

The Relation between Music and Philosophy: Three Retrospects/Perspectives

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Having for its object the relation between music and philosophy, the present article aims, on the one hand, to seek out the philosophical resources contained in foundational texts in terms of musical knowledge, and, on the other, to outline the musical resources enriching philosophical knowledge. With this end in view, three retrospects/perspectives are examined which can be traced throughout the history of the *music-philosophy* relation. The first looks back at the two basic words referring to music in Greek philosophy (*armonia* and *musikē*) in order to find out how the human ability for musical knowledge can be activated when these two are brought together. The second focuses on what lies at the heart of music, namely the thing which can be defined as the tone-ness of the tone. The third explores the *art-and-science* content of music, which allows for a further perspective to be drawn forth—a perspective on musical knowledge proceeding from, though at the same time remaining with music as a mode of human existence.

Keywords: Aristoxenus, *armonia*, *armonica*, art-and-science of music, *musikē*, Socrates' dream, tone-ness

1. Introduction

The relation between music and philosophy has been as long-lasting as changeable. In various historical periods, its positivity and fruitfulness have either been taken without question or called into doubt. Since the unequivocal premise put forward by Plato's Socrates that philosophy is the highest music (the *Phaedo*), the history of ideas on music has gone a long way towards accepting or rejecting the said relation which in the process has undergone a certain diminution so as to reach in the 20th century Lacoue-Labarthe's no less determined statement that "music has barely had any luck with philosophy (1994, 86)."

The present research offers three theses each of which addresses a given retrospect/perspective that can be traced throughout the history of the music-philosophy relation. The aim of this undertaking is twofold: On the one hand, it seeks out the philosophical resources contained in groups of texts specifically dedicated to the subject of music or treating it on specific occasions, e.g. works of philosophy or music theory treatises. On the other hand, it sets out to outline the musical resources enriching the philosophical knowledge itself.

To accomplish this, the text needs certain secure foundations to proceed from. One of them resides in a word which is the prerogative of philosophy, the word "truth." The fact that philosophy is a striving for truth, or etymologically speaking "a love of wisdom," has remained unalterable in history (I do not here concern myself

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with the issue of the novel leanings towards adding the prefix “post” onto any term, which has, in markedly bad taste, resulted in the invention of the word “post-truth”).

A second premise is related to this word, this time a methodological one: It consists in the necessity for hermeneutic trust, inasmuch as possible, in statements (put forward by thinkers of various times) which may nowadays appear distant to the body of scientific knowledge. Instead of giving them the necessary attention and seeing them as raw material for modern interpretation/comprehension, researchers often brush them away as secondary ornaments accompanying a specific view, as the result of some literary fiction, or as mythological embellishments.

On more than one occasion have we witnessed the condescending attitude towards Plato’s etymological ramblings in the *Cratylus*, including the ones related to the word “truth.” In our aspirations to open up yet unrevealed resources within our knowledge of music, we will attempt in this text to treat such seemingly tangential passages with no less sensitivity than the well-established tenets about a given author, school of thought, trend, and the history of ideas as a whole.

The next reliable premise in which the text is to be grounded is yet another word which in its own meaning is a word-mediator between music and truth. This is the word *logos* (belonging to Heraclitus’ lexicon) which he used to refer to the universal interconnectedness of all things. A reason for this word to be introduced as a point of reference can be derived from another assertion put forward by Martin Heidegger, in whose view truth and *logos* need each other for the sake of their comprehension. Truth needs *logos*, because *logos* is what allows truth to manifest itself. *Logos* is not conceivable without truth, which as the Un-concealedness of Being,¹ is its *telos*. This is why if we grant that there is a connection between music and truth, but at the same time deny such a connection between music and *logos*, it means that the acceptance of the first connection is but a “half-hearted admission.”

2. First Retrospect/Perspective

The name of Pythagoras, named the “discoverer of music” and the only claimant to this title at least up to the High Middle Ages (McKinnon 1978, 1-28), lies at the beginning of a tradition which gave shape to the first historical paradigm of the relation between music and philosophy. The specificities of this relation, based on number, which in turn has its expression in sound, are governed by harmony, i.e., the numerical relation or the proportion among all existing things.

“The harmony of the spheres,” the definition invariably referred to in relation to Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism, holds enough sway to preserve a degree of stability throughout the centuries while generating mutable historical versions—from the idea of music as caused by the movement of celestial bodies (sounding in reality albeit unperceivable by man) to its understanding as a symbol of cosmic order (Finney 1973, 389-90).

Being the manner in which the cosmos has been established, or the principle that brings order into it, harmony is also the ontological possibility for knowing this order. If we were to allow ourselves a retroactive transfer of terms pertaining to later periods, we could say that as early as the beginning of musical ages there was the perspective which would later lead up to that scope of the harmony concept which contained its ontological and epistemological aspect (Carlin 2000, 102-3). The configuration of the tripartite relation of *music-truth-logos* is also specific in early Pythagoreanism, where, as it is well known, *logos* manifests itself in its meaning as number. Music and *logos* reside under the common denominator of “number” and thus they justify the position of *harmonics*—the field of knowledge which in Greek antiquity concerned itself with

numerical proportions—in theoretical philosophy.

Alongside the interpretation whereby music is defined through the word ἁρμονία, throughout the ages there would be another version of it based on the word μουσική. We owe it to Plato—the thinker who laid out the two words as coordinates of a world whose soul is glued together through a musical bond.

When Plato's views on music are considered, it is customary to proceed with sorting out his writings dealing with the numerical nature of music from those which address the subject of "music and soul." It is emphasized that precisely Plato was the philosopher who brought together the two doctrines (one concerning the number and the other concerning the soul) which had previously existed separately from each other in the teachings of earlier Pythagoreans (Philip 1973, 31). *Timaeus*, the dialogue which remains unparalleled in terms of its significance for music, reveals the reasons for the interconnectedness between number and soul through the idea of "the cosmic soul," and yet it preserves its position within the first domain of problematics with its detailed calculations and descriptions of the technique whereby the Demiurge created the World Soul. On the other hand, it is from the *Laws* and the *Republic*, as well as from the *Phaedo* and the *Phaedrus* that the principles of the ancient doctrine of *ethos* are derived, where music plays a central part in shaping up virtues, moral character or the *ethos* of the individual. Such bifurcation is methodologically fruitful, since the enormous scope of Plato's concept of music along with its unfathomable influence throughout history in both philosophy and music could not be grasped without certain confines and an algorithm.

Only when these are observed can a music researcher have a proper view of the borderline zone between number and soul, where a "third" Plato's idea on music comes forward. This idea, incorporating the answer to the question "What is music?" sets up the relation between philosophy and music in the very process of answering it. The *Timaeus* (34 c) introduces the basic premise, significant both in itself and in terms of the status it grants music, regarding the hierarchical relation between the soul and the body whereby the first is higher and more esteemed by birth like a mistress governing the body. The soul, "interfused everywhere from the centre to the circumference of heaven, of which also she is the external envelopment, herself turning in herself, began a divine beginning of never ceasing and rational life enduring throughout all time" (36 e).² In this never ceasing and rational life of hers she "partakes of reason [λόγος] and harmony [ἁρμονία], and being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created" (37 a).

The clearly discernible connection *soul-logos-harmony* provides the universe with life through a basic principle, namely the principle of movement. In this movement which the World Soul makes, the real and immutable *logos*, "which works with equal truth" (37 b) is what measures the harmonious proportions of all existing things and being in communication with "the whole" of the soul (37 b), acts in such a way as to allow it to know things. And while the musical resources within philosophy have been outlined here through the role of harmony in favour of the good/truthful/right knowledge, Plato, by means of describing the qualities of a person who is musical (μουσικός), introduces us into the scope and content of the other music-related word—μουσική.

"Mousikos" is a person who partakes of the Muses. The word μουσικός (which in its Latinized form would turn into the noun "musicus") is in Greek the adjective denoting relation or belonging³—such a person belongs to the Muses. It is precisely in its status of correlation and belonging that the word "mousikos" opens up a perspective for the mental grasp of the relation between music and philosophy whereby they do not act upon one another as separate entities, but music courses through the veins of philosophy elevating it to the highest possible music. Thus, if harmony denotes the true order in the universe and this is the first, ontic

musicality in Plato's idea, then the second one is the musicality of understanding, the kind of understanding possessed by "the intelligent votary of the Muses" (Timaeus 47 d). And it is here that the meaning of the word μουσική comes to the fore as the meaning it carries etymologically, namely comprehension, intelligence, educatedness, and all the qualities which a mousikos is required to be in command of. This is how the circle between harmony and music gets closed and we see that human faculties for knowledge require full activation, an absorption of μουσική in the mind, and ἁρμονία in the soul—a never-ending process of bringing the human soul into alignment with the World Soul, which is the only thing that makes knowledge possible.

It comes to be understood that what is said about music in the etymologies contained in the Cratylus is not at all a mere ornament of thought, but belongs to the very pivotal point of this same idea of the musicality of the process put in motion by the soul's inner striving for knowledge: "The name of the Muses [Μούσες] and of music [μουσική] would seem to be derived from [μῶσθαι] their making philosophical enquiries [φιλοσοφία]" (Cratylus, 406 a). Perhaps the most meaningful etymology provided in this dialogue is the one of the word "truth:" "Truth—ἀλήθεια—is also an agglomeration of theia ale (divine wandering), implying the divine motion of existence" (Cratylus, 421 b). What is important for the conceptualization of music is not only "the divine motion of existence," where the aspects of the divine and of movement manifest themselves, but also the fact that this movement represents a wandering which is indifferent about the goal it moves toward.

However differing from Plato's and each other's interpretations, two twenty-century thinkers and proponents of different traditions manage to retain an important aspect of Plato's ἀλήθεια in their renditions of the word "truth," namely the indifferent movement of truth as not going anywhere. Martin Heidegger and Pavel Florensky explicate the essence of truth proceeding from the negative structure of the Greek word (ἀ-λήθεια). They both insist on the literal veracity in translating λήθη, from the verb λήθω, but they choose different meanings of this verb. The first thinker chooses "conceal" (Heidegger 2008a, 125), and the other opts for "forget" (Florensky 1990, 17-18). From then on, the German philosopher translated the Greek term for truth as Un-concealedness (Unverborgenheit), and the Russian theologian and philosopher of religion landed on Unforgotten-ness. Heidegger needed the initial indifference of movement so that he, in emphasizing the Un-concealedness as an aspect of Being itself, could introduce the original engagement of Un-concealedness with the human mind before which it is unconcealed. In a similar fashion Florensky brought as an aspect of truth the mind where truth resides unforgotten.

What guarantees the encounter of truth as Un-concealedness and the act of distinguishing it as unconcealed by human beings is *logos*: "Discourse lets something be seen ἀπό... that is, it lets us see something from the very thing which the discourse is about. In discourse (ἀπόφανσις), so far as it is genuine, what is said [*was geredet ist*] is drawn *from* what the talk is about... This is the structure of the λόγος as ἀπόφανσις" (Heidegger 2001, 56). Thus *logos* in its meaning as an act whereby the wandering movement gets "adjusted" to human standards suggests the direction towards man, and by this very suggestion articulates movement as an approach to man. This approaching movement is musical in the degree in which it synchronizes, adjusts into consonance, or tunes into harmony two important modes of *letting*: *I let the thing to appear* and *I let myself to be at the disposal of its appearance*.

Nowadays, music and philosophy are in need of this very musicality of *logos* by which it constantly transforms the indifferent wandering of truth into oncoming towards man, as it proceeds each and every time from its first Un-concealedness, from the initial purity of its anamnestic attainment by man. Thus, if *logos* is the general concept referring to the act of synthesis, the short path between the self-revelation of truth and its

discovery by man, then music provides a specific mode for this synthesis to be realized. The essence of this specific mode of synthesis lies in the deepest, most intimate musical category—the tone (τόνος).

3. Second Retrospect/Perspective

Another clue to the explication of the relation between *logos* and *tonos* was put forward by another thinker of the Greek antiquity—Aristoxenus (4th c. BC), the first and main author of a body of treatises dedicated this time to the study of specific musical problems. It is well known that he was the author who laid the scientific foundation of musical knowledge, as he established the discipline called “music theory” and made it the main field of this knowledge. He was also the one who crafted the algorithm of scientific research, proposed the basic categories of music, and expounded the content of each one individually. This might be the reason why, as noted by Henry Macran, a translator and commentator of the “*Elementa Harmonica*” by Aristoxenus, even the ancient writers called Aristoxenus “the Musician” (Macran 2013, 86). The cited author calls attention to the convergence, brought about by Aristoxenus, between music itself and the science about it, namely that with the

clearer perception of the scope of musical science there came also a deeper conception of music itself. So busy were the Pythagoreans in establishing the mere physical and mathematical antecedents of sounds in general that they never saw that the essence of musical sounds lies in their dynamical relation to one another. Thus they missed the true formal notion of music, which is ever present in Aristoxenus, that of a system or organic whole of sounds, each member of which *is* essentially what it *does*, and in which a sound cannot become a member because merely there is room for it, but only if there is a function which it can discharge. (Aristoxenus 2013, 88-89)

There is powerful potential for the relationship between music and philosophy in the convergence of music and the knowledge of it. Macran finds similar potential more specifically in the two (as formulated by him) Aristoxenus’ contributions to the *philosophy of music*:

The conception, then, of a science of music which will accept its materials from the ear, and carry its analysis no further than the ear can follow; and the conception of a system of sound-functions, such and so many as the musical understanding may determine them to be, are the two great contributions of Aristoxenus to the philosophy of music. (Macran 2013, 89)

With the content which Macran reads into Aristoxenus’ idea of a philosophy of music, this idea reaches as far as musical phenomena would allow for: It implies a philosophy situated *within* and *by* music; it does not allow the relations *sense-reason*, or *ear-reason* to be unequivocally reduced to an opposition. Primary in this philosophy is the musical comprehension based on such a disposition of the *ear-reason* relation where the ear does not simply convey sensory information to the reason, but also “tells” it what to listen into.

The judgment of hearing disciplines the logical path whereby we derive the laws of reason with its capacity for gazing into truth or, said more aptly of music, for listening into truth. It is this judgment that determines the elements which do not require any further explanation, as they are the ultimate authorities on musical understanding. Aristoxenus’ *philosophy of music* is the thought horizon where Aristoxenus’ *music theory* resides. Philosophy is aware of why the ultimate elements are precisely these, and theory looks into them in order to conceptualize them.

The tandem of voice and tone holds a central position in Aristoxenus’ framework of categories. The fundamentalness of the first term in its true meaning is owed to the fundamentalness of the phenomenon it describes. It is understandable then that Aristoxenus’ definition of “voice” would be passed down from one treatise to another nearly intact throughout the Middle Ages.

From the comprehensive explanation of the term “voice” provided by the author, the history of musical knowledge would largely derive (often in the most literal form) the assertion about the two kinds of voice:

Our first problem consists in ascertaining the various species of motion. Every voice is capable of change of position, and this change may be either continuous or by intervals. In continuous change of position the voice seems to the senses to traverse a certain space in such a manner that it does not become stationary at any point, not even at the extremities of its progress—such at least is the evidence of our sense-perception—but passes on into silence with unbroken continuity (συνεχής). In the other species which we designate motion by intervals, the process seems to be of exactly the opposite nature: the voice in its progress stations itself at a certain pitch, and then again at another, pursuing this process continuously—continuously, that is, in time. As it leaps the distances contained between the successive points of pitch, while it is stationary at, and produces sounds upon, the points themselves, it is said to sing only the latter, and to move by intervals (διαστηματική). (Aristoxenus I. 8, 2013, 102 [Greek]/170-1 [Engl.])

The definition of the diastematic voice prepares the one of the tone: “By the term pitch (τάσις) we mean to indicate a certain persistence, as it were, or stationary position of the voice” (Aristoxenus I. 12, 2013, 104/173). And if from the viewpoint of music theory the two concepts are autonomous and independent of each other, from the perspective of the *music-philosophy* relation they always remain connected. Only in this way can the tone transcend its physical limitations and rise to being a faculty of the human mind. The tone with its tautness and sustained pitch provides the potentiality for the unity of what is voiced and what is heard, i.e., the synthesis where consciousness *reveals* what is *revealed* before it. The tone provides this potentiality, because the intensity (*tonus*) of the revealing consciousness is the same as the intensity (*tonos*) of the thing revealing itself. And it is exactly this *tonos-logos* thread that infuses music with its own cognitive capacity. Aristoxenus defines the limit of the musical by the limit of the diastematic. Under the threshold defined by the smallest diesis the diastematic principle ceases to operate. “Cease” means that the diastematic voice has transitioned into the voice of speech.

And here comes the boundary between the two. The criterion for the “ceasing” is the aurally cognitive one—a criterion that is not equivalent to the sensory-aural one inasmuch as it conceives of hearing in a broader sense, i.e., as a colluder to the voice. The collusion between the voice and the hearing in relation to the *always-the-same* point from which they will not go any further not only puts the limit on music theory, but it also imbues it from within with the perspectives of a philosophy interested in the cognitive potential of music hidden in the deepest recesses of music, i.e., the recesses of *tone*. Its pitch is necessary, because it provides the actual identity of the process of incessant self-revealing of something (the *I reveal myself* mode), on the one hand, and, on the other, its incessantly being revealed by man (the *it is revealed to me* mode).

4. Third Retrospect/Perspective

The dichotomy of music was first explicated in the ancient Greek treatises on music theory in terms of its status as science and art.⁴ This dichotomy was crowned by the two words for music—“harmony” and “music.” Whereas the *Timaeus* is more closely related to the first one, referring to the number and the science of music, the *Phaedo* introduces the second one in order to reveal the art of music not as an entity separate from man but rather something in which man is involved—the art of living and dying. The heartfelt profundity with which the *Phaedo* talks on the subject of music and death is due to the fact that the dialogue represents a personal confession. But this profundity marks the very link between music and death—a link woven in the death-bed narrative of Socrates:

But I wanted to see whether I could purge away a scruple which I felt about certain dreams. In the course of my life I have often had intimations in dreams “that I should make music.” The same dream came to me sometimes in one form, and sometimes in another, but always saying the same or nearly the same words: Make and cultivate music, said the dream. And hitherto I had imagined that this was only intended to exhort and encourage me in the study of philosophy, which has always been the pursuit of my life, and is the noblest and best of music [ἡ φιλοσοφία εἶναι το ἀνώτερο εἶδος μουσικῆς]. The dream was bidding me to do what I was already doing, in the same way that the competitor in a race is bidden by the spectators to run when he is already running. But I was not certain of this, as the dream might have meant music in the popular sense of the word [τῇ “δημοτικῇ” μουσικῇ], and being under sentence of death, and the festival giving me a respite, I thought that I should be safer if I satisfied the scruple, and, in obedience to the dream, composed a few verses before I departed. And first I made a hymn in honor of the god of the festival, and then considering that a poet, if he is really to be a poet or maker, should not only put words together but make stories, and as I have no invention, I took some fables of Esop, which I had ready at hand and knew, and turned them into verse (ποιήσαντα ποιήματα). (Phaedo, 60 e-61 b)

Among the many aspects of music touched upon in the dialogue to the fore comes the aspect concerning the tautness/tensile strength which becomes a moving agent of events—it is the tension between the outspoken death-bed story and the arcane of its messages. Very broadly speaking, there arises the question of why given that music “in the popular sense of the word” is ascribed a lower place than that of philosophy, “the noblest and best of music,” there is now this ordinary music is revealed in a new light by the very fact that Socrates in his last days undertakes to *make* it. It is exactly the *making* that is of the essence here: it rearranges the static division of music into practical and theoretical whereby *making* gets attributed to the first domain, and contemplation—to the second. In the dialogue the idea of *making* gets broader. Philosophy continues to be the highest music, but with this it is not left in the field of contemplation—philosophy itself is thought of as *making*, as a practice of the soul. *Making* also refers to everyday music where it also broadens its meaning. The emphasis in the phrase concerning Socrates’ composing verses falls on the skill of workmanship, the proficiency of making.

The introduction of *making* opens up new perspectives onto the relation between music and philosophy. Here one’s philosophical venture proceeds from and is realized in the actual and never ceasing musical exercise of his own soul. Such philosophy, musical in its essence, makes good use of the depositories of the μουσικῇ which Socrates, following his dream, decided to choose in his final hour, and at the same time renews them through the lessons it has received in its entire hard-trodden path of ups and downs in the relation between music and philosophy. It substitutes the contemplative attitude of the mind for a passive position of man, who rises to knowledge by journeying through the suffering of his own existence. It grasps the pressing need for musical *making*—the more pressing the closer one gets to death. Because the “subject” here is the soul, the *making* is its practice, and what it practices is death. Separating the soul from the body while keeping it pure from drawing along no bodily taint (Phaedo, 80 e) means that this soul is engaged in philosophy the right way; and being engaged the right way means mastering the musical law (νόμος) given to melodies by nature (Laws II, 657 a): The law according to which the soul, “herself gathered into herself” (Phaedo, 80 e), returns to its celestial homeland.

5. Conclusion

The history of ideas on music has been marked by a distinct tendency towards greater and greater proliferation of the meanings of “music” stratifying it into different “musics” and at the same time narrowing

down the object of music in each specific case. The specialization of musical knowledge, the development of its physical, psychological, sociological, and other aspects loses sight of both the broad spectrum of separate significations in music and the multidimensional stratification of its meaning as a whole. Philosophy today can make use of its musical potential by admitting that music has bearing not only on objective scientific truths (reached by each individually specialized discipline of music), but also on the truth of Being; that the entities music encounters in the process of its self-realization, the ideas it gives rise to, and the categories whose rationalization it partakes of, are fundamental entities, ideas and categories, such as truth, Being, existence, *logos*, meaning, universe, life, death...

The whole range of meanings residing in the word “music” plays into the perspectives which music opens up within philosophy, e.g., as a mode of existence unveiling before man the horizon of Being, as a thought ability to listen into truth, or as the musical tuning of *logos* which gives the mind the respective intensity (tonos) which allows it to grasp what is being revealed before it in its own intensity of revealing. A philosophy of music today is in vital need of acknowledging the tone as an ontological condition for the possibility of that bi-united process of an incessant self-revealing and its simultaneous capturing in man’s discovery, which in essence is the movement of *logos*. The first thing which music with its inherent tone-ness does within *logos* and for *logos* is that it draws and retains with inerrant precision the direction coming *from* truth and turning *towards* man’s comprehension. It is the direction of which Cratylus speaks when coming to the question: “Whether the image and the truth of which the image is the expression” could be rightly conceived from the things themselves, or should we learn from the truth “whether the truth and the image of it have been duly executed?” he replies “I should say that we must learn from the truth” (Cratylus, 439b).

Notes

1. Heidegger interprets the Greek word ἀλήθεια literally (with its negative structure, ἀ-λήθη) as Un-concealedness [Unverborgenheit] especially in *Parmenides* (1992), *Being and Time* (as disclosedness, [1962]/2001, 434-49), *On the Essence of Truth* (2008, 111-38), *The Origin of the Work of Art* (2008, 139-212), *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking* (2002, 55-73), *Plato’s Doctrine of Truth* (1998, 155-82) and in other works.

2. Here and hereafter the quotations from the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedo*, the *Cratylus*, and the *Laws* are cited after ELPENOR’s online edition (Plato 2006).

3. The same kind of belonging is referred to by the word μουσική, the art of the Muses (Babich, [2005], 172). Babich refers to Thrasybulos Georgiades, (Georgiades, Thrasybulos. *Musik und Rhythmus bei den Griechen*, Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1958, 45) who emphasizes that in its grammatical form μουσική is not a noun, but an adjective related to the Muses (Ibid.).

4. “Music is a science, certainly, in which exists sure and infallible knowledge, for whether we speak of it in terms of problems or in terms of effects, it would never demonstrate any change of alteration. And indeed, we might also with reason call it an art, for it is both a composite of perception (and these are practiced to gain accuracy) and is not useless to life, as the ancients discerned and our discourse will demonstrate” (Quintilianus 1998, 48). Concerning the difference between science (ἐπιστήμη) and art (τέχνη), pointed out by Greek philosophers, Mathiesen refers to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* 1.1 and *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.3-8 (Mathiesen 1998, 48, note 5).

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