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Saint Augustine, Music, and God

That Saint Augustine of Hippo enjoyed music is clear. Yet, writing in later years about his pre-Christian youth, as well as the nine years in Carthage teaching rhetoric, he bemoaned an immorality that he associated with music. “From the mud of my fleshly desires and my erupting puberty belched out murky clouds that obscured and darkened my heart...” (Conf. II.1) He agonized over his pursuit of “...popular acclaim, theatrical plaudits, song-competitions and the contest of ephemeral wreaths...” (Conf. IV, 1) His enjoyment of music bothered him, music being one of the *artes liberales* that could enslave one to sensual pleasures; working eventually toward some resolution, he planned a series on the liberal arts, music to be included, in 387. De Musica was written after he left Italy and returned home to Africa, in 391.¹

Planned originally to be one work in a series on the *artes liberales*, De Musica was envisioned as comprised of six books on rhythm alone and six on music. Episcopal duties, however, interfered with this ambitious plan, as he explained to his friend Bishop Memorius, who had requested a copy of the entire work. The six on rhythm were the only ones finished, and, of these, “the first five sections thereof are all but unintelligible...” The sixth section was revised, however, and contained “...the product of the other five...”² It is in this sixth and last section of De Musica where we learn how Augustine resolved his moral ambivalence about music. Years later, in the Confessions, he revisits this resolution.

In his reflections, he took inspiration and comfort from Platonism and what one commentator has called his “...bold Christianization of Neo-Platonism.”³ Neo-Platonism was the dominant philosophy and world-view from the third century C.E. forward, the Enneads of Plotinus being its premier exposition.

¹ The in-text references to De Musica show three numbers: ‘6’, for the last section of the document; then the number of the chapter; and finally a numbered paragraph within the chapter.

² Augustine, Letter to Memorius

³ O’Connell, p.13

Early generations of Christian thinkers and theologians found Neo-Platonism intellectually sympathetic to the Christian gospel, and Augustine was a Neo-Platonist before and after his conversion.⁴

Following his conversion, he began his efforts toward the resolution of his moral challenges concerning music. His definition of music is set forth in the first book of *De Musica*: *Musica est scientia bene modulandi. Music is the science of mensurating (measuring) well.* (1.2.2) Absent are any characterizations that point to sensual pleasure or civic function. Music is essentially a science, a rational enterprise that uses numbers to measure the sounds arranged in, and conforming to, metrical patterns. Unlike the traditional Roman attention to music education in *paideia*, efforts in music must now be approached as an individual experience by a Neo-Platonist Augustine, but now a Neo-Platonist eager to prioritize his Christianity.

The concept of number receives his attention first.⁵ One use of the term *numbers* is that of the counting of items in our physical world, in what the Platonic tradition termed the realm of Becoming. Such numbers are changeable; they come and go. There are numbered sounds in nature, even when no hearer is present: "...a sound's beating the air by the drop of a liquid or the shock of bodies..." (6.2.2) There are numbered sounds in a hearer's ears, in his sense of hearing. There is numbering within a person, even if he does not know this, and no one knows about it nor remembers it: "...the soul produces the numbers we find in the beat of the veins...in recurrent breathing..." (6.3.4) Numbering in a person's memory is important because it tends to last longer. Lastly, the numbers that we use in

⁴ Thinking of himself as a true Platonist, Plotinus would not have accepted the "Neo" designation. He would have to argue with some later historian.

⁵ The Latin noun *numerus* meant far more than a numeral used in counting. Cassell's Latin lexicon lists other meanings sufficient in diversity to serve Augustine's creative needs. *Numerus* also means an uncertain number, a heap, a mass, an enormous quantity, a division of the army, a cipher, dice (in the plural), mathematics, a part of a whole, melody and music (in Vergil), a metrical foot in a line of poetry (also Vergil), a dance, harmony, rank, position, order, rule.

That Augustine was well acquainted with the poetry of Vergil leads one to suspect *numerus* was well positioned to be used in *De Musica*.

judging, "...when we are delighted by the equality of numbers or offended at a flaw in them...in accepting or rejecting, to give sentence on them all as if by some natural right." (6.4.5-6) The listing of numbers continues (6.6-7): "Then let the first be named judicial, the second advancing, the third reacting, the fourth memorial, the fifth sounding." All are still on the sense level. (6.6.16)

Though this numbering in the physical sense, in the realm of Becoming, is necessary and desirable, it is insufficient for any Neo-Platonist. What seems like a kind of psychologizing on Augustine's part is complicated by the ever-present wariness of everything physical. He is clearly hoping to offer a monitoring of the work of soul and body meant to establish and guarantee the wholesomeness of sound in general and music in particular. Still, the soul must transcend its physical embodiment and return to the realm of Being, the realm of Intelligibles; rationality and virtue must be achieved, and numbers are a means of achieving sufficient rationality.

Rationality is recognized and achieved in the deliberate juxtaposition of individual numbers in patterned ratios. Augustine offers a physical example: "...whatever restrains and keeps us from walking with unequal steps...or from eating or drinking with uneven motions of the jaw..." are examples of a numerical ratio. (6.8.20). Ratios are relationships that do not change, even while the individual *relata* can and do change. More importantly, it is a belief that Augustine never questions, viz. that innumerable numerical ratios permeate human existence, ratios planned and maintained by God for our benefit.

Musical ratios are two-dimensional, in that they must incorporate both sounds and words. Instrumental music is not a consideration in De Musica; when Augustine names a particular piece of music, *Deus Creator Omnium*, it is a hymn associated with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan.⁶ The first mention

⁶ Augustine left Africa for Italy in 383, getting a teaching position in rhetoric in Milan in 384. Hearing of the great reputation of Bishop Ambrose as a preacher, he attended the Milan cathedral to hear for himself. Ironically, he was struck more by the Christian message than by the rhetorical skills of the Bishop. Also, Ambrose was a musician

of this hymn begins a discussion of number location (6.2.2.); a second establishes the judgment that numbers are necessary to delight souls (6.9.23-24); a third mention summarizes his approval of this hymn: “*Deus Creator Omnium* sounds with the harmony of number not only to the ears, but even more is most pleasing in truth and wholeness to the soul’s sentiment.” (6.17.57) ⁷ He might have been influenced in this regard by Plato, who decried the state of music in Athens and identified three criteria that a “sensible judge” must satisfy. He must know, “first, what has been represented; second, how correctly it has been copied; and then, third, the moral value of this or that representation...” “It is extraordinarily difficult to know what the rhythm and harmony without speech are supposed to signify...such practices appeal to the taste of the village idiot.” ⁸ But it is obvious here that a hymn to God is involved, and we have to notice that the mention of God makes a difference.

The governing ratios within music are several: the number of syllables in a metrical foot, the number of metrical feet within a line, the number of syllables overall in a line, and the number and patterns of long and short vowels or diphthongs. Like Plato in being almost-Pythagorean on the question of an explanation, Augustine also understands these ratios within musical verses to be in proportion to those in the universe as a whole; rationality is believed or even assumed to pervade all, in the optimism that souls will be led by such harmony to work to return to the realm of Being. “...to each living things in its proper kind and in its proportion with the universe is given a sense of places and times, so that even as

and composer, having taught his congregation antiphonal chanting during Mass. Both the Christian message and the music set Augustine on a path that he had not anticipated.

⁷ The hymn *Deus Creator Omnium* was a special favorite of Augustine. There are eight stanzas with four lines in each. Each line was four metrical feet, and each foot is iambic. The first stanza:

Deus creator omnium	O God, who made the universe,
Polique rector, vestiens	and ruler of the sky, who dress
Diem decoro lumine,	the day with fair and gladsome light
Noctem soporis gratia.	The night with grace of restfulness.

⁸ Plato, *Laws II*, 669d-670a

its body is so much in proportion to the body of the universe whose part it is..." (6.7.19) In short, where there are ratios, there is rationality.

There has to be a reason for the governing rationality of numbers-in-ratios, a reason that is consistent with the Platonic/Neo-Platonic tradition and with Christian belief especially.

There is delight, Augustine makes clear. "...the very sense of delight could not have been favorable...unless it itself were imbued with numbers." (6.9.24) Reason is necessarily dominant, sensory enjoyment having been denigrated. What is it that we love? We love "...a sort of equality and equally measured intervals..." (6.10.26) Reason sees an ordering that defines an intellectual kind of harmony.⁹This intellectualist harmony is further demonstrated by the existence of rests; even in rests, when there is no sound, the numbering is maintained. Because the human soul is attracted to patterns of ratio, it is attracted to numbers within ratios; it then enjoys the harmony resulting from numerical ratios; and such harmony produces delight. Human life is meant to enjoy the poem that is the universe. (6.11.29)

Because ratios are relationships, they do not change, even while numbers within such ratios do change. Ratios must be eternal and unchangeable, and their possession and enjoyment by human souls must have origin and explanation in God Himself. We must "...believe what is eternal and unchangeable to be given the soul...from the eternal and unchangeable God." (6.12.36) "God alone can operate on rational souls, not through a body, but through Himself." (6.13.41)

The last five chapters of Book VI of De Musica describe a Christian life in a context of numerical ratios. The unique delight that emerges from a recognition of the harmony to be discovered in true music is a measure of a life well lived. The Christian is meant to love God and love neighbor; he is meant to have "...God within where all we love is sure and unchangeable." (6.14.48) This is the primary ratio

⁹ The Greek noun *harmonia* has the primary meaning of joining or fastening. It is a joint; a suture; it is the framework of the universe; order; covenant; agreement; in music, stringing, as on a lyre; a musical scale; the pitch or intonation of a voice; concord.

established for human beings by their Creator, their Composer. If the soul be engaged in the enjoyment of temporal ratios, as in the enjoyment of music, but is still intent on one God, he will enjoy that earthly music even more. The best measure of the soul's success is in the achieving of the four virtues of prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice, as in Chapter 16 of Book VI.

God "...has created and rules all things through...numbers...and has set numbers moving even to the lowest corruption of the flesh." (6.17.56) Here there is something of a hint by Augustine that God may be conceived of as Number; number, he writes, begins from one, is beautiful in equality and likeness, and all things are made from one beginning. According to Plato's metaphysics, the One is the dominant and originating Form; he also names it "Beauty" and "the Good." Plotinus also listed the One at the top of his metaphorical "ladder". Augustine has maintained some connection with his philosophical inspiration.

Six years after completing De Musica, Augustine began a three-year project writing his Confessions. Here, virtually everything dovetails with De Musica, and yet there is an important nuance: he can no longer accommodate the cyclical theory of time long held in Graeco-Roman culture. Human souls are meant for eternal life with God, and there is no constant replay of a finite-forever, temporal life. Time 'moves' toward an eternity with God. Human souls spend only one life in time working for that timeless existence. Describing time so as to make circularity impossible, Augustine offers his great accommodation to his understanding of God's design for the human journey. Music provides that accommodation.

Augustine "redeems" music by making it a symbol of time. And time, as elusive of explanation as it may seem, is a gift from God, the only path to eternity; and by association, music too becomes a gift.

Augustine departs boldly from the Graeco-Roman mainstream view of time. It is inaccurate, he writes, to say that past and future exist: "...nec proprie dicitur" (XI.20.26). The past exists only if

someone remembers it, and the future has no reality either; the latter is guesswork based on one's memory of past events.¹⁰ The present, however, is comprised of "fugitive moments that never stand still..." (XI.11.13) The present is a relentless slipping-away, the future forever slipping away into the past; what does not yet exist is forever slipping away into what no longer exists. "...we cannot really say that time exists ...because it tends to non-being." (XI.14.17) Even if the present had some duration, that too would be divisible into past and future, and so it is correct to say that the so-called 'present' is reduced to a vanishing point.

Something-to-be-measured (x) is measurable only if it has extension; present time has no extension; so present time is not measurable. "But when we measure periods of time by our awareness of them, what we measure is passing time." (XI.16.21) Here, his word for the English word *awareness* is *sentiendo*, the use of a gerund to express *feeling* or *insight*; and a reader may be aware that he is working to create a more sophisticated vocabulary for a nascent psychologism. At XI.20.26 he offers the word *attention* to help solve this conundrum: "...the present of past things is memory, the present of present things is attention, and the present of future things is expectation." Augustine's word for *attention* is *contuitus*, a creative use of a word with a range of meanings. *Contuitus* is a *beholding*, an *attentive looking at*."¹¹ Even though the present is reduced to a vanishing point, even to the point that

¹⁰ We know the past only in memory; and the future is supposition and inference based on memories. So it is, in Book X, that we learn why Augustine gave his reader so much detail about memory in Bk.IX.

¹¹ According to Cassell's, *contuitus* is "a beholding," an "attentive looking-at."

it forever slips away, what reality it has is that conscious activity of the human soul positing the moving of the future into the past. Whatever objectivity the present has is dependent on, or the work of, human consciousness. The present has no extension (*spatium*) which can be measured, given its status as a 'passing away' recognized by the human soul. Still, the soul is able to hold all three aspects of time in tension (*distentionem*), each aspect characterized and identified in the soul's distinctive way while still held conjointly. The human soul, considered specifically as memory, attention, and expectation is the locus of time's establishment.

The word *distentio* is his primary explanatory concept. "I see, therefore, that time is a kind of strain or tension." (XI.23.30) Then, shortly after: "I have therefore come to the conclusion that time is nothing other than tension...tension of consciousness." (XI.26.33) *Distentio* does allow translation to *strain* and *tension*, though its primary meaning is a physical spasm or distortion. Augustine's intention is not physical: our awareness of present time is not a physical spasm or distortion. His efforts in developing a vocabulary are clear testimony to both the importance and the novelty of what he is doing, i.e. he has needed, all along, a concept of time that will support his re-imagining of music as morally acceptable.

Distentio, contuitus, sentiendo: these are Augustine's words to identify a human effort to understand time; *tension, beholding, feeling or insight*: his words point to a human apprehension of ratios, in time, which God has placed in his creation. God is "...the builder of the animal..." (6.8.20) Only humans live with the exigencies of time, and, whether time be seen as gift or as challenge, it is meant for human souls. Only humans "perceive" time, time that is a necessary passage to an eternal present with God.

Augustine's unique contribution is that of assigning a congruence between time and music, re-defining the former and redeeming the latter. How, then, is this congruence achieved?

Even though there is a multiplicity of parts in time, in music, and in the universe, the structures which he consistently terms *ratios* are sufficient for human souls to achieve, freely, a timeless present with God in eternity. Such structures are the relations between the parts of x , whether time or music, with each other and with the universe. As with the Platonists before him, Augustine assigns an ontological basis for such structural relations, i.e. Number. Plotinus had established Number as the basis for multiplicity throughout Book VI of the Enneads, in such passages as these: Number "...causes Being to be in labour with multitude." (6.6.9); Being "...is Number resting in a multiplicity." (6.6.10) Number makes multiplicity of parts possible and, because it is rational and numbering necessarily exists, the parts have a rational accounting. Beauty is thus accounted for by the perceived rationality, but beauty is the province of the mind, not the senses necessarily. And with beauty comes delight. In De Musica: "...the very sense of delight could not have been favorable...unless it itself were imbued with numbers. (VI.9.24) What is it that we love here? We love "...a sort of equality and equally measured intervals...reason "sees" an ordering...of their own kind to the numberliness of times." (VI.10.26) Although the parts of time and music are different, they are congruent in their rationality, beauty, and capacity to delight the reasoning soul.

In delight such as this, the soul begins its approach to God. "From where, then, must we believe what is eternal and unchangeable to be given the soul if not from the eternal and unchangeable God." (VI.12.35) Delight in beautiful things is a result of such insight into time and music, but some warning comes from Augustine, who does not dismiss the allurements of sensual things easily: Beautiful numbers do not soil the soul, "...but let us not love them to become happy in their enjoyment. For we shall keep

free of them since they are temporal.” (VI.14.46) This warning is repeated in his Retractations: “For bodies are the better to the extent that they are more harmonious by reason of such numbers. But the soul is made better through lack of these numbers it receives through the body when it turns away from the carnal senses and is changed by the divine numbers of wisdom.” (1.10.2)

Whatever ratios there are, whether in time or music or the universe as a whole, God is their source, their Composer who eternally plans to beguile and lead human souls to an eternal present with Him. He is eternally shaping ratios according to which He wishes human lives to proceed into eternity. Time is a unique “flowing” from future into past; so too music, a “flowing” of sounds and words. Interestingly, Augustine probes further, reflecting on a difference between time and music, viz. music existed before time. Time exists only if matter exists; matter does not exist before Creation; therefore, time does not exist before Creation. What he terms the ratios within time can only emerge from ratios inhering within music, thus offering the provocative implication that God used the ratios within music in creating time and the universe. Presumably, then, when time and the universe have passed away, music will remain.

“From where, then, must we believe what is eternal and unchangeable to be given the soul if not from the eternal and unchangeable God? I don’t see what else to believe.” (VI.12.36)

In Confessions, if not fully in De Musica, we see the full “redemption” of music by Augustine. Music has been embraced by reason and only then shared with the senses.

“How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled into my heart until it overflowed in loving devotion; my tears ran down, and I was the better for them.” (IX.6.14)

While references to music may be found in many of Augustine's writings, De Musica and the Confessions deserve a special reading on this question. In the former, a reader comes to appreciate the very personal question that is bothering him, even while the question of the sensuality of music may not be a common concern. When he began De Musica, clearly when this question had already begun to bother him, he was converted but not yet baptized. His conversion dates to 386, and he was baptized on Easter 387 by Bishop Ambrose in the Milan cathedral, and so the dating of De Musica may be placed sometime in 386. Even then, if he did indeed begin it then, he wrote very little in 386. Moreover, it was, in his words, "unintelligible," as he wrote to Bishop Memorius, and the text underwent significant changes. The version that has come down to us must be quite different from his first efforts. By way of contrast, he was satisfied with the four works produced in the Cassiciacum interlude, which began in late August 386 and lasted for seven months into 387 (*De Beata Vita, Contra Academicos, De Ordine, Soliloquia*).

What is remarkable in De Musica is the level of concern, even urgency, of the question of music, an urgency that is reflected in his negative judgment of his efforts, together with the resolution to produce something with which he was satisfied. This work is a salvation of music. There is irony, in that, even though he has embraced the centrality of the concept of number/ratio from his Platonic-Plotinian heritage, his Christianity is now dominant in re-shaping that heritage. God, the sole creator of everything, has built in these structures as a means for human souls to reach eternity; and only human souls can perceive these, suggesting to the readers of De Musica that Augustine may have begun creating a psychology of music.

In earlier days the pleasures of the ear enthralled me more persistently under their spell and held me under their spell, but you broke my bonds and set me free. Nowadays I do admittedly find some peaceful contentment in sounds to which your words impart life and meaning, provided the words are sung

*sensitively by a tuneful voice; but the pleasure it not
such as to hold me fast, for when I wish I can get up and go. (X.33)*

His Confessions is a fulfillment of De Musica: he loves music but is free of it also.

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