ending with the iconic hammer strokes first heard at the start of the journey.

The first movement of *Eroica* is so intellectually captivating because it successfully tells a story with no words. The notes on the staff act as a script that each instrument follows and gives dimension to with their respective timbres and tones. The brilliant work is about youth, hope, joy, frustration and anger, confusion, and the acceptance of fate. This movement sets the emotional precedent for the whole symphony, it is about life. The three movements that follow continue to place the protagonist in settings where it stretches the boundaries of the human spirit and its capacity to feel and learn. In Jupitorean fashion, all four movements are connected together to form the story arc for the protagonist whose character is cleverly unveiled by subtle Mercurial figures. The relationship shared by Mercury and Jupiter demonstrates the contrast of scope for which to analyze music.

## VENUS AND MARS

The symbolism behind Venus and Mars highlights the distinction between harmony and discord. The relationship that consonance and dissonance share is arguably one of the first things we hear when listening to music. Harmonic and lyrical passages that are challenged by the introduction of harmonic or rhythmic tension work to contrast each other and to that affect heighten the emotional capacity of a piece of music. The titular song of Billie Eilish's new album, *Happier Than Ever* is an excellent setting of music that demonstrates the qualities of both Venus and Mars in good condition.

Venus is the lesser benefic whose significations associate her with beauty, desire, love, cleanliness and balance. The nature of Venus is to magnetize and harmonize.<sup>40</sup> When Venus is in good condition, she brings distinction and symmetry. Mars on the other hand is the lesser malefic. His qualities naturally oppose those of Venus as he is associated with anger, hatred, separation, combat, and imbalance. In a good condition, Mars brings forth daring and courageous qualities. The nature of Mars is to energize and divide.<sup>41</sup>

The song begins with a light ukulele strumming on a G major chord. On the second measure of the song, an F is added to the G chord just before the entrance of the vocal line. The addition of the G7 chord so early in the piece subtly throws us off balance, hinting at a somber poetic tone before the song is able to fully express the reasoning behind it. The opening lyrics firmly establish the despondent nature of the song: “When I’m away from you, I’m happier than ever.”

The word “away” in the lyric “When I’m away from you” is at a higher pitch than the word “you,” supporting the nature of sorrow that encompasses this song. The text painting on the word “away” is symbolic of the singer’s wishes to be free but the lowered pitch on the second person pronoun tethers the singer to the depressive nature of another. The words are of a Martian nature despite the balanced nature of the harmonic material as if to symbolize a relationship that may appear balanced and happy but is instead riddled with bitterness and distrust.

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<sup>40</sup> George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> George, *Ancient Astrology in Theory & Practice*, 48.

This song is structured in a simple binary form. The A section is marked by passages of balanced lyrical and harmonic material that subtly add modulations on words that emphasize the singer's wish to distance herself from somebody. This section embeds a ternary form whose B section has the singer challenge their former lover through a series of questions. The simple melody in this section also simplifies the nature of the questions which still remain unanswered for Eilish. The ending line to the embedded B section ends with the lyrics "don't say it isn't fair, you clearly weren't aware that you made me miserable." This is important to note because the word miserable ends on a high note compared to the rest of the phrase. After processing the extent of the abuse endured in her failed relationship, Eilish embarks from a place of freedom for the rest of the song.

Another aspect of this song that draws more contrasts between feelings of love and hate is the soft tone of voice Billie Eilish uses at the beginning. This softer dynamic allows the emotional material to grow in volume as the song develops and can be indicative of a state of emotional exhaustion; a final straw for what is to come later in the song. The pacing of this song is brilliant as it slowly unfolds the story of a love that was once innocent but then becomes corrupted. Venus is the innocence and balance, while Mars provides the energy necessary to release feelings of disdain.

Figure 4. B Section sample #1 from Billie Eilish's *Happier Than Ever*.<sup>42</sup>

After the return of the A section in the embedded ternary, a driving set of strummed quarter notes lead us into the completely different nature of the B section of the overall binary form. The ukulele strumming changes to the strumming of an electric guitar and now harsher timbres in the orchestration begin to accompany Eilish's vocal line. The opening vocal describes a scene where Eilish expresses her worry for the reckless actions her former partner pursued such as driving under the influence. This story, which happens over a phone call, is energized by the sharp timbres of the guitar and drums that continues supporting the vocal line. In this new section, Eilish's anger at the situation begins to grow, so much so that she cuts herself off in a fit of frustration at the circumstances before her. The firm landing on the C major chord as she cuts herself off illustrates a firm standing to sever the relationship and never look back. Eilish is forcefully reclaiming her power in the B section and cathartically expresses her feelings as the song develops.

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<sup>42</sup> Billie Eilish, *Happier Than Ever*. Transcribed by Nick Reardon, 2021.

Figure 5. B Section sample #2 from Billie Eilish’s *Happier Than Ever*.<sup>43</sup>

The driving quarter notes lead us into the climax of the piece through the phrase starting on the pickup to measure three of Figure 5. Eilish is practically shouting in a cathartic fashion by measure 11 of the sample above. The instability of the chords helps to energize the song and figuratively release Eilish from the emotional responsibility of her previous relationship. She is expressing volumes of pain and grief as the song comes to a blazing finish. The last utterance of the vocal line is followed by a sonic texture that morphs into static, resolving the piece in a fit of anger and confusion but ultimately freedom from a difficult situation. In the studio recording, Eilish layered her own cursing screams into the texture of the guitar and drums that end the song, adding even more dramatic flares to her expression of wrath.

The contrast between infatuation and absolute disdain is the essence that pervades this song. This binary invokes the natures of Venus and Mars as the driving forces behind aesthetic

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<sup>43</sup> Billie Eilish, *Happier Than Ever*. Transcribed by Nick Reardon, 2021.

choices in art. The sweet innocent strums in the A section function to highlight the aggressive nature of the B section. The tonal stability found in the declamations of the B section serve to establish a sense of grounding and resolution for the singer. These moments of high contrast work hand in hand as one is necessary for the realization and appreciation of the other.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

The system of Hellenistic astrology is an excellent medium to communicate the smallest and largest qualities music can possess. Drawing connections between the symbolic potential of both music and astrology is useful when interpreting large concepts that can be explained through analogies and a system of comparison.

The symbolism of the two luminaries and their relationship with the dimmest visible body, Saturn, serve to show the contrast between the creation of art and the limits it is bound to face. When studying music, especially of the past, it is important to be aware of the context that allowed for a musical work to be created. Historical context, whether acceptable today or not, provides the full story behind a musical work and it connects the music to the lives of real people. It is our duty, as scholars in the modern day, to preserve knowledge of the past without cutting corners regarding what is remembered or not. Understanding the historical context of music is a fundamental step when analyzing a musical work or genre.

The symbolism between the relationship shared by Mercury and Jupiter shows us how important it is to pay attention to the smallest details and what roles they play in the full realization of a work. Beethoven's *Eroica* is a fantastic setting to analyze which small parts are connected to communicate a large idea. This symphony contains many strokes of brilliance that communicate a story through music. When focused on the motion of certain notes or recurring motifs, we are able to hear the words that communicate a story. This is Mercury at work. When focused on the overarching symbolism embedded into the structure of the work, we are able to connect musical ideas and reveal the poetic message being told. This is Jupiter at work. Both



planets represent skills of analysis that are important when unpacking the messages that music aims to communicate.

The relationship shared between Venus and Mars illustrate the tension that exists at the poles of love and hatred. In Billie Eilish's *Happier Than Ever*, the idea of harmony and discord pervades the song. It is about a person who loved intensely but was ultimately abused by the other party and wishes to be free from their connection to the other. The contrasting nature of this song is communicated by moments of balance and consonance as well as moments of instability and frustration. The essence of the song is to demonstrate the highest highs and lowest lows a person can face when they no longer experience intense feelings of love for someone. The symbolic natures of both Venus and Mars exemplify the necessity for this distinction.

In this study, Hellenistic astrology is used to isolate binaries formed within music and compare how they function to the binaries present in this system of astrology. Themes we see in life are not only reflected in the poetic material that can accompany a piece of music but can also be descriptive of things the music itself experiences. Music is not only a vessel through which to communicate thought and emotion but at times can be the very thing it communicates, like an actor playing a character on stage. After realizing the full extent of Hellenistic planetary symbolism, I am confident in the application of this system to the interpretation of music. Not only does it provide a language to express why we may like or dislike the things we hear but it is a framework by which to analyze anything. Hellenistic astrology urges us to examine polarizing ideas to reveal the contrarities underlying deeper truths.

## Ending Remarks

This creative challenge expanded the ways in which I view and analyze music. Many times, it felt like layering languages on top of each other to find cognates of the same expression. Since the language of astrology is meant to be descriptive of the subjective spectrum of human experience, the music discussed with this language humanized the significations that were uncovered by melding the two disciplines.

My hope is that this analysis can reconcile the differences between the study of music and the study of astrology. Both have such potential to say powerful things about the human condition. For astrologers, this research should be informative of the symbolic ramifications of music. For musicians, this research should be informative of an esoteric language that can be used to discuss multiple facets of music. Hellenistic planetary symbolism humanizes our most intimate and public experiences with music.

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