

PYTHAGORAS BY MOONLIGHT: A TRANSLATION AND
EXPLICATION OF LORCA'S *EL CONCIERTO INTERRUPTIDO*

El Concierto Interrumpido

Ha roto la armonía
De la noche profunda
El calderón helado y soñoliento
De la media luna.

Las acequias protestan sordamente,
Arropadas con juncias,
Y las ranas, muecines de la sombra,
Se han quedado mudas.

En la vieja taberna del poblado
Cesó la triste música,
Y ha puesto la sordina a su arístón
La estrella más antigua.

El viento se ha sentado en los torcales
De la montaña obscura,
Y un chopo solitario – el Pitágoras
De la casta llanura –
Quiere dar con su mano centenaria
Un cachete a la luna.¹

The Interrupted Concert

The cold and somnolent pause-mark
Of the crescent moon
Has broken the harmony
Of the deep night.

The channels, clad in sedges,
Protest in silence,
And the frogs, muezzins of darkness,
Have held their peace.

In the old village tavern
The sad music stops,
And the more ancient star
Has placed the mute on its barrel-organ

On the gloomy mountain's caverned sides
The wind has died down,
And a solitary poplar – the Pythagoras
Of the level plain –
Tries to give the moon a blow
With its age-old hand.

It is night, and Lorca stands outdoors, alone, within earshot of the tavern. From behind a cloud the crescent moon appears, its form suggesting the musical pause-mark $\cap$, and all at once four of the night's sounds are no longer heard. The channels which have been earlier swollen by rain, and so have run noisily, now carry a smaller volume of water whose passage is slow and inaudible. The frogs that normally would be in mid-chorus are silent. The tavern music comes to an end. The wind has ceased. Now $\cap$ may indicate either

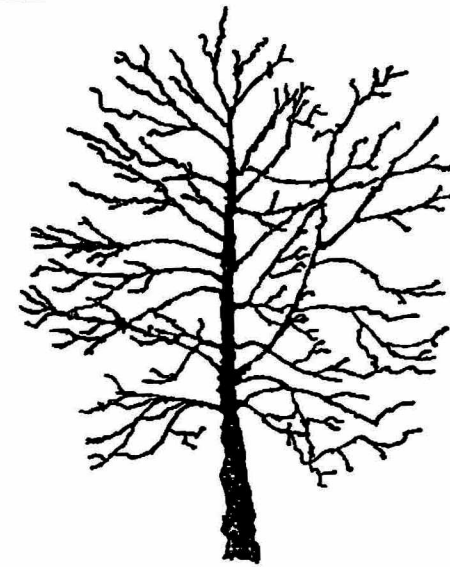
- (i) a momentary prolongment of one note or chord in the middle of a piece, or
- (ii) a prolongment of a piece's final note or chord (in effect, the end of the music).

Lorca's $\cap$ is really a mixture of both (i) and (ii): for the moon, while appearing in the middle of the nocturnal music, brings it to a violent and unexpected close. Night's *armonía* is composed of several strands which should each enter and depart at different times: but by forcing the strands to stop simultaneously, the moon breaks their natural counterpoint.

Now to the frogs. If the word *muecines* is easily translated, it may be fully appreciated only by dwellers in a land where the Moriscoes stayed until 1610. "Muezzin" is a remote, exotic word to an Englishman; to a literate Spaniard, however, the word *muecín* connotes forms of regularity and reliability that are bound up with religious obligation. The effect of the word here is therefore much stronger than if Lorca had said *heraldos*: when the *muecines* cease their proclamations, something is badly wrong.

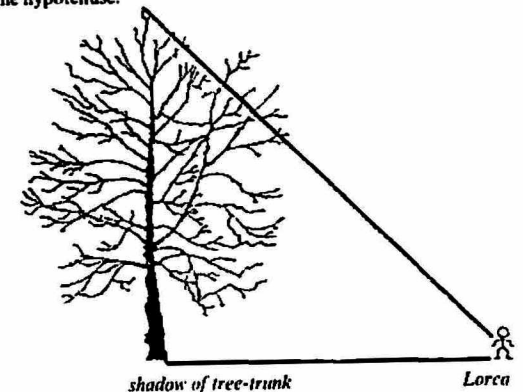
Aristón was in its day a household word, as universal in usage as "transistor" in the 'sixties or "stereo" today. The *Aristón*, a disc-playing organette, was the best-known product of the Leipzig firm of Paul Ehrlich. By 1890 well over two hundred thousand *Aristóns* were distributed across the world. It is therefore not surprising that by the end of the century *Aristón* had become an eponym in several languages of "barrel-organ." The sound of some player reed organs could be modified by setting mutes and partial mutes over the open ends of the reed cells. If Lorca's *sordina* is such a mute, we must understand his use of the word *arístón* to be imprecise, and to indicate some kind of player reed organ. Whatever the case, however, the best word to use in translation is "barrel-organ." It is hardly necessary to emphasize that a mute reduces the volume of an instrument (so far from rendering its sound inaudible); so Lorca's *sordina* cannot possibly be construed as a bringer of silence.

Chopo is the black poplar, *populus nigra*, which we British know both from Constable's East Anglian paintings and from the modern industrial north of England, where it has been much used as a screening tree. Lorca's anthropomorphic conceit *muno* indicates a poplar leafless in late autumn, when its silhouette really does suggest a huge, polydactyl hand.



Silhouette of a full-grown black poplar (approximate height thirty metres)

I imagine Lorca standing on the plain at the extremity of the poplar's shadow. The tree and its shadow suggest two arms of a right-angled triangle, and Lorca's eye, ranging up to the top of the tree, draws the hypotenuse.



Then the notion of a right-angled triangle leads Lorca to think of the forty-seventh proposition of Euclid, and of its discoverer, Pythagoras. According to mythical tradition Pythagoras wrote characters on a mirror, held it up to the moon, and caused his characters to be reflected on the lunar surface. This tradition, operating in Lorca's memory, is at work in his conception of the *chopo* trying to strike the moon. It may also be seen at work in the curious construction of stanza 3; as the music (presumably of a barrel-organ) in the tavern stops playing, the moon (*La estrella más antigua*) is compelled to correspond by putting a mute on its barrel-organ. What on earth does this mean? Well, since a mute does not silence an instru-

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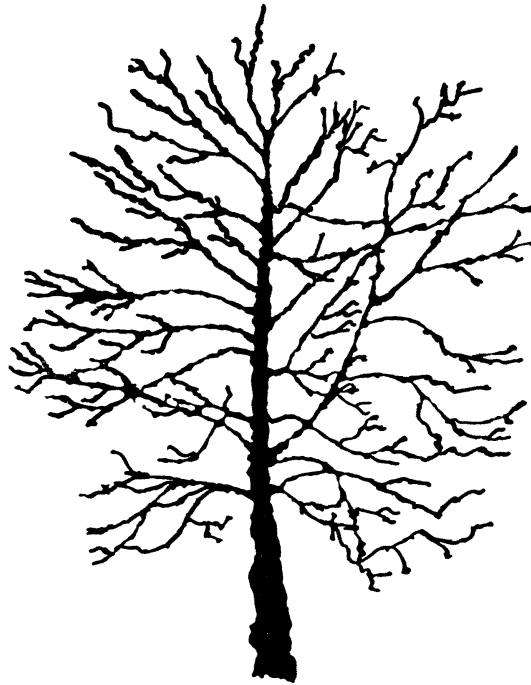
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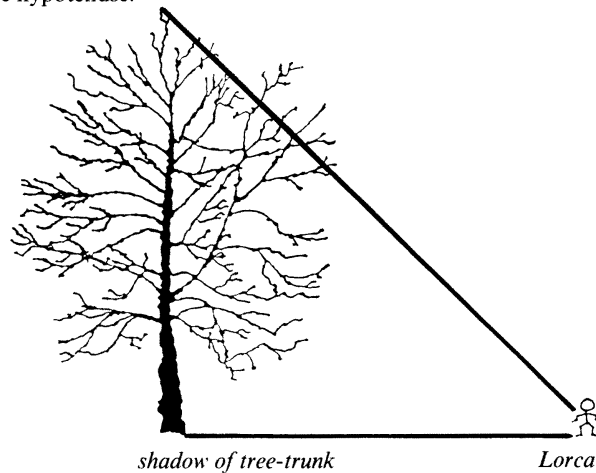
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Neophilologus 74 (1990) 318-320



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ment, as we have seen, and since the moon's only "music" is its light, the *sordina* at the natural level must be a cloud – crossing the moon's face, and reducing its light in reply to the tellurian silence.

To Pythagoras and his disciples, of course, there was more to the moon's music than its light. In the famous doctrine of "the music of the spheres," the Pythagoreans combined their musical and astronomical discoveries. The velocities of the heavenly bodies depend upon their distance from a central "fire;" the slower and nearer bodies emit a deep note, the swifter ones a high note; the concert of the whole yields the cosmic octave; in fact, the entire heavens constitute a musical scale. English readers will be familiar with the doctrine from Lorenzo's speech in *The Merchant of Venice*, Act V, Scene I:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank!
Here will we sit, and let the sounds of music
Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
Become the touches of sweet harmony.
Sit, Jessica: look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But, whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

(Shakespeare's musical luminaries may owe something to the Old Testament. In *Job* 38. 7 the Lord describes the dawn of creation, *When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy.*) Leaving other literature aside, we shall find several hints of Pythagorean doctrine in the work of Lorca. In ¡*Cigarra!* he describes the cicada as *estrella sonora*.² In *Elegía del silencio* he refers to

...la música eterna,
La harmonía sonora
De luz...³

In *Prólogo* he conceives of *El rigodón de los astros*.⁴ And in *Mar* he speaks of Venus as *La harmonía del mundo*.⁵ Such hints as these preclude a purely naturalistic understanding of the moon's *aristón* in *El Concierto Interrumpido* (even if ultimately the idea of the moon's "obedience" to something done on earth is taken to be a fanciful piece of irony).

Two words in stanza 4 – *solitario* and *llanura* – may refer obliquely to Pythagoras the mathematician. Numbers in the Pythagorean system are spatially conceived, and *one* is identified with the point in the sense of a unit having both position and magnitude. Something of this notion may lie behind Lorca's *chopo solitario*. *Llanura*, the plain, may signify to some degree the plane surfaces of geometry.

Now, standing aside from the explication of details, let us try to work out what is actually going on in the poem. As soon as the moon appears four nocturnal sounds come to an end (either in reality, or in Lorca's fancy). The lunar antiquity both highlights and negates the transient life of earth. A poplar (whose life-span is a mere century) suggests Pythagoras, who represents all intelligent, inquisitive humanity. Pythagoras attempted to understand the entire universe by studying music, mathematics, and astronomy: but humanity has as much chance of understanding the universe as the poplar has of striking the moon.

If there is much complexity in this poem, there is no hope.

Belfast

DAVID Z. CROOKES

Notes

1. Federico García Lorca, *Obras Completas*, Madrid 1957, p. 184
2. o.c., p. 117
3. o.c., p. 147
4. o.c., p. 169
5. o.c., p. 205