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Robin Headlam Wells



A Concert by Lorenzo Costa (London, National Gallery)

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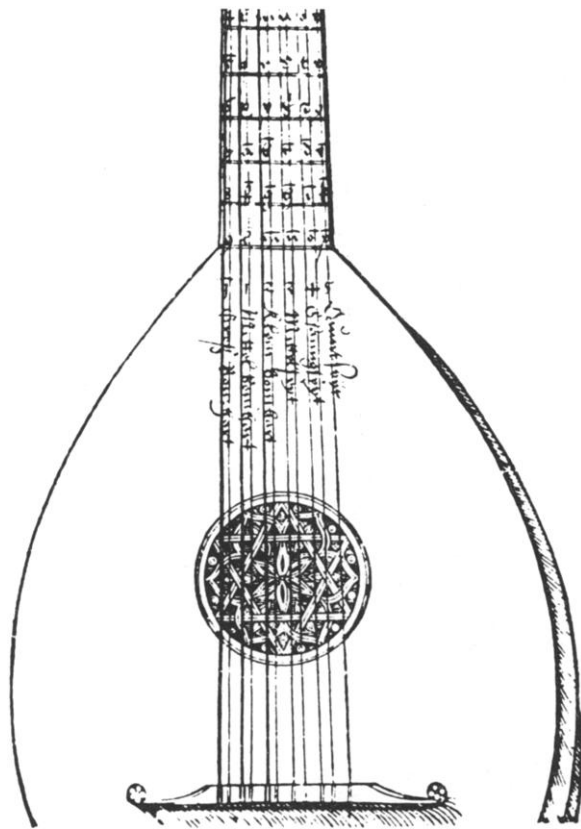
In this article Robin Headlam Wells argues that the renaissance luthier adapted the decorative motifs which his instrument inherited from its Islamic origins in order to express the idea of harmony. Despite their apparent variety most renaissance lute roses are based on two figures: the hexagram and the tetragram. According to the familiar body of Pythagorean doctrine transmitted through Plato to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the numbers six and four were of profound significance. The author here suggests that, as the renaissance cosmographer represented the idea of a harmonious universe by means of number expressed diagrammatically, so the luthier employed geometry to symbolize the principle of discordia concors.

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In a seminal article on the construction of renaissance and baroque lutes¹ Friedemann Hellwig pointed out that the enormous number of different rose patterns which characterize the lutes of this period can be reduced to a few basic motifs. The most frequent of these, he claims, is the six-pointed star formed by the interlacing of two equilateral triangles (see illus. 1). Such a design, Hellwig

suggests, may have been intended to symbolize 'the permeation of the visible and invisible world'.² The suggestion is not implausible: indeed it would be surprising if the geometrical intricacies of the typical renaissance lute rose did not conceal a symbolic meaning of one kind or another. It was, after all, the product of an age whose passion for the arcane reflected itself in pageantry, in emblem books, in



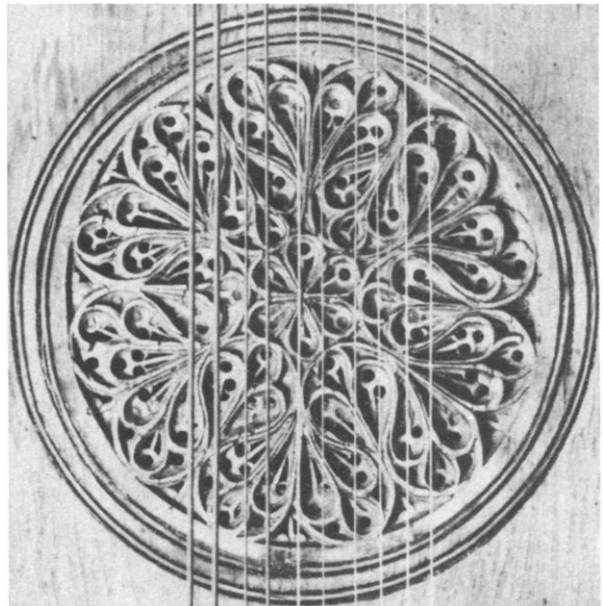
1 Rose with six-pointed star, from R. Wyssensbach, *Tablatura uff di Lutten* (Zurich, 1550)

allegorical portraiture, in architectural conceits, in literary puzzles and conundrums and in number symbolism of all kinds. Moreover the lute itself, as the noblest of musical instruments,³ was widely treated as a symbol of the harmony which underlies the cosmos. William Drummond, for example, elaborates this familiar conceit in the manner of an emblem-book writer:

GOD binding with hid *Tendons* this great *ALL*,
Did make a *LVTE* which had all parts it giuen;
This *LVTE*s round *Bellie* was the azur'd Heauen,
The *Rose* those lights which Hee did there install;

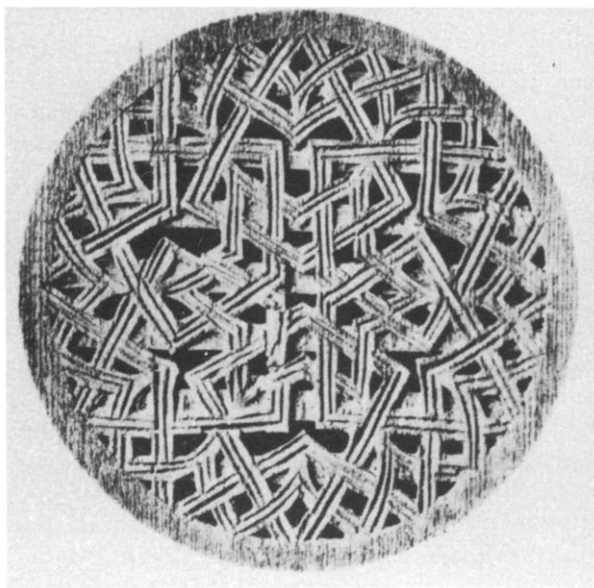
The *Basses* were the Earth and Ocean,
The *Treble* shrill the Aire: the other *Strings*
The vnlike Bodies were of mixed things:
And then His Hand to breake sweete Notes began.⁴

At a time when the essential function of art was conceived as being 'to lead and draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate soules made worse by their clay-lodgings, can be capable of',⁵ ornament had a vital role to play in the techniques of moral persuasion. How can poetry, asks the Elizabethan critic George Puttenham, 'shew it selfe either gallant or gorgious, if any lymme be left naked and bare and not clad in his kindly clothes and colours . . . ?'⁶ The lute rose provided a unique opportunity for artistic invention; that the possibilities it afforded for expressing symbolic meanings should have been neglected is unlikely. In this article I hope to show that the typical renaissance lute rose was designed to express a symbolic meaning which was at once complex and extremely precise.⁷ From the discussion which follows it will be clear, however, that a single article can hope to do no more than touch the surface of a very large subject.

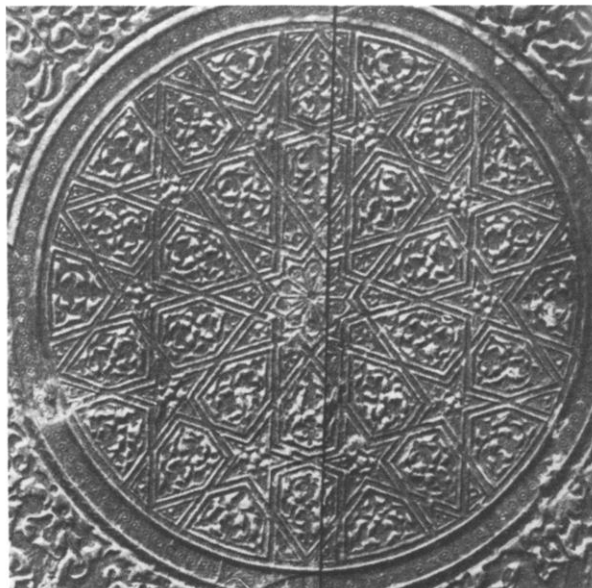


2 Gothic rose from a cittern in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

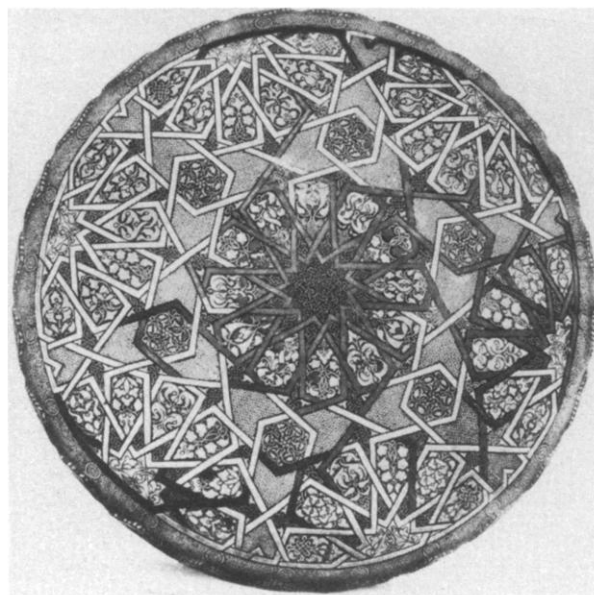
Unlike most of its wire-strung relatives, whose roses were usually of gothic design (illus. 2),⁸ the lute retained the geometric motifs of its Arabic origins. Basing his designs on a few simple forms such as the sphere, the triangle and the square, the Islamic artist



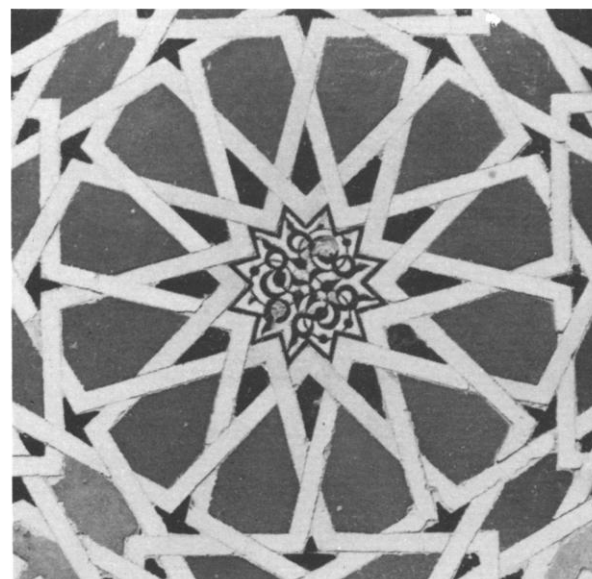
3 Rose from a 16th-century Italian lute in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



4 Rosette from a pair of wooden doors in an Angoran mosque, from H. Glück and E. Diez, *Die Kunst des Islam* (Berlin, 1925)



5 Late 15th-century Egyptian bronze bowl, from Glück and Diez, *op cit*

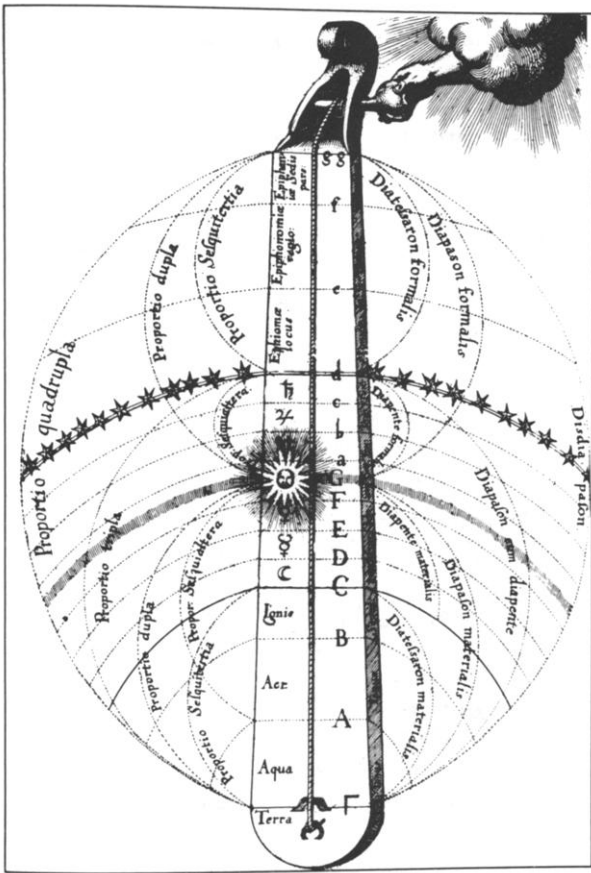


6 Detail from a ceramic wall decoration in the Alhambra, Spain. Reproduced by permission from E. Garcia-Gomez, *L'Alhambra: il Palazzo Reale* (Florence, 1965)

developed a highly sophisticated system of symbolism whose purpose was to reveal the hidden laws of the universe.⁹ The characteristic idiom of this symbolic language was a complex geometrical pattern interwoven with floral arabesques. The interlacing strapwork which is a feature of most renaissance lute and archlute roses (illus. 3) has its origins

in the ubiquitous Islamic rosette, a design which is found in countries as widely separated geographically as Turkey, Egypt and Spain (see illus. 4-6). By repeating an infinitely extendible geometrical motif the artist gives us, in effect, an incomplete picture of a pattern which exists only in infinity.¹⁰ In this way he is able to suggest the idea, fundamental to Islam, that

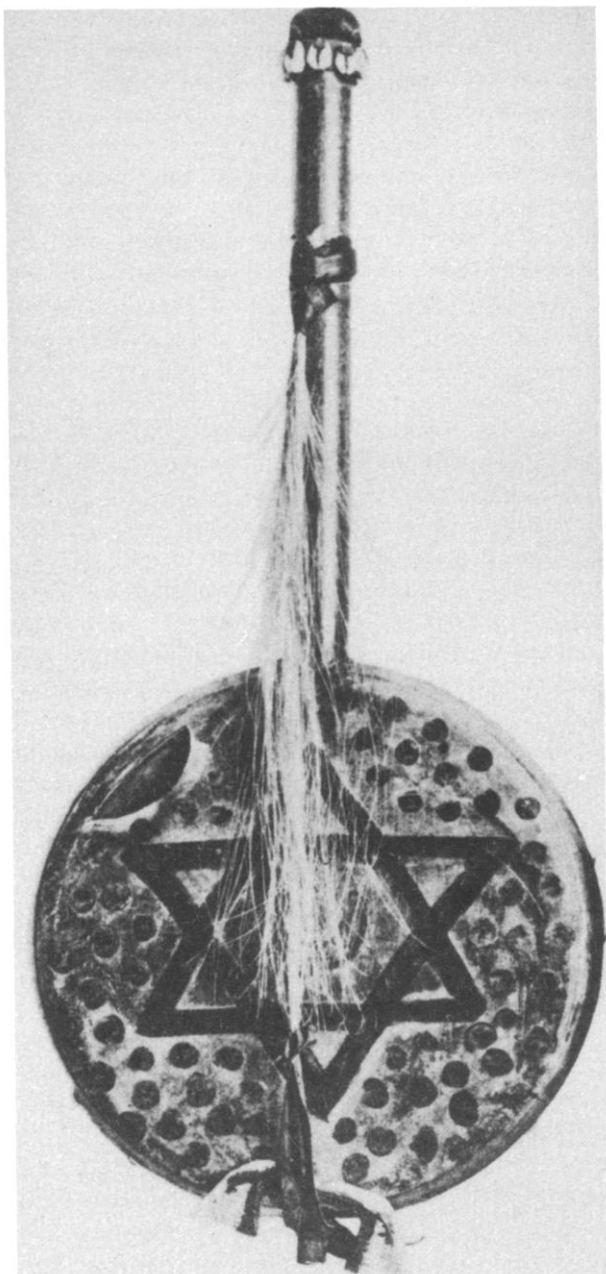
The renaissance luthier thus inherited a form of geometrical decoration whose original purpose was essentially symbolic. But he also inherited, from the European Middle Ages, a tradition, parallel in many respects to that of Islam, of representing the cosmos by means of number expressed diagrammatically. Fundamental to the renaissance outlook is the idea of harmony.¹¹ According to the body of Pythagorean doctrine transmitted through Plato to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the endless variety of the



universe was no chaotic *mélange*, but a rational system of identical structures in which each part had its proper place and was related both to the whole and to every part. This fitting together of discrete parts in a complex whole is what is originally meant by *harmonia*.¹² If harmony is the unseen and unheard

The idea that number is the principle which governs the creation is the distinguishing feature of Pythagoreanism as an intellectual system. This is not the place to attempt a summary of Pythagorean number symbolism;¹³ what must be emphasized, however, is that this body of doctrine can in no sense be described as esoteric: on the contrary, there is scarcely a major classical philosopher or Church Father whose thinking was not coloured by Pythagorean principles.¹⁴ The study of numbers formed the very basis of the medieval *quadrivium*;¹⁵ in providing man with a means of plumbing the mysteries of the universe and so of appreciating the moral beauty of the divine plan, numbers possessed an important ethical value.¹⁶ In the Renaissance, Pythagoras himself came to be regarded as a type of that humanist ideal of moderation which combined piety with practical wisdom.

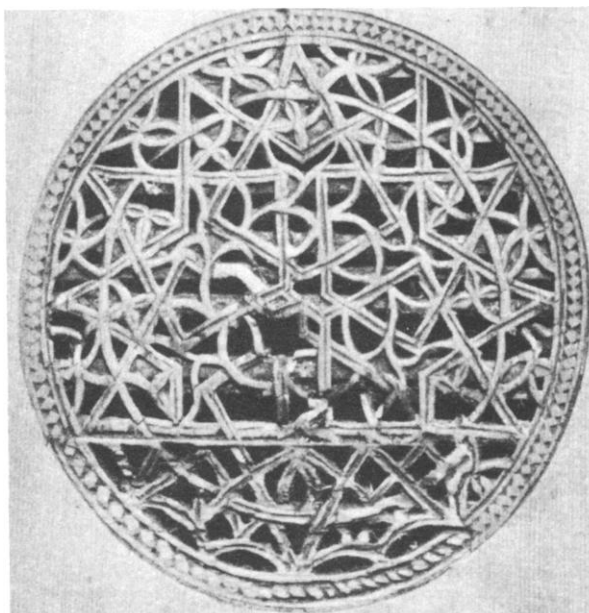
When the renaissance luthier made the hexagram the central feature of his rose design we may reasonably conclude that he did so with some awareness of its special significance. According to Macrobius six is 'a number with various and manifold honors and abilities . . .'.²⁰ It owes its peculiar distinction to the fact that, as the sum of its aliquot parts (1+2+3), it



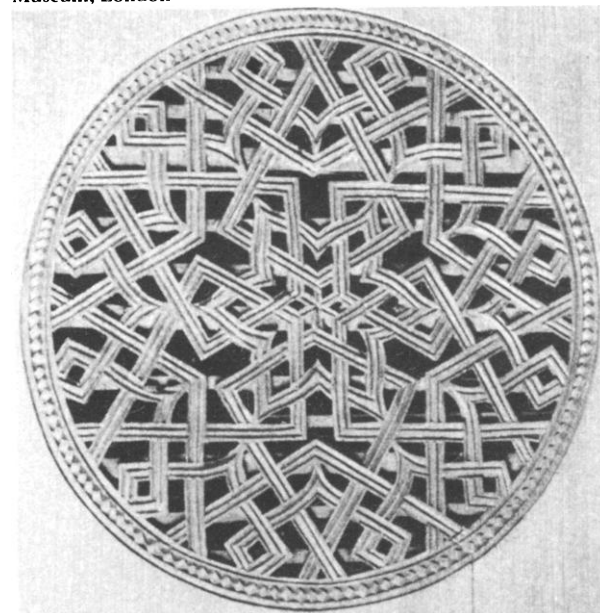
8 Primitive African rebab decorated with a six-pointed star, in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

was regarded as the first perfect number. 'The Number of six', writes Ingpen, 'is every way full, perfect, divine . . .'.²¹ Its identification with harmony is probably due to the fact that six is the number of intervals in the Greek scale.²²

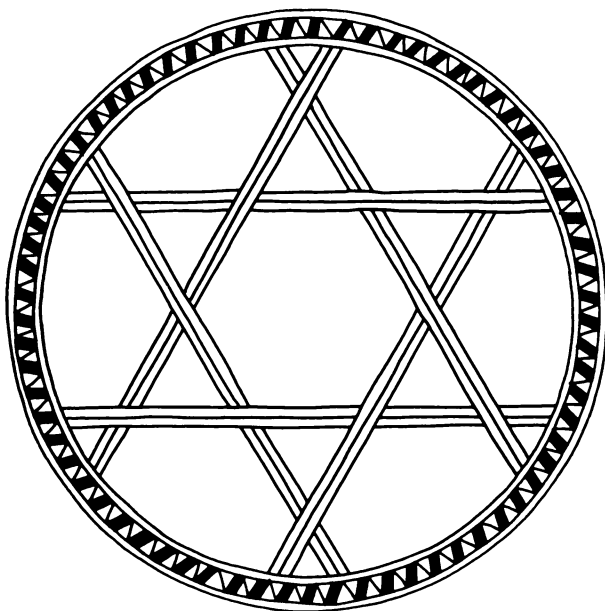
It may be seen, then, that the ancient device of the hexagram, still to be found in musical instruments



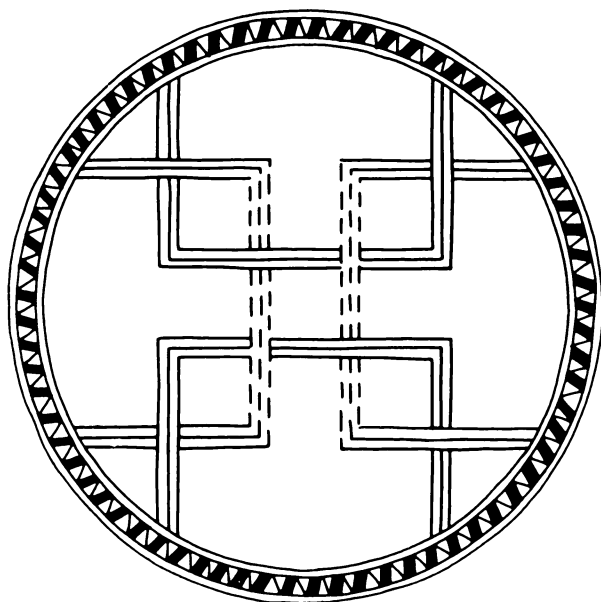
9 and 10 Roses of two chittaroni in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London



like the African rebab (illus. 8), is a fitting symbol to incorporate in a musical instrument which was itself adopted as an image of a harmonious universe. While its form, consisting of two interpenetrating triangles, signifies the union of the human and the divine, the corporeal and the spiritual, the visible and the invisible, its numerical significance suggests the



11



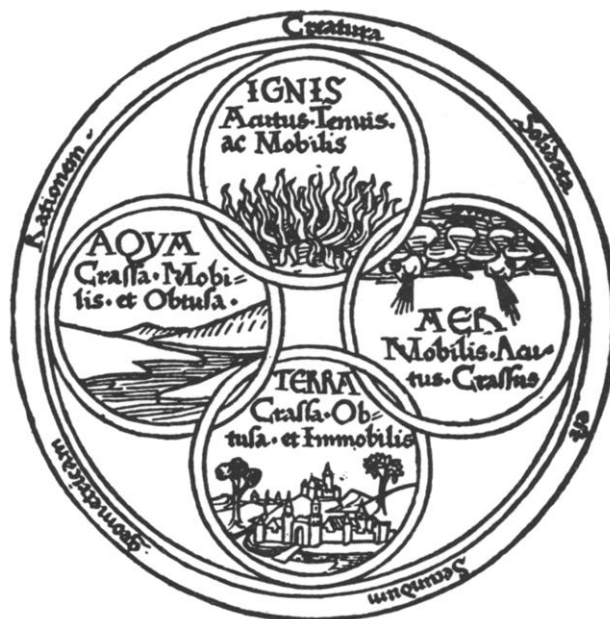
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harmony of which it was in a real sense the mouth-piece.

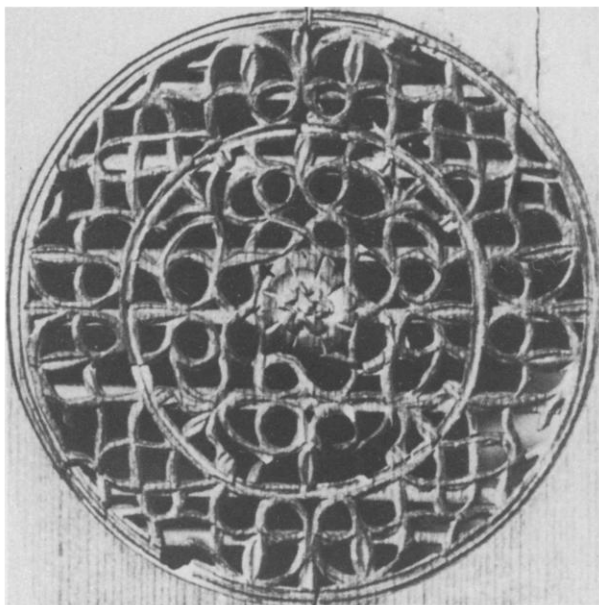
Although Hellwig is, of course, right to notice the prevalence of the hexagram in renaissance rose designs, it should be pointed out that by the later 16th century it had become usual for this motif to be assimilated to a more complex pattern in which there

also appears a quadrilateral figure. Which of these two motifs is first perceived depends, as in the familiar reversing figure used by psychologists, on the mental set of the observer. The roses of two early 17th-century chittaroni in the Victoria and Albert Museum may serve as typical examples (illus. 9 and 10). Despite the obvious differences in the treatment of their arabesques, the same geometrical pattern is present: from whichever of the eight cardinal points of the compass the roses are viewed the eye perceives either a hexagram (illus. 11) or a rectangular figure which divides the circle into four main compartments (illus. 12).

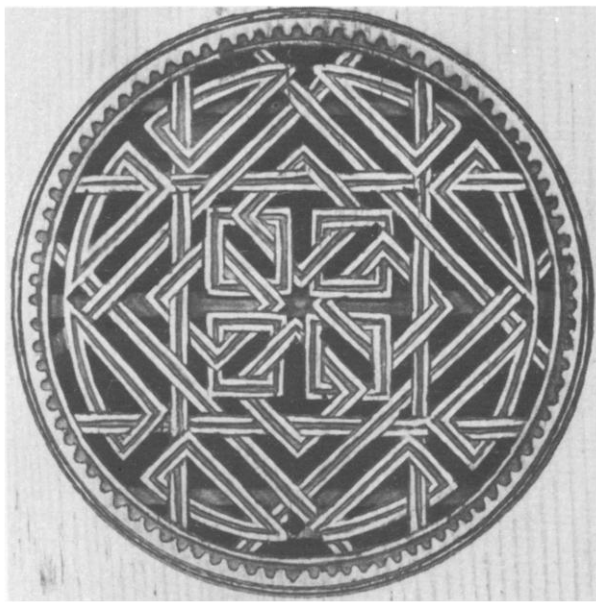
Now the number four is of paramount significance, for it is the very basis of the Pythagorean cosmos. 'All the foundation of every deepe studie and invention', wrote La Primaudaye, 'must be settled upon the number fower, because it is the roote and beginning of all numbers.'²³ The fourth integer provided a key to the cosmos because it embraced the four elements, the four seasons, the four ages of man and the four bodily humours. Each of these systems was related to the others in a completely integrated whole. The harmony of the cosmos depended upon the nature of the relationship between the four elements. In its simplest form this stable union of four conflicting elements was represented as four interlocking circles (illus. 13), and derivations of this



13 Tetrads from Isidore of Seville, *Liber de responsione mundi et astrorum ordinatione* (Augsburg, 1472)



14 Rose from a lute by Hieber in the Conservatoire Royal de Musique, Brussels



15 Rose from an early 16th-century lute in the collection of Laurence Witten, Southport, Connecticut. By kind permission of the owner.

motif are frequently found in lute roses either as a simple quatrefoil (illus. 14) or, in a more stylized form, as a series of interlocking quadrangles (illus. 15). Although it is unusual to find a rose whose geometry is unrelieved by arabesques, this pattern of interlocking quadrangles is in fact extremely widespread, and, as illus. 16 shows, it often forms the basis of roses which have lost all trace of geometrical strapwork.

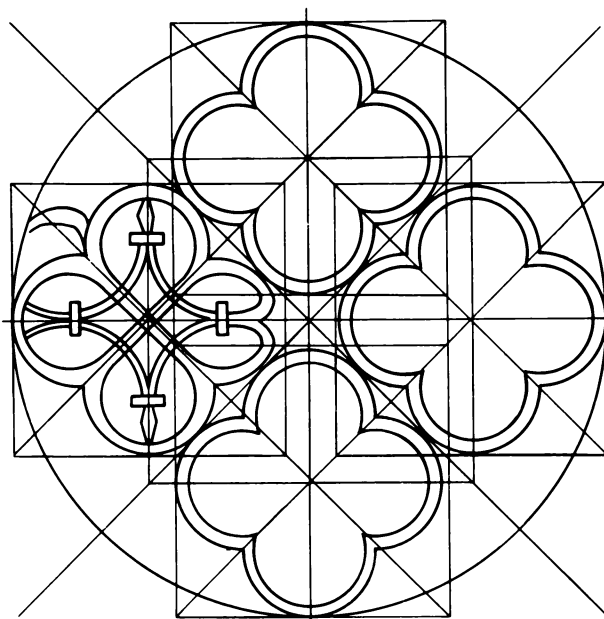
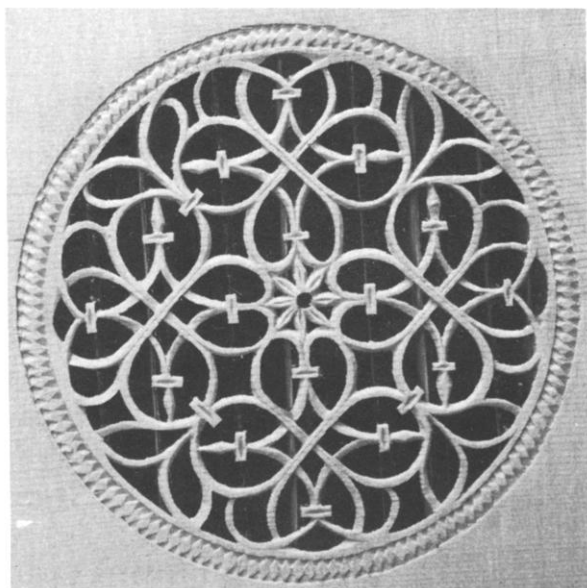
The inherent stability of the cosmos was explained by the fact that the four elements were bound together in a tetrad, that is to say a configuration of two pairs of opposites linked together by their two mean terms. This arrangement was the principle upon which God had created the universe. The clearest account of the way the four elements are united in a tetradic relationship by their mean terms is by Macrobius (*fl* AD400). Macrobius was one of a group of neo-Platonists whose ideas exercised a seminal influence on medieval thought. In his *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* Macrobius explains that the Creator gave to each of the elements two qualities, one of which it shared with the element closest to it in character. Thus,

Earth is dry and cold, and water cold and moist; but although these two elements are opposed, the dry to the wet, they have a common bond in their coldness. Air is

moist and warm and, although opposed to water, the cold to the warm, nevertheless has the common bond of moisture. Moreover, fire, being hot and dry, spurns the moisture of the air, but yet adheres to it because of the warmth in both. And so it happens that each one of the elements appears to embrace the two elements bordering on each side of it by single qualities: water binds earth to itself by coldness, and air by moisture; air is allied to water by its moisture, and to fire by warmth; fire mingles with air because of its heat, and with earth because of its dryness; earth is compatible with fire because of its dryness, and with water because of its coldness. These different bonds would have no tenacity, however, if there were only two elements; if there were three the union would be but a weak one; but as there are four elements the bonds are unbreakable, since the two extremes are held together by two means.²⁴

The same idea is reflected in John Norden's *Vicissitudo Rerum* (London, 1600). In answer to the question why discord is essential to the harmony of the cosmos, Norden explains (stanza 85) that if the mutually antagonistic elements were not kept in check by one another the result would be an imbalance in nature:

Yet thus, this *disagreement* must bee set,
As in the *discord* bee no power to wrong:
For why? supremest have no fatall let,
But will preuaile, as they become too strong.

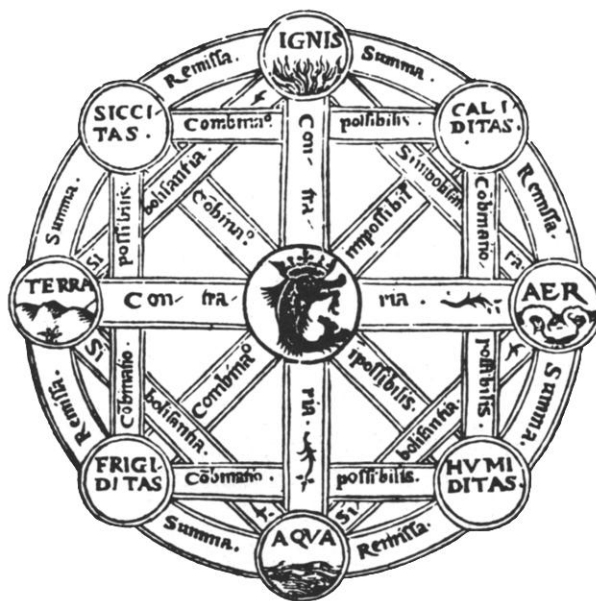


16 Rose based on one from a damaged instrument by Graill in the Museo Bardini, Florence. Reconstruction by Phil Lourie

Therefore such *meane* must them be set among,
As though things bee compact of *contraries*,
They must by *ballance*, have like quantities.

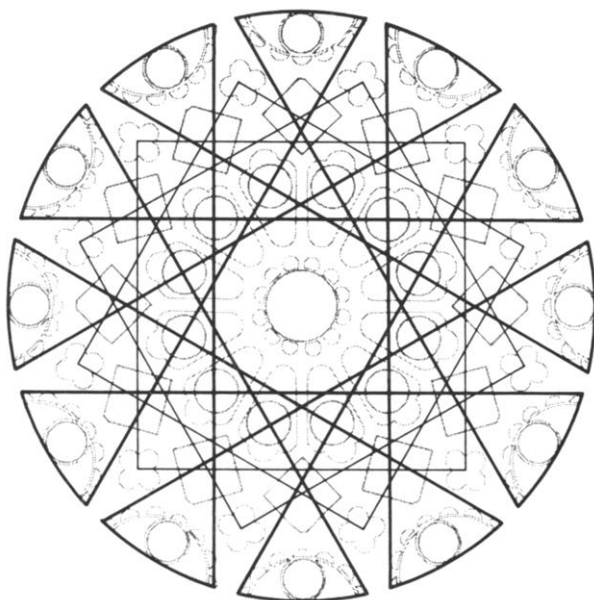
The tetrad, then, is the principle upon which depends the concord and harmony of the cosmos. It was commonly represented by renaissance cosmographers with great precision in diagrammatic form. In illus. 17 the elements are arranged at equal intervals round the circumference of a circle. Between them are their four qualities, which, acting as mean terms, serve to bind the warring elements together in a stable union. By a network of intersecting lines the extremely complex nature of the relationships within the tetrad is illustrated. The luthier who pierced the belly of his instrument with a design similar in many respects to the cosmographer's diagram of the universe could hardly be unaware of the fact that the geometry he employed was a key which could reveal the mystery of the cosmos. Indeed examples of geometry employed for symbolic purposes were available to him in glorious profusion not only in the Arab world, but in every major city in Europe. For as Painton Cowen argues in his magnificent study of medieval cathedral windows, 'Every rose window is a symbol and image of . . . the created universe'²⁵ (see illus. 18).

It has already been noted that the number four owed its peculiar distinction to the fact that it repre-



17 Tetrad from Oronce Finé, *Protomathesis* (Paris, 1532)

sented both the macrocosm (the universe as a whole) and the microcosm (man himself). This analogy was an essential feature of the Pythagorean system and it too was commonly represented in diagrammatic form. Illus. 19 shows how the four elements have their counterparts in the four seasons and the four bodily humours. In this case we may note that the



18 Rose window in the north transept of Chartres Cathedral. 'Its divine geometry is among its finest glories. Everything in the window is generated from the properties of the square within the circle' (Painton Cowen)

19 Tetrad from Isidore of Seville, op cit



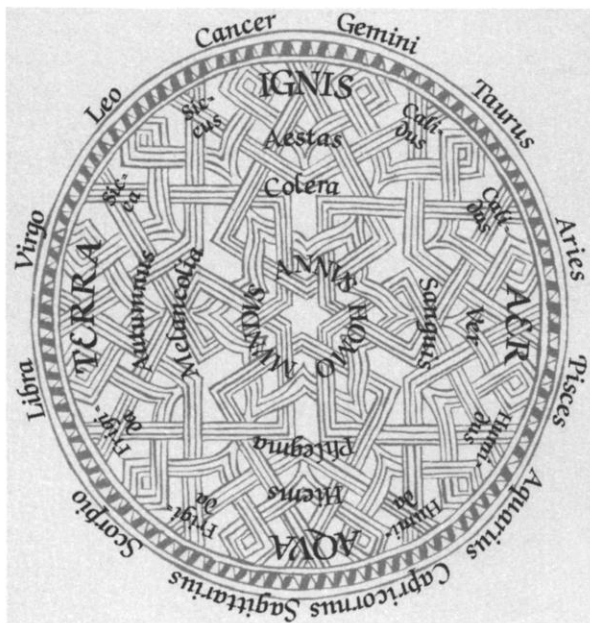
20 Tetrad from Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum* (Lyons, 1485)

elemental mean terms are represented as eight in number. This arrangement of elements and qualities has the effect of dividing the circle into twelve sections, which is of course the number of months in a year. The whole diagram thus symbolizes the world, the year and, finally, man himself.

The idea—implicit in illus. 19—that man's life must be seen as part of an endless cycle of time is expressed pictorially in illus. 20 where the twelve months of the year are each identified with a typical human activity. The perfect integration of microcosm and macrocosm is suggested by the arabesque (in illus. 19) which interweaves and binds together the concentric circles which symbolize these related planes of existence.

In many late renaissance lutes and archlutes the geometric strapwork which the instrument inherited from its Islamic origins has disappeared, and the rose consists entirely of floral arabesques. This type of non-geometric rose is in many cases purely decorative and probably has no symbolic meaning. But so widespread was the geometric design which combined the hexagram with the tetrad that it seems probable that the luthier wished to express in abstract form the kind of symbolic meaning which is familiar enough to students of renaissance literature. Just as, for example, the elaborate grouping and regrouping of characters in the fourth book of Spenser's *Faerie Queene* forms a tetradic pattern which mirrors the *discordia concors* of the universe,²⁶ so the





21 The renaissance lute rose as a symbol of cosmic harmony

renaissance lute rose may be 'read', point by point, as a symbol of cosmic harmony.

Illus. 21 shows a typical late renaissance rose interpreted in such a manner. At the four points of the compass are the four elements, the four seasons and the four bodily humours and between them are their four pairs of mean terms. Binding together these corresponding planes of being and interlacing them is a graceful arabesque. Where the strapwork approaches the perimeter of the rose it divides the perfection of the circle into twelve equal sections, one for each sign of the zodiac, thus symbolizing in the same figure both the eternal revolution of the heavens and also the annual unit of time. The uniquely harmonious nature of the tetrad is finally recapitulated in the figure of the hexagram. As man was believed to be 'a little world made cunningly'²⁷ whose own composition reflected that of the universe, so the hexagram occurs twice: once as a figure filling the entire rose, and again in microcosm at its centre. Together the tetrad and the hexad embrace the entire cosmos; for their sum is the decad, the most important of all numbers, and, in the words of Iamblichus, the very 'root and fountain of overflowing Nature'.²⁸

The Renaissance believed that music had an ennobling effect on the mind. If man was an imperfect creature inhabiting a fallen world, music could assist

him in his attempts to regain his former grace and harmony. As Castiglione's Count Lodovico explains,

it hath beene the opinion of most wise Philosophers, that the worlde is made of musike, and the heavens in their moving make a melodie, and our soule is framed after the verie same sort and therefore lifteth up it selfe, and (as it were) reviveth the vertues and force of it selfe with Musicke.²⁹

It seems, therefore, entirely fitting that the noblest of instruments should express in visual form the ideal to which its music aspired.

**The Heavens in their peereles pryde may boyst,
That they in their orbiculer figure
Are farre the freest, and by change vntoyst,
Keeping by turne, their Revolutions sure;
Though still reuoluing yet alike endure.
As Orbes and Circles figures perfectest,
Held by all Artistes to excell the rest,**

22 John Norden explains the origin of the circle as a symbol of perfection. From *Vicissitudo Rerum: An Elegiacall Poeme, of the interchangeable courses and varietie of things in this world* (London, 1600)

Robin Headlam Wells studied at the universities of Leeds and Oxford, and at the Royal Academy of Music. At present he lectures in the English Department at Hull University where he is able to combine his interests in Elizabethan poetry and music. He is currently writing a book on Edmund Spenser.

¹ Friedemann Hellwig, 'Lute Construction in the Renaissance and Baroque', *GSJ* 27 (1974), pp. 21-30.

² *ibid.*, p. 25.

³ 'During the Renaissance the lute unquestionably occupied a special place of honour, second only to the human voice. It was the courtly instrument *par excellence*. . . . Philosophers discussed it, theorists endowed it with the power of Apollo's lyre, poets praised it, and painters never ceased their delight in depicting it in a wide variety of roles. . . . In literature the lute became the legendary instrument of Orpheus, with which he charmed all Nature and attempted to lead Eurydice out of Hell: its noble classical associations are often invoked at moments of high tragedy'—David Munrow, *Instruments of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (London, 1976), p. 75.

⁴ *The Poetical Works of William Drummond of Hawthornden*, ed. L. E. Kastner, 2 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1913) 2, p. 165.

⁵ Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, *The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Albert Feuillerat, 4 vols (Cambridge, 1923) 3, p. 11.

⁶ George Puttenham, 'Of Ornament', *The Arts of English Poesie*, ed. Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (1936 R Cambridge, 1970), p. 137. See also Brian Vickers, *Classical Rhetoric in English Poetry* (London, 1970), pp. 83-121. For a bibliography of

secondary material on rhetorical theory in the Renaissance see Vickers, *ibid.*

⁷ I should like gratefully to acknowledge the help of Diana Poulton and Friedemann Hellwig in supplying me with photographs, and Phil' Lourie and Tony Rooley for their valuable suggestions.

⁸ See Donald Gill, *Wire-Strung Plucked Instruments Contemporary with the Lute*, Lute Society Booklets, 3 (London, 1977), p. 18. The symbolism of the gothic rose is another subject and falls outside the scope of the present article.

⁹ See Keith Critchlow, *Islamic Patterns: An Analytical and Cosmological Approach* (New York and London, 1976).

¹⁰ See Ernst J. Grube, *The World of Islam* (London, 1966), p. 11. See also Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven and London, 1973), pp. 92-3.

¹¹ See F. M. Cornford, 'Mysticism and Science in the Pythagorean Tradition', *Classical Quarterly*, 16 (1922), pp. 137-50; 17 (1923), pp. 1-12; Leo Spitzer, 'Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony; Prolegomenon to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung"', *Traditio*, 2 (1944), pp. 409-69; 3 (1945), pp. 307-64; Gretchen Ludke Finney, *Musical Backgrounds for English Literature: 1580-1650* (New Brunswick, n.d.), pp. 1-20; John Hollander, *The Untuning of the Sky: Ideas of Music in English Poetry 1500-1700* (Princeton, 1961), pp. 30-31; S. K. Heninger, *Touches of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics* (San Marino, 1974), pp. 178-87.

¹² 'omnia, quae ex contrariis consistunt, armonia quadam coniungi atque componi. Est enim armonia plurimorum adunatio et dissidentium consensus.' (Boethius, *De Institutione Arithmetica*, 2, 32).

¹³ See Cornford, *CQ* 17, pp. 1ff; Heninger, *op cit*, pp. 71ff; Christopher Butler, *Number Symbolism* (London, 1970), pp. 1ff.

¹⁴ See Heninger, *op cit*, p. 45.

¹⁵ See Russell A. Peck, 'Number as Cosmic Language', *By Things Seen: Reference and Recognition in Medieval Thought*, ed. David L. Jeffrey (Ottawa, 1979), p. 55.

¹⁶ See, for example, St Bonaventure: 'Number . . . leads most directly to God. . . . It causes him to be known in all corporeal and sensible things while we apprehend the rhythmical, delight in rhythmical proportions, and through laws of rhythmical proportions judge irrefragably'—*Itinerarium Mentis ad Deum*, 2, trans. George Boas (Indianapolis, 1953), p. 70.

¹⁷ William Ingpen, *The Secrets of Numbers According to Theological, Arithmetical, Geometrical and Harmonical Computation* (London, 1624), p. 9.

¹⁸ See Alastair Fowler, *Spenser and the Numbers of Time* (London, 1964).

¹⁹ See Vincent Foster Hopper, *Medieval Number Symbolism: Its Sources, Meaning and Influence on Thought and Expression* (New York, 1938), pp. 136-201.

²⁰ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952), p. 102.

²¹ Ingpen, *op cit*, p. 44.

²² See, for example, Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*: 'totius harmoniae toni sunt sex . . .' (quoted Fowler, *op cit*, p. 49n).

²³ Pierre de la Primaudaye, *The French Academie*, trans. T. Bowes (London, 1586), p. 177.

²⁴ Macrobius, *op cit*, p. 105.

²⁵ Painton Cowen, *Rose Windows* (London, 1979), p. 85.

²⁶ See Fowler, *op cit*, pp. 27-9.

²⁷ John Donne, *Holy Sonnets*, 5.

²⁸ Iamblichus, *De Vita Pythagorica Liber*, quoted by Cornford, *CQ* 16, p. 1.

²⁹ Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Sir Thomas Hoby (London, 1928 R 1966), p. 75.

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