

ALCHEMICAL MELODIES
THE QUEST FOR MUSICAL QUINTESSENCE IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Maison Française
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

27 May 2015

Organisers
Fabrizio Bigotti & Georgiana Hedesan

Sponsored by
The Society for the History of Alchemy and Chemistry
(SHAC)

9.30 – 9.45 INTRODUCTION

FIRST SECTION *Chair* Fabrizio BIGOTTI (University of Exeter)

9.45 – 10.15 Peter J. FORSHAW (University of Amsterdam)
*Alchemy, Myth and Music in Michael Maier's Atalanta
Fugiens (1617)*

10.15 – 10.30 » Discussion «

10.30 – 11.00 Luca GUARIENTO (University of Glasgow)
*Matter, Spirit and Proportions: the Idea of Music in Robert Fludd's
Philosophy*

11.00 – 11.15 » Discussion «

11.15 – 11.45 COFFEE BREAK

SECOND SECTION *Chair* Georgiana HEDESAN (University of Oxford)

11.45 – 12.15 Penelope GOUK (University of Manchester)
*Transforming Matter, Refining the Spirit:
Alchemy, Music and Experimental Philosophy around 1600*

12.15 – 12.30 » Discussion «

12.30 – 13.00 Fabrizio BIGOTTI (University of Exeter)
*Allegorical Contents, Alchemical Suggestions and Rhetorical
Techniques
in Seventeenth-Century Music: Some Remarks*

13.00 – 13.15 » Discussion «

13.15 – 13.30 FINAL REMARKS: Fabrizio Bigotti & Georgiana Hedesan

13.30 LUNCH

ABSTRACTS

Fabrizio BIGOTTI
University of Exeter

ALLEGORICAL CONTENTS, ALCHEMICAL SUGGESTIONS AND RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MUSIC: Some Remarks
Since the very development of the monodic style, seventeenth-century musicians and theorists felt the need to express with music an entire variety of extra musical contents: emotional (*cantata, opera*), devotional (*mottetto*), biblical (*sacra rappresentazione, oratorio*) and even alchemical suggestions began to be seen as an integral part of the new style, a mode to stress the supremacy of the new approach (*seconda prattica*) on the previous one (*prima prattica* or polyphony). Musicians considered themselves as actors (*recitar cantando*) and music was their rhetorical repertoire. Thus, by borrowing the names and the functions of ancient techniques, seventeenth-century music aimed to constitute a series of common places to be used also as a model to arrange the inner language of musical composition. By exploring some of these techniques, the aim of my report shall be to shed some light on their applications in early baroque theorists and composers, notably in Maier's work *Atalanta fugiens* (1617) and Kircher's *Musurgia universalis* (1650).

Peter J. FORSHAW
University of Amsterdam

ALCHEMY, MYTH AND MUSIC
IN MICHAEL MAIER'S 'ATALANTA FUGIENS' (1617)

The best-known instance of the presence of music in an alchemical work is undoubtedly the *Atalanta fugiens* (1617) of Emperor Rudolf II's personal physician Michael Maier (1566-1622). This impressive multimedia work with its fifty emblematic images, epigrams, and alchemical exegesis of Egyptian and Greek mythological material that Maier considers relevant to the study and practice of alchemy, also contains fifty 3-voice fugal canons that are enjoying increasing popularity in the world of early music, with several recordings currently available. This paper discusses the relation of these various elements in the context of Maier's other works, including the *Arcana arcanissima* (1614), where he first formulated his idea of mythoalchemy, the *Symbola aureae mensae* (1617), and *Viatorium* (1618), and presents new insights into Maier's experimental combination of alchemy and music.

Penelope GOUK
University of Manchester

TRANSFORMING MATTER, REFINING THE SPIRIT
Alchemy, Music and Experimental Philosophy around 1600

Drawing on the iconographic evidence available from around 1600 there seems to have been a convergence between music and alchemy in the early seventeenth century, most notably in the courts of Rudolf II and Moritz of Hesse-Kassel. In this paper I explain why the experimental practice of alchemy was attractive to these patrons in the form of Paracelsian medicine and what this had to do with music. As a way into discussing these interactions I take as my central focus one of the images found in Heinrich Khunrath's *Amphitheatrum sapientiae aeternae* or Amphitheatre of eternal wisdom, which was first printed in 1595 and republished in 1609 four years after his death. As one of the

earliest depictions of a laboratory, this engraving can not only tell us about the overlap between magic, science and also religion in the alchemist's worldview, but also can clarify the function of music in his experimental philosophy. I will argue that the performance of actual music was not a necessary part of the alchemist's practice even though it was constitutive of courtly life in this period. Nevertheless music plays a pivotal role in Khunrath's laboratory, being linked to alchemy by virtue of *spiritus* at a number of different levels. I will suggest that the depiction of musical instruments served as a reminder of the harmony of nature and of the pathway to higher spiritual truths, as well as embodying music's power as soul medicine.

Luca GUARIENTO
University of Glasgow

MATTER, SPIRIT AND PROPORTIONS: THE IDEA OF MUSIC IN ROBERT FLUDD'S
PHILOSOPHY

The physician and philosopher Robert Fludd (1573/4-1637) was one of the last thinkers who tried to build a philosophical system in which alchemical, Cabalistic, biblical, and many other motives are all harmonised under the unifying power of musical proportions. If it is true that for many aspects Fludd's ideas on the interconnection of macrocosm and microcosm were not original, I will show that it is still possible to argue that in Fluddean philosophy one finds features which characterise the English philosopher in a unique way. With Fludd, the syncretistic approach at work in men such as Giovanni Battista della Porta or Gregor Reisch is brought a step further, producing results, in terms of internal coherency, which few matched before and especially after him. I will show how Fludd achieved this consistency by means of his pyramidal *scientia*, i.e. the idea that the cosmos can be depicted by means of two intersecting pyramids: one representing matter, and the other its spiritual counterpart. Musical proportions are an active part in this schema, which is applied to philosophical experiments such as the monochord and the weather-glass. With the help of some of the most representative plates, chosen amongst the many which embellish Fludd's works, I will explain how the above-mentioned and many other elements convene together to form a philosophical system which is only apparently obscure and inscrutable. Once the seeker of truth obtains the key to the unlocking of the mysteries of the universe, in fact, he/she is allowed to listen to the perfect harmonies and to fully grasp the underlying structure of the two cosmoses.