

CHAPTER I

*The Ancient World***I.1 Introduction**

Philosophy of music was coeval with philosophy. Philosophy is distinguished from earlier, mythopoetic, ways of understanding the world in that it is a systematic inquiry and guided by dialectic. Philosophy is a comprehensive discipline in that its goal is to understand the entire world. Music was an important part of the world of the ancients and, consequently, it became a subject of philosophical inquiry as soon as philosophical inquiry began. Music was, and is, a puzzling phenomenon. Even after more than 2,500 years of philosophical reflection, music and human responses to music remain puzzling, but philosophers in the ancient world began the long process of understanding music and human experience of it. Ancient philosophers of music made some false starts, but they also made progress and introduced important questions and advanced answers that remain worthy of consideration after two and a half millennia.

Four major questions dominated ancient philosophy of music. Ancient philosophers asked, in the first instance, about the nature of the art of music. In particular, ancient philosophers debated questions about whether music is a mimetic (representational or imitative) art. The second question concerned the relationship between musical harmony and the rest of the world. Many philosophers in the ancient world believed that an understanding of musical harmony provides a key to the understanding of other aspects of reality, including the human soul and the motions of celestial bodies. The third question concerned the value of music. Some philosophers held that music is valuable primarily as a source of pleasure, while others believed that music could educate the soul and improve or, alternatively, corrupt the characters of listeners, and still others talked about the beauty of music. The final question concerned musical genius. Musical genius does not receive much attention in the surviving philosophy of music literature; nevertheless, we find in the ancient world the

origins of two views of genius that would continue to shape thinking about musical genius until the nineteenth century.

The first important question for ancient philosophy of music asked about the nature of the art of music. Plato and Aristotle were among the earliest defenders of the view that music is an imitative art. It was, they believed, one of a group of imitative arts, the other members of which are poetry, painting, sculpture and dance. Plato and Aristotle seem to have adopted, if they did not originate, the view that music resembles human expressive behaviour and that it is, in this sense, an imitative art. This account of music was widely, though not universally, accepted in the ancient world. Other philosophers agreed that music is an imitative art but denied that it represents anything human, and still others rejected the view that music imitates anything.

Pythagoreans introduced the second question addressed by ancient philosophers of music. This chapter began with the statement that philosophy of music began with philosophy. One could almost say that philosophy began as philosophy of music. Pythagoras was among the earliest Greek philosophers and among the earliest contributors to philosophy of music. According to Iamblichus (c. 245–c. 325), a Neoplatonist from what is now Syria, Pythagoras was the first person to call himself a philosopher.¹ Boethius similarly stated that “Pythagoras was the first person to call the study of wisdom ‘philosophy.’ He held that philosophy was the knowledge and study of whatever may properly be said ‘to be.’”² Pythagoras is a shadowy figure, none of whose writings survive and, consequently, it is difficult to say how much of Pythagoreanism originated with its founder and how much was developed by a school of thought that persisted and evolved through the entire span of antiquity, over a thousand years. We can know that Pythagoreans showed that musical harmony is rationally intelligible and mathematically describable. Musical harmony was among the first features of the world that admitted of rational explanation. From an understanding of harmony, Pythagoreans extrapolated to the nature of the human soul and structure of the cosmos. They believed that the rational understanding of harmony provided the key to understanding both the human soul and the motions of celestial bodies. In one form or another, the view that harmonic ratios reveal something about the soul and the universe was widespread in the ancient world. The view that an

¹ Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, trans. Gillian Clark (Liverpool University Press, 1989), p. 23.

² Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, trans. Calvin M. Bower (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 52.

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understanding of musical harmony casts light on the soul and on the heavens persisted until the end of antiquity and beyond.

Perhaps the most hotly contested question in ancient philosophy of music concerned the value of music. The Pythagoreans introduced the view that music can affect human character. On this view, music is primarily beneficial in that it can improve human character and make listeners more virtuous. This view was adopted by Plato and others who did not adopt all of the Pythagorean philosophical system. (Plato also adopted the possibility that the wrong sort of music can harm people's characters.) Other philosophers believed that music was valuable only as a source of pleasure. Still others believed that music could be valuable in a variety of ways. Aristotle, for example, believed that music can be the source of moral improvement, pleasure and catharsis.

The final question concerns the nature of musical genius. The discussion of this topic is found primarily in two writers: Plato and the first-century AD author of *On the Sublime*, conventionally referred to as Longinus, though that was almost certainly not his name. Neither Plato nor Longinus speaks specifically about the genius of the musician. Plato is primarily concerned with the art of rhapsodes, the performing artists of antiquity who recited the poems of Homer and others, often with a musical accompaniment. Longinus is concerned with the poetical genius. Nevertheless, the views of Plato and Longinus need to be discussed in this context since they became the basis for views on musical genius in subsequent eras. Plato is the source of the belief that artists, including musicians, are divinely inspired. In Longinus we find the origin of the view that great artists have a natural endowment that can be enhanced by the mastery of rules and the emulation of great artists.

One preliminary point must be made before we begin to investigate these questions. The ancient Greek word μουσική has a wider extension than the English word 'music.' Poetry, drama and dance, in addition to the art that we call music, were regarded by the ancients, both Greek and Roman, as musical arts. The ancients regarded as music any imitative art subject to rhythm. Quintilian (c. 35–c. 100 AD), a Roman teacher of oratory, writes that "Music has two modes of expression in the voice and in the body; for both voice and body require to be controlled by appropriate rules."³ This passage indicates that dance and, indeed, all of acting, was regarded as a musical art. Similarly, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), an

³ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, Books I–III, trans. H. E. Butler (London: William Heinemann, 1922), I 10.22.

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important philosopher, theologian and Church Father, wrote that “Music is the science of moving well. But that is because whatever moves and keeps harmoniously the measuring of times and intervals can already be said to move well.”⁴ The motion, times and intervals to which Augustine refers apply to the voice as much as to the body. Indeed, the bulk of his *On Music* is concerned with poetic metres and not music as we understand it.

1.2 Music and the Imitative Arts

The ancients had a category of arts similar to the modern concept of the fine arts. Together with poetry, painting, sculpture and dance, music was widely regarded as one of the image-making or imitative arts. The belief that music is one of the imitative arts was widespread, though not universal, in the ancient world. Today the view that music is an imitative art is controversial, but some ancient philosophers gave plausible arguments for thinking that at least some music is mimetic.

For a long time, historians of aesthetics doubted that the ancients had a conception anything like the modern conception of the fine arts. This doubt is traceable to a classic essay by Paul Oskar Kristeller.⁵ In fact, the ancients did conceive of poetry, painting, sculpture, dance and music (our fine arts) as belonging to the same category.⁶ The ancient conception was somewhat different from ours in that they believed that these arts all involved imitation or mimesis.

That Plato (c. 429–347 BC), an important Greek philosopher, believed that music is an imitative art is apparent from passages in several dialogues. In the *Cratylus*, in a passage concerning the nature of names, he writes that

we shall not, in my opinion, be making names, if we imitate things as we do in music, although musical imitation also is vocal; and secondly we shall make no names by imitating that which music imitates.⁷

Passages in the *Laws* also indicate that Plato believed that music is an imitative art. In one such passage we read that “A choric exhibition is a

⁴ Augustine, *On Music*, trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro, in *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1947), p. 175.

⁵ Paul Oskar Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics (I),” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12 (1951), pp. 496–527.

⁶ James I. Porter, “Is Art Modern? Kristeller’s ‘Modern System of the Arts’ Reconsidered,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 49 (2009), pp. 1–24, and James O. Young, “The Ancient and Modern System of the Arts,” *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 55 (2015), pp. 1–17.

⁷ Plato, *Cratylus*, 423c–d. All references to Plato are from Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, eds (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

mimic presentation of manners, with all variety of action and circumstance, enacted by performers who depend on characterization and impersonation.”⁸ In the same dialogue we find this passage: “it would be universally allowed of music that its productions are all of the nature of representation and portraiture.”⁹ In these passages, Plato may have had mainly drama and poetry in mind, but later still in the *Laws*, Plato writes that “rhythms and music generally are a reproduction expressing the moods of better and worse men.”¹⁰ Plato certainly believed that music, in our modern, more restricted sense of the word, is a mimetic art.

Aristotle (384–322 BC), a student of Plato and the other major philosopher of antiquity, also holds that music is an imitative art. This can be inferred from two passages in the *Poetics*. In the first, Aristotle writes that

epic and tragic poetry, as well as comedy and dithyramb (and most for the pipe or lyre), are all, taken as a whole, kinds of mimesis. But they differ from one another in three respects: namely, in the *media* or the *objects* or the *mode* of mimesis.

In this passage Aristotle lumps together music with other imitative arts and, notably, indicates that even instrumental music is imitative. He classifies the imitative arts according to their media and notes that “the arts of the pipe and lyre (and any other arts with a similar potential, such as that of the pan-pipes) use melody and rhythm alone.”¹¹

Some authors who wrote specifically about music agreed that music is an imitative art. For example, Aristides Quintilianus (fl. late third or early fourth century AD?), a Greek music theorist, states that music is mimetic and adds that “music imitates the ethoses [characters] and passions of the soul.”¹² We should not, however, be surprised that Aristides believed music to be an imitative art, since he acknowledges the influence of Plato on his thought.

Some ancient thinkers denied that music is an imitative art. For example, Philodemus (c. 110–c. 30 BC), a Hellenistic philosopher from what is now Jordan, wrote that

music is not mimetic as some imagine it to be, nor is Diogenes right in claiming that music does have resemblances, though not mimetic ones, to qualities of character, as for instance, magnificence and humbleness,

⁸ Plato, *Laws*, 655d. ⁹ Plato, *Laws*, 668b. ¹⁰ Plato, *Laws*, 798d.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Stephen Halliwell (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 31 (1447a).

¹² Aristides Quintilianus, *On Music*, trans. Thomas J. Mathiesen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 119.

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courage and cowardice, audacity and modesty. Music does not possess these qualities any more than the art of cooking does.¹³

(The Diogenes to whom Philodemus was opposed is Diogenes of Seleucia, fl. second century BC.) Philodemus adopts a quite radical position, apparently denying that music can properly be characterised using any terms that apply to human character. This suggests that he believed that music is simply a contentless pattern of sound.

Having seen that music was often regarded in the ancient world as an imitative art, we need to ask what and how music imitates. Some ancient philosophers of music believed that music is composed in such a way that it resembles human behaviour that is expressive of emotions. This expressive behaviour can be either vocal or non-vocal. This is the origin of the resemblance theory of musical expressiveness, a theory that is still widely adopted. Other ancient philosophers seem to believe that music arouses emotion and, in this way, imitates it.

Plato is an example of a philosopher who believes that music imitates human expressive behaviour by resembling expressive behaviour. Plato never systematically writes about music, and his views on the subject must be gleaned from his brief discussions of music in the context of discussions of education and other matters. Nevertheless, he seems to have believed that music is an imitative art because it resembles expressive behaviour. This view is expressed in both the *Republic* and in the *Laws*. In the *Republic*, Plato says that “music and rhythm must follow the speech.”¹⁴ That is, music ought to be suited to the expressive character of the words being set. A little later, Plato gives an example of how music ought to be set to words: the Dorian mode “would fittingly imitate the utterances and the accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare or in any enforced business.”¹⁵ It is, however, unclear how the Dorian mode is suited to the representation of such utterances. (A musical mode is a scale. Modern music typically uses only two modes: the major and minor. Ancient and medieval music, in contrast, used several modes.) Rhythm and melody are also used, on Plato’s view, to imitate speech and deportment. He states that the rhythm of music “must observe what are the rhythms of a life that is orderly and brave, and after observing them require the foot and air to conform to that kind of man’s speech and not the speech to the foot and the tune.”¹⁶

¹³ Philodemus, *De Musica*, in Ruth Katz and Carl Dahlhaus (eds), *Contemplating Music: Source Readings in the Aesthetics of Music*, vol. 1 (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1986), pp. 286–87.

¹⁴ Plato, *Republic*, 398c. ¹⁵ Plato, *Republic*, 399a. ¹⁶ Plato, *Republic*, 400a.

In the *Laws*, Plato states that the “coward and the brave man have their characteristic postures and strains” when “struggling with distress” and music imitates these.¹⁷ When Plato speaks of a characteristic posture, he apparently refers to the ways in which people move, since it is hard to see how a static posture could be represented in music. In speaking of strains, he is speaking of tones of voice that indicate emotions. For example, a fearful person has a high-pitched tone of voice, while a brave person will express himself in a firm tone of voice.

The view that music is an imitative art persisted into the period of the Roman Empire. Quintilian (c. 35–c. 100 AD), a Roman rhetorician, is another ancient thinker who believes that music imitates the human voice as it expresses emotion. In his *Institutio Oratoria*, Quintilian observes that an eloquent orator varies his tone of voice according to what is being expressed and this tone of voice is “is in sympathy with the emotions of which it is the mouthpiece.”¹⁸ In thus expressing themselves, orators are able to arouse emotions in listeners. Most importantly for present purposes, Quintilian adds that “different emotions are roused even by the various musical instruments.”¹⁹ This indicates that he believed that music, including instrumental music, like oratory, imitates the expressiveness of the human voice. Quintilian also believed that music arouses emotions.

Aristotle’s account of musical imitation seems to have differed from Plato’s. Aristotle wrote that

musical times and tunes provide us with images of states of character – images of anger, and of calm; images of fortitude and temperance, and of all the forms of their opposites; images of other states – which come closer to their actual nature than anything else can do.²⁰

For present purposes, the important feature of this passage is that Aristotle claims that music can represent character itself, rather than tones of voice and bodily behaviour that are expressive of character traits and emotions. In this respect, music differs from an art such as painting and other visual arts. Aristotle states that “the shapes and colours presented by visual art are not *representations* of states of character: they are merely *indications* . . . With musical compositions, however, the case is different. They are, in their very nature, representations of states of character.”²¹ Here we see the contrast with Plato’s position. Plato believes that music imitates behaviours

¹⁷ Plato, *Laws*, 655a. ¹⁸ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, p. 171 (1 10.25).

¹⁹ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, p. 171 (1 10.25). ²⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, pp. 343–44 (1340a).

²¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 340 (1340a).

expressive of a character, while Aristotle states that music represents a character itself.

One might reasonably wonder how music is able to represent a character. Long ago, Thomas Twining provided an influential interpretation of Aristotle.²² According to Twining, Aristotle holds that music imitates characters by arousing emotions. On this view, people's characters are constituted in large part by the emotions they feel. A cowardly person, for example, frequently feels fear, while a person with a cheerful disposition feels happy. If this is right, then characters can be imitated when emotions are imitated. On Twining's reading of Aristotle, music arouses emotions that are like the emotions people feel in the course of their ordinary lives and, in this way, music imitates emotion.

Longinus seems to have doubted that instrumental music is an imitative art. He certainly believed that music can arouse emotion, writing that the "flute, for instance, induces certain emotions in those who hear it. It seems to carry them away and fill them with divine frenzy." Similarly, the sound of a harp can "exercise . . . a marvelous spell." Nevertheless, the sounds produced by a harp are "meaningless" and "only a bastard counterfeit of persuasion, not, as I said above, a genuine activity of human nature."²³ Instrumental music, he seems to believe, is primarily valued for the emotions and pleasure that it arouses.

The view that music is an imitative art is crucial to one account of how music has value. As we shall see in the next section, music's capacity to represent the expression of emotion and character is used as a premise in one version of the ethos theory, the ancient hypothesis that music can affect listeners' characters.

1.3 Music, the Cosmos and the Soul

1.3.1 *The Music of the Spheres*

Western philosophy of music may have begun in the east. According to some sources, Pythagoras (c. 570–c. 495 BC), an early Greek philosopher, is reported to have learned about music and mathematics while in

²² Thomas Twining, *Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry, Translated with Notes on the Translation, and on the Original; and Two Dissertations, On Poetical, and Musical, Imitation* (London: Luke Howards & Sons, 1812), vol. 1, p. 72.

²³ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, trans. H. L. Havell, revised Donald Russell in *Aristotle xx111* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 284–85.

Babylon.²⁴ Generally, however, Pythagoras is credited with an astounding discovery. In order to appreciate the discovery, consider any musical note, for example, middle C. The pitch of a note an octave above middle C and the pitch of middle C stand in a 2:1 ratio. Middle C and the note a fifth higher stand in a 3:2 ratio. The note a fourth above middle C stands in a 4:3 to middle C. The importance of this discovery can scarcely be overestimated. For perhaps the first time, part of the world had been found to be mathematically describable, and it could be described by simple mathematical ratios. The world, it seemed, could be understood by the use of mathematics and reason. Perhaps, if musical intervals could be understood by the use of mathematics, more of the world could be as well. Perhaps even the movements of celestial bodies could be described by mathematics. Even more strikingly, the octave, the fifth and the fourth are heard as consonant intervals. This suggested to the Pythagoreans that there was a deep affinity between humans and musical ratios. Even the human soul, perhaps, can be rationally understood.

If Pythagoras discovered the ratios of the octave, the fourth and the fifth, he did not do so in the way legend says he did. According to legend, Pythagoras happened to pass a smithy and noticed that one hammer was sounding a note on an anvil an octave higher than another hammer produced.²⁵ Pythagoras is said to have weighed these hammers and found that one had twice the weight of the other. He then supposedly discovered that the weight of a hammer producing a certain note stood in a 3:2 ratio to the weight of hammer producing a note a fifth higher. Next, according to legend, he discovered that when the weights of two hammers stand in a 4:3 ratio, they produce notes a fourth apart. Unfortunately, this legend cannot possibly be true. As a matter of physical fact, a hammer of a given weight does not produce a note an octave lower than a hammer weighing half as much as the first hammer. Neither are the weights of hammers correlated with the intervals of a fourth and a fifth in the way the legend says they are. This has been known since Marin Mersenne in the seventeenth century.²⁶

The ratios of the octave, the fourth and the fifth can be demonstrated using a monochord, though it is uncertain when this instrument was invented. Using a monochord, it is easy to demonstrate that a note an

²⁴ Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, p. 8.

²⁵ This story is related in Iamblichus, *On the Pythagorean Life*, p. 51. For a discussion, see Walter Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans. Edwin L. Minar, Jr (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), p. 375.

²⁶ Marin Mersenne, *Questions harmoniques* (Paris: Jacques Villery, 1634), pp. 166f.

octave higher than a given note is sounded by a segment of the string half the length of the string sounding the given note. That is, the ratio between the lengths of the string segments is 2:1. Similarly, a monochord can be used to demonstrate that the lengths of a string segment sounding a note and a string segment sounding a note a fifth higher stand in a 3:2 ratio. The ratio of the string lengths in the case of a note and one a fourth higher is 4:3.

The Pythagoreans were deeply impressed by the discovery of the ratios between consonant intervals. They were not merely impressed by the fact that part of reality could be mathematically described. They were also impressed by the fact that the intervals in question can be described by the integers one, two, three and four. They were also impressed by the fact that the sum of the first four integers is ten. This struck the Pythagoreans as more than a coincidence, and ten is a number they called a tetractys. Sextus Empiricus (c. 160–c. 210) explained that by a tetractys the Pythagoreans meant

a number which, being constituted out of the first four numbers, fits together the most perfect number, as for instance ten: for one and two and three and four becomes ten. This number is the first *tetractys*, and is described as the “fount of ever-flowing nature” in as much as the whole universe is organised on the basis of these numbers according to *harmonia*; and *harmonia* is a *systema* of three concords, the fourth, the fifth and the octave.²⁷

The Greek word *harmonia* had several meanings. In its most general sense, it referred to an ordering of elements. It could be a musical scale, and sometimes the word meant an octave. It seemed to the Pythagoreans that they had found a key to all of reality in that the whole universe was, in a sense, harmonic or musical. Athenaeus of Naucratis (fl. late second or early third century AD), a Greek man of letters, writes that

Pythagoras the Samian, who had such a high reputation as a philosopher, is well known, from many circumstances, to have been a man who had no slight or superficial knowledge of music; for he indeed lays it down that the whole universe is put and kept together by music.²⁸

²⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, VII, 94, in Andrew Barker (ed.), *Greek Musical Writings, Volume 11: Harmonic and Acoustic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 30.

²⁸ Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists*, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1854), p. 1010.