

FROM SOUND TO SENSE: ΜΟΥΣΙΚΗ AS ASCENT IN PLATO

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I. Introduction: μουσική and Philosophy?

According to a common interpretation, Plato's attitude to art is one of hostility and rejection. Alexander Nehamas claims, for example, that "Plato did not include art among the proper expressions of culture."² Art in general and especially poetry could not possibly be a product or a source of knowledge and would inevitably create moral and political chaos; as *mimesis* it would be illusory, useless, and even harmful. Plato's criticism, as virulent as it is, notably in the *Republic*, does not aim at the abolition but, rather, at the reform of art. Some scholars, like Julia Annas, nevertheless think that his programme of reform is incompatible with his virulent criticism, and maintain that it completely alters art in making it dependent on moral and pedagogical ends.³ It is true that Plato's art reform involves a revaluation and, in part, a redefinition of art, but it also implies a certain *continuity* with Greek traditional culture that needs to be emphasized.

Greek traditional education rests on gymnastics and μουσική (remarks on translation of this term below). It is a remarkable fact that Socrates in the *Republic* introduces the notion of μουσική⁴ without prior justification, presupposing its importance as self-evident.⁵ Gymnastics

¹ I would like to thank the audience for many helpful comments at the 2022 ISNS conference in Athens, which Harold Tarrant was unfortunately unable to attend. If he had, he would surely have had incisive suggestions to make on my paper. I offer him this revised and enlarged version of it as a modest token of our friendship, and as an acknowledgment of his many contributions to the study of literature in Plato and the Platonic tradition.

² Nehamas (2007, 73).

³ According to Annas (1981, 343) this incompatibility is the reflection of a contradiction within Plato himself: Plato the reformer and moralist destroys art, Plato the artist or writer knows artistic creation from the inside.

⁴ Followed by that of γυμναστική, *Rep.* III 403c–405c.

⁵ Cf. Jaeger (1944, 288).

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provides the cultivation of the body, μουσική that of the mind, which according to Plato must take precedence. The combination of μουσική and gymnastics is meant to produce a state of harmony (σύμφωνα), stretching and nurturing the rational part (λογιστικόν) with fine words and learning (λόγοις τε καλοῖς καὶ μαθήμασιν), and relaxing the spirited part (θυμοειδής) “through soothing stories, and making it gentle by means of harmony and rhythm (ἁρμονίᾳ τε καὶ ῥυθμῶ)” (*Rep.* IV 441e8–442a2).⁶ On the contrary, a lack of experience in μουσική and philosophy prevents the individual’s moral and intellectual development (III 411c–d). Both the traditional and Platonic approaches to art are opposed to the modern outlook, which tends to regard aesthetic pleasure as autonomous and morally neutral. Plato, moreover, preserves the notion of mimetic art. His criticism of *mimesis* can easily make us forget his defence of a good *mimesis*, when done in service of virtue.⁷ As part of μουσική, music is also conceived as mimetic. In short, Plato recognizes μουσική as the foundation of all education, including philosophical. The middle-Platonist treatise by (Ps.-) Plutarch, *On Music*, for example, defends Plato’s assessment of the pedagogical power of μουσική. After praising Plato’s musical expertise,⁸ the anonymous author asserts that the ancient Greeks, including Plato, “thought that the minds of the young should be moulded and modulated (πλάττειν τε καὶ ῥυθμίζειν) by music to a pattern of graceful bearing, since music is helpful (χρησίμης) for every occasion and all serious activity” (26, 1140b–c, trans. Einarson, de Lacy, ed. Ziegler).

What is then, according to Plato, the actual nature of the links uniting μουσική and philosophy? More specifically, how does sound assume meaning, how does “musical” form contain a philosophical content? This is a vast question to which I offer a few preliminary elements of

⁶ For Plato’s Greek text I follow Burnet (1900–1907); all the translations of Plato’s text are taken from Cooper (1997), in few cases slightly modified as indicated.

⁷ As Socrates advances: “We ourselves should employ a more austere and less pleasure-giving poet and storyteller (τῷ αὐστηροτέρῳ καὶ ἀηδεστέρῳ ποιητῇ [...] καὶ μυθολόγῳ), one who would imitate the speech of a decent person (τὴν τοῦ ἐπαικοῦς λέξιν μιμοῖτο).” (*Rep.* III 398a8–b2). Cf. 398b5–d3.

⁸ (Ps.-) Plutarch, *On Music*, 17, 1136f: “For Plato gave much attention to the art of music (πάννυ γὰρ προσέσχε τῇ μουσικῇ ἐπιστήμῃ), as being the hearer of Draco the Athenian and Metellus the Agrigentine; but considering, as we have intimated before, that there was much more majesty in the Dorian mood, it was that he preferred” (trans. Einarson, de Lacy, ed. Ziegler).

an answer, building on prior scholarship. I examine mainly three passages: *Republic* III 401a-403d, *Laws* II 664e-665a and *Philebus* 17a-c, occasionally referring to the treatise *On Music* by Aristides Quintilianus (3rd-4th c.). In *Republic* III Socrates sketches the principles of a musical aesthetics,⁹ while the *Laws* and the *Philebus* offer complementary considerations. These passages underline the pedagogical and epistemological power of μουσική, propose a reform of education seeking to avoid the dangers of contemporary “music,” in correcting certain erroneous or unduly narrow views related to it, and regarding its epistemological and ontological foundations.

The translation of the term μουσική in Plato often presents some difficulty. Let us recall that the traditional meaning of the term is not *music*, but more largely all that pertains to the Muses (Μοῦσαι), what is devoted or dear to them. Μουσική includes chant, dance, and poetry, and more broadly, the union of these forms of artistic expression. Over time this global meaning gradually assumes a narrower scope. For Aristotle already,¹⁰ and his school, μουσική designates only music in the modern sense of the term.¹¹ Plato, however, appropriates traditional μουσική and enlarges it. He takes up and corrects the traditional conception of μουσική as *techne*, elevating it to the status of a non-empirical science.

There are many references in the Platonic corpus to μουσική and its cognates. There are no fewer than 210 occurrences of μουσικ-. Among the most famous, and most enigmatic passages is that in *Phaedo* (61a1) where Socrates claims philosophy to be the supreme (μεγίστη) μουσική and that in the *Phaedrus* (248d3-4) where he describes the philosopher as μουσικός (as well as φιλόκαλος and ἐρωτικός). The many references to μουσική can be divided in roughly three types: those pertaining to (i) moral education, (ii) mathematical science and (iii) the links between the two domains, namely the relation between the constitution of the human soul and that of the universe.¹² It must be pointed out, however, that the passages on moral education often include an intellectual dimension. In what follows I show that moral education, resulting from μουσική, rests according to Plato on a natural and rational basis.

⁹ Cf. Halliwell (2011, 207).

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Pol.* 8, 3-7.

¹¹ Zamminer (1999, 161-162).

¹² Barker (1984, 124). For a far-ranging study of the relationship between music and the soul in Plato, see Barker (2022).

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II. Importance and Usefulness of μουσική

The passage from *Republic* III (401a–403d) is often neglected by the commentators. This partial omission is not unrelated to the common interpretation that makes Plato an enemy of μουσική, or art. Stephen Halliwell fittingly remarks that it is one of the passages from the dialogues of Plato in which he “pays a kind of compliment to the ‘musical’ values of his culture.”¹³

A few words on the immediate context first: in the preceding section Socrates specifies that μουσική includes the words (λόγος), sung or spoken, as well as the rhythm and mode, the Dorian or Phrygian (397a–401b).¹⁴ Singing (μέλος) is made up of three elements: word, harmony and rhythm (λόγου τε καὶ ἁρμονίας καὶ ῥυθμοῦ, 398d1–2). The Dorian mode, contrary to the Phrygian, contributes to self-mastery, moderation and, more generally, a courageous and ordered “lifestyle’s rhythm” (βίου ῥυθμοῦς, 399e10). Socrates explicitly refers to the musician-theoretician Damon as his authority,¹⁵ as does Aristides Quintilianus much later. Only a few rare fragments of Damon have survived, which makes it difficult to understand fully the context and debates which the Platonic theory often presupposes.

Socrates defends a twofold thesis. First, μουσική has mimetic power. The good μίμησις, referred to earlier, imitates the virtuous human by means of a story (μῦθος) recounted or sung in a simple and austere manner (398a–b), conducive to self-mastery (410a–412b). In this way Socrates links, in mimetic terms, a good rhythm to a good character.¹⁶ Secondly, he defends the primacy of words (λόγοι) over music, thus opposing “modern music,” in which the relation is inverted: “the mode

¹³ Halliwell (2012, 17). Likewise, Burnyeat (1999, 217–222).

¹⁴ Cf. for instance *Rep.* II 376e.

¹⁵ Cf. *Rep.* III 400b1–4: “(Soc.) Then we’ll consult with (βουλευσόμεθα) Damon as to which metrical feet (βάσεις) are suited to slavishness, insolence, madness, and the other vices and which rhythms (ῥυθμούς) are suited to their opposites.”

¹⁶ *Rep.* III 400d11–e3: “(Soc.) Then fine words, harmony, grace, and rhythm follow *simplicity* of character—and I do not mean this in the sense in which we use simplicity (εὐηθεία), as a euphemism for *simple-mindedness*—but I mean the sort of fine and good character that has developed in accordance with an intelligent plan (τὴν ὡς ἀληθῶς εὖ τε καὶ καλῶς τὸ ἦθος κατεσκευασμένην διάνοιαν).” Likewise in *Laws* II 655d5 the Athenian Stranger says, “Performances given by choruses are representations of character (μιμήματα τρόπων ἐστὶ τὰ περὶ τὰς χορείας).”

and rhythm must fit the words (ἀκολουθεῖν δεῖ τῷ λόγῳ)” (398d8–9).¹⁷ The primacy of words, that is narrative, is at the same time the primacy of the rational, insofar as words, and therefore concepts, contribute to the formation of rationality. It is not easy, however, in our two first passages, to determine the respective role of words in comparison to music as pure sound. In the passage Socrates makes the following claim:

Aren’t these the reasons, Glaucon, that education in music and poetry (ἐν μουσικῇ τροφῇ) is most important (κυριωτάτη)? First, because rhythm and harmony (ῥυθμός καὶ ἁρμονία) permeate the inner part of the soul (καταδύεται εἰς τὸ ἐντὸς τῆς ψυχῆς) more than anything else (μάλιστα), affecting it most strongly and bringing it grace (εὐσχημοσύνην), so that if someone is properly educated in music and poetry, it makes him graceful (ποιεῖ εὐσχήμονα), but if not, then the opposite (εἰ δὲ μή, τοῦναντίον, *Rep.* III 401d5–e1).

This passage recognizes the importance of μουσική in human life, following Greek traditional education. Protagoras for instance, in the eponymous dialogue, thinks μουσική makes the soul gentle, decent and harmonious, in speech and movement (εἰς τὸ λέγειν τε καὶ πράττειν, *Prot.* 326a6–b4). In the *Republic* passage, some translate μουσική by “music and poetry” (Grube-Reeves 1997) or “musical and poetic education” (Griffith 2000), some as “music” only (Shorey 1930), and others indicate the ambiguity by “la musique <et la poésie>” (Leroux 2002). Up to that point in the discussion, Socrates’ discussion of the guardians’ education explicitly includes words (λόγος), sung or spoken, as well as rhythm and mode.¹⁸ However, as Malcom Schofield points out, in 401a–403d the emphasis is put on music rather than words.¹⁹ Indeed, Socrates claims that the first form of perception of the beautiful

¹⁷ Two other relevant passages are worth quoting: III 399e11–400a2: “(Soc.) Rather, we should try to discover what are the rhythms of someone who leads an ordered and courageous life and then adapt the meter and the tune (τὸν πόδα [...] καὶ τὸ μέλος) to his words, not his words to them (λόγῳ ἀναγκάζειν ἔπεσθαι)”; III 400d1–4: “(Soc.) Further, if, as we said just now, rhythm and mode must conform to the words (ῥυθμός γε καὶ ἁρμονία λόγῳ), and not vice versa, then good rhythm follows fine words (τῇ καλῇ λέξει ἔπεται), and is similar to them, while bad rhythm follows the opposite kind of words, and the same for harmony and disharmony.”

¹⁸ Cf. for instance *Rep.* II 376e and III, 398b.

¹⁹ Schofield (2011, 231).

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and the good in the individual occurs “while he’s still young and unable to grasp the reason” (πρὶν λόγον δυνατός εἶναι λαβεῖν, 402a2). Words, although inseparable from music, are not consciously understood; here non-conscious receptivity to sound predominates over conscious understanding. In other words, the passage, and its context, maintains the links uniting the extended with the specialised meaning of μουσική, while underscoring the sound or prelinguistic dimension. This apparently means that sound initially takes the place of word, thus achieving the first step towards rationality. If this is so, “musical” expression, when in conformity with the stated principle of simplicity and order, *pre-shapes* thinking.²⁰ It would therefore be a mistake to believe that in Plato’s eyes musical scales are devoid of sense or reason. The importance of μουσική, especially in the sense of *music*, for Plato, lies first in the power to stimulate sensory perception and cognitive processes, albeit in a subliminal manner. From the first stages of life then, sense is present, although latent and inarticulate.²¹ Education through art thus prepares and contributes to the cultivation of science and philosophy.

III. Πυθμός Defined, Nature and Education

The passage in the *Laws* is part of a discussion on choral art (χορεία). Choral art is comprised of dance (ὄρχησις) and song (ὥδή), which includes, as we have seen, instrumental music and storytelling. Choral art is thus the embodiment of the unity of word, music, and bodily movements. It constitutes for Plato the paradigm of education, as it combines gymnastics and μουσική, both of which contributing to the cultivation of the mind.²²

In our passage (*Laws* II 664e–665a), the Athenian Stranger claims that the overabundant and disorderly energy of children can be channeled and ordered by dance and song:

If we remember, we said at the beginning of our discussion that all young things, being fiery and mettlesome by nature (φύσις),

²⁰ Brancacci (2008, 91–93).

²¹ See for example Année (2018) for an original study of the *Meno* on the subliminal auditory meanings, located below dialectic’s logico-semantic dimension.

²² See *Laws* II 654b6–7: “[T]he well-educated man will be able both to sing and dance well (Ὁ καλῶς ἄρα πεπαιδευμένος ἄδειν τε καὶ ὀρχεῖσθαι δυνατός ἂν εἴη καλῶς).” Cf. II 672e–673c.

are unable (οὐχ οἷα) to keep their bodies or their tongues still—they are always making uncoordinated noises and jumping about. No other animal, we said, ever develops a sense of order (τάξεως δ' αἴσθησιν) in either respect; man alone has a natural ability to do this (ἡ δὲ ἀνθρώπου φύσις ἔχει μόνη τοῦτο). Order in movement is called *rhythm* (τῇ δὲ τῆς κινήσεως τάξει ῥυθμός ὄνομα εἶη), and order in the vocal sounds—the combination of high and low notes (τοῦ τε ὀξέος ἅμα καὶ βαρέος)—is called *harmony* (ἁρμονία); and the union of the two is called *a performance by a chorus* (χορεία). We said that the gods took pity on us and gave us Apollo and the Muses as companions and leaders of our choruses; and if we can cast our minds back, we said that their third gift to us was Dionysus (*Laws* II 664e3–665a5).²³

The Athenian Stranger thus defines rhythm (ῥυθμός) as “order in movement.” While rhythm resides in a certain sequence of movements or measured sounds in repeated sequences, slow and quick, harmony (ἁρμονία) is a series of notes of varying pitch, alternating between high and low.²⁴ Human beings have this peculiarity in comparison to animals that they can acquire a sense of order.

The definition of ῥυθμός here given is apparently the first definition of that term in ancient Greek thought. The notion of rhythm has been hotly debated, especially since the publication of Émile Benveniste’s seminal article (1951; 1966). I cannot analyze this learned and incisive study in any detail; rather I concentrate on a few of its main theses very briefly, raising a few objections. According to Benveniste, the Platonic definition of ῥυθμός constitutes a break with the traditional meaning, in inventing the aesthetic or musical meaning that we have used ever since (1966, 335). The archaic, pre-Platonic meaning would be generic, non-musical, and would mean the “shape” or “configuration” of an “improvised, momentary, modifiable” structure, following in this its etymological meaning of “flowing” (ῥέω; 1966, 333). According to Benveniste, moreover, the notion of rhythm is emphatically not innate, but acquired; it is not a primitive discovery made by the observation of natural phenomena. He writes: “a long reflection on the structure of things, and later a theory of measure applied to dance figures and

²³ Cf. *Laws* II 653e.

²⁴ Cf. *Rep.* III 399a–c.

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inflection of singing was needed before one was able to recognize and name the principle of rhythmic movement.”²⁵ In other words, the phenomenon of rhythm would not be a given; verbal expression would be the cause of perception.

Let us first note that the standard dictionaries, the Liddell-Scott-Jones (1940) and the Bailly (1950), which Benveniste quotes, do not consider the Platonic definition as an innovation with respect to a prior, more generic meaning. These dictionaries indicate, without chronological distinction, the following meanings: “form,” “shape” as well as “arrangement,” “proportion,” “order.”²⁶ It is true that the term *ῥυθμός* is not employed in the Platonic corpus to designate the ordering of the cosmos, and is employed in anthropological contexts only, those of dance, poetry, and music. The term *ἁρμονία*, however, which accompanies *ῥυθμός* in connection with *μουσική*, is used by Plato in cosmological contexts. In other words, beyond lexicographic considerations, the concept of rhythm involves cosmological implications, through its close association with harmony. *ἁρμονία* in its general meaning refers to “order configurations,” including mathematical. Cosmic harmony, that is mathematical structures, is also expressed by the term *περίοδος*, designating above all circular motion.²⁷

The *Laws* passage quoted above sketches a contrast between the naturally uncoordinated movements in children and an acquired sense of order in movement. The *Timaeus* (47d7–e2) explains this twofold truth in mythic form: the Muses have given rhythm (*ῥυθμός*) to human

²⁵ Orig. French: “Il a fallu une longue réflexion sur la structure des choses, puis une théorie de la mesure appliquée aux figures de la danse et aux inflexions du chant pour reconnaître et dénommer le principe du mouvement cadencé.” (1966, 335).

²⁶ Liddell-Scott (1940): *ῥυθμός* I. 1. measured motion, time, whether in sound and motion, 2. Special phrases: *ἐν ῥυθμῷ* = in time, of dancing, marching, etc. II. Measure, proportion or symmetry or parts, at rest as well as in motion. III. Generally proportion, arrangement, order. IV. State or condition of anything, temper, disposition. V. form, shape of a thing. VI. manner, fashion of a thing. Bailly (1950): “I. Mouvement réglé et mesuré: 1. Mesure, cadence, rythme, Platon, *Leg.* 665a, 2. Par analogie, proportions régulières, ordonnance symétrique, juste mesure. II. Par extension manière d’être, 1. Forme d’une chose (d’un caractère d’écriture), 2. Sorte, genre, espèce.”

²⁷ Sauvanet (2008, 63) notes: “C’est d’ailleurs sans doute la raison pour laquelle, s’il y a bien harmonie des sphères, il n’y a pas à proprement parler rythme de l’univers: le rythme, musical ou ‘formel,’ reste toujours lié à la corporéité, à la matérialité, à la sensibilité.” Cf. Sauvanet (1999, 62–93).

beings to assist them: “For with most of us our condition is such that we have lost all sense of measure (τὴν ἄμετρον ἐν ἡμῖν), and are lacking in grace (χαρίτων ἐπιδεῖξις γιγνομένην)”²⁸; this divine gift allows humans to adjust to the cosmic order by contemplating and imitating it. In other words, human life begins with disorderly movements, but thanks to the sense of order that human nature alone can acquire (ἡ δὲ ἀνθρώπου φύσις ἔχει μόνη τοῦτο), humans develop what one may call, in non-mythic terms, a natural potentiality for rhythm, namely through education. This sense of rhythm which we have received²⁹ can only be actualized through the experience of beautiful and ordered things³⁰, or else the individual will suffer from ἀπειροκαλία, a lack of experience in things beautiful, as order and beauty are inseparable.³¹

As for Benveniste’s thesis that Plato is the inventor of the musical meaning of rhythm, it is important to emphasize that in Greek archaic culture all knowledge depends on oral communication, the artistic expression of which is poetic language, through the unity of metric

²⁸ A little earlier in the *Laws* (II 653e4–654a1), we find the same reference to the gift of the gods, without specifying however the lack of the sense of order to which this gift is the remedy: “And whereas animals (ἄλλα ζῷα) have no sense of order and disorder in movement (*rhythm* and *harmony*, as we call it), we human beings have been made sensitive to both and can enjoy them. This is the gift of the same gods whom we said were given to us as companions in dancing (ἡμῖν δὲ οὗς εἵπομεν τοὺς θεοὺς συγχορευτὰς δεδόσθαι).”

²⁹ Aristotle is more explicit about the naturalness of the sense of rhythm: “mimesis comes naturally to us (κατὰ φύσιν), as do melody and rhythm” (*P.* 1448b19–20, trans. Halliwell).

³⁰ If trained exclusively in gymnastics, deprived of any “musical” education, the youth is unable to develop their moral and psychic potential. See *Rep.* III 411c9–d5: “(Soc.) But what happens if he does nothing else and never associates with the Muse? Doesn’t whatever love of learning (φιλομαθὲς) he might have had in his soul soon become enfeebled, deaf, and blind, because he never tastes any learning or investigation or partakes of any discussion or any of the rest of music and poetry (οὔτε μαθήματος γευόμενον οὐδενὸς οὔτε ζητήματος, οὔτε λόγου μετίσχον οὔτε τῆς ἄλλης μουσικῆς), to nurture or arouse it?”

³¹ *Rep.* III 403c1–2: “(Soc.) [O]therwise he will be reproached as untrained in music and poetry and lacking in appreciation for what is fine and beautiful (ἀμουσίας καὶ ἀπειροκαλίας).” Shorey translates ἀπειροκαλία by “want of taste,” later in III 405b by “lack of all true sense of values”; he notes: “There is no exact English equivalent for ἀπειροκαλία, the insensitiveness to the καλὸν of the banausic, the nouveau riche and the Philistine.” Cf. III 403c6–7: “(Soc.) Anyway, it has ended where it ought to end, for it ought to end (τελευτᾶν) in the love of the fine and beautiful (τὰ τοῦ καλοῦ ἐρωτικά).”

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syllables and rhythm. Behind the visual experience of written letters, the Greeks (until Plato at least) always heard the intonation of a voice, as shown in the *Philebus* passage to be examined in the next section. The Greeks of the archaic period are unlikely to distinguish, let alone separate, language and music. The distinction between language and music is a modern projection resting on written culture. As Claude Calame (1993, 790) rightly remarks, “one thus finds again the musical notion of rhythm, since vocal rhythmic movements, constituted by a sequence of brief and long syllables, accords with that of the dance steps keeping the rhythm of vocal emissions.”³²

Finally, Plato recognizes the legitimacy of pleasure (ἡδονή) traditionally associated with μουσική. Earlier in the *Laws* (II 658e–659a), the Athenian Stranger recognizes, with the majority, pleasure as criterion of excellence of music, specifying the pleasure of the educated and moral individual, who is the true judge in these matters.³³ Aristides Quintilianus corrects the interpretation of the *Republic* that portrays Plato as hostile to and dismissing of music, as Book X might lead us to believe. Aristides writes:

As a result, some of them have treated melodies that are conducive to pleasure as completely worthless, without distinguishing the people for whom they are suitable and the manner in which they are used (οὐ διακρίναντες οἷς τε ἤρμωτε καὶ ὅπῃ παρελαμβάνετο). (*de mus.* II, 6; trans. Barker 1989; ed. Winnington-Ingram).

This is why Plato rejects music associated with the Phrygian harmony. This is also why he welcomes the chorus of Dionysos (cf. 665b6), besides that of Apollo, as long as the orgiastic and shameless music traditionally associated with Dionysus is tamed and controlled, according to the requirements of good imitation (μίμησιν τὴν εὖ, 812c2), which is conducive to virtue.

³² Orig. French: “On retrouve ainsi la notion musicale de rythme, puisque la cadence phonique constituée par la séquence des syllabes brèves et des syllabes longues s’accorde avec celle du pas de danse rythmant l’émission vocale.” Cf. Dalimier (1992, 154).

³³ *Laws* II 658e6–659a1: “(Athenian Stranger) I am, then, in limited agreement with the man in the street (τοῖς πολλοῖς). Pleasure (ἡδονή) is indeed a proper criterion in the arts (μουσικῇν), but not the pleasure experienced by anybody and everybody. The productions of the Muse are at their finest when they delight men of high calibre (βελτίστους), and adequate education (ικανῶς πεπαιδευμένους) — but particularly if they succeed in pleasing the single individual whose education (παιδεία) and moral standards (ἀρετῇ) reach heights attained by no one else.”

IV. Number and Reality

The third and last main passage, *Philebus* 17c–d, is part of a discussion on the one and the many (έν, πολλά), more specifically the limited and the unlimited (πέρας, ἄπειρον), of which everything that exists is constituted. According to Socrates, the key task is to determine the intervals between the one and the many, by means of number (ἀριθμός). This is an indispensable task, as it allows one “to inquire and learn and teach one another” (σκοπεῖν καὶ μανθάνειν καὶ διδάσκειν ἀλλήλους, 16e3–4). The difference between knowing and not knowing these intervals, or intermediates, corresponds to that between arguing in a dialectical (διαλεκτικῶς) and an eristic manner (ἐριστικῶς). Thus, the epistemological and ontological contexts of μουσική come to the fore.

Socrates illustrates his argument by two closely related examples: voice and music. Voice or vocal sound (φωνή) coming out of the mouth is one for each and every one of us, but it is also unlimited in number. What we need to know to be able to read (τὸ γραμματικόν) is to know how many and what kinds of vocal sounds there are (17b8–9). It is the same for music or the musician (τὸ μουσικόν). As Socrates explains, the basic interval is that between low and high pitch (βαρὺ καὶ ὀξύ, 17c4). Elementary musical knowledge, therefore, consists in distinguishing the interval between the height of sounds. Musical expertise, however, consists in a second, far more complex level of knowledge, that of measuring the number of intervals, defining harmonies. Socrates specifies as follows:

But you will be competent, my friend, once you have learned how many (ὅποσα) intervals (διαστήματα) there are in high pitch and low pitch (ὀξύτητός τε πέρι καὶ βαρύτητος), what character they have (ὅποῖα), by what notes the intervals are defined, and the kinds of combinations (συστήματα) they form—all of which our forebears (οἱ πρόσθεν) have discovered and left to us, their successors, together with the names of these modes of harmony (ἁρμονίας). And again the motions of the body display other and similar characteristics of this kind, which they say should be measured by numbers (ἃ δὴ δι’ ἀριθμῶν μετρηθέντα δεῖν) and called rhythms and meters (ῥυθμοὺς καὶ μέτρα). So, at the same time they have made us realize that every investigation should search for the one and many. For when you have mastered these things in this way, then you have acquired expertise there, and

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when you have grasped the unity of any of the other things there are, you have become wise (σοφός) about that. (*Phil.* 17c12–e1)

As concerns voice, note that Socrates makes no distinction between sounds and letters, or pronounced sound and written combinations.³⁴ This recalls once more the primarily oral culture of the time, where reading was done out loud. This also explains why the notion of μουσική, before and in Plato, includes both poetry and music (and so singing and dancing). It is, moreover, important to underscore the significance of the distinction, often neglected by commentators, which Socrates establishes between basic musical knowledge and musical expertise: the ability to distinguish between low and high pitch hardly makes someone a musical expert (τὴν μουσικὴν εἰδώς, 17c7), but this knowledge is nevertheless fundamental and indispensable.³⁵ This observation made by Socrates brings out the continuity between empirical and intellectual knowledge. I shall get back to it below.

In the *Theaetetus* (206a–b), the analogy between letters and sounds is used also to distinguish between knowledge of the elements (στοιχεῖα) and that of the system of relations governing them. Likewise in the *Sophist* (252e–253b) the Stranger distinguishes the non-specialists from the expert, who can recognize the links between the separate elements. The novelty in the *Philebus* lies in the distinction between differences in pitch as a condition of true musical knowledge. In 26a–b Socrates returns to the measuring character of the musical art, regarding the numeric principle structuring all reality. The limit of fundamental harmonic proportions consists precisely in structuring the unlimited variations of high and low pitch, rapid and slow, in numerical terms.³⁶ In other words, the utility of music coincides with the utility of number. In the *Philebus* passage quoted above Socrates refers, in connection with harmonies or interval systems (συστήματα), to the

³⁴ For a tentative reconstruction of the process (left largely unexplained in the *Timaeus*) which goes on in “intelligent” people’s souls and through which they interpret the music they hear, see Barker (2022, 167–182).

³⁵ Cf. Wersinger (2010, 351).

³⁶ The decisive role of number in the knowledge of reality is again discussed in 55d–56a (cf. “counting, measuring, and weighing,” ἀριθμητικὴν χωρίζη καὶ μετρητικὴν καὶ στατικὴν, 55e1–2), although music here is understood exclusively in its empirical sense, allowing conjectures only.

knowledge of his predecessors (οἱ πρόσθεν, 17d2). Pythagoreans are the likely candidate, perhaps Philolaus specifically.³⁷

The *Timeaus*, in a passage referred to earlier (47c–d), explicates and deepens the thesis about the numerical structure of things, by linking it with the constitution of the soul: cosmic harmony (ἁρμονία) is made of movements akin (συγγενεῖς) to harmony, and to the orbits within our souls (ἐν ἡμῖν τῆς ψυχῆς περιόδοις), a kinship made visible by the experience of μουσική (*Tim.*, 47d2–7).³⁸ Shortly before Timaeus claims:

So once we have come to know fully (ἐκμαθόντες) them and to share in the ability to make correct calculations ((λογισμῶν) according to nature (κατὰ φύσιν), we should stabilize (καταστησαίμεθα) the straying revolutions within ourselves (ἐν ἡμῖν) by imitating (μιμούμενοι) the completely unstraying revolutions of the god. Likewise, the same account goes for sound and hearing—these too are the gods’ gifts, given for the same purpose and intended to achieve the same result. Speech (λόγος) was designed for this very purpose—it plays the greatest part in its achievement. And all such composition as lends itself to making audible musical sound (μουσικῆς φωνῇ) is given in order to express harmony, and so serves this purpose as well (χρήσιμον πρὸς ἀκοὴν ἔνεκα ἁρμονίας). (*Tim.* 47c1–d1, trans. mod.).

³⁷ Philolaus, fr. 1: “Nature in the world-order was fitted together both out of things which are unlimited and out of things which are limiting, both the world-order as a whole and all the things in it (ἀ φύσις δ’ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἁρμόχθη ἐξ ἀπείρων τε καὶ περαινόντων, καὶ ὅλος (ὁ) κόσμος καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ πάντα)” (DL VIII, 85 = DK 44 b1 = 1.9 Huffman ed. and trans.). Or frag. 4: “And indeed all the things that are known have number. For it is not possible that anything whatsoever be understood or known without this (καὶ πάντα γὰρ μὲν τὰ γινωσκόμενα ἀριθμὸν ἔχοντι· οὐ γὰρ [οἶόν] τε οὐδὲν οὔτε νοηθῆμεν οὔτε γνωσθῆμεν ἄνευ τούτω)” (*Stob. Anth.* 1.21, 7b = DK 44 B4 = 1.11 Huffman ed. and trans.).

³⁸ Aristides Quintilianus (III, 10) refers to the *Timaeus*, and indirectly to the Pythagorean tradition, as follows: “Further, the fact that so far as their own nature is concerned, the pitches of the notes extend upwards indefinitely, but are given boundaries by art (τέχνη δὲ περιορίσθαι), draws attention to the power of the divine craftsman (τοῦ δημιουργοῦ) and the nature of matter, of which the latter is indefinite and irrational (ἄπειρον οὖσαν καὶ ἄλογον), while the craftsman is limit and ratio (πέρας ὄντα καὶ λόγον).” (*de mus.* II, 6; trans. Barker 1989, ed. Winnington-Ingram).

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Μουσική therefore contributes to the same purpose as astronomy, namely the understanding of things³⁹ and human self-transformation through imitation. The continuity here is mimetic in nature. This brings us back to the distinction between elementary knowledge and expertise, which implies a continuum often neglected by the commentators in the name of Plato's strict distinction between sense perception and reason. There are two fundamentally distinct forms of knowledge. What can then be the value of sensory, auditory experience, given the undeniable superiority of mathematical knowledge? Only the expert is capable of classifying sounds as well as kinds of (vocal) sounds, and without these classifications there exists only the unlimited.⁴⁰ This is why the true μουσικός goes beyond the sound properties of musical instruments and examines musical harmonies *per se* in mathematical terms. These are, therefore, two fundamentally different ways of understanding music, one scientific, the other unscientific. These two forms of knowledge rest on a common basis, however. The musical expert (τὸ μουσικόν) recognizes an ideal structure *present in* the sensible world of sound. Admittedly, most human beings are limited to decoding sensory stimuli in an elementary manner, while the expert is capable of recognizing, through an elaborate cognitive process, the logical or rational composition in music. Still, this decoding of non-sensible reality is also activated by the stimulus of sound.⁴¹ Thus, these are two forms of *receptivity* with regard to the sensible world. In other words, the psychagogic power of μουσική lies in its twofold nature, more specifically in its intermediary position between the sensible and intelligible. Μουσική is the sensible (auditory) reflection of an ideal law and order (νόμον καὶ τάξιν) marked by the limited (πέρας, 26b9–10).

³⁹ On the intimate kinship between astronomy and harmonics, as well as with dialectic, see *Rep.* VII 530d–532b. This passage begins: “(Soc.) It’s likely that, as the eyes (ὄμματα) fasten on astronomical motions, so the ears (ὄτα) fasten on harmonic ones (ἐναρμόνιον φορὰν), and that the sciences of astronomy and harmonics are closely akin (ἀδελφαί). This is what the Pythagoreans say, Glaucon, and we agree (καὶ ἡμεῖς), don’t we?” (*Rep.* III 530d6–9). Harmonics constitute the highest propaedeutic science, directly leading to dialectic, which alone can grasp eidetic unity. For a discussion on the status of harmonics in the *Republic*, see Wersinger (2008).

⁴⁰ *Phil.* 17b; cf. Barker (1989, 464 n.37).

⁴¹ Pelosi (2010, 110). Order and beauty pertaining to μουσική can be compared to the scales of beauty (τὸ καλόν) in the *Symposium*: the philosopher goes far beyond the initial stage of sensible beauty, but that stage nevertheless constitutes the necessary starting point for the ascent to intelligible beauty.

V. Conclusion: Order and Receptivity

Let us return to the initial question: what unites, according to Plato, μουσική and philosophy, or more specifically, how does sound take on sense, form and content, especially philosophical? The preceding analyses suggest the following conclusions. The sounds of μουσική carries meaning insofar as they constitute an order, that of rhythm and harmony. This created order rests in a sense of order that is specific to human beings. That order pertaining to the domain of τέχνη also exists in the domain of nature (φύσις). Indeed, in *Republic* III already Socrates specifies that the person receiving an adequate musical education will acutely sense the imperfections as well as beauties in “objects that have been crafted or made by nature” (δημιουργηθέντων ἢ φύντων, 401e3). Plato thus links sound and sense in postulating a correspondence, or an analogy, between man-made order and the order in the cosmos, as discussed in *Philebus* (17b) and the *Timaeus* (47c–d).⁴² If ῥυθμός before Plato is already a musical notion, contrary to Benveniste’s view, that sense of “musical” order, which imitates virtue and beauty, finds an ontological pendant in the order and beauty of the cosmos. A mimetic continuity is here to be found, which rests on receptivity towards a reality distinct from the human mind. Plato thus defends the primacy of receptivity, by contrast to the modern (Kantian) primacy of subjectivity. Human thought rests on a fundamental, notably auditory experience; it presupposes hearing, listening. The sensible, notably auditory, constitutes the condition for the ascent to the intelligible. Therein notably resides the underlying continuity linking μουσική to philosophy. Μουσική adequately understood is the condition of philosophy, and inversely, philosophy the supreme actualisation of μουσική. The Platonic tradition, especially Middle and late Platonism, will explore and develop this complex relation, which is why the study of the ancient reception helps to bring out many aspects of Plato’s sometimes allusive style, as some recent publications show.⁴³

⁴² Cf. *Crat.* 387d4–7; Ford (2002, 186–187). See Democritus’ very similar view on this: “Nature and instruction are very similar. For instruction modifies the configuration of a man, and, modifying his configuration, produces a nature (ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ διδαχὴ παραπλήσιόν ἐστι. καὶ γὰρ ἡ διδαχὴ μεταρυσμοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον, μεταρυσμοῦσα δὲ φυσιοποιεῖ)” (DK 68 B 33 = D403 ed. and trans. Laks-Most).

⁴³ See for instance the collection of essays edited by Pelosi and Petrucci (2021), which includes Harold Tarrant’s contribution on Porphyry’s *Commentary on Ptolemy’s Harmonics*.

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