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Plato's *Phaedo*:  
An Interpretation

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APPENDIX

Philosophy and Music

In Socrates' remark, that 'philosophy is the greatest μουσική,' μουσική can perhaps best be translated as 'music' provided one bears in mind that for the Greeks music and poetry were much less independent of one another than they are for us and that music then referred naturally to the rhythmic and melodious speech of poetry as well as to what we call music. Let us try, by comparing Plato's views on philosophy and music generally, to understand what Socrates might have meant by this paradoxical remark.

Since Plato gave no unified presentation of his views on music, revealing instead different features of them in different contexts, any attempt at exegesis requires a greater speculative emphasis than usual if one hopes to arrive at an overview that would convincingly place the scattered remarks in a unifying perspective. Fortunately, there seems no reason to believe that his views on music underwent significant revision or that the relevant remarks in the dialogues are so dependent on the dialogues' context and characters that they cannot be extracted without violence, short of a separate examination of each dialogue. The view of art as a kind of madness, for example, is present as early as the *Ion* and as late as the *Phaedrus*; the view of art as imitation is present in the *Ion*'s comparison of the artist to Proteus and reappears in such dialogues as the *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Laws*; and the view of art as an embodiment of the divine is present from the *Ion* through the *Republic*, *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, and *Laws*.<sup>2</sup>

We have already seen that music proper is distinguished from philosophy by its connection with myth and incantation. Myth presents to our image-loving, irrational nature what logos presents to the rational, and it is therefore frequently compared by Plato to incantation.<sup>3</sup> Plato's reference to myth by the musical metaphor 'incantation' suggests further that myths have some figurative kinship to music and are not related to it merely as material to form. In some

193

cases such a metaphor may imply only a superficial resemblance, as when Socrates speaks of the 'accord' of theories with one another (92c3, 5) and the 'consonance' of results of hypotheses with the hypothesis itself (100a5) and with each other (101d5), as well as the many other places the musical leitmotif appears in metaphors throughout the *Phaedo*. In such cases the metaphor is based merely on an analogy of relations – fitting together of arguments is analogous to fitting together of sounds – and does not contribute to our understanding of Plato's view of music. The use of 'incantation' as a metaphor for myth, however, is based not on analogy of relations but a simile of character, and thus is worth investigating.

To consider why myth may readily be compared to incantation brings us to the question of the nature of incantation generally. This is an important question for Plato's theory of music not only in terms of the present context but also because incantation serves as Plato's model for the primary function of music. This is implicit in the *Republic's* discussion and becomes explicit in the *Laws* (659e, 664b, 665c, 773d, 812c). Plato evidently sees as the chief virtue (and danger) of music its ability to render us susceptible to stories and attitudes that may not be accepted on purely rational grounds, just as authentic incantations make us susceptible to magical influences that otherwise would have no power over us.

What, then, is this power of music that exposes us to the influence of the irrational, whether in the realm of myth or magic? To put this question first to incantation in the literal sense, let us ask why incantation takes music to be an essential avenue for magic. What efficacy might sung words seem to have that spoken words lack? The attempt to answer this must be largely speculative, as neither musicology nor anthropology can furnish us with anything conclusive here.

If we begin by distinguishing singing from speech (whether linguistic or pre-linguistic, eg infantile, speech) as the prolongation of syllables for an abnormal length of time and their vocalization at abnormal pitches, the possibility suggests itself that the unusual powers attributed to singing may be connected with its character of abnormality. (The stylized distortion of walking and other activities in dancing and the stylized distortion of human and animal figures in primitive painting and sculpture would admit the same conclusion.) The world of normal speech is a world of specified meanings and concepts, a world in which we are at home and in which our activities and expectations are regular and orderly. When, however, one deliberately contravenes the normal patterns of verbalization, the effect is to switch us out of this normal utilitarian frame of mind and into one where our normal associations and expectations are suspended. The relative clarity of the everyday world is suspended, to be replaced

by a mysteriousness – in some cases meaningless, in other cases conveying a special and indefinable sense of relevance – that suggests an alternative significance. In such moods the everyday world's ideal of rational clarity is replaced by an aura of evocation and emotive imagination. Because such moods transfer our consciousness from the rational, orderly, and regular to its imaginative, elusive alternative, they are the moods in which we are especially open to the suggestion of the supernatural and hence to the power of magic in incantation. The continued innovations of style in music and the other arts answers to this need to keep the experience from becoming overly familiar rather than continually challenging.

We can see from this why myth, understood as a metaphor, a figurative presentation of something that could be presented literally or conceptually, can be compared to incantation, for myth aims at capturing our emotive, imaginative nature instead of our rational one, in much the way incantation does this by substituting song for speech. The myth remains in the realm of prose but achieves a comparable effect by means of an imagery that carries us out of our normal mode of experience. Aesop, by using animal paradigms for human qualities, presents a fantastic, anomalous, and thereby strangely compelling world of imagination. The morals later added to his myths are obvious to reason but uninteresting and banal, while the myths themselves are ever intriguing. In his own myths Socrates manages to achieve a similar effect by the introduction of such extra-ordinary images as the gods and Hades.

If we can describe music as a breaking of our normal utilitarian mode of perceiving the world, by the replacement of our normal auditory expectations with modifications based on different principles, then myth is like music because it substitutes metaphorical images for concrete and literal presentation. The difference is that in myth it is the meanings of words, not their sound, that produce the effect; in poetry and song both are operative, but for Plato it is the effect of the sound (rhythm, harmony, metre) of the words and not their meanings that gives these arts their real worth (cf *Ion* 534a, *Republic* 601a-b). By this same analogy philosophy resembles music as well: by directing the mind's attention from the visible world of normal utilitarian experience to the intelligible world that lies beyond the bounds of sense, a similar breaking of the normal perceptions is effected. This is why philosophical education is seen as a 'turning around' of the soul (*Republic* 518c-d) and the philosophical and ordinary views are each depicted as 'blind' to the other (*Phaedo* 96c, 99e, *Republic* 515c-516a, 516e-517a).

To use the language of the *Phaedrus* (244a-245a, 249d-252e) what philosophy and art have in common is the character of 'madness.' They are mad because they mutually oppose the 'sane and sober' everyday perceptions of the world.

This is a theme that is emphasized even in the early *Ion*, whose chief subject is the impossibility of understanding art as a sane and sober skill (a 'making') rather than a madness, a transported state of creativity underivable from rational principles of knowledge. Of the various art forms, it is to music (including poetry) that philosophy is most akin, as both proceed initially by means of aural rather than visual devices.

Music, of course, is not merely negative, not merely a distortion of speech. In abandoning the order and conventions of speech, another order is traditionally substituted,<sup>4</sup> based on some (among many) system of rhythm and harmony capable of communicating a deeper sense of meaning. It is because of this positive element that music is not simply 'mad' but 'divine' madness, as Plato always adds. In the *Phaedrus* (250b-d) for example, beauty, which designates this deeper sense of meaning, appears to be the sensible symbol of the essential nature of reality, as in the *Ion* the beautiful in art stems from the utterances of the gods.

Were these two—the negative ('mad') and the positive ('divine')—elements the only decisive features of music, the only positive input would be divine (however one interprets that metaphor) and Plato would have no grounds for disapproval of art. To understand Plato's ambivalent attitude toward art one must bear in mind that art is fed by two sources—the human as well as the divine—and imitates both. In the case of music, however, understood primarily as song and poetry, this imitation of the human occurs in conjunction with certain formal strictures, in a way that is not true of the visual arts.

All arts display a triadic character involving subject-matter (including both objective imitation and subjective expression), aesthetic form, and medium. In visual art the medium not only makes the subject communicable to others, as all media do, but also, because it is usually foreign to the subject, contributes to a distancing of the work from the normal utilitarian context in which the subject is usually found. To the extent that the subject is an external phenomenon to be imitated, such distancing helps ensure that the work is a creating rather than making; and to the extent that it is an internal thought or feeling to be expressed, such distancing helps ensure that the work is indeed an expression rather than merely a venting of our thoughts or feelings.

For example, an artist who seeks to imitate a human or animal form on canvas, or in stone or metal, is working in a medium so foreign to the nature of the thing that our normal utilitarian associations are suspended in favour of other associations intrinsic to the art work itself, and the artist has created a world together with his subject. Someone who builds an automaton, on the other hand, or who makes an object (like wax replicas of people or fruit) designed to counterfeit its model, is imitating in a medium not foreign but

conducive to the functioning of the product in one of the normal utilitarian ways of the original, and such production is accordingly considered 'making' rather than creation in the aesthetic sense. Again, an artist who makes arrangements of trees, streams, and flowers out of canvas and paint is working in an alien medium that therefore distances the subject from its utilitarian associations and eventuates in creativity rather than making; as opposed to a landscapist, who makes arrangements of trees, streams, and flowers out of trees, streams, and flowers and is thus, other things being equal, considered more utilitarian and less artistic than the painter, even where he achieves aesthetic form. Similarly photographers, whose medium is so conducive to the mere recording of the ordinary appearance of things, always have had to struggle for recognition as artists rather than as mere technicians.

In the expression of what is *internal*, the same is true. Normally when we give vent to our thoughts and feelings we put them into words. When instead a purely visual medium is employed the viewer is forced to consider the meaning of the work in some way different from the conventional associations of linguistic meaning, so that here too the medium helps ensure a distancing from conventional meanings. But with song and poetry this does not apply. Since their medium is language, which is already the normal mode of externalizing our thoughts and feelings, they do not have, in the act of expression, this means of automatically distancing themselves from normal conventional meaning. Moreover, since conventional language already represents external as well as internal phenomena in words, nothing extraordinary is achieved automatically through this medium in the act of imitation either. This is why even while visual art was striving for verisimilitude, poetry and song did not try to sound like ordinary talking but on the contrary intentionally distorted normal speech patterns to achieve such distancing by other means and devised rhythmic, harmonic, and metric models as devices by which this could be achieved effectively. Only in recent times, when art is no longer functionally integrated in the utilitarian activity of society, so that it is already 'distanced' by a cultural isolation from normal activity, do we find a weakening of these artificial devices.

These formal strictures peculiar to music, although to a considerable extent arbitrary, are not entirely so. Like art generally they are formed from a confluence of human and 'divine' sources. In our earlier speculation about the origins of music we took as our starting point the alteration of normal durations and pitches of spoken sounds, whether verbal or pre-verbal. We can suppose in addition that they were altered not arbitrarily and pointlessly but in the direction of exaggeration and intensification. Thus we might imagine, for example, one sort of music arising from a festive and gay mode of speech, another from a mournful one, and another from a relatively unemotional one. Such forms

would, after awhile, take on a certain degree of stylization and standardization. As with linguistic grammar their development presumably would have been guided at first by an undefined aural sense of rightness and formalized subsequently when it was discovered that this undefined sense could be analysed into rules and principles. These rules and principles are the formal strictures mentioned above, and the dual sources – imitation of speech patterns and guidance by an aural sense of rightness – reflect the intersection of the human and divine: at least on Plato's view, the sense of rightness is a function of our sense of the beautiful and thus of the 'divine' order that underlies the world.

That the Greek systems of harmony (ie melodies, since Greek music was usually monophonic), which we call modes (*ἁρμονίαι*), were conceived by Plato not only as diverse instantiations of divine harmony but also as models for imitating various modes of speech is easily seen from the *Republic*. The Dorian and Phrygian modes<sup>5</sup> are described respectively as 'the mode that would suitably imitate the tone and accents of a brave man in battle action or in any violent deed' and the mode that would suitably imitate the tone and accents of 'a man in peaceful, not violent, voluntary activity.' Thus 'these modes most finely imitate the tones of moderate and brave men in bad fortune and good' (399a6-c4). Similarly, other modes are banned because they imitate the speech of immoderation, whether in grief or gaiety (398d11-399a2).

His belief that music derives from imitation of human speech, as well as from transcendent principles of harmony, is one of the two main reasons (the other appears in the next paragraph, below) for Plato's reservations about music and, in a similar way, art in general. Were all music a direct representation of the divine harmonia, it would have only salutary effects; but as it imitates human frailties as well, it can communicate these to the character of the listener and therefore must be restricted to the 'virtuous' modes alone. In the *Laws* a similar principle is maintained but in a more flexible way, and once again the Dorian mode is singled out for praise (669b-670b).

The most salutary form of music, then, is that which combines divine harmonia with imitation of virtuous speech, inculcating by this dual means the temper of virtue into the pre-rational soul. It is thus an important instrument of education (*Republic* 401d f, 549b, *Laws* 673a) but because even in this most salutary form harmony is mixed with imitation of *physical* manifestations of the soul's activity, it remains tied to the sensuous rather than eventuating in pure thought and is thus limited in its powers of elevation. The sensuous component provides a mediation between human feeling and divine harmony but for that very reason also impedes any complete transition from the sensuous human realm to the intelligible divine: the experience of the sensuous is so enhanced by

beauty's irradiation of it as to provide an irrational (sensuous) pleasure that binds us even more firmly to the realm of the senses. This double propensity of music – to anchor us more firmly in the sensuous at the same time it arouses in us intimations of the transcendent – is remarked, for example, in the *Timaeus*. 'However much of music in sound is useful for hearing is given for the sake of harmony. And harmony, which has motions akin to the revolutions within us of our soul, was given by the Muses to him who makes use of it with intelligence, not for irrational pleasures, such as now appears to be its use, but as a co-fighter against the disharmoniousness of the revolution of the soul which has come about in us, to bring it into order and concordance with itself' (47c7-d7). Music thus can point us in the direction of the intelligible but is unable to lead us there. That is why its usefulness for early education in the *Republic* does not extend to the point at which the transition from the sensuous to the intelligible realm, the liberation from the cave, is effected; for it does not promote knowledge but only 'educated the guardians by habits, giving them by means of harmony a certain harmoniousness, not knowledge' (522a). Music's upward impetus can be disengaged from its anchorage in the sensible only by abstracting the harmony it conveys to our senses, from the sensuous conveyance itself. Only by our studying the conceptual principles on which it is based rather than listening to it, Socrates says, can music be made to serve the needs of this higher stage of education (530d-531c). It is perhaps an illustration of his indifference to the sensuous side of music that Plato portrays Socrates as ignorant of the names of the musical modes, needing to rely on Glaucon's expertise (398e1, 399a5).

On the basis of this distinction between the sensuous and intelligible elements of music – the imitation of human modes of speech and of the divine harmonia – we further can see how philosophy might be called the greatest music. Philosophy and music are comparable because both present an auditory 'image,' based on the model of speech, of the intelligible order underlying our experience, thereby arousing our interest in the intelligible. The comparison is made in several dialogues besides the *Phaedo* (see, for example, *Phaedrus* 248d1-4, 259d3-7, and *Laws* 689d4-7, in addition to the passages quoted here). In the *Cratylus*, for example, Socrates says, 'Both "Muses" and "music" as a whole come from the term *μῦσθαι* (to seek after), as it seems, and this name is named from searching and philosophy' (406a). And in the *Symposium* Alcibiades compares Socrates' philosophical speaking to Marsyas' aulos playing:

Aren't you an aulos player? Indeed, a far more wondrous one than he. For he summons people with the power of his breath, as is still done by whomever plays his music on the aulos – for Olympus<sup>6</sup> played them, I mean the songs of Marsyas, having been taught by

him. It is his songs, therefore, whether played on the aulos by a good aulos player or an inept aulos girl, which alone cause to be possessed, and reveal, those who are in need of the gods and the mysteries, because the songs are divine. But you differ from him in this alone, that you do this same thing without instruments, by means of friendly words. (215c)

But the difference between music and philosophy is as important as the similarity. In music the harmonia is reflected onto the "tones and inflections" of speech, while philosophy concerns itself with the conceptual component of speech, reflecting the highest truth onto *logoi*, as Socrates says in the *Phaedo* (99c). Since sound is only the vehicle of expression of a concept, not part of its essence, conceptual thought can leave behind its sensory origins and ascend, by such methods as dialectic, to ever purer intellectual apprehension. Sound belongs, however, to the very essence of tone and inflection, and so musical thinking can never become intelligible and non-sensuous without ceasing to be musical. Philosophy is the greatest music because it resembles music in its origin and sources but transcends it in its progress. The emphasis in music is that the intelligible element enhances the sensuous experience, while in philosophy the sensuous is the vehicle to transport us to the intelligible.

From our present standpoint Plato's observations are subject to two limitations: 1/ he was interested in music as a propaedeutic to philosophy rather than as intrinsically valuable and therefore sketched only a general interpretation of it, deliberately ignoring much of its complex nature; 2/ he wrote at a time when there was very little independence between poetry and music, the composition of either without the other being the exception rather than the rule, so that he naturally took song as his model of fundamental music and saw instrumental music as a derivative abstraction, whereas for us absolute music means purely instrumental music and song is seen as a derivative mixture. But with these limitations, the fundamental principles underlying his remarks about music continue to be applicable and worthy of consideration as a basis for further reflection. His conception shows itself to be multi-faceted and consistent, sensitive to the interplay between formal and expressive elements, rather than one-sided or inconsistent.

Nor is it without relevance to contemporary philosophy of music, for both expressionists and formalists can find fundamental antecedents in Plato. His view of the modes as variously appropriate to expressing different emotional states gives some support to those who see music as a language of emotions; but not without qualification, for he makes clear that it is a language only in a vague and ambiguous way: in the *Laws* (699e) the Athenian stresses the importance of not playing music without words, because of the difficulty of understanding the

meaning and purpose of the music without the words as a guide. This is a more explicit version of the impression given by the *Republic* as well, that apart from the shepherd's pipes all music will be based on singing.

Because of this qualification Plato's view is compatible with such formalistic theories of music as Hanslick's, who argues that music cannot represent the subject of our feelings, but

only their dynamics. It can depict the motion of a psychic process according to its elements: fast, slow, strong, weak, climbing, falling. Motion, however, is only *one* property, *one* element of feeling, not this *itself*. (p 18; cf English p 24)

Aesthetic investigation ... will therefore, even without knowing the name and biography of the author, detect in Beethoven's symphonies a tempestuousness, struggle, unsatisfied longing, defiance conscious of its strength; but it will never glean from the words - nor may it utilize to appreciate them - that the composer had republican sentiments, was unmarried, and deaf, and all the other factors on which the art historian dilates illuminatingly. (p 52; cf English p 63)

Only on the question of whether these are factors that one might 'utilize to appreciate' the music would Plato and Hanslick disagree.

Hanslick, however, speaks of the motion of a psychic process, while Plato speaks of the tone and inflection in the speech of someone experiencing a certain kind of emotion. What precisely is meant by 'the motion of a psychic process' (*die Bewegung eines psychischen Vorganges*)? The phrase has the ring of truth, it elicits a response of recognition, but it is somewhat misleading. It evidently refers to the motions of our thoughts, their tempos and rhythms, like the 'movement' of music. But do we in fact discover such tempos and rhythms in our thoughts, corresponding to our various kinds of feelings?

While it is certainly true that we experience differences of tempo and rhythm in our thoughts, the differences correspond to the intensity of our feelings, not to their kind. Our thoughts do not change any more or less quickly when we are happy than when we are sad, but intense emotions of whatever kind tend to arrest our thoughts and retard the speed of their flow - we dwell on them - while superficial or transitional ones leave the rapidity of the mental stream relatively unchecked. If the tempos and rhythms of our thoughts do not then correspond to our thoughts' emotional content but only to the degree of their intensity, it cannot be they that music represents in its expression of different kinds of emotion.

Hanslick's words strike a responsive chord in us because music does indeed represent the motions associated with our emotions; however, these motions are

not psychic but physical, the quickening and slowing not of our thoughts but of bodily processes accompanying emotion-laden thoughts. It is from observation of the animatedness of our whole being rather than from introspection of our thoughts that we are led to such associations. When we are sad we move slowly and heavily, when happy we quicken, and so on. And it is in speech patterns, whether verbal or pre-verbal, that these associations first acquire the purely temporal dimension of sound. In that case, the association of slow and fast sounds with grief and joy would not follow from observation of our thought patterns but from observation of our speech patterns. This is not to deny that our speech reflects our state of mind, but to point out that if our state of mind is the ultimate referent for musical expression, it is through our bodies that our mental state is translated into analogues of motion, and in speech that these analogues first become audible.

Think of the tones, inflections, rhythms, and tempos with which a story-teller imparts emotion to his words: the voice becomes flat, slow, and soft to express sadness, faster and louder to express joy, tight and measured to express apprehensiveness or tension, freer and expansive to express confidence. It is plausible to suggest that whatever associations we form between emotions and aural modifications of sound are derived not originally through introspection or even empirical observation of the emotional effects of various kinds of sounds on us, but through the manifestation of these characteristics in speech.

Connected with this relationship between music and expression, however one conceives it, is its counterpart, the effect of music on the mind of its audience. Here again one finds the Platonic position—that music can strongly and enduringly affect the minds of its listeners—upheld in contemporary thought. One can find it, of course, in Nietzsche's attacks on Wagner, but since it involves the view that some kinds of music are suitable and others unsuitable for various audiences, its primary locus today seems to be in the field of psychiatry,<sup>7</sup> as is only to be expected in a democratic society where it is always difficult to justify censorship for those who have not yet been certified insane.

Perhaps the most challenging and controversial issue Plato raises is whether music, as he claims, not only affords us an intimation of the transcendent, but by imbuing the sensible with the dimension of the transcendent makes the pleasures of the sensuous so captivating as to retard our further progress toward the purely intelligible. This occurs with regard to both sensual gratification and emotional indulgence. In the first, love of music involves us in taking pleasure in manifestations of sound, fascination with kaleidoscopic sonority, which acknowledges and encourages a degree of devotion to sensuous gratification. The admission here that sensuous gratification has a legitimate claim on us insinuates a regard for it generally. Second, with regard to emotional indulgence, book 10 of the

*Republic* goes beyond the above passages and argues that not only does art appeal to the emotions but it also appeals most effectively to the most tumultuous emotions. In order to enter thoroughly into and enjoy art, especially music, one must be willing to give rein to and indulge in the emotions often most antithetic to reason.

Whether or not one shares Plato's views generally, anyone who finds merit in some degree of asceticism, and who perhaps loves art for the very reason that it elevates the mind beyond the realm of sense to the realm of reflection, must consider whether art's sensuous and emotional gratification compromises this elevation and whether the very charms and delights of art are inimical to its promise of spirituality.

- 2 See especially Geddes pp 263-7. Geddes also suggests that the use of the term φάρμακον as the only reference to the poison may be deliberately ambiguous since it means 'medicine' or 'cure' as well (p 263).

CHAPTER 12

- 1 See, for example, T.M. Robinson p 32. The dual conception of soul in Greek philosophy generally, as both energy and mind, is noted by Aristotle in *de Anima*.
- 2 I use the term 'energy,' despite its being an anachronism, because it is appropriate to the conception of soul as the principle of motion.
- 3 There is an apparent exception to this in bk 10 of the *Laws* (896e). See below n 5 and context.
- 4 In addition to the reference to Skemp at the beginning of this section, see *Timaeus* 30b, 34b, and 57c (provided one takes the temporality of the *Timaeus* as a metaphor for logical priority rather than as a literal succession of events).
- 5 It is sometimes argued that this motion is not due to soul since it is irrational (eg Vlastos DMF pp 393-6), but, while the motions of soul are rational per se, when combined with and influenced by the irrational nature of the body irrational motion would result. This distinction between pure and embodied soul is easily obscured in genetic myths such as the *Timaeus*, where body must be spoken of as if it were capable of self-sufficient existence. It is not necessary to suppose, however, that Plato regarded soul and body as ever physically separate from each other.
- 6 This may be the point as well of the *Laws*' reference to two contrasting souls (896e). Also see Rist *EP* pp 105-9.

APPENDIX

- 1 For simplicity's sake it was translated in the introduction as "art" but this is too general for the purposes of the present more detailed discussion.
- 2 The presence of all three themes in the *Ion* shows it to be an important, though much neglected work for studying Plato's aesthetic theory in general. My article on the *Ion* supplements much of the present discussion, as well as elaborating the brief references here to that dialogue.
- 3 Cf. *Charmides* 155e, 158c, 176b; *Gorgias* 483e, 484a; *Phaedo* 77d-77a; *Republic* 608a.
- 4 In aleatory music where random or unplanned occurrences are substituted for any imposed order, the music succeeds in traditional terms when some such order is accidentally achieved and fails when it is not.
- 5 See Apel 'church modes.'
- 6 The legendary inventor of music
- 7 See for example Assagioli.