

# Performative and Multimedia Aspects of Late-Renaissance Meditative Alchemy:

The Case of Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* (1617)\*

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Fecha de recepción: 13 de junio de 2009

Fecha de aceptación: 14 de diciembre de 2009

Fecha de modificación: 19 de julio de 2010

## ABSTRACT

In 1617 the alchemist, counselor and court physician to the then recently deceased Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II (1552-1612) published his *Atalanta Fugiens* (Atalanta fleeing). The book fits into the general category of an 'alchemical emblem book', very popular in the day: it contains 50 beautiful engravings to which are assigned poetic sextets in both Latin and German. The main difference with all known similar works is that it includes a three-part canon with each engraving. According to the author, the purpose is for all of this input "to be looked at, read, meditated, understood, weighed, sung and listened to, not without a certain pleasure" (Maier 1990, 91). In this sense, this book might be interpreted as a very early example of multimedia, and as a work which requires a performative attitude and activity (in the form of singing) and not merely to be read, for its original purpose to be fully accomplished. In this brief article I will describe the work, and present arguments to support my belief that it would be reasonable to conclude that it is an early form of multimedia.

## KEY WORDS

*Atalanta Fugiens; Michael Maier; Historical Instances of Performance; Alchemical Meditation; Emblem Books, Early Multimedia.*

## Aspectos performativos y multimediáticos de un libro de emblemas alquímicos del siglo XVII: el caso de *Atalanta Fugiens* de Michael Maier y sus simultáneos niveles poético, visual y musical

## RESUMEN

En 1617 el médico, alquimista y consejero del Emperador Romano-Germánico Rodolfo II publicó en Praga su "*Atalanta Fugiens*" (Atalanta huyendo). El libro contiene 50 meditaciones alquímicas, cada una de las cuales consta de un breve epigrama en latín, un grabado simbólico relacionado con la alquimia espiritual, sextetos poéticos en latín y alemán, y una partitura de un canon a tres voces. Si bien se han publicado numerosos estudios centrados en ciertos de estos componentes por separado (especialmente en los espectaculares grabados provenientes del taller de Johann Theodor de Bry), pocos estudios han seguido la clave dada por el mismo Maier en su prefacio: se trata de un libro de ejercicios espirituales cuya intención es *combinar* los estímulos visual, auditivo y poético para así brindar al alquimista una experiencia holística, multimediática y preformativa durante las meditaciones rituales que constituían una de las principales operaciones de la alquimia espiritual o simbólica. Este artículo se centrará precisamente el aspecto preformativo de esta obra.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

*Atalanta Fugiens; Michael Maier; antecedentes históricos del Performance; meditación alquímica; emblemática barroca; multimedia primitiva.*

\* El presente artículo se desprende del estudio de la historia de la música especulativa y las relaciones entre la teoría musical y las doctrinas y movimientos esotéricos, tales como la alquimia. Este análisis corresponde a una parte de la investigación doctoral, titulada "Towards Hermeticist Grammars of Music: A Proposal for Systems of Composition Based on the Principles of the Hermetic Tradition, with Musical Demonstrations", financiada por el Centro Internacional de Estudios Musicales (ICMus) de Newcastle University (Inglaterra).

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## Aspectos performativos e multimidiáticos de um livro de emblemas alquímicos do século XVII: O caso de *Atalanta Fugiens* de Michael Maier e seus simultâneos níveis poético, visual e musical

### RESUMO

Em 1617, o médico, alquimista e conselheiro do Imperador Romano-germânico Rodolfo II publicou em Praga seu "Atalanta Fugiens" (Atalanta fugindo). O livro contém 50 meditações alquímicas, cada uma delas consta de um breve epigrama em latim, um gravado simbólico relacionado com a alquimia espiritual e uma partitura de um cânone a três vozes. Embora tenha publicado numerosos estudos centrados em alguns desses componentes separadamente (especialmente nos espetaculares gravados provenientes da oficina de Johann Theodor de Bry), poucos estudos seguiram a chave dada pelo mesmo Maier em seu prefácio: trata-se de um livro de exercícios espirituais cuja intenção é *combinar* os estímulos visual, auditivo e poético para assim proporcionar ao alquimista uma experiência holística, multimidiática e preformativa durante as meditações rituais que constituam uma das principais operações da alquimia espiritual ou simbólica. Este artigo se centrará precisamente no aspecto preformativo desta obra.

### PALABRAS CHAVE

Atalanta Fugiens; Michael Maier; antecedentes históricos da Performance; meditação alquímica; emblemática barroca; multimídia primitiva.

I first came across Michael Maier's *Atalanta Fugiens* while reviewing the literature on the subject of my doctoral thesis in late 2004. I had bravely (or foolishly) embarked on the review and proposed update and practical application of an obscure musicological specialty known (or rather *unknown*, judging from the bemused expression of most colleagues at conferences and other academic gatherings!) as *speculative music*, which "is the esoteric part of music theory, and as such readily absorbs ideas from theosophy, Hermeticism, and the occult sciences" (Godwin 1995, 4).

Given that in our modern positivistic, materialistic times the esoteric and occult is regarded at best as a curiosity which is seldom taken seriously and generally ignored by academics –in contrast with what happened in the past<sup>1</sup> it is not surprising that the study of speculative music has focused on the *historical* uses of these esoteric theories rather than their current relevance. The general attitude in this respect is that which is granted

to something dead, something which is not pertinent to modern thought,<sup>2</sup> for example, ways of organizing musical material in the post-tonal soundscape.<sup>3</sup> This stress on the historical focus at the expense of a concentration on their current relevance could be an advantage in the long term, because it will provide a necessary historical foundation for the contemporary application of such theories that is likely to emerge in the future. It is certainly an advantage for research on the historical aspect of speculative music, the subject of this article.

I must confess that I was not originally interested in *Atalanta Fugiens* itself but the work of Joscelyn Godwin, without any doubt the leading authority on the historical study of speculative music.<sup>4</sup> While reviewing his work for my doctoral thesis, I came across his annotated edition of Maier (Maier 1990 [1617]), the first to thoroughly explore the musical aspects of Maier's book. Within Godwin's preface there is a scholarly 66 page-

1 Granted, there is currently an upsurge of academic interest in esotericism, whose approach is mainly historical, anthropological or methodological, but I refer here to serious efforts to *advance* our knowledge of the occult, which were very common before the 18th century. See for example (Dobbs 1988: 182-191), (Field 2003: 29-44) and (Linden 2003). For the role of important scientific and philosophical figures in the tradition of speculative music, see the compilations by Joscelyn Godwin (Godwin 1986; 1989; 1993).

2 There are very few exceptions to this, namely, Marius Schneider, Rudolf Haase and Hans Erhard Lauer, whose work is discussed by Godwin (1989), with some translations into English.

3 As a composer, my approach is one of the few that is not focused on the historical aspect of speculative music *per se*, but rather the application of its theories to the composition of contemporary music (Hasler 2007). This, however, is not the intention of this paper.

4 For a list of his contributions in the study of historical speculative music see his webpage, <http://people.colgate.edu/jgodwin/>

long introduction by Hildemarie Streich which delves into the alchemical and psychological implications of the musical theories in that remarkable emblem book, while Godwin's contribution focuses more on the purely musical (rather than psychological and alchemical) aspects.

Several previous editions of Maier had focused on other aspects of his book, mainly the magnificently detailed engravings made at the de Bry family's workshop in Frankfurt,<sup>5</sup> and the book's place in the grand tradition of alchemical emblems (De Jong 2002). What did strike me as remarkable is that Godwin and Streich seem to have been the first to clearly understand the multi-mediatic nature of Maier's theories, a subject ignored by previous studies.

It must be noted, though, that Streich and, to a lesser degree Godwin, employ a modern Jungian interpretation of alchemy as a form of inner work, a sort of precursor to self-analysis of the psychoanalytical type, and thus have a post-Enlightenment view of alchemy, the one discussed by Principe and Newman:

The well-recognized complexity and opacity of alchemical literature has long constituted a barrier to its proper understanding. Indeed, since the eighteenth-century disappearance of its last serious practitioners within the community of chemists, alchemy has been the subject of several radically distinct schools of historical interpretation. The current understanding of alchemy among historians of science, not to mention the general public, remains strongly colored by one or more of these divergent schools of interpretation, which stem, respectively, from the Enlightenment rejection of obscurity and the later Romantic disenchantment with Newtonian science that led to a new embrace of the occult (Principe & Newman 2001, 385).

The Jungian or 'inner development' model of interpretation clearly belongs to the latter school (Jung 1987), and is passionately defended by its supporters, but it has also been challenged by another sector of academics, for example Principe and Newman, who argue that "none of these established interpretative schools is satisfactory, for none

represents alchemy in a way that is consistent with the historical record, and all severely distort the content and context of this discipline" (Principe & Newman 2001, 385).

Principe and Newman have questioned such an "adoption, frequently unwitting, of principles derived from nineteenth-century occultism, which have become widespread tenets in the historiography of alchemy", though they do acknowledge that there were indeed "mystical brands of alchemical thought propounded by Heinrich Khunrath and the Rosicrucian enthusiast Robert Fludd" in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Principe & Newman 2001, 385-386). It is precisely this alchemical interpretation of Maier's work, which has been advanced by several modern scholars, that I will draw on in this article. As Principe and Newman state themselves, "the esoteric school [of interpretation] remains strong to this day and continues to have an extensive impact on both the general and the learned perceptions of historical alchemy" (Principe & Newman 2001, 396).

## THE LEGEND OF ATALANTA

The title of Maier's book refers to the mythological figure, *Atalanta*, who was reputed to be skilled in all types of bush-craft and outdoor pursuits, since she had been raised by a hunter after her father, Iasus, king of Arcadia, abandoned her as a baby in the forest –female infanticide being a common practice in ancient Greece–.

When she grew up, however, Atalanta sought out her father and both were reconciled, but Iasus wanted to marry her off and since that was against her wishes, they agreed to a compromise. Knowing that, because of her upbringing, she was the fastest runner known, she and Iasus agreed that if a suitor could beat her in a foot race, she would marry him. If he lost the race, on the other hand, he was to be executed.

Unbelievably given the conditions, many suitors accepted the challenge, and all lost both the race and their lives. But Hippomenes (also known as Melanion) prayed to Aphrodite for help. Aphrodite wanted to punish Atalanta for rejecting love in such an arrogant manner, and so she gave Hippomenes three golden apples, instructing him to toss them on the ground during the race, knowing that the curious Atalanta would stop and pick them up, and thus lose the lead and eventually the race.

5 Since the engravings are unsigned, it is not entirely clear whether they are by Johann Theodor de Bry (1560-1623), son of the equally famous engraver Theodor de Bry (1528-1598), or by his brother-in-law Matthaeus Merian 'the elder' (1593-1650), who also worked at the de Bry workshop from 1616 to 1620. Despite this debate among art historians, the current consensus is that Merian was the author of these 50 remarkable plates, though Godwin suggests that de Bry created the human and animal figures while Merian was responsible for the landscapes in the background (Godwin 2007: 34).

It was a close call for Hippomenes: twice he threw the apples to the ground, and twice Atalanta stopped to pick them up, but she was so fast she caught up with him and recovered the lead. It was after he threw down the last apple that he managed to win the race, thus saving his life and marrying Atalanta.

So why this theme for a book of alchemical emblems? Godwin suggests that it is a perfect metaphor for the work of the alchemist, or the philosopher (at that time a generic term for what we would now call a scientist, an intellectual, an academic or indeed a philosopher, a seeker of truth and a lover of wisdom): Hippomanes represents the philosopher, who knows from the start that it is impossible to outrun Atalanta, who in this case represents Nature and her mysteries. So instead of physical prowess, Hippomanes employs cunning to make Atalanta lag behind and thus catch up with her. The apples are the tools of his cunning, and by using them wisely (as for example a philosopher would use Maier's book), the seeker of truth can catch up with Nature, who otherwise eludes men, since, lacking cunning or a strategy, they merely engage in a mad pursuit of Her. Once the Philosopher catches up with Nature and beats her in the race, he is entitled to 'marry her', in the symbolic sense of the 'chemical wedding', the *unio mysitca*. (Godwin 1990).

In his preface Maier gives a more technical explanation, based on the alchemical codes of the three Philosophical Principles of Mercury, Sulphur and Salt, which, for the spiritual alchemist, represent far more than what we now regard as mere physical substances:<sup>6</sup>

This same virgin [Atalanta] is purely chemical, namely the Philosophic Mercury who is fixed and retained in flight by the golden sulphur; which if one knows how to arrest it, will be the wife whom he seeks, but without that knowledge he will lose his goods and perish. (Maier 1990, 103-104).

## DESCRIPTION OF ATALANTA FUGIENS

*Atalanta Fugiens*, which can be translated as "Atalanta fleeing", was published in 1617 by the printer Hieronimus Galler of Oppenheim, in the upper Rhineland (Rheinessen). While, at first sight, it appears to be one of a myriad of alchemical emblem books result-

6 For further details on the three alchemical or philosophical principles and their symbolic meaning, see (Junius 1993).

ing from the Rosicrucian craze of the early 1600s (Yates 1986), a closer inspection reveals its uniqueness: as has already been mentioned, the 50 engravings are much more detailed and their artistic quality is considerably higher than those in the average emblem book of the time, including some distant view of cities and landscapes in the background (Godwin 2007, 34, Streich 1990). In addition, it is the only emblem book of its kind that includes musical scores along with the emblems, thus adding another component to a genre whose aim was to improve character. According to some modern scholars, such an inner, psychological transformation (a so-called 'spiritual alchemy') was a more important purpose of these books than the transmission of chemical or metallurgical recipes. (Streich 1990, 78-85).

On opening the book –and this can be appreciated in several of the modern editions (Maier 1990; 2006; 2007), especially the facsimile one edited by Lucas Heinrich Wüthrich (Wüthrich 1964) – the reader finds three things on the right-hand pages: first, the heading "*Emblema* [number of the emblem in the book] *de secretis naturae*"; below it a phrase in Latin gives a short explanation of the general meaning of the engraving (for example, *Hic est Draco caudam suam devorans*, the phrase for emblem 14, literally means "this is the Dragon devouring its tail").<sup>7</sup> Below this motto one sees the engraving, and under it the 'epigram' or poetic sextet, also in Latin, which expands on the symbolism of the engraving.

On the left-hand pages the reader will see the same number applied to the emblem, but with the heading *fuga* and a technical explanation on how it has been composed, which specifically mentions the interval employed (for example *reciproca*, which means in unison, or *in 4 supra contrapunctum*, or *in 8 duplici supra*, etc.). Below this 'technical heading' appears a German translation (in the Gothic type of the era) of the Latin phrase on the opposite page, above the engraving. Below this translation one sees the 'fugue', or rather a canon,<sup>8</sup>

7 This is not to say that the explanations are short and straightforward: the engravings are highly symbolic, as is quite typical of emblem books, and even more so if they are devoted to spiritual alchemy. Sometimes the images are quite bizarre, and so are the explanations: e.g. emblem 12, which says 'The Stone that Saturn vomited up, after having devoured it in place of his son, Jupiter, has been placed on Helicon as a monument for mortals.' The emblem shows Saturn, (complete with scythe and white long beard) flying over the rocky outcrop of a mountain and vomiting a veritable boulder on its top (Maier 1990:129).

8 Even though Maier calls them 'fugues', modern musical theory would call them imitative canons, though not all of them imitate at unison or the octave, and several imitate at different intervals, as fugues do.

written out in three separate parts (not as a score) with the headings *Atalanta seu vox fugiens* (Atalanta, or the fleeing voice) for the first part, *Hippomenes seu vox sequens* (Hippomenes or the voice which follows) for the second part, and *Pomum objectum seu vox morans* (the apple which is tossed, or the voice which lags behind) in the third part. As can be easily deduced, all of these refer to the myth of Atalanta and how her suitor Hippomenes was able to beat her in the race told by the story. In these three-part canons, the parts of Atalanta and Hippomenes imitate each other in close succession, while the part of the apples is a slow descending *cantus firmus*<sup>9</sup> which recurs over and over again as a *basso ostinato* in the 50 canons. Thus the design and format of the music reinforce the legend on which the book is based, and the text which is sung is a *verbatim* version of the Latin epigram below the engraving on the right-hand page of the book. In the words of Maier himself,

Just as this Atalanta flees, so one musical voice always flees from the other, and the other follows like Hippomenes, while they are stabilized and grounded by a third voice, which is simple and of constant rhythm, like the golden apple (Maier 1990, 103).

Below the music one finds the *versio Germanica* or German translation of the epigram on the right-hand page, below the emblem.

The reader therefore receives three types of input: first, the visual one of the emblem, which is quite striking due to the big size, technical perfection and detail of the engraving.<sup>10</sup> Second, the linguistic one of the motto or short explanatory phrase above the engraving and then below in the form of the poetic sextet in both Latin and German. And third – though, as I will explain below, this might be more of an aspiration or principle of design than an actual result – the auditory one of the three-part canon.

After providing the reader with these images, texts and musical parts (again, not written as a score showing simultaneous voices, but rather the single parts for each singer), Maier devotes the following pages to a lengthy analysis of their symbolism, especially of the cryptic images and their mottos.

9 Helen Joy Sleeper has identified this *cantus firmus* as the *Chryste Eleison* of Gregorian Mass IV, *Missa Cunctipotens genitor* (Godwin 1990, 11).

10 This is reason why this work has recently caught the attention of so many art historians.

## A MULTIMEDIA EXPERIENCE FROM THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY?

The key to the role of music in the inner alchemy that was supposed to transform the Self – the “allegorical mode”, as Linden calls it (2003, 22), which some modern authors regard as the focal point of the symbolic alchemy of the Renaissance – is provided by the author himself in the typically long ‘abstract’ or ‘second sub-title’, found below the sub-title itself, in the frontispiece, where Maier tells us that his ‘New chemical emblems on the secrets of Nature’ are

Adapted partly for the eyes and intellect in figures engraved on copper, with legends, Epigrams and notes attached, partly for the ears and the soul’s recreation with about 50 musical fugues in three voices [...] to be looked at, read, meditated, understood, weighed, sung and listened to, not without a certain pleasure (Maier 1990, 91).

It is therefore evident that the intention of the author was to provide the reader with what we would now call a ‘multimediativ’ experience: the work is ‘to be looked at, read, meditated, understood, weighed, sung and listened to’, all at the same time, in order to get a deep and true understanding of the cryptic meditative messages found in the apparently bizarre engravings, with their textual descriptions and accompanying music, the latter in a style that is sometimes unusual for the period.

I would like to elaborate a bit more on the peculiarities of the music, considering that the format of this article does not allow me to include the score or a recorded version. The music is indeed sometimes as strange, unpredictable and unusual as the other features of this peculiar book. Godwin has pointed out that “[...] one finds oneself in a musical world almost entirely devoid of the reference points that one expects in music of this period, as close to timelessness as any style could be” (Godwin 1990, 14). This, Godwin continues, is undoubtedly due to the fact that Maier, as the composer of the canons, decided to “[...] set aside the rules (of which he must have been perfectly well aware) such as the prohibitions of consecutive fifths and octave, or of unprepared and unresolved dissonances” (Godwin 1990, 14).

I would argue that this timelessness can even be interpreted as an outrageous form of proto-postmodernity – in the sense of the ‘end of history’<sup>11</sup> where all styles are

11 In this respect see Fukuyama (1992).

seen as current and therefore usable in a precocious form of pan-historic multi-stylism *à la Schnittke*-. Godwin hears echoes of all sorts of music in Maier's canons:

[...] readers familiar with music history will hear the most unexpected resonances here: passages that seem to come from an *Ars Antiqua* motet, from Machaut, from fifteenth century Burgundian music. [...] At other times one seems to be hearing a later style altogether, perhaps a passage from Stravinsky or Hindemith, so unpredictable are the discords and even some of the melodies. (Godwin 1990, 14)

The question this begs is simply *why*? Why would a man raised in the 16<sup>th</sup> century forego the strict rules of composition of his day, and instead indulge, as he himself admits, in “musical rarities” (Maier 1990, 103) so timeless that, for a savvy listener of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they evoke certain 20<sup>th</sup> century composers, as if that listener were applying his or her post-modern sensibility to a 17<sup>th</sup> century composition (Passler 1993)?

Again, we can find answers to these questions in Maier's own preface to *Atalanta Fugiens*:

If this usage should be more intellectual than sensual, the more useful and agreeable it will eventually be: for if indeed it is first entrusted to the sense, there is no doubt that it should be transferred from the sense to the intellect, as through a portal. [...] because it is necessary for everything knowable to be brought and made known to the intellect, as to a magistrate or arbitrator, first by the senses as investigators and messengers, like the guardians who watch at the gates (their organs) of some city (Maier 1990, 103).

This ‘intellectualization’ of the various forms of input, admitted by the author himself, has led Godwin to comment that “When one comes to sing the fugues in their entirety one discovers that some of them are only just practicable, and one has to admit that there is a large element of eye-music and even of conceptual art that does not necessarily require enactment” (Godwin 1990, 13).

But conceptual art? In the 17<sup>th</sup> century? Again, one is amazed at the numerous innovative proposals in this peculiar emblem book-*cum*-poems-*cum*-polyphonic miniatures, which tempts us, its later commentators, to try to anachronistically use our modern categories to catalogue a work that, in the canons of its day, is basically unique and therefore in a category of its own.

This characterization of the fugues as ‘eye music’ is made even more evident in all of the modern reprints of the work—except for Godwin's, intended for musicians, which presents the canons in choral notation—and certainly in the facsimile edition of 1964, in which one sees the music annotated in its original form: each line printed separately, as modern orchestral parts are, rather than presented simultaneously, as in choral scores. This might have been intended to make the imitative nature of the canons clearer to the reader (since one sees the same melodic and rhythmic design in two voices, albeit with some rests at the beginning, for the benefit of the singer who follows the lead voice).

As Godwin has pointed out, “since the educated person of Maier's time could be counted upon to sing a line of music, the inclusion of these fugues was not so arcane a gesture as it might seem today, with the additional barrier of an unfamiliar notation system” (Godwin 1990, 12). One might therefore assume that a solitary reader could also sing each voice consecutively and mentally join them ‘in his head’, thus strengthening the intellectual exercise Maier seems so keen to promote.

But it is clear that the way in which the music is set down in all the modern facsimiles and modern reprints (Godwin's again being a notable exception) basically makes it incomprehensible to the modern reader, since it is presented in three separate staves, with square note heads, no bar lines and with clefs that look unfamiliar, although on closer inspection they are roughly equivalent, in their placement if not graphic appearance, to treble, alto and bass. In addition, the order of the staves on the page always puts *Atalanta* first, then *Hipomenes* and finally the apples, but the clefs often change. This indicates, in turn, that the parts should be swapped between the voices, so that it is not the bass who is singing the apple part throughout the canons, but rather, that the different vocal ranges interchange the parts of *Atalanta*, *Hippomenes*, thus altering the timbre, resonance and general sonority of the music.

This can be clearly heard in the recent recordings of the work (Ensemble Plus Ultra 2007; Vagantes A.V. Consort 2006). But again, the modern reader who simply looks at the score will miss all of this, since it is not written in a ‘global’ manner (for a conductor or analyst), but in a manner more suited to individual performers. Besides, there is no explanation of any of these musical subtleties in Maier's preface or notes: one simply has to figure it out on one's own by examining the score, as any good musicologist must do.

But can we really consider this proposal as a multimediaic one, intentionally designed to make the reader combine all of these inputs into a complex sensory, intellectual and even meditative or spiritual experience? In his *Preface to the reader* Maier gives us a glimpse on his intentions:

Four things, I say, are contained once and for all in a single book, destined and dedicated to your usage: poetic and allegorical; fictive, pictorial and emblematic, engraved on 'Venus' or copper, not without 'venery' or grace [...]; and lastly musical rarities.

[...] Therefore, in order to have as it were in a single view and embrace these three objects of the more spiritual senses, namely of sight, hearing and the intellect itself, and so as to introduce to the soul that which is to be understood at one and the same time, we have joined Optics to Music and the sense to the intellect, that is, rarities for the sight and hearing with the chemical emblems that are proper to this science (Maier 1990, 102-103).

But can we be really sure that this proposal was ever realized, that is, as a *literally performative* enactment of Maier's original plan? We do not have historical documents that unequivocally refer to this particular work, but we do have indications that such an enactment might have been possible: in his study on the esoteric schools of RudolFINE Prague (at precisely the time when Maier lived in the imperial capital), Peter Marshall tells us that one of Maier's colleagues, the physician to Emperor Rudolf Dr. Tadeáš Hájek of Hájek (also known by the Latin version of his name, *Taddaeus Hagecius*) "conducted alchemical experiments in his house on the corner of Bethlehem Square in the Old Town and it became the meeting place for many alchemists, physicians, scientists and scholars". (Marshall 2006, 104). Due to his interests and profession, Maier naturally would have been the kind of person to be invited to these meetings.

And what did these 'alchemists, physicians, scientists and scholars' do at such meetings? Godwin provides us with a deliciously provocative clue: the *Gesprächspiele* or conversation games "such as were played in the Renaissance academies" (Godwin 1990, 13). He then quotes James Haar: "The technique is simple: an emblem is shown, a tale or poem told, or the rules of the game explained; then the six speakers in turn discuss, or moralize on, the topic at hand" (Haar 1965, 15, cited in Godwin 1990, 13).

Godwin himself speculates that

Perhaps one should imagine *Atalanta* being used in a similar way, in the Hermetic academy of Rudolf II's court: an emblem is shown, its descriptive epigram is sung as a three-part fugue, and the participants make their own discourse on its meaning. Just as the book itself spreads over the boundaries that the modern mind sets up between a musical score, a picture book, and a textbook in chemistry, so the occasion of its use is only imaginable if one can somehow fuse the categories of parlor-game, amateur chamber-music, and esoteric discussion-group (Godwin 1990, 13).

If so, these practices might have resembled the mysterious and largely incomprehensible *glass bead game* found in Herman Hesse's novel of the same name, played at big annual events, with much pageantry, by the enlightened and utterly neo-Renaissance 'Castalians' ('the chaste ones') of a future 'post-postmodern era'—one which the speculative musicologist Siglind Bruhn has so masterfully traced back to the mystical-mathematical concerns of another protégé of Rudolf who likewise lived in Prague at that time: Johannes Kepler (Bruhn 2005)—, and a further indication of the interaction between science and occultism characteristic of the city's intellectual atmosphere then.

#### **ATALANTA FUGIENS AS A PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION SET TO MUSIC: AN EXAMPLE FOR CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS**

That an amateur composer of a set of three-part canons published in 1617 would refuse to respect the rules of musical composition of his time—which, given the authoritarian world-view of that age, had a stronger legitimacy than nowadays, and would therefore have been more difficult to relinquish than in our modern times—in order to *strictly* pursue a graphic representation of an extra-musical theme in the dimension of time (in this case the three characters of the legend: Hippomenes, Atalanta and the golden apples) for which music would have been the most appropriate art in an age when motion pictures and their derivatives, like video- and performance-art, did not exist, was, I believe, an astonishing example of intellectual integrity and artistic courage: Maier was clear that he wanted music to be a part of a multimediaic experience which also employed engraving and music, and in line with this holistic experience, zleading or imitative counterpoint would not

have been consistent with a descriptive, almost pictorial representation of the myth of Atalanta. If the norms of musical composition then in use required him to alter his material in order for it to be 'correct' in the eyes of the experts, he had to defy them: his goal was clear, his method even more so: it was not a piece of music he had in mind but a pan-artistic creation, (a *multimediat* one, in current parlance) and as such it required the invention of new rules, or at least a refusal to slavishly bow down to the traditional ones, when inappropriate for the artistic and structural coherence of the work. The lesson here may be that one should consider multimedia as an art form of its own, with an autonomous discourse, syntax and rules, rather than as a combination of other traditional art forms, which for the most part follow their own rules and do not bend or subordinate them to others, except perhaps in the case of opera or film.

#### **POSTSCRIPT: CURRENT ATTEMPTS TO EMPLOY ATALANTA FUGIENS FOR ITS ORIGINAL PURPOSE.**

Whereas at least three recent editions of *Atalanta Fugiens* are accompanied by a complete recording of the canons (Maier 1990; 2006; 2007), it does not necessarily follow that the latter are intended to enrich the study of the emblems, epigrams and commentaries and, in accordance with what seems to have been Maier's intention, induce a state of meditation.

A notable exception is Adam McLean's extraordinary, literally multimedia CD-ROM, which

[...] provides a modern multimedia approach to the *Atalanta fugiens*. To make the emblematic images more accessible to the modern eye. Adam McLean has hand-coloured the images, and has also re-created the music and made it more approachable to contemporary ears by programming it for a modern synthesizer [sic] (McLean 2008).

As McLean acknowledges himself, whereas other audio editions have been strictly faithful to the vocal timbre of the music and the capacity of the voice to convey the text, he has provided a purely instrumental accompaniment for the colored emblems:

For this CD-Rom I have orchestrated the music and played it through a multi-timbral synthesiser (Yamaha SY77) which incorporates sampled instruments. I have used a wide palette of instruments to provide variety, a number of horns (french horn,

flugel horn, trumpets), woodwind (oboe, clarinet, bassoon, flute), harp, harpsichord, and some strings, organs and orchestral sounds. I have avoided any modern entirely synthetic sounds as well as the piano. The general sound can be likened to an early music group, but of course with no pretensions to authenticity. (Mc Lean, 2008.)

Ingeniously, he has also strictly stuck to the symbolism of the characters of the myth as expressed in their corresponding voices, using stereo technology to underline them:

[...] The first voice, which always appears on the right stereo channel, is the fleeing Atalanta. She is pursued by the second voice, Hippomenes, following a short interval later, which I have mapped to the left channel. The three golden apples, the base, is in the centre of the stereo space (Mc Lean 2008).

Of the three executable files in the CD-ROM, one shows the emblems on their own as a slide show, but the other two play both the emblems *and* their associated canons in sequence.<sup>12</sup>

Even though the 'voices' are not sung by actual voices and thus cannot convey the words of the epigrams – the timbre of the parts being assigned, instead, to modern instruments rendered by a synthesizer – McLean's CD-ROM nevertheless comes closer to Maier's original intention than any other printed or audio edition, since it allows the reader-listener-onlooker to see the images, listen to the music and read the descriptive mottos *all at the same time* (via modern multimedia technology).

Thus, *Atalanta Fugiens*, a proposal dating back to 1617, has nearly come full circle in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, insofar as what could only be envisioned or dreamt of in the medium of the printed page has, thanks to the invention of electronic technology, become an *actual* multimedia work which better lives up to its original intentions than any previous version.

To definitively close the circle, a further step needs to be taken, one which is simple enough given the reach of contemporary technology: to include the performance of the original Latin text by a vocal ensemble in

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12 The difference between these latter two files with music is that one shows the mottos with the emblems, while the other one does not, but both show the emblems while playing the music.



the multimedia presentation, with the addition, perhaps simultaneously with the music, of a reading of Maier's interpretations of the emblems. Once this is done, a user could very well sit in front of his screen, and with the click of a button or mouse, experience what Maier described as *looking, reading, meditating, understanding, weighing, singing and listening* to his work, "not without a certain pleasure" (Maier 1990, 91).

Then, *Atalanta* would indeed have come full circle. ∞∞∞

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