

EXALTATION OF THE RATIONAL: THE TREATMENT OF MUSIC BY PLATO AND ST. AUGUSTINE

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Friedrich Nietzsche, in reference to the effusively emotional music of the late nineteenth century, claimed, “Only sick music makes money today.” Victor Hugo, on the other hand, defended emotional compositions by saying, “Music expresses that which cannot be said and on which it is impossible to be silent.” The historic tension between the impulse to embrace or reject the expressive aspect of music is visible in the treatment of music by two major philosophers of the ancient world. Plato, writing during the Golden Age of Greece, dedicated a portion of his *Republic* for the discussion of music in an ideal state. Nearly eight hundred years later, Augustine of Hippo wrote the treatise *De musica* as a newly-converted Christian and later returned to the topic as a seasoned philosopher in his *Confessions*. Both thinkers carefully consider the place of music in society and support their positions with reasoned arguments. However, the fundamental difference lies in the fact that Plato writes from an established and self-assured philosophical standpoint, while Augustine’s writings demonstrate that he does not find a position that he holds to unreservedly even as a mature thinker. Unfortunately, their emphasis on rational thought leads both Plato and Augustine to reject the edifying power of music out of fear of its influence over the soul.

While the *Republic* clearly shows Plato’s respect for the power of music, it also reveals his belief that such power is easily abused and potentially dangerous. In particular, music is dangerous because its emotional appeal challenges the dominance of reason. To ensure that the rulers of his ideal state are not swayed by excess emotion, Plato subjugates music to the control of the state and he intends to neutralize its influence by imposing strict criteria for official acceptance of the arts. Plato’s limitations on the purpose and nature of music strip it of its most precious quality: the ability to engender the entire range of human emotions. Since he views music as a utilitarian tool of the state, Plato fails to recognize that the emotive strength and didactic potential of the fine arts, particularly including music, place them on the same level of “good” as reason and justice.

In Books II and III of the *Republic*, Plato articulates his views on music in a conversation about the proper education for the guardian class. Plato’s purpose in teaching the guardian class about the fine arts is to mold character, first by making the people “as god-fearing and god-like as human beings can be” (*Rep.* 383c),

and second by teaching them “the love of the fine and the beautiful” (*Rep.* 403c). The power of excellent art to shape character remains an oft-cited reason for teaching people to appreciate the arts. However, Plato’s vision of the fine and beautiful severely limits the range of emotions available to music. For instance, Plato specifically excludes music that is sad or overly relaxing (*Rep.* 398d-399a), and he forbids all music that does not express “the violent or voluntary tones of voice of those who are moderate and courageous” (*Rep.* 399b). In other words, music is useful when it serves the purposes of the state by encouraging people to be resolute in the face of difficulty and considerate in relationships with other people.

If one examines Plato’s arguments about the arts, it becomes apparent that Plato assigns music to the lowest class of “good” things—those which society appreciates for their desirable results, rather than for any natural value (*Rep.* 357c). This causes Plato to restrict polyharmonic instruments for the sake of civic unity and to discourage subtlety and variation in rhythm in order to promote an orderly and composed life (*Rep.* 399c-399e). However, an evaluation based primarily on social benefits contrasts sharply with the modern perception of music as something to enjoy for the pleasure it brings, which would place it in the middle category of “good” things—those that people delight in for their own sake rather than for any collectively beneficial consequence. In the end, neither a modern view nor Plato’s argument can sufficiently encompass the full value of music.

Plato argues that justice and reason belong to the highest class of “good” things—those that society values based on both advantageous effects and intrinsic merit (*Rep.* 357c-357d). Yet Plato has already admitted that it is easier to shape the soul with *mousikē*, or the fine arts, than it is to shape the body with exercise, so it is clear that the arts do have a special potential to train the soul (*Rep.* 377c). Still, Plato’s assumption that music should not be esteemed for the joy it produces is evidence of his disregard for its emotional influence. Music can both instruct and delight, just as reason can. While some music can appeal to base passions, Plato’s attempt to curb its emotive strength demonstrates his disregard for the role that the non-rational element can play in leading a person towards the Good.

A final part of Plato’s claim takes place in Book X of the *Republic*. Plato is dealing with practitioners of the arts—specifically craftsman and poets; however, his views are certainly applicable to musicians as well. To expand on one of his examples, in the same way that a god creates the form of the bed, a carpenter makes a physical representation of a bed, and a painter makes an image of a bed. Hence, there exists the form of music created by a god, a composer’s representation of music, and the performer’s aural image of music. Plato refers to those who

interpret the physical realm, such as artisans, painters and performers, as “imitators” of truth (*Rep.* 597e). These imitators, he argues, do not have the capability to understand or teach moral truths because the act of imitation is a part of the non-rational element in the soul (*Rep.* 603a). Thus, in designing the education of the guardian class, Plato uses music to develop the logical nature of man, while ignoring the so-called “imitative” qualities.

Though Plato discusses music within the context of a secular city-state, St. Augustine is concerned with the place of music both in the private life of a Christian and within the church. Platonic thought heavily influenced Augustine, and he accepts many of the Greek philosopher’s principles, including the moral and ethical nature of music and its ability to shape character. However, Augustine is more tolerant toward the participation of the spirit than Plato. In fact, Augustine’s struggle to reconcile his own experience with his philosophical views proves the most intriguing aspect of his writings on music. His treatise, *De musica*, can be viewed both as an extended philosophical justification for the use of music in the church and as a medium in which he explores his personal attraction to the subject (Brennan 268). If one examines his writings, it seems as though Augustine is never fully convinced by his own reasoning; he remains torn between a love for music and a concern for its emotional power. Nevertheless, he eventually formulates a belief that is relatively close to Plato’s vision, and thus falls prey to the same mistake: over-emphasizing the scientific aspect of music at the expense of its artistic counterpart. Yet Augustine’s evident appreciation of this artistic counterpart continually moderates his philosophical views and challenges his differentiation of music as an art and as a science.

Due to the autobiographical nature of *Confessions*, more is known about Augustine’s personal contact with music than is known about Plato’s. It is abundantly clear that Augustine was both familiar with the music of his day and enjoyed it. Music frames two key events in Augustine’s life, the first being his conversion at a country house near Milan. While alone in the garden, he hears the mysterious voice of a young child singing the refrain, “Take it and read, take it and read,” which prompts Augustine to pick up a copy of the Scripture and come to a final decision about Christianity (*Conf.* 8.12). The second occasion is the death of Augustine’s mother, Monica, at Ostia when he is on his way back to Africa. Instead of weeping over her death, the entire household sings a psalm, led by Evodius (*Conf.* 9.12). While this comforts Augustine at the time, it is not until later that his emotions come to the forefront, and he is moved to tears by the remembrance of another hymn (*Conf.* 9.12). A further testimony to music’s power occurs earlier in the narrative when he mentions his profound response to the hymns sung in Ambrose’s church,

going so far as to equate his musical experience with a revelation of truth. “The music surged in my ears, truth seeped into my heart, and feelings of devotion overflowed” (*Conf.* 9.6). Hence, music inspires Augustine to action at the time of his conversion and provides an outlet for grief over the death of his mother.

Although the emotional impact of music is unmistakable in Augustine’s life, his philosophy of music has other influences, the strongest being Neo-Platonism. Neo-Platonic concepts can be seen in Augustine’s nearly exclusive focus on music as a field of knowledge rather than as a vocation. He clearly believes his audience to be the educated citizen for whom music is a leisure activity. Professional musicians, who perform to please their audiences and reap a monetary reward, may not appreciate his philosophy. However, he has very little to say about music as a profession, and instead urges people to examine music rather than attempt to play with technical virtuosity (Brennan 272). Augustine believes that if professional musicians understood the science of music they would withdraw from the stage, in much the same way Augustine himself withdrew from the public teaching of rhetoric (Brennan 273). Certainly this attitude draws on Plato’s dismissal of poets, painters, musicians and other practitioners of the arts as “imitators” who are three steps removed from the Truth (*Rep.* 597e). As a result, Augustine’s absorption in the rational side of music prompts his subsequent neglect of the artistic component.

To this point, Augustine’s view of music has been discussed as though the instrumental music and accompanying lyrics are one entity. However, a crucial distinction must be made as the church fathers generally viewed instrumental compositions with suspicion. To take an extreme example, St. John Chrysostom called instrumental music a part of “the Devil’s great heap of garbage” in the late fourth century (Faulkner 56). In Book X of *Confessions*, Augustine claims that he is moved not by the melody itself but by the meaning of the words sung (*Conf.* 10.33), and he accuses himself of “a grievous sin” when he finds “the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys” (*Conf.* 10.33). It is apparent, then, that Augustine believes the meaning of lyrics to be more significant than the emotions they produce. At the same time, Augustine recognizes that words have more emotional power and inspire more fervent worship when they are accompanied by music than when they are spoken alone (*Conf.* 10.33). Further, when one is unable to speak to God, Augustine instructs people to sing wordlessly, but with jubilation, “that the heart may rejoice without words” (“Expositions on the Book of Psalms” qtd. in Perl 499). Thus, Augustine finds himself “waver[ing] between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which [...] can accrue from singing” (*Conf.* 10.33). He knows that music has the potential to draw a person closer to God, yet his theology demands that the soul transcend sensual pleasure and reach rational

deliberation before one can truly contemplate the divine.

The primary deficiency in Plato's philosophy is his failure to appreciate *mousikē* not only as a method of teaching virtue, but also as an outlet for expression. Augustine himself senses this expressive facet and, as a result, fears it may distract from rational contemplation of God. As Plato argues that too much emotion in music causes man's spirits to dissolve (*Rep.* 411b), Augustine similarly declares: "I ought not to allow my mind to be paralysed [sic] by the gratification of the senses" (*Conf.* 10.33). While balance between *logos* and *pathos* is crucial for the proper function of music, the exaltation of the rational component, which Plato and St. Augustine advocate, is no better than repression of the expressive element they campaign for. To phrase the problem in musical terms, the cerebral sterility that characterizes much of the twentieth century's Serialist movement is no more spiritually satisfying than are the lush and dramatic melodies of the Late Romantic period. In essence, neither style communicates the fullness of music's potential as music is both an intellectual and emotional endeavor. While the logical understanding of religious lyrics is important for true reflection on God, as Augustine points out, the irrational "lovely chants" also prompt a vital, spiritual response (*Conf.* 10.33).

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