

# REFLECTIONS CONCERNING ANCIENT AND MODERN PHILOSOPHY OF MUSIC

Stefan Lorenz Sorgner

John Cabot University in Rome  
stefan@sorgner.de

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, the author refers to some of the main fields of research within the Ancient philosophy of music, and stresses that these philosophies do not have to be studied solely from a historical perspective. Many insights of the various Ancient philosophies of music have the potential for being of the utmost relevance for many contemporary reflections. This insight could be of particular importance for developing a detailed contemporary account of the relevance of the numerical ratios which have been upheld in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition. The author argues that the various philosophers of this tradition had put forward poignant and correct insights, even though it is doubtful whether their explanations have always been the most plausible ones.

## INTRODUCTION

Mick Jagger represents an androgynous satyr from the working class, and most young people idolize him as a hero and dream of leading a hedonistic life like him, according to Bloom the author of "The closing of the American mind". (Bloom 1987, 68-81) Rock music in general promotes a life which is dedicated to the sexual passions, because the rhythm of rock music corresponds to the rhythm of sexual intercourse. The lyrics support the attitude of being concerned solely with sex, drugs, hatred concerning authority, in particular ones parents, and a hypocritical version of solidarity. (Bloom 1987, 68-81) This is Bloom's position. It represents an attack on rock music which stands in the tradition of the Platonic attack on some works of art.

His position also reveals one of the central questions within the philosophy of music, namely the question concerning the reception of music: What can music bring about in the recipients? Basically one can distinguish three groups of replies. Firstly, there is the group of Pythagorean-Platonic thinkers

who hold that music can and ought to bring about virtues in the recipients. The Pythagoreans, Plato, Seneca, Cicero, Plutarch, Plotinus, Augustine and Boethius can all get associated with this attitude. Secondly, we have a group of sceptical and epicurean philosophers like Epicurus, Lucretius and Sextus Empiricus who doubt the ethical powers of music and hold and stress the hedonistic character of music. Thirdly, we have an intermediate position which is best represented by Aristotle who both holds and affirms the educative as well as the entertaining aspects of music. (Sorgner 2010a, 22)

All three positions are still being put forward in modern philosophy. Thinkers like Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Vattimo can get associated with the first type of approach because all of them uphold that music can bring about moral and cultural insights and attitudes in the recipients. Kant, Hanslick, and the formalist and the aestheticist tradition, on the other hand, doubt that anything but pleasure or pain can be experienced by recipients. Adorno in a way takes in a middle position, because he stresses the importance of the autonomy of music. (Sziborsky 2003, 191-208) However, he also claims that by being confronted with autonomous works of music, the recipient realises paternalist and authoritarian structures of the society he lives in. Hence, autonomous works can bring about moral insights in the recipients in a dialectic manner.

There are some obvious parallels concerning the Ancient and Modern philosophy of music. There are also some obvious differences which need to be considered, too, because our concept of music is different from the Ancient Greek concept of *mousike techne*, the art of the muses. *Techne* cannot solely get translated by the word art, because it also involves crafts, techniques or craftsmanship. In addition, the muses, the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, not only represented musical activities but also stood for poetry, astronomy, history, comedy or tragedy. (Sorgner 2010a, 17) By employing the concept *mousike*, philosophers did not solely refer to instrumental music, but the word was also used to refer to the art of the muses in general or at least to all types of musical dramas which consist of words, sounds and dance.

When we talk about the philosophy of music in Antiquity, it is tempting to also mention Homer and Hesiod, because their epics are representatives of a type of poetic philosophical thinking which in its explicit form begins with Pythagoras who supposedly also introduced the notion "philosophy". (Thiel 2010, 87-102; Staab 2010, 103-122) In addition, it is tempting to also refer to some Ancient myths in which problems of the philosophy of music have been dealt with in a metaphorical manner, and many later philosophers, musicians and artists were concerned with these myths because they contained the philosophical questions with which they were concerned in such a

way. One of the most intriguing myths is the contest between Marsyas and Apollo.

The satyr Marsyas found a kind of flute, the *aulos*, after it had been thrown away by Athene, who invented the instrument. Marsyas learnt to play the instrument and became convinced of his capacities as performer. Hence he decided to challenge the leader of the muses and God of the arts Apollon to a musical contest.<sup>1</sup> The instrument with which Apollo is usually depicted is the *kithara* which was invented by the messenger of the gods Hermes. The muses were granted the right to be jury members and they decided that Apollon had won the contest. To punish Marsyas for his arrogance in claiming that he is a better musician than the God of the *kithara*, Apollo decided to hang the satyr and skin him which is quite a brutal way of treating a loser of a musical contest. It has been a matter of dispute to explain why Marsyas was punished in such a cruel manner? In this context, it has also been discussed what the contest between Apollo and Marsyas represents. (Sorgner 2010a, 17-19)

The philosopher of music from Columbia University Lydia Goehr is currently working on a monograph in which she considers various philosophical treatises of this myth and analyses them concerning their relevance for the debates in the philosophy of music. However, this myth has also been dealt with extensively in the history of the visual arts. Michelangelo, Myron, Tintoretto, Tizian, Rubens and Tiepolo represent the most famous examples in question. (Brinkmann 2008) In addition, the Marsyas myth is still being dealt with by composers today. The best example in this context is Wolfgang Rihm's work "Marsyas". However, the meaning of integrating Ancient myth within a composition has changed significantly from Plato via Vincenzo Galilei, Richard Wagner and Friedrich Nietzsche until Wolfgang Rihm. Before, I will be concerned with the Marsyas myth in more detail, I will give a short survey concerning the meaning of myth in the history of music and the philosophy of music.

In Plato, myths as well as music were supposed to have an educative function. His remarks inspired Vincenzo Galilei's thinking about music. (Sorgner 2010a, 15-16; Poehlmann 2010, 56-67) Vincenzo Galilei who was the father of the famous astronomer and a member of the Florentine Camera-ta was partly responsible for the invention of opera around 1600. He referred to Plato's philosophy of music and integrated it into his own thinking about

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<sup>1</sup> The history of the musical contests is extremely interesting and leads from Marsyas via the mediaeval Minnesang, a musical contest of knights, to Wagner's Tannhäuser and the British Pop Idol and the Eurovision Song Contest today.

music to recreate Ancient tragedies which was actually his intention. He was dissatisfied with the polyphonic music of his time because he believed that it merely stirs up the emotions and entertains the audience. He on the other hand believed in virtue, and wanted music to be supportive in bringing about virtues in the listeners. In Ancient texts he read about the ethical power of Ancient tragedies which he believed to be sung from beginning until the end of a performance. Contemporary research rather holds that only the chorus sang, the protagonists, however, did not. Galilei's misunderstanding brought it about that all parts of operas contain music. He also believed that no intervals were used in musical pieces, which is the reason why the initial operas were monodies. Some and then classical philologists challenge this assumption. Recently, Sier (2010, 151-161) put forward reasons which were based on Plato's writings for claiming that harmonic intervals existed and different notes were played at the same musical moment during musical performances. Unfortunately, and this is one of the greatest challenges research concerning the Ancient philosophy of music faces, is that we simply do not and cannot know what Ancient music sounded like. Of course, there have been attempts to reconstruct Ancient music, but as we do not have recordings of Ancient music such a task is bound to be highly speculative. In addition, Vincenzo Galilei integrated Plato's comment that words have to guide the instrumental music into his thinking, because instrumental music alone merely plays around with one's passions, only by means of the words one can specify the exact content so that a virtuous ideal can get communicated. Because of the noble goals which the initiators of opera had, and the faith they had in the power of music, the content of these works had to be such that it suited well their intentions. Consequently they had chosen the Orpheus myth as the appropriate content of most of the operas composed during this period. Hence, myth was used to support the ethical power of music. The main ethical goal of the pieces was to establish virtues in the listeners. However, the composers did not intend to bring about significant cultural, social and political changes by means of their music. The next important step concerning the relevance of myth in the history of opera is related to the compositions and reflections of Richard Wagner.

The use of myth in musical dramas according to Richard Wagner and the early Friedrich Nietzsche who wrote the "Birth of Tragedy", was supposed to be such that it has an ethical function but more importantly it was also supposed to have a social and cultural task. (Sorgner 2008, 194-214; Sorgner 2006, 59-76; Sorgner 2003, 115-134) Richard Wagner was inspired by Ancient Greek festivals during which all social levels within a community come together to reinforce the communal feeling of belonging together.

(Sorgner 2011a, 152-171) Thereby, he hoped that a move from a society in which individuals live separate from one another similar to atoms, towards an organic community would occur. (Toennies 1979) However, he held that Ancient Greek myth would not work in this way in Germany because the Germanic people had their own history and their own myths which is the reason why he employed them within his own music dramas.

Even though Wagner was not successful concerning his task, something similar did occur during the Third Reich in Germany. Myths were being used to bring about totalitarian structures within Germany. Adorno recognised the dangers which are related to myth and criticised the use of myth in Wagner's musical works, even though he had great respect for other aspects of his work like the widening of musical material by Wagner. Due to the abuse of myth during the twentieth century, many intellectuals today share a certain hostility concerning myth and seem to link myths with the affirmation of totalitarian structures.

However, the work of Wolfgang Rihm, who is a pupil of Karlheinz Stockhausen, shows that affirmative use of myth and rejection of totalitarian structures can consistently turn up within one perspective. The main focus within this work is the demonstration of the use of power and the suffering inflicted upon Marsyas which it brings about. Thereby, the following insights become particularly relevant. Firstly, the use of dissonance and the sounds which are being brought about by this composition make it clear that the piece advertises a radical type of this worldliness. There is no transcendent world in which the Gods exists or in which we have ideal harmonic ratios, but there is only this one world full of permanent change and suffering. Secondly, insight number one gets further support because the composer uses a Greek myth which represents a world view which is diametrically opposed to the Judeo-Christian one which is dominant in Western industrial countries. By being confronted with a radically different world view from the dominant one, we become aware of the contingency of all world views. Thirdly, the insight that we are living in an immanent world gets specified further because we are being made aware of the power structures which are of particular relevance once there is no transcendent judge whose punishment we have to fear. The importance of the connection between power and the right to judge becomes particularly clear within the Marsyas myth. Fourthly, the representation of Marsyas in Rihm's musical work alludes to the possibility of Marsyas depicting composers or artists in general in a nihilistic world without clear standards of taste, whereby the skinning of Marsyas corresponds to the self doubt and uncertainty of an artist whether he fulfils his role as an artist. Fifthly, the Marsyas myth has a particularly intellectual appeal

because it hints at several problems within the philosophy of music. In the following sections, I will refer to three interpretations which reveal many aspects of the Ancient debate concerning the philosophy of music and the relevance of their insights concerning the contemporary discourse.

1. The myth could simply represent the contest between stringed versus wind instrument, which implies that for some reason string instruments are superior to wind ones because Apollo who wins the contest plays the *kithara*. There has been quite some hesitation concerning the *aulos* as an instrument. Both Plato as well as Aristotle did not regard the *aulos* as a valuable instrument and both suggested to avoid its use due to the passionate nature of the instrument. One reason for the identification of the flute with chaos and the passions is the sound of the instrument. Another reason is that one cannot sing and use ones *logos* when one is playing a flute. A further reason might be that the way an *aulos* has to be played resembles some type of sexual intercourse and many thinkers were afraid of the chaotic nature of sexual intimacy.

2. It is possible that Apollo represents the arts in general whereas Marsyas represents only one specific art. In that case the story implies that one specific art must never claim superiority among the arts so that a hierarchy of the arts comes about. However, this interpretation is rather a postmodern one because currently many thinkers doubt that there is plausible criterion upon which we can erect a hierarchy of the arts. In the history of the philosophy of music most philosophers created a hierarchy of the arts and of the components within one type of art. In Plato's case it was clear that instrumental music brings about morally dubious consequences in the recipients. Only when the appropriate verbal content governs the melody, music can have good consequences. Schopenhauer shared Plato's belief in the realm of forms. However, in contrast to him he regarded instrumental music as the highest type of art, because music is supposed to be an immediate representation of the nature of the world, the will itself, whereas all the other arts are mediated ones via the realm of forms. In the Ancient world, the only art which nowadays belongs to the fine arts which was valued highly was music. The reason for this was that music was closely linked to ontology whereby the various levels of ontology were linked with numbers because it was possible to find the same numerical ratios in all of these realms.

It was the intimate connection between ontology, numerical ratios and music which enabled music to be taken seriously in Antiquity, why it became one of the seven liberal arts in late Antiquity and why it was the only "fine art" which belonged to the liberal arts then. Of course, the concept of the "fine arts" was developed during the Enlightenment. Painting and sculpturing

belonged to the inferior *artes mechanicae* in Antiquity and during the Middle Ages. Leonardo da Vinci was the first who placed painting on the top of the hierarchy of the arts in his fascinating book “Paragone” in which he discusses the contest between the arts. Kant and Hegel, on the other hand, referred to reason to justify their placing poetry on the top of the hierarchy of the arts. (Sorgner 2010a, 19-20)

3. Another contest which was implicit in the myth of Apollo and Marsyas is the antagonism between sensuality and reason. Marsyas is a satyr and satyrs are lustful natural beings who belong to the ecstatic god of wine Dionysos who usually gets depicted with the wind instrument, *aulos*, too. In the Marsyas myth reason wins against sensuality which might have the normative implication that reason ought to win against the passionate side of human nature, and that it is in our interest that reasons rules within our soul. Plato and the Platonic tradition agree with this judgement. Nietzsche, however, refers to the importance of the interplay between Apollo and Dionysus but turns the evaluation of the relationship between reason and the passions upside down. It is in our interest when both the Dionysian as well as Apollinian aspects are being considered within our actions whereby we have to bear in mind according to Nietzsche that the Apollinian reason comes about as a result of a Dionysian grounding so that it would be false to claim that there is a necessary antagonism between the Dionysian and the Apollinian. Consequently, he holds that musical tragedies also ought to take this insight into consideration and integrate Apollinian and Dionysian elements in its score whereby the Dionysian side ought to have a foundational character. In contrast to both Plato and Nietzsche, one can find a different evaluation of these forces in the work “I Sonnetti Lussuriosi” by the contemporary composer Michael Nyman. Both the content of the lyrics of these eight songs as well as the musical language of the pieces affirm primarily the erotic and Dionysian aspect of existence. Dissonant intervals support the atmosphere of permanent erotic tension. The rhythm and the instrumentation of the songs allude to the affirmation of a playful sexuality without any moral limits which got superimposed by the people according to this view. The lyrics strengthen this impression by giving explicit descriptions of sexual acts so that a parental advice had to get added to the CD that it contains extremely explicit content. The songs were composed on the basis of eight sonnets written by Pietro Aretino. It was during the Renaissance when Aretino wrote the originally sixteen pornographic sonnets in which he affirms daring practices of erotic encounters. These sonnets again were based upon sixteen engravings by Marcantonio Raimondi who was thrown into prison by the pope for making them. The engravings which still exist were made after

drawings entitled “I modi” by Giulio Romano which are lost unfortunately. The painter Giulio Romano was a close collaborator of Raffel and worked in Raffael’s studio.

The relevance of Dionysos for our contemporary culture not only reveals itself in these songs of Michael Nyman but also in the opera *Die Bassariden* by Hans Werner Henze which is based upon a libretto written by W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman who adapted the tragedy *Bacchae* written by Euripides. The opera portrays the power of eroticism and its destructive elements both in its musical as well as in its literary elements. If Henze and Nyman had to adopt the myth of Marsyas, it would probably have had to be Marsyas who defeats Apollo.

All three interpretations of the Marsyas myth reveal its importance for questions concerning the philosophy of music. Similar analysis can be made on the basis of myth which deal with Arion from Lesbos, Pan versus Eros, Odysseus, or last but not least Orpheus whereby I particularly wish to stress the opera “*The Mask of Orpheus*” by Harrison Birtwistle who adopts the myth in a timely manner.

Besides the problems of Ancient philosophy of music and their reception in modernity mentioned so far, there are others which have not been mentioned explicitly, but which have been alluded to within the previous sections already. The following three topics are particularly relevant in this context: 1. The Production of Music; 2. The Relationship between Music and Ontology; 3. The Relationships between Music, Numerical Ratios, and Beauty.

## 1. THE PRODUCTION OF MUSIC

Many philosophers from the Platonic tradition distinguished between morally appropriate and inappropriate music. Plato stressed that the form of the good is being contained in appropriate music which can be used for educative means. In order to have such music in which the logos is dominant and which limits the expressions of our passions, the music has to be created by the right kind of composer. (Sier 2010) However, it is a matter of debate what the prerequisites of such a composer are.

Plato held that musicians cannot have access to the realm of forms to actually have an intellectual perception of what is good or what is beautiful. Hence musicians need to accept what philosophers teach and then apply these insights. However, there are other interpretations of Plato according to which philosophy gets identified with the highest kind of music, and one can find passages where Plato himself stresses this identification. I doubt that this



is an appropriate way of reading Plato, because Plato clearly upholds the principle of specialisation and that every human being ought to focus solely on becoming master of one *techne*. Hence, it seems clear that philosophers when they are philosophers, they cannot be artists any longer. Once you are a philosopher you realise the importance of being a philosopher and also the intrinsic value which lies in this profession. Plotinus, on the other hand, is explicit in stressing that not only philosophers but also musicians and lovers can get access to the higher realms of existence. (Sorgner 2010b) Musicians after having contemplated the realm of forms have fulfilled the necessary preconditions for turning this information into musical works in an appropriate manner. Schopenhauer's philosophy of music actually contains quite a few similarities to Plotinus' one, and it is striking to see how similar they are. (Sorgner 2011b) In the contemporary discourse the majority of thinkers seem to doubt the possibility that there is any objective content which can get known and communicated by musicians.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MUSIC AND ONTOLOGY

I mentioned before that music was the only "fine art" which was listed among the liberal arts in late Antiquity. It had this special position because music was closely connected to the various levels of Being via the analogous numerical ratios which exist in all of these spheres. (Sorgner 2010a, 20-21) Modern philosophy of music was dominated by a different understanding. From Kant onwards, most philosophers of art claimed that the arts are autonomous and cannot get analysed by reference to practical, theoretical or ontological concepts. The same applies to music. Lydia Goehr argues convincingly in her monograph "The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works" (1992) that it was around 1800 when music stopped being related to non-musical elements and the concept of musical works came into existence.<sup>2</sup> During the previous decades this development stopped and it became more and more important again to acknowledge the relevance of the non-musical world for musical pieces. From a philosophical perspective Vattimo who stands in the hermeneutic tradition of Heidegger and Gadamer revives the relevance of ontology for the aesthetics discourse. (2008) However, his ontology is a hermeneutic one whereby Being reveals itself in events, and a musical work can be such an event. However, the existence of an insight is dependent on the musical piece which embodies it. Thereby, his understand-

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<sup>2</sup> See also Sorgner/Fuerbeth 2003, 1-20.

ing of ontology is radically different from an Ancient understanding.

In the dominant Ancient traditions music was inseparably connected to Being whereby Being represented the foundational level of the world. Boethius summarises this element of many former philosophies of music well when he distinguishes three types of music: *musica mundana*, *musica humana* and *musica instrumentalis*. *Musica mundana* stands for the harmony of the macrocosm. *Musica humana* on the other hand represents the analogous structures in the microcosm, i.e. the relationship between body and soul. *Musica instrumentalis* refers to the musical sound which we can hear. According to the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition which was summarised by Boethius there are analogous structures on all three levels of music and what is important on all levels are the numerical ratios which one can find there. (Heilmann 2010, 311-330)

### 3. THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MUSIC, NUMERICAL RATIOS, AND BEAUTY

Reflections concerning numerical ratios were particularly important for the philosophy of music, and the Pythagoreans developed complex systems for analysing such ratios. The *tetraktys*, the monochord, and harmonic ratios are some of the most relevant concepts in this context. The golden ratio is another concept whose realisation many Greeks attributed to Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. However, the first written definition of that ratio can be found in Euclid's *Elements*. Later thinkers who belong to the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition integrated the golden ratio into their reflections concerning music and the other arts, too. Plato, Fibonacci, Kepler but also the leading contemporary mathematical physicist Sir Roger Penrose can be mentioned in this context. This tradition is still alive in the contemporary world of music, too. Last year, the opera "Kepler" had its world premiere in Linz. It was composed by Philip Glass, who is the most successful composer of classical music today. Glass writes minimal music which is mostly tonal. In the aforementioned opera he glorifies the life and work of the Neo-Pythagorean-Platonic thinker and scientist Kepler. This raises many questions from the perspective of Adorno and Popper. However, I doubt that there is anything morally dubious concerning this musical piece. In addition, I think it is one of the greatest operas of the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Many thinkers of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition held that the nature of beauty can be found in harmonic ratios and the golden ratio. Plotinus doubted this position, even though he acknowledged that these ratios are one way in which beauty can reveal itself. Due to his holding that colours and virtues

can be beautiful and also that neither of these types of beauty can get analysed by means of numerical ratios, he infers that beauty must be something else, something simple which lies beyond the realm in which ratios can exist. (Sorgner 2010b, 286-289)

Beauty used to be a central concept for approaching musical works. However, from Kant onwards the sublime became more and more important. Kant applied the concept merely to the perception of nature. Via Rosenkrantz and his aesthetics of the ugly and Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian, beauty steadily lost its relevance and the sublime took over and gained prominence in the field of the arts. Adorno and Welsch even held that modern music and also the arts in general are dominated by the concept of the sublime. (Welsch 1990, 114-156) Many philosophers of music, especially the ones in the tradition of the Frankfurt school, doubted the value of beauty which can get analysed by means of numerical ratios and connected this type of beauty with totality or Kitsch.

However, postmodern aesthetics and evolutionary aesthetics granted that beauty is a valuable concept which ought to get appropriate recognition or at least that it does not have to get associated with fascist social structures as some member of the Frankfurt school claimed. In particular from the perspectives of evolutionary aesthetics and neuroaesthetics the harmonic ratios and the golden ratio are considered carefully, and I think this is a valuable way of dealing with these ratios, because this approach takes seriously the insights from philosophers of the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, but at the same time it naturalises their insights whereby they become more plausible for many scholars today.

However, there are further insights concerning the Ancient philosophy of music which ought to get considered by evolutionary aestheticists today. Lucretius explains that after the techniques have been developed which are helpful for human survival, the non-necessary arts got developed which are a prerequisite for a pleasurable way of structuring ones leisure times. Music in Lucretius gets identified with a means of achieving the highest kinds of pleasure. (Rumpf 2010, 217-232) Even though I doubt that the importance of music lies solely in the pleasure it gives to recipients, I think Lucretius' account considers valuable insights which deserve further consideration.

## CONCLUSION

What was important for me in this summarising text was to point to some of the main fields of research within Ancient philosophy of music, and to also

stress that dealing with these philosophies does not have to be made solely from a historical perspective, even though I can understand the fascination and the importance of such an approach. However, many insights of the various Ancient philosophies of music have the potential of being of utmost relevance for many contemporary reflections. Martha Nussbaum applies many insights from Ancient ethical tradition to contemporary ethical questions – with great success. Analogous procedures can be taken in the field of the philosophy of music. Lydia Goehr seems to take a similar approach by focusing on the Marsyas myth. I am working on a detailed contemporary account of the relevance of the numerical ratios which have been upheld in the Pythagorean-Platonic tradition, because I think that the various philosophers of this tradition had put forward poignant and correct insights, even though I doubt whether their explanations have always been the most plausible ones. However, many other topics in this field are still subject to research. The future needs our history, and without a detailed awareness of the past, there will be no progress, because we will get stuck in the same dilemmas over and over again.

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