

The Medieval Concept of Music Perception

Hearing, Calculating and Contemplating

Seeking to indicate the most salient features of the medieval perception of music, we must first of all point to the close relationship between the sensual and intellectual elements. This relationship is most conspicuous in the term "harmonica" introduced in the Latin Middle Ages by Boethius and defined as follows: "harmonica is the faculty of perceiving through senses and the intellect the differences between high and low sounds" (Friedlein 1867: 352).

The same definition reveals another significant feature of the perception of music, namely, that the importance is attached not to individual sounds, but to the differences or relationships between them, that is to the intervals. Since — in accordance with the Pythagorean tradition, which was a major force in medieval music theory — the relationship between sounds can be expressed numerically, it may therefore be considered in terms of the relationship of two numbers, apart from actual sound and beyond physical time. This feature makes it possible to examine individual musical intervals and consequently the whole musical composition on two levels: the sensual and the intellectual.

The question arises whether this concept of music could influence the perception of a medieval listener. For instance, can listening to music be understood as a process which engages both cognitive powers and concerns reducing in some unspecified manner the data perceived and processed by the senses to abstract categories which can be conceived only by the intellect? In my subsequent remarks, I shall try to formulate an answer to this question.

In our search for information on the subject of the perception of music in the Middle Ages, we must depend almost entirely on the opinion offered by the music theorists and philosophers of that time. The point must be made here, however, that the problem of music perception did not belong to the canon of questions investigated within the framework of medieval treatises on music. It is dealt with in works devoted to broader problems. Abundant

and most interesting material on the subject is furnished by the commentaries to book VIII of Aristotle's *Politics*. Latin Europe became acquainted with *Politics* in the second half of the 13th century in a translation by Wilhelm Moerbeke. Commentaries on the subject were provided by Albertus Magnus and Thomas Aquinas, whose work was carried on by Peter of Auvergne. In the 14th century, commentaries to *Politics* were written by Walter Burley and Nicole Oresme who also translated the work into French. Echoes of *Politics* can also be found in the *Musica speculativa*, a treatise by Johannes de Muris, one of the most widely disseminated texts on music theory in the late Middle Ages (Witkowska-Zaremba 1992: 52).

To interpret the statements of the authors who wrote about music several centuries ago, we must, quite obviously examine the then prevailing conceptual system. I am fully aware, therefore, that the word "perception" does not have an exact equivalent in medieval music terminology. The texts mentioned earlier, which I intend to discuss in greater detail, pertain to listening to music, to listening which also involves understanding music by referring that which is heard to the binding system of norms (Eggebrecht 1985: 57).

For Aristotle music was one of the four disciplines, together with grammar (*grammata – litterae*), gymnastics (*gymnastike – luctativa*) and drawing (*graphike – protractiva*), which provided commendable pursuits to fill the free time (*schole – vacatio*). Music occupied a special place among the four because, unlike the other three, it had no practical application. Its only purpose was to provide pleasure (*hedone – delectatio*). Delectation that accompanies leisure is understood as the antithesis of sadness (*lype – tristitia*) caused by work. Delectation is caused by play (*paidia – ludus*) or by *diagoge*, a word which for Aristotle seems to have meant a form of intellectual contemplation that is conducive to moral improvement.

In this context, the Stagirite called to mind a scene from the 9th book of the *Odyssey*. At a banquet given by Alcinous, King of Phaeacia, Odysseus, charmed by the song of the aoidos (bard) Demodocus, highly commends listening to music together with guests seated at a banquet table. The words of Odysseus quoted by Aristotle as well as the scene of listening to music have been altered slightly in the translation by Wilhelm Moerbeke: he has the banqueting guests sit at a "super tecta" (which is the Latin calque of the Greek *ana domata*). Hence, it may be assumed that they were seated not in a banqueting hall but outside the house; according to the translation they listened not to the song of the bard but to the nightingale. The word *diagoge*, which is used by Aristotle to describe that scene, was translated into Latin as *deductio* (Aristoteles 1872: 340).

The commentators of *Politics* made an effort to give a more precise definition of the term *deductio*. Furthermore, one may note a certain consistency in the interpretations which created a bridge between the argument put forth by Albertus Magnus and Peter of Auvergne. Most generally speaking, the interpretations incorporated the Neoplatonic concept of music as a mathematical discipline into the Aristotelian system of education. It was also in this spirit that Nicole Oresme interpreted the term *deductio*.

Albertus Magnus asserted that the term *deductio* meant to listen to music (*deductio enim est audire musicam*). It was morally beneficial because through the musical measures listeners were able to learn the structure of the universe rooted in the laws of harmony (Jammy 1651: 482).

Peter of Auvergne considered *deductio* an intellectual activity (*operatio intellectualis*) dictated by the mind (*secundum rationem*) that led through *delectatio* to happiness. He drew attention to the attainment of *delectatio* by listening to music in which he seems to have discerned a process that evolved on three levels: sensual, intellectual and ethical. Thus the sound of music (*sonus harmonicae*) first reaches the sense of hearing which is transported with delight by the agency of musical proportions. Peter was of the opinion that this kind of *delectatio* is accessible to everyone. Next, the sounds are submitted to evaluation by the intellect, which examines the principle behind and reason for proportions as something intrinsically rational. In this manner the intellect attains a state of perfection (*perfectio intellectus*) enabling it to recognize the truth. Recognition of truth through the agency of musical proportion is accompanied by intellectual delight (*delectatio intellectualis*). Ultimately, this kind of *delectatio* leads to a preference for a virtuous life (*secundum virtutem*). Peter tended then to distinguish two basic aspects of music: the sensual and the intellectual-ethical. It is in this spirit that he seems to have interpreted Aristotle's division (given only in a rough sketch and not explained in detail), the division into "pure music" (*mousike psile*) and "music with melody" (*mousike meta melodias*), Latinized by Wilhelm of Moerbeke as *musica nuda existens* and *musica cum melodia*. Peter linked the category of "pure music" with "the theoremata rooted in music, the contemplation of which leads to the perfection of the intellect and to delectation" (Thomas 1966: 423-425).

The structure clearly outlined by Albertus Magnus, which combined quadrivial music with Aristotelian *diagoge*, and which was developed by Peter of Auvergne, emerged in the form of a mature concept in the commentaries of Nicole Oresme. *La vie contemplative*, as Oresme called the area of activity free of any obligations (*la vie active*), becomes an area to be devoted to sublime and noble thoughts directed toward physical and

mathematical sciences, for having as their subject the beauty and greatness of creation they lead to the knowledge of God's perfection. It is in this area that music, whose purpose is deduction and delectation, is located. That is why, according to Oresme, it is one of the seven liberal arts. That, in brief, is the background of the scene taken out of Homer which Oresme described as follows: the guests, assembled on the house terrace, were seated at the table listening to the song of the nightingale hidden close by. This scene, in Oresme opinion, reflects in its poetic form, the essence of *deductio* which he understood as "delight and pleasure derived from speculative or contemplative thoughts".

Oresme drew a clear division between music which sounded real (*la musique sensible*) and music which was speculative (*la musique speculative*) and, in terms suggested by Peter of Auvergne, located this division in the categories distinguished by Aristotle. The mutual relation between *la musique sensible* and *la musique speculative*, indicated by Oresme, seems to confirm the similarity of thought of the two commentators. It was assumed that actual music created conditions for the consideration of speculative music and for preparing the soul for contemplation. Speculative music, on the other hand, was an intellectual experience of the order that existed in the structure of the universe, an order described as the harmony of the elements, the music of the spheres or as celestial music. "Contemplating it leads to such great transports that those who are deeply immersed in it can hardly tear themselves away from it and the more they think of it the more they like it." The line between speculative and actual music also marked— according to Oresme — the difference between play (*gieu*) and *deductio*: "because play should be a remedy for sadness and should provide pleasure in periods of leisure and recreation. On the other hand, the purpose of *deductio* is to give rise to noble and worthy thought as well as speculation or contemplation of things divine." (Menut 1970: 342–348).

Listening to music, or *deductio*, is, in accordance with the view presented here, a process of a gradual moving away from the corporal world, to which sounds belong, and an approach through successive stages of abstraction to the divine, made accessible in the act of contemplation. The key role in this process fell to the sense of hearing.

Aristotle distinguished between those senses which, when given too much rein, destroyed the mind — these were taste and touch — and those which provided the mind with laudable pleasure: these were sight and hearing. In recognition of its very special role, pride of place was given to sight. But hearing was acknowledged as that sense which contributed most conspicuously to intellectual development and in this sense it was deemed

superior to sight. Aristotle substantiated this view, saying that hearing participated to a fundamental degree in the understanding of speech and words. He also ascribed to hearing the greatest role in arousing aesthetic emotions which gave shape to morality (Spiazzi 1966: 422; Spiazzi 1970: 8).

Hearing was thus acknowledged as "a comprehensive" sense which not only recognized the qualities of sounds, but, acting in this case together with the intellect, also distinguished and evaluated them. It is significant that medieval authors, wishing to describe exclusively sonorous properties of tones, usually did so in terms of sensations provided by other senses, especially what was then considered the inferior senses of taste and touch. They wrote about "soft" and "hard" or "harsh" tones, or about "sweet" and "sour" tones (e.g. Frobenius 1971: 71–75).

In the Neoplatonic tradition, the sense of hearing was said to have the ability to serve as an intermediary between the corporeal and the non-corporeal world. That view lies at the foundation of the concept of the cycle of *septem artes liberales* elaborated by St. Augustine (Hadot 1984: 119–122). According to him the seven arts situated in the area penetrated by sight and hearing formed a kind of ladder leading from *sensibile* to *intelligibile*. Thus, the four mathematical studies — music, astronomy, geometry and arithmetic — that is the quadrivium, had a very important role to play, for they led to the contemplation of existence and of God, that is to the final aim of all cognitive activity. Augustine gave an exact description of the path leading from actual sounds to the cognition of eternal and unalterable beauty, which is the domain of divinity, a path of overcoming successive stages of abstraction conceived as various categories of numbers, ranging from the numbers tangible to the senses contained in actual sounds (that is Augustine's concept of musical rhythms) to numbers as ideal quantities accessible only to the intellect (De musica, VI; cf. Edelstein 1929: 105 ff.).

In the period during which the commentaries discussed here were written, there prevailed a specific musical concept of numbers related to the idea of "numerus harmonicus". The origins of this idea go back to Platonic cosmology and his concept of the World Soul as a model constructed according to numerical proportions which corresponded to musical consonances. In the 14th century, the term "numerus harmonicus" encompassed all the numbers whose proportions could form musical intervals. According to the principle of the then binding Pythagorean system, the numbers concerned were the product of factoring or the product of 2 and 3 (Frobenius 1989: 245 ff.). Nicole Oresme, who devoted much of his attention to harmonious numbers, believed that they contained all the speculative music, that is the

abstract order which constitutes a kind of sublimation of actual music (Menut and Denomy 1968: 480).

The view that to listen to music is to overcome the successive steps of abstraction leading from the sensual world to the ideal world (as rendered by the word *deductio*, one of its basic meanings is "to lead across") bears a clear Neoplatonic stamp. The roots of that view are deeply embedded in the concept of the septem artes cycle as a process which prepares the soul for the contemplation of eternal truth, a concept which, as supposed, contained echoes of Neoplatonic mystic rites (Hadot 1984: 145–146). Placing this view in the context of Aristotle's thought, and of the scene of listening to music, introduced new elements to the notion of contemplation. Contemplation became first and foremost an aesthetic experience. That context and the same Neoplatonic connotations define the social aspect of that experience: it is accessible only to educated persons who are not weighed down by any duties.

In conclusion let us go back to the two types of pleasure provided by music as distinguished by Aristotle: play (*ludus*) and *deductio*. This division reveals two aspects of music: the ludic and the contemplative. Aristotle clearly related these aspects to social stratification, a fact to which Peter of Auvergne drew attention. He distinguished two categories of listeners (*auditores harmoniae musicalis*): in the first category are free and educated persons prepared for intellectual pursuits, while the second category included uneducated and hard working persons who in moments of ease derive pleasure from games and spectacles. Peter believed that it is the natural right of every man to derive pleasure from music regardless of taste, education or social status; that is why he maintained that a shepherd's pipe has greater significance than the noblest of instruments (Spiazzi 1966: 436).

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