

## Deciphering the Stars

### University. The premiere of four Kepler-Motets by Tim Watts as part of the Graduate Research Project "Keplers Welten" (Kepler's Worlds)

**Tübingen** At the time of the astronomer Johannes Kepler faith and superstition, natural sciences and alchemy, were inseparably entwined and not, as yet, divided by modern perspectives and discourse. An example of this is the fact that Kepler provided General Wallenstein with a horoscope.

In 1619, exactly 400 years ago, at the beginning of the Thirty Years War, Kepler published his "Harmonices Mundi". In this "World Harmonic" he saw the coherence between the cosmos conforming to the laws of nature - the orbits of the planets within their "harmony of the spheres" - and the wise proportions in nature and the harmonic laws of music.

Already at the time of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians and the Greek natural philosophers, such as Pythagoras, the correspondence between macro- and micro cosmos had been a matter of interest.

In "Harmonices Mundi" Kepler compared the orbits of the planets with the vocal range of a six-part choral composition and had envisaged a future visionary music: a motet, conforming to celestial laws.

400 years on, this impulse found an echo in Tim Watts. The English composer teaches at the renowned St. John's College of the University of Cambridge. On Thursday his four Kepler-Motets were premiered in front of a capacity audience of around 180 people in the Pflughofsaal.

Commissioned by the University of Tübingen, the Motets refer to Tübingen in several ways.

The Premiere took place at the end of a Kepler-evening, organised by the Graduiertenkolleg "Religiöses Wissen im vormodernen Europa" [Research Training Group "Religious Knowledge in a Premodern Europe"] (Spokespersons: Prof. Volker Leppin and Prof. Annette Gerok-Reiter). During the first part of the evening, the historian Ulinka Rublack, who also teaches at Cambridge, introduced her recently published book "The Astronomer and the Witch" (as reported previously).

Rublack's research inspired Watts as early as 2016 to write an opera. Central to "Kepler's Trial" is the trial for witchcraft of Kepler's mother which took place in 1615. An excerpt of the opera, lasting half an hour, was presented on Thursday. Watts played the orchestra-part on the Steinway (the intention of the research group to have a performance of the whole opera failed because of problems with sponsorship).

Cerys Purser had also sung the part of Katharina Kepler at the Premiere and managed to enthuse the audience in the Pflughof with an intense-expressive performance. The solo part has been written in a "timeless modern" style, an arioso-like parlando, reminiscent of Britten's chamber operas. The tragic chorus (the celebrated vocal sextet "Gesualdo Six"), however, is anchored in a musical history context, suggestive of the vocal polyphony of Kepler's time.

It is also for the "Gesualdo Six" (conductor: Owain Park) that Watts composed his 15-minute Kepler-Motets. They are representative of the English college choir tradition: two counter-tenors (Guy James and Alex Chance), two tenors (Joseph Wicks and Josh Cooter), one Baritone (Michael Craddock) and one bass (Samuel Mitchell).

The first Motet, based on Novalis' Kepler text "Zu dir kehr ich zurück", began with dissonant tight clusters, compressed agglomerations of sound overlaid by irridesciently sweet counter sonorities.

The second Motet gave us Kepler's transposition of the earth's orbit into sound frequencies. According to this, the "elliptically wobbling" earth oscillates between e and f - known as "mi" and "fa" during Kepler's time, which was for Kepler the signature for earthly conditions: "miseria" and "famine" - misery and hunger. In addition, and as commentary, there is a line from Hoelderlin's poem on Kepler "Im Labyrinth, Strahlen beschwurst du in die Nacht" [In the labyrinth, you conjured rays into the night].

### Rising Suns of Sound

The subject of the third Motet is the confessional split of Kepler's time. The Novalis text "Der Tag ist das Bewusstsein des Wandelsterns" [The day is the consciousness of the planet] comes up against the protestant hymn "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern", written by Philipp Nicolai in memory of his pupil Graf von Waldeck, who had died in Tübingen. After the two atonal Motets we now have major-minor chords: harmonies appear straightened out, thirds upon thirds, like rising suns of sound.

The last Motet has been built on a Latin quotation from Kepler's "Harmonices Mundi": "The celestial movements are nothing but an eternal harmony". But no harmony without "dissonantes tensiones" (dissonant tensions), "syncopationes" (collisions) or "cadentias" (random liberties), represented by Watts in an artistically accomplished and sonorous fashion. It finished the way it

began, with the same atonally entwined strands of sound. Dissonance gives rise to harmony and vice versa - altogether remarkable, philosophically and compositionally advanced music.  
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