

# The Significance of *The White Goddess* for Musical Thought

## Part Two: *The Sound of Her Sacred Marriage and Seven-Day Love Song*

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In *The White Goddess*, Graves demonstrated the enormous cultural resonance of the five vowels of the 'Arcadian' alphabet and the seven vowels of the succeeding 'Classical Grecian' alphabet: Egyptian, Phoenician, Cretan, and Irish writing systems are shown to be invested with shared, albeit modified, mythological/calendrical preoccupations. In the first part of this article, I showed that each note of a specific five-note scale may correspond both to a vowel of the Irish Ogham tree alphabet, an aspect of the Five-fold Goddess, and to the Chinese and Indian musico-cosmological systems. This scale was employed by Gustav Mahler in the radiant conclusion of the last movement of *Das Lied von der Erde*, which he wrote when confronted with death: 'Der Abschied', representing his mystical reabsorption into the womb of the White Goddess in her oriental aspect as the Lotus Goddess: an acceptance of death as 'a natural phase of life, comparable to the moment of the planting of the seed', the mystical vision of Frobenius's tropical planting cultures, rejecting the hunter's view of death as a 'consequence of violence, generally ascribed to magic' (Frobenius, 439).

Prompted by Graves's understanding of Hygenius, that Simonides's addition of four letters to the Arcadian/Cadmean Greek alphabet enabled each of the seven strings of the 'zither' to be allocated a letter, described on page 221 of *The White Goddess*, I now wish to suggest that the letters associated with the strings of the lyre might be alternatively restricted to the seven vowels of Classical Greece. Such combinations of vowels and notes can be found in a Gnostic invocation in the papyrus W of Leyden: 'Thy name [...] is composed of seven letters according to the harmony of the seven tones, which have their sound according to the twenty-eight lights of the Moon' (Wellesz, 65).

TABLE 4: The twenty-eight vowel name of God

Sarahara,	Araphaira,	Braarmarapha,	Abraach,
oueē,	iaō,	oue,	eiou,
Pertaomech,	Akmech,	Iao	
aēō,	eēou,	Iaō	

Similar constellations of vowels at the end of antiphons for the Divine Office have also troubled scholars of plainchant.

‘F. M. Böhme mistook *Euouoe* for a familiar Greek word and was greatly exercised at the admission of a “Bacchanalian shout” into the office-books of the Church,’ write William S. Rockstro and Mary Berry in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (New Grove vi, 321). For *them*, the vowel sequence was ‘a technical pseudo-word formed from the vowels of the last six syllables of the doxology – *saeculorum. Amen*’ used in medieval office books as an abbreviation when, at the close of an antiphon, it is necessary to indicate the psalm tone with its appropriate ending to be used in the following psalm or canticle.

Whilst Egon Wellesz, in his study of Byzantine hymnography quoted above, acknowledges that similar ‘meaningless syllables’ such as *nana* and *Hagia* may have served the same purpose in Byzantine chant, his recognition of their similarity with the inserted vowels in Manichean cantillation (121) suggests an alternative function: the evocation of a gilded Byzantine White Goddess, supported by Graves’s observation that the Manichees were Christians who committed the heresy of reconciling Judaism with Astaroth worship (416).

In the same volume, Wellesz documents the Gnostic concordance between Classical Greek vowels, five planets and the five principal notes of the Greek Dorian mode (66) – whilst the association of each planet with a day of the week is demonstrated by Graves in the fifteenth chapter of *The White Goddess* (252).

TABLE 5: Greek/Gnostic Correspondences

Vowel:	(alpha) α	(epsilon) ε	(iota) ι
Planet:	Moon	Mercury	Sun
Pitch:	d	c	a
Day:	Monday	Wednesday	Sunday
Vowel:	(omikron) ο	(omega) ω	
Planet:	Mars	Saturn	
Pitch:	g	e	
Day:	Tuesday	Saturday	

The other two planets, Jupiter and Venus, were given the two vowels upsilon (υ) and eta (η): the complete vowel sequence, the seven-vowel system of Simonides achieved by making a 'distinction between' (Graves, 220) omicron and omega, and eta and epsilon, in the Arcadian alphabet in the sixth century BC. Some four hundred years later, Dio Cassius, describing the cosmological system of ancient Egypt, couples Jupiter with F and Venus with B, the simultaneous sounding of these two notes an interval of unique quality and potency within the seven-note collection, appropriate for the marriage of Venus to Jupiter, her father.

The celebration of such sacred sexual congress was a sacrament abhorred by the church; the uniquely piquant conjunction of notes celebrating this union was consequently taboo – demonized as the *diabolus in musica*. It should be noted that the B ascribed to Venus may be lowered (to B flat) in Egon Wellesz's tabulation of the correspondences – most commentators derive this B flat from the Greek 'lesser perfect system'. My hypothesis rests on considering the B from the 'perfect system'. However, if Wellesz's lowered B is accepted, the *diabolus in musica*, a sacred union is forged between B flat and E, Venus conjoined with her grandfather, Saturn. (Incidentally, it is in the former *avatar* that the *diabolus*, the Goddess, exiled from both music and the alphabet, was welcomed back from the Far East by Chopin in bar 124 of his *Ballade* Op. 23 of 1835, the whole piece evoking a poem about a moonlit lake by the Polish/Lithuanian poet Mickiewicz, and exalted by Wagner in *Tristan und Isolde* as the dual Goddess of love and death, part of the chord associated with the love/death potion, the Tristan chord.)

Simonides's addition of *eta* (η) and *omega* (ω) to the five original Greek vowels follows the addition of three strings to the four-string Greek lyre, the *kithera*, in the seventh century BC by Terpander. (Incidentally, Graves's translation of *cithaera* as zither is a mistranslation: no reproductions as sculptures or paintings of *semikon* and *epigoneion*, Greek words in texts by Aristotle, Pollux and Jubal (d. 24 AD) which do suggest zithers, have been found in Greece (Sachs 1940, 137).) If each new string of the enlarged seven-string lyre is assigned a distinct vowel, considering Graves's argument in *The White Goddess* (277), each vowel/string can have his or her own deity: the God of the lyre becomes the transcendental God of the Hyperboreans, the Lord of the God of each day:

TABLE 6: The seven vowels of the transcendental God

Vowel:	α (alpha)	ε (epsilon)	η (eta)	ι (iota)	ο (omikron)
Planet:	Moon	Mercury	Venus	Sun	Mars
Pitch:	d	c	b	a	g
Day:	Monday	Wednesday	Friday	Sunday	Tuesday
Vowel:	υ (upsilon)	ω (omega)			
Planet:	Jupiter	Saturn			
Pitch:	f	e			
Day:	Thursday	Saturday			

The twelfth century writer Abraham ben Meir ibn Ezra observed that the Hebrew seven-string *kithera*, the *kinnor*, was shaped like the Hebrew candelabrum, the *menorah* – each of its seven branches, Graves notes (255), also dedicated to a day of the week. If the central note of the *kinnor* can be associated with the central branch of the *menorah*, both may signify Wednesday and the almond Goddess of healing and inspiration, the White Goddess Artemis Carytis, also known as Carmenta, who allegedly adapted the Cretan thirteen-consonant alphabet to conform to a fifteen-consonant system, encouraging the adoption of a Venusian Year of five seventy-two-day seasons (Graves, 266).

Venus shines at bar 71 of ‘Der Abschied’ as Queen Satyavasti’s river: to attain enlightenment, the ego must cross it. Similarly, in Chinese Taoist thought, such a river must be crossed to reach the world mountain, the K’un-lun mountain, to attain immortality. The river flows beneath a snaking yin-yang motif, Isolde singing from the stream the first four notes of her *Liebested* in Wagner’s opera fused into three – Isolde, Gottfried’s thirteenth century epiphany of the Serpent Goddess who, like her countless avatars, sheds her skin and then arises as if re-born, linked to birth and death and resurrection, worshipped as Dea Syria with ecstatic dancing and ritual prostitution. In the Tantric practice of Kundalini Yoga, the dormant Goddess Kundalini – meaning literally ‘coiled up’ – symbolizes the female energy in the universe conceived or understood as a serpent:

The divine power  
*Kundalini*, shines  
like the stem of a young lotus;  
like the snake, coiled up round herself  
(Mookerjee, passim.)

The serpent is, consequently, linked to the lotus – at bar 77 of ‘Der Abschied’ described obliquely as an anonymous female flower growing pale in the moonlight.

The lotus, the goal of Mahler’s spiritual journey, appears as a three-note

figure at bar 309. This phrase occurs conspicuously in Schumann's 'Die Lotosblume', in his song-cycle *Myrthen*, Op. 25 (1840): thematically, the three-note motif celebrating Schumann's love of Ernestine, though the name of her birthplace has become extended to a figure of five distinct pitches. Eric Sams has already discovered the cipher which converts the letter-names of these pitches into CLARA, the friend of Ernestine, whom Schumann was to marry on September 12, 1840, the physical epiphany of Shri Lakshmi, his own private Lotus Goddess. Throughout Mahler's funeral march beginning fourteen bars later, Brahms and Schumann are among the attendants of the cortège. Brahms, the bourgeois Protestant, fears for Mahler as he stands trial before his Thunder God, the first seven notes of his Second Clarinet Sonata heard throughout the march having been divested of all sense of composure, whereas Schumann, the devotee of Oriental mysticism, is happy for Mahler as he believes *his* deity has a less distressing fate in store for her acolyte, as further references to the peace and radiance of 'Die Lotosblume' bear witness.

Fortunately, Isolde's *Liebestod*, the Great Mother, blesses Mahler's last breath, not Brahms's Clarinet Sonata, the Heavenly Father. Mahler's soul, not yet transformed into its desired form, a Holy Mountain man, the Chinese immortal bird, continues to search for the Mountain Queen in the music following the funeral march, bars 430–459, the Queen who will effect this transformation with her miraculous peaches served at one of her banquets on her mountain.

The concentration at this point on material from bars 42 and 72 is *encouraged* by the mystical significance of these numbers: forty-two was the number of days from the beginning of the hawthorn month, which is the preparation for the midsummer marriage and death orgy on Midsummer Day – the mythical day of Mahler's death as Oak-King. Seventy-two was the size of Moses's party which ascended the sacred hill to consult the oracular hero. On Cyllene, Demeter's mountain, such a hero was known as *Elatos*, or 'fir-man'. As the pun '*Der Bach singt*' and the numerous quotes from other composers suggest, Mahler consulted *his* dead heroes Bach, Schumann, Brahms and Wagner throughout the movement.

The Oriental isorhythmic techniques that structure the last eighty-three bars of 'Der Abschied' suggest the a-temporal world of such a sacred hill: isorhythm is partly the imposition on a plainsong melody of a repeated rhythmic cell or *talea* (the term borrowed originally from the Indian *tala*). The speed of this cell is sufficiently slow to prevent the apprehension of a rhythmic pulse, corporeal rhythm replaced by an 'ecstasy induced by Spiritual rhythm' (Mellers, 16) from the Arabian and Moorish music flooding into Europe during the Crusades. In the aesthetic of the Middle Ages, both gargoyles and creatures of beauty are distractions that may be sublimated into the architectural Whole: the material and the spiritual are allowed to co-exist, as in Tantric thinking.

The isorhythmic motet, like the Gothic cathedral, is constructed under such Tantric paradigms, different texts set simultaneously, often in different lan-

guages, one voice singing a sacred *trope* (enlargement) of a plainsong text to the Virgin, another singing of the joys of carnal love. Mahler's isorhythmic structure is overlaid by the repetition of the word 'ewig' ('forever') from this sentence after it has been heard complete: 'Everywhere and forever, the distance shines bright and blue': the blue sky, the stella epiphany of the White Goddess, the cloak of the Catholic Virgin, receiving the souls of the dead into her womb, forever.

The lotus from bar 77 floats amidst the isorhythmic cycle, unfolding to greet the moon in the evening. This lotus is a symbol of the Lotus Goddess known in Tantric thought as *Chinnamasta*, the sixth Goddess transformation, or *Mahavidya* of Black Kali, *Lalita* familiar to Occidental readers through Vladimir Nabokov's eponymous anti-heroine of his novel *Lolita*. The *Sadhaka* (one who performs acts of ritual, worship and meditation) will find her in himself at the level of his navel, inside a full blown lotus. The lotus rises from a pair of figures representing pure cosmic fertility, a blue male and a female in sexual union (known collectively when coupling as *Mahalakshmi*), as do Krishna and Rahda or indeed Tristan and Isolde (Rawson, 126).

This is the vision of *Sahajiya* Buddhism which flourished in Bengal in the Pala dynasty (c.730–1200 AD) wherein it was held that the only true experience of the pure rapture of the void was the rapture of sexual union. 'There is no duality in *sahaja*. It is perfect, like the sky' (Campbell, 351): the eternal blue sky of the last section of Mahler's 'Der Abschied'. Having experienced the cyclic temporal nature of the lunar psyche in the first twenty-eight sections or *avartas*, each representative of a day of the lunar month, the last nine *avartas* (from bar 460) view the lunar psyche outside of time, in her a-temporal totality as the nine-fold muse, who thrusts her vision upon the artist the *sahaja* reality. He himself is the universe – the Buddha, perfect purity, non-cognition, the annihilator of the cycle of existence.

Mahler's jewel (*mani* or *lingam*) penetrating the lotus (*padme*), the yoni of the Goddess, and his subsequent absorption into her womb in the last five bars of 'Der Abschied' is the surrounding of the pitch E by three others from the Chinese five-note scale – G, A, C. Mahler has returned to the lotus – the womb of the Five-Fold White Goddess.

The White Goddess visited Eastbourne in August 1905, engendering *Reflets dans l'eau*, the first piece in the first set of piano Images by Claude Debussy. As a Wagnerite and a Symbolist with an interest in many occult movements then in vogue, such as the Rosicrucians and the esoteric Egyptology of the Maurice Denis school, Debussy naturally drew on the resources of Wagnerian harmony and rhythmic schemata derived from sacred geometry as metaphors for mystical concepts throughout the work.

The principal motif returns in bars 35 and the Venusian bar 72, each time, as the 'pebble dropping into water', unchanged. After the only silence in the entire work at bar nine, the Goddess as Nine-Fold Muse descends into the work



silently during the only rest, engendering a reflection, a harmonic inflection, which will dominate the entire piece.

However, the primarily numerical building block is 5, Minerva – also responsible for the major formal division of the piece, beginning with the literal repetition of the principal theme at bar 36, which divides the piece into two unequal sections of 35 and 60 bars. Through Minerva's eyes the shorter section may be considered to consist of seven five-bar units, the longer, twelve five-bar units. The only section that doesn't acknowledge the sovereignty of Minerva is a four-bar unit, bars 16–19, the epiphany of the White Goddess from behind her unhewn dolmen, Wagner's Tristan chord.

In *The Song of the Earth: Music and the Great Mother in Twentieth Century Europe*, I also investigate the presence of Graves's Goddess in other twentieth century works. The number 72, which Graves associates with Venus, is found to be a fundamental structural pivot in both Berio's *Ofanim* and Maxwell-Davies's *Ave Maris Stella*. Maxwell-Davies's medievalism prompted research into the presence of Graves's numerological speculation in the music of this period. It was interesting to find numbers like 3 and 19 controlling the structure of Dunstable's fifteenth century motet *Gaude Virgo saluta*: three, the ubiquitous 'Triple Goddess', a.k.a. the Trinity, and nineteen, the number of revolutions of the sun between each (approximate) concurrence of solar and lunar time (Graves, 277). Lutheranism did little to stifle the Goddess: Bach celebrates her lunar epiphany in the *fifteenth* variation of the *Goldberg Variations* (the first variation in a minor key) and the fifteenth lunar section of the *B Minor Mass*: *Et incarnatus est de Maria Virgine*.

Whilst some may find nothing new under the sun, there is plenty to be discovered under the moon. The result of my work on music and *The White Goddess* to date is a song cycle for bass and chamber orchestra, *My Last Muse*, setting six of Graves's poems inspired by Julia Simonne, his 'last muse'; and my *Second Symphony: The Five Seasons* whose structure is based on a simultaneous presentation of Graves's Five-Season Year, the Five-Fold Goddess of the year as Birth, Initiation, Marriage, Rest and Death, and his Fifteen-Consonant Year, Hercules's fifteen-chapter biography.

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