

The Clockwork of Mount Parnassus

Behind a replica of Mount Parnassus in the gardens of Frascati, there was “a paire of organs, which are made with such art that noe man can play and keep better tyme on a pair of organs, than the water doth upon these.” Water organs proliferated from the 1530’s through the early seventeenth century. Highly refined from their classical roots, they were a testing ground for newly unearthed scientific principles as well as a visual and aural art form. Their ludic nature, however, should not obscure the revolution that they represented. Before the mid-sixteenth century, numerous engravings depict a leader standing in front of his choir with his hand in various stages of marking the beat. In contrast to this corporeal time the machines kept strict time, a feature that was highly praised by contemporaries perhaps because it was so little in evidence in musical practice. Although the water clock had been invented centuries beforehand, the application of this principle to art called for a serious reexamination of the meaning of time.

Despite the fact that few music theory treatises include significant discussions of rhythm or beat, contemporaneous listeners were fascinated by clockwork, time, and rhythm. In fact, the founding texts of Neo-Platonism resound with references to the clockwork of the universe and the harmony of the spheres, which is not so much consonance as it is the harmonic movement, or rhythms, of bodies whirring in time to each other. Monteverdi was among the first composers to codify this shift in his preface to his *Madrigals of Love and War*. His discussions of rhythm correlate with different musical styles and his recommendations, loosely translated, are to play certain pieces either mechanically, in time with the body (the hand), or in time with the affect of the soul. An examination of mechanicity and affect, two concepts so important within the trend toward Cartesian rationality, will show that the two concepts interpenetrate and are intimately linked. This revelation leads to a reexamination of bodily movement, for so long the “unmarked” style, and a reassessment of what it means to be musically human.