

Salve Regina University

Digital Commons @ Salve Regina

Faculty and Staff - Articles & Papers

Research and Publications

2024

Boethius and the Quest for Harmonia

Lois Eveleth

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/fac_staff_pub

Boethius and the Quest for Harmonia

According to the Liddell-Scott lexicon, the Greek noun *harmonia* acquired a range of meanings in the Graeco-Roman world. This classic reference identifies seven categories/contexts of usage and cites the music context as the fourth of these; here we find references to works of Plato, Philolaus, Nicomachus, Aristotle, Pythagoras, and Aristoxenus. *Harmonia* is multi-faceted. It is any means of joining or fastening; it is a joint or a suture; a framework; a covenant; an agreement, especially for settled government. In the general context of music, it is a method of stringing, a musical scale, an octave, music itself, or a musical mode.

It is no surprise, then, when we discover that Boethius turns, in the Consolation of Philosophy, to still another interpretation of *harmonia*, viz. an ethical-metaphysical one. Imprisoned by Theodoric, the ruler of the Kingdom of the East Goths, centered in Ravenna, Boethius has plenty of time to hope for some comfort in this disheartening exigency. So, we see him turning to philosophy and music for intellectual and spiritual coping for he is “...bound down by heavy chains, the light of his mind gone out.”¹ The presence of philosophy is achieved by the imaginative visit and presence of Lady Philosophy: “...there appeared standing above me a woman of majestic countenance whose flashing eyes seemed wise beyond the ordinary wisdom of men.”² At the outset of their conversation, Boethius is dispirited, even though he may or may not be aware of something far worse, i.e. that Theodoric is considering the execution of his Master of Offices. While he surely had an abundance of parchment and ink (*atramentum librarium*) in his cell, it is clear that Boethius did not have his library with him in his prison cell; and so his philosophical interchange with Philosophy from memory signals his great achievements in Graeco-Roman scholarship.

The word *harmonia*, so broad in denotation and connotation, was appropriate for such disparate purposes as carpentry or politics or music, whether music broadly intended or as a

¹ Bk. I V 2. My references to the Langston edition of the Consolation are offered in this way: Book number from I to V, followed by P, for a prose section, or V for a verse section, and then the number of this prose or verse section. This reference, then, is in Book One, in the second of the verse sections.

² Bk. I P 1

specific pattern or ratio of pitched sounds on a lyre. Central is the notion of joining together items that differ but should and can be brought together for a greater good. It was a notion as old as Heraclitus' Fragment LVI: *The harmony of the world is a harmony of oppositions, as in the case of the bow and of the lyre*. In the dialogue, Lady Philosophy consistently urges and challenges the distraught prisoner to 'harmonize' his dreadful situation with both the knowledge at his disposal and the values which he has embraced throughout his life. She holds up an ideal of inner liberation, whether or not physical liberation is possible. "...You have forgotten yourself a little..."³ she observes; his memory is disconnected from reason. He 'knows' that the world is subject only to divine reason but has forgotten this. It is time to join memory to reason once again. Boethius has much to re-learn and takes up her challenge in both form and content.

The Consolation is classified as a prosimetrum in form, alternating prose and verse segments. Their dialogue is prose, but the verses, as with classical poetry generally, are sung: "We must invoke the Father of all things without whose aid no beginning can be properly made. You are right, said Philosophy, and she began to sing this song."⁴ In taking up the task posed by Lady Philosophy, Boethius incorporates advice from two of his earlier writings for the work at hand, viz. De Institutione Arithmetica and De Institutione Musica.⁵

The influence of Pythagoras is clear in De Institutione Arithmetica, the four disciplines of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy having been brought together by the Pythagorean School. The Arithmetica depended heavily on the earlier work of Nicomachus of Gerasa, and Boethius writes of him that "...those things which demanded a greater care of understanding, but are gone through quickly, I clarified with a small additional explanation and I have even used formulae and diagrams for greater clarity of matters."⁶ The importance of this adaptation and translation was its harmonization of four disciplines around the concept of number, an approach begun by Pythagoras, and, like him, Boethius makes number theory central to his overall effort.

³ Bk.1 P 2

⁴ Bk.3 p 9. In his edition of the Consolation, Rudolf Peiper (1871) identifies the metrical patterns that Boethius used; these are found on pages 24-29 of his Preface.

⁵ Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus, a contemporary of Boethius, wrote in a letter to him, "For it is in your translations that Pythagoras the musician (sic) and Ptolemy the astronomer are read as Italians." (Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning, p.226). If his claim is true, Boethius would know a great deal about astronomy. In 1983 Michael Masi published Boethius' Number Theory: A Translation of the De Institutione Arithmetica (with Introduction and Notes).

⁶ Boethius is quoted in Ivor Bulmer-Thomas' review of Michael Masi (1983). Pp.86-87

He gives arithmetic priority among the four. Music, geometry, and astronomy are numbers that are joined to a physical referent, e.g. pitched sounds, engineering, the heavenly bodies, while numbers can be conceived by themselves alone. Number is measurement of whatever exists, e.g. the total substance of the universe, and it remains distinct from whatever exists and thus has a “higher” level of existence. Mathematics is a practical term for the category of four. Archytas, a Greek mathematician and friend of Plato, introduced the term *tetrakus* for the four disciplines, *tetra* being the word for *four*. It was Boethius who named the *tetrakus* the *quadrivium*, organizing it with formal education in mind. The overall significance of this text is the reiteration of the classical principle that harmony is not judgment based on sense or perception, but on reasoning.

To most modern viewpoints, music seems a strange member in the listing, strange until we learn how early scholars, such as Boethius, explained music, as he does in De Institutione Musica. The word *harmony* often substituted for music, especially as the originating word for *music*, *mousike*, came to mean all of the arts associated with the Muses; the emergence of the noun *harmonia* for music distinguished pitched sound from all the other Muse-inspired arts. Such pitched sounds were organized by means of numbers evolving in time within specific patterns or ratios. Harmony was seen as a judgment of reason exclusively, founded solely on a calculation about the acceptability of the numbers and the ratios within which the pitched sounds move. This Pythagorean influence was still strong. Boethius compiled what he considered educationally significant in music in his Musica. There are four mathematical disciplines, he writes, and “...the other three share with music the task of searching for truth; but music is associated not only with speculation but with morality as well.”⁷ Morality, as a human concern, governs human music or *musica humana*, the second of three kinds.

Cosmic music is the first kind, the sounds of the heavenly bodies and the crystalline sphere to which the stars are attached; included also are the study of the harmonization of the four elements, together with accounting for and explaining the diversity and change of the seasons. It is “...nevertheless impossible that such extremely fast motion of such large bodies should produce absolutely no sound...” and the sounds must be harmonious.⁸ The third kind of music

⁷ Boethius, Fundamentals of Music, Translated by Calvin Bower, page 2

⁸ Ibid, p.9

lies in various instruments, e.g. strings, wind, percussion. Most of Musica examines numbers-in-ratios, scales, tonality, consonances, presenting the work of Pythagoras in particular; other musical theorists are cited, approvingly or not, e.g. Ptolemy, Aristoxenus, Archytas, Philolaus, Nicomachus, Eubulides, and Hippiasus.

Early in Book 1 of Musica, Boethius provides his overview of what human music should examine. Unfortunately, either he did not return to this topic or perhaps manuscripts were lost. There are three questions/topics in his ambitious prospectus, and all these must be associated with morality:

1. "...what unites the incorporeal nature of reason with the body if not a certain harmony...?"
2. "What other than this unites the parts of the soul...?"
3. "What ...intermingles the elements of the body or holds together the parts of the body in an established order?"⁹

It is reasonable to hope that some of this agenda for human music can be derived or inferred from what is available; I have taken the Consolation as being the most likely place to achieve such deriving and inferring. The very first word in the very first sentence of Book One in the Latin text is encouraging: the word is *carmina*, songs: "*Carmina qui quondam studio florente peregi...*"

As Book One of the Consolation opens, Boethius is picturing himself in abject misery, his life seeming hopeless; he is dispirited, physically, mentally, and spiritually beaten down. Remarkably, Lady Philosophy appears in his prison cell, promising to help him, not to escape or to reverse Theodoric's rulings, but to bring him to his senses and "...wipe the dark cloud of mortal things from your eyes."¹⁰ He must become, once again, a master of himself; he must regain an inner freedom from the "...fury of these impotent men..."¹¹ This is her lofty urging, even while the ruler of the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy was indeed a man to be feared. She is holding up an ideal of inner liberation, whether or not physical liberation is possible.

Boethius delineates his misery. He no longer has access to a library, as he did at home. He was dressed in finer clothes. He was well thought of. Lady Philosophy was with him,

⁹ Ibid, Bk. 1, section 2, page 10

¹⁰ Bk. I P 2

¹¹ Bk. I V 4

guiding “...my whole view of life according to the norm of the heavenly order.”¹² Why does justice not prevail, accused as he is of seeking to restore the liberty of the Roman Senate, thus undermining the authority of the Ostrogothic dynasty? As reasonable as his prayer may seem, Lady Philosophy begins her instructions and urging: “...you have forgotten yourself a little.”¹³ His memory is disconnected from reason; though a rational animal, he has forgotten how the world is governed. The world is subject only to divine reason and so he has nothing to fear. Boethius has much to learn.

His memory should re-learn what his reason has always known. Only in this way can he regain his inner freedom, a state that will prevail whether or not physical freedom is possible now and a state that will transcend his present misery. If he will recall all that he learned in his philosophical insights, he will quickly be himself again. “You should not be surprised, then, if we are blown about by stormy winds in the voyage of this life, since our main duty is to oppose the wicked,” Lady Philosophy admonishes, thus attributing a moral duty and connection to the philosophical insights of Boethius.¹⁴

But he has still another question: “Creator of the star-filled universe,” he begins, “...you govern all things...human acts alone...you refuse to restrain within just bounds...we wallow here in the stormy sea of fortune...”¹⁵ He is questioning human freedom itself, but is quickly corrected. “You have not been driven out of your homeland; you have willfully wandered away. Or, if you prefer to think that you have been driven into exile, you yourself have done the driving, since no one else could do it.”¹⁶ With urging from Lady Philosophy, Boethius acknowledges that “...God the Creator governs his work...” and nothing happens without a purpose. Divine governance must be harmonized with even his suffering.¹⁷ Knowing all of this, viz. that he must harmonize his knowledge and memory in order to deal with his present situation, he still has to reconcile the “stormy sea of fortune”.

¹² Bk. 1 P 4

¹³ Bk. 1 P 2

¹⁴ Bk. 1 P 3

¹⁵ Bk. 1 V 5

¹⁶ Bk. 1 P 5

¹⁷ Bk. 1 P 6

Fortuna, the Roman goddess of luck, fame, chance, and fortune, must now be the subject of their interchange. Depicted most often as either blindfolded or veiled to emphasize her non-rational or capricious influence on human lives, she nonetheless was a popular deity. Her symbols were the cornucopia, a ship's rudder, and a wheel, suggesting diverse outcomes such as good blessings, direction and decisions, and unpredictable destiny. In his Agamemnon, Seneca writes, "Whatever Fortune has raised on high, she lifts but to bring low. Modest estate has longer life; then happy he woe'er, content with the common lot, with safe breeze hugs the shore, and, fearing to trust his skiff to the wider sea, with unambitious oar keeps close to land." (Chorus / 101)

"I am well acquainted with the many deceptions of that monster, Fortune," Lady Philosophy announces.¹⁸ She remonstrates with Boethius, in that he has expected his good fortune and thus happiness to endure. "One thing is certain, fixed by eternal law: nothing that is born can last."¹⁹ If X is the supreme good, it cannot be lost; happiness is the supreme good; therefore happiness cannot be lost.²⁰ She guides him through a list of supposed sources of happiness: material possessions, honors and power, and fame.²¹ Finally, she proposes a counterintuitive perspective: "Good fortune deceives, adverse fortune teaches...bad fortune frees them (i.e. persons) by making them see the fragile nature of happiness."²² If one conceives of happiness as honors, power, material possessions, or fame, this supposed happiness is not fulfillment.

A reader would expect Boethius, at this juncture, to propose a Christian view of happiness, as influenced by Aristotle, or the One according to Plato. Then, if happiness is the supreme good, we expect some detailing of the difference between happiness as the supreme good versus specious and fragile happiness. Saint Augustine of Hippo might have served as a model. In On the Free Choice of the Will, he wrote, "Our Lord Himself also encouraged belief in those whom He called to salvation with both His words and His deeds...This is life eternal, that they might know you, the true God, and Jesus Christ, the one whom You have sent."²³ Life eternal would clearly satisfy the supreme good criterion offered by Lady Philosophy. But Boethius says

¹⁸ Bk.II P 1

¹⁹ Bk.II V 3

²⁰ Bk.II P 4

²¹ Bk.II P 5-7

²² Bk.II P 8

²³ King edition, p.34

nothing about eternal life with God. In his City of God, Augustine wrote, “But the true and highest good...is God...for philosophy is directed to the obtaining of the blessed life, and he who loves God is blessed in the enjoyment of God.”²⁴ Boethius says nothing about enjoying God, and Christ receives no mention; instead, he has clearly said that happiness is the supreme good. It is time to harmonize, or at least clarify, the difference between fragile happiness and supreme happiness and their commonality.

These two aspects of happiness should not be separated but accepted as a continuum of one reality, viz. a quality of life, whether earthly or heavenly, which God wishes for all persons. “Clearly, then,” Lady Philosophy begins anew, “perfect happiness is the perfect state in which all goods are possessed.”²⁵ Honors, power, fame, and bodily pleasure are good but only partial; they cannot achieve what they promise, but “...are not perfect in embracing all that is good...”²⁶ This task of embracing all that is good is now his moral mandate, issuing from his metaphysical continuum of happiness.

The best clue on how to proceed comes from translator Richard H. Green (Langston Edition, 2010) where he writes in the Translator’s Preface: “In many instances, Boethius’s context makes the meaning of his philosophical terminology reasonably clear. Where it does not, I have tried to represent his ideas as nearly as I could in the language at my disposal.”²⁷ Professor Green, then, knowing that Boethius was Christian, was justified in rendering words in the original text in Christian terms. I am assuming that Boethius’s avoidance of specifically Christian vocabulary is explained by his deliberate engaging with the concept *harmonia*.

Consider this excerpt, Book III, verse 9, lines 1-2: “O God, Maker of heaven and earth, Who govern the world with eternal reason, at your command time passes from the beginning.” Green’s translation clearly gives Boethius’ sentence a Christian connotation; it is not at all equivalent to Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover and different enough from Plato’s One to cause no confusion. A brief survey of a few translations of this sentence gives us more insight into Boethius’ postulates.

²⁴ Dods edition, p.318

²⁵ Bk. III P 2

²⁶ Bk. III P 8

²⁷ Page 19

O Father and maker of heuen, and erth, that gouerneth the worlde wyth thy perpetual prouidence. And causeth y time to passe forth, fro thy age perdurable. **(George Colville, in 1556)**

*O thou in Lasting sort the world that rulest,
Of erthe and heaven the framr; Who time from first
Bidst go and stable stedy all elz dost while...* **(Queen Elizabeth I, in 1593)**

*O thou who with perpetual Reason rul'st the World, great Maker of the Heaven and Earth!
Who dost from Ages make Swift Time proceed,
And fix'd thy self, mak'st all things else to move!* **(Richard Lord Preston, in 1695)**

*O thou, who by eternal reason rul'st
The world, Creator both of earth and heav'n,
Who time command'st from age to age to flow
And motion giv'st to all, thyself unmoved;* **(Robert Duncan, in 1789)**

*Maker of earth and sky, from age to age
Who rul'st the world by reason; at whose word
Time issues from Eternity's abyss..* **(H.R.James, in 1897)²⁸**

Each of the five translator/interpreters is addressing a person, using the words *Father, Thou, Creator, and Maker*. Boethius's Latin text, though, uses the noun *sator* (weeder, hoer, patcher, mender, and tailor); in some interesting way, God is like a gardener or a tailor. The cosmic *sator* weeds and hoes whatever plants need weeding and hoeing; he also mends and fashions whatever garments need mending and fashioning. *Gardener*, though, is especially helpful in deciphering Boethius.

Eden, the special Garden with its own Gardener, was a harmonious state of existence between humanity and God described in the Book of Genesis; Heaven is humanity's return. Between these, in human time, we find partial, feeble, or incomplete renderings of happiness,

²⁸ These five translations are available at <https://archive.org>. The relevant pages are these: Colville, 1107; Elizabeth, 60; Preston, 129; Duncan, 97; and James, 130.

whether in the guise of honor, wealth, power, fame, or bodily pleasure. The latter have value and are salvageable to the degree that they are harmonized with their perfect versions, because this harmonization holds the promise of the fully-moral restoration of humanity. Boethius is replacing traditional Christian terms, e.g. salvation, with the term *happiness*, a clear nod to Aristotle.

Boethius has established happiness as a continuum encompassing a full range of goodness. Honors, wealth, power, fame, and bodily pleasure, though only partially good, nonetheless have their place in this continuum of happiness/goodness.²⁹ This is a clear analogue to the ethical-metaphysical Great Chain of Being or the Ladder of Being (*scala naturae*) of Plotinus, who also found ideas of Plato and Aristotle agreeable, and it is reasonable to assume that Boethius was well acquainted with Plotinus when deciding on a conceptual framework. As with Plato and his eternal and perfect Form of The Good or The One, Boethius has identified simply ‘god’ (*deus*) as the simple, perfect, ineffable existent at the top of his ladder. Though a Christian, he is not referring to the Triune God, nor is he referring to the many Graeco-Roman gods on Mount Olympus.³⁰ His *deus* is perfect but abstract. As with Aristotle, who introduced the paradigm of the continuum in his History of Animals, he presents this Perfect Good as presiding over devolving levels of all existents.

All beings are arranged from highest to lowest with The One/The Good (*deus*) as the pinnacle, and, at each devolving level, there is an absence of some characteristic and/or some level of goodness. Each existent is envisioned as attracted to the pinnacle and moving toward it, because goodness is irresistible to the will. Evil, envisioned as the very bottom of the ladder, is the absence of all forms of being and all intelligibility; it is ultimate privation, and deliberately seeking such nothingness is inconceivable. Boethius describes its human relevance:

*Nothing is done for the sake of evil, even
by wicked men, who, as I have proved, are
actually seeking the good when they are*

²⁹ Bk.III P 8

³⁰ Boethius neither states nor implies Trinitarian doctrine. King Theodoric, an Arian Christian necessarily rejecting the mainstream Christian doctrine of the Trinity, would have been pleased with the Consolation, if he read it.

perverted by wretched error... ³¹

Error, then, is the great moral problem, not evil and not malice; the greatest human and moral endeavor and challenge is seeking the heights of human possibility, while facing possible perversion because of what Boethius calls “wretched error.” Evil is empty of all content and meaning, the polar opposite of The One/The Good; it is the conceptual possibility that we can give a name to an X that lacks traits, being, intelligibility, and thus any goodness. All existents which lie ‘above’ evil on the metaphorical ladder have varied levels of content, meaning, and thus goodness, all of these increasing the closer they ascend toward The One/The Good.

The meaning and intent of the Consolation of Philosophy, then, is to offer an ethical-metaphysical “ladder” similar to that of Plotinus in order to conceptualize the harmonization of the inferior/partial forms of happiness/goodness with the perfection thereof. The Consolation did not achieve the three goals as Boethius had envisioned those years earlier in his De Institutione Musica, but did instead portray human individuals directed toward a moral perfection with the three powers of the human soul, viz. intellect, will, and memory. This achievement, though, was no mere proto-psychology but rather a paradigm for moral development based on philosophical forebears, if not on Christian moral theology. The spirit of *musica humana* was not forgotten but rather enlarged. Lady Philosophy, his guide, sings verse passages that alternate with the prose, and in the prose provides challenging instruction to this disheartened prisoner. The harmony of human music has given way to the harmony that is a required template of man’s moral striving.

³¹ Bk.IV P 6

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Augustine of Hippo. The City of God. Translated and Edited by Marcus Dods. New York: Hafner. 1948.

Augustine of Hippo. On the Free Choice of the Will, On Grace and Free Choice, and Other Writings. Translated and Edited by Peter King. London: Cambridge University Press. 2010.

Boethius. De institutione musica. G. Friedlein (Ed) Leipzig: Teubner. 1867

Boethius. Fundamentals of Music. Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Calvin M. Bower. Ed. Claude Palisca. New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 1989.

Boethius. Anicii Manlii Severini Boetii Philosophiae Consolationis Libri Quinque. Ed. Rudolfus Pieper. Leipzig: B.G.Teubner. 1871. Retrieved from: <https://archive.org>.

Boethius. The Consolation of Philosophy. Translated by Richard H. Green. Edited by Douglas C. Langston. New York: W.W.Norton & Company. 2010.

Bulmer-Thomas, Ivor. Boethian Number Theory: A Translation of the De Institutione Arithmetica, With Introduction and Notes. By Michael Masi. *Classical Review*. Vol.35. No.1. April 1985. 86-87.

Cassiodorus, Flavius Magnus Aurelius. Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning. Edited and Translated By R.A.B. Mynors. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1937.

Cassiodorus, Flavius Magnus Aurelius. Letters of Cassiodorus, Being a Translation of the Variae Epistolae of Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus Senator. Translator and Editor Thomas Hodgkin. London: Henry Frowder. 1886.

Chadwick, Henry. Boethius, The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1981.

Chamberlain, David S. "Philosophy of Music in the Consolatio of Boethius". *Speculum*. Vol.45. No.1 January 1970. 80-97.

Cherniss, Harold Fredrik. The Platonism of Gregory of Nyssa. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 1930. Retrieved from: <https://archive.org>.

Heraclitus. The Fragments of the Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on Nature. Translated from the Greek Text of Bywater by G.T.W. Patrick. Baltimore: Murray. 1889. Retrieved from <https://archive.org>

Masi, Michael. Boethius' Number Theory: A Translation of the De Institutione Arithmetica
With Introduction and Notes). Leiden: Brill. 1983.

Pike, Nelson. God and Timelessness. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1970.

Schrade, Leo. "Music in the Philosophy of Boethius". *The Musical Quarterly*. Vol.33. No.2.
April 1947. 188-200

Walden, Daniel K.S. "Charting Boethius: Music and the Diagrammatic Tree in the Cambridge
University Library's De Institutione Arithmetica." MS II.3.12. *Early Music History*. Vol.34.
2015. 206-228