

BMCR 2008.03.20

Mousikè et Aretè. La musique et l'éthique de l'antiquité à l'âge moderne. Actes du colloque international tenu en Sorbonne les 15-17 décembre 2003

Florence Malhomme, Anne Gabrièle Wersinger, *Mousikè et aretè : la musique et l'éthique, de l'antiquité à l'âge moderne : actes du colloque international tenu en Sorbonne les 15-17 décembre 2003. De Pétrarque à Descartes, 74*. Paris: J. Vrin, 2007. 254 pages ; 25 cm.. ISBN 2711618323 €26.00.

Review by

Massimo Raffa, Liceo Classico "G.B. Impallomeni", Milazzo, Italy.

massimo.raffa1@istruzione.it

[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review. The reviewer apologizes for the unusual length of this review, which is due to the number of papers the book consists of. To help readers find their bearings, each paragraph clearly refers to a single contribution or at least to a couple of essays linked to each other by thematic affinity. The last three paragraphs contain the reviewer's general considerations.]

The idea that music is linked to the moral world and can affect the character of both individuals and the whole society is one of the most productive philosophic conceptions that Greek thought has handed down to so-called western civilization. This book, the result of a 2003 colloquium at the University of Paris-Sorbonne and consisting of sixteen contributions arranged in chronological order, aims at covering the historical development of the topic from the Homeric age to the 17th century, thus implying a number of references to different branches of knowledge, such as ancient and humanistic philology and philosophy, rhetoric, musicology, history of political thought, and so on. Because the contributors are from different cultural backgrounds, the volume as a whole offers a great variety of scholarly approaches. Accordingly, Wersinger's preface is particularly helpful, as it provides an outline of the structure of the book and at the same time accounts for the relation of each single contribution to the general topic.

The first contribution, Sylvie Perceau's *Héros à la cithare. La musique de l'excellence chez Homère*, discusses the role played by music in the Homeric poems. While in the *Odyssey* several figures of professional musicians are to be found, such as Phaemius and Demodocus, the *Iliad* offers two examples of amateurs, Achilles and Paris. In particular,

Perceau points out that in the third book of the *Iliad* Paris's ability to play the cithara is seen by Hector as a negative feature, in opposition to the warlike attitude a Trojan warrior should have (19). The scene of the young boy singing the Linos-song and playing the cithara depicted by Hephaestus on Achilles's shield (*Il.* 18, 569-572) deserves sharp attention, as it is the first description we have of a young performer and allows us to connect the Linos-song to feasts, such as vintage-related rituals, and not only to mourning performances. The latter part of the essay, however, seems to be the most interesting one. Perceau analyses the role of professional singers (*aoidoi*) as preservers of the moral order within the Homeric society. The importance of music as a factor of social cohesion can be seen in the *Odyssey* as well, i.e. in Alkinoos' words at 8.98-99, where the Greek *terpsis* is to be interpreted as referring not only to an individual pleasure, rather to a shared condition of moral wellness (26). Perceau's discussion of Odysseus' incapability of performing music is very accurate. A cunning master of the art of speech, he is able to manipulate someone else's music for his own purposes, but not to produce any music himself. In Perceau's view, a distinction is to be found in the Homeric poems between such heroes as Paris and Achilles, who are able to sing on the cithara and to be clear and trustworthy in making speeches, and other figures, such as Ulysses and Hector, who prove insensible to music and — at least in the case of Ulysses — use words as a means of deception. So music can be seen as a part of general *paideia* as early as the Homeric period. There is no doubt that Perceau's essay as a whole sheds new light on the role of music in Homer. To single out a couple of minor points, it seems surprising to me that she makes no reference to the controversial reception of Paris's cithara, which dates back to the ancient commentaries to Homer and has thoroughly been examined, e.g., by Alina Veneri.¹ On the other hand, I am not as sure as Perceau that at 18.569 (description of Achilles' shield) “l'on pourrait entendre résonner, derrière le mot *pais* que choisit le narrateur, le nom même de Pâris (20)”; such an interpretation, imaginative as it may seem, is not entirely plausible, as there is no need to argue for the presence of such a pun in order to better understand this passage.

Moutsopoulos's brief contribution focuses on the importance of Damon, the philosopher whose thought was fundamental in the making of Plato's view of music. Every discussion of Damon must face the fact that, as we have no direct access to Damon's writings, his philosophical system has to be reconstructed from indirect sources and mostly from Plato himself, what makes it even harder to distinguish what is originally Damonian from what belongs genuinely to Plato. Moutsopoulos is right in pointing out that Damon was probably the link between Plato and the Pythagoreans, and, on the other hand, that it is from Damon that Plato must have derived his theory of musical *ethos* and his basically traditionalist attitude toward music and its connections to ethics; unfortunately, his conclusions do not seem to add any points of novelty to our knowledge of Damon. On the other hand, one could reasonably have expected a more up-to-date bibliography: except for a couple of quotations from his own 2004 volume, Moutsopoulos leaves out such important essays as Robert Wallace's published in *Harmonia mundi* (1991);² moreover, as Moutsopoulos seems to regard Damon's philosophical achievements as totally detached from his political activity in the

Athenian city (“point n’est besoin de s’attarder sur l’activité politique de Damon ni sur les vicissitudes que celle-ci entraîna pour lui”, 39), the very title of his contribution — “un idéal athénien” — is left partially unaccounted for.

A. G. Wersinger deals with the relationship between music and ethics in Plato’s thought and provides an interpretation of that famous passage of the *Phaedo* (60 e) in which Socrates is told by Apollo to “compose and practise” some music. By means of such musical metaphors and concepts as *harmonia* and *symphonia* with reference to politics, Plato’s Socrates seems to picture a kind of philosophy that has something in common with music; but what kind of music? Wersinger distinguishes a traditional one, which is based on the so-called *harmoniai* and is able to arouse such feelings as indignation and anger, and a more enchanting music, which has more to do with magic and with Orphic tradition. In Wersinger’s opinion, the latter is what Socrates seems to be thinking of as he describes philosophical activity in musical terms, while the music he is urged to compose by Apollo is to be identified with the former. Wersinger concludes that according to Plato moral philosophy cannot be content with only addressing the rational part of human soul; it is the emotional sphere which has to be reached as well, and this can be done only if the philosophical discourse takes the form of traditional music composition, with its *harmoniai* and modulations (*metabolai*).

A. Barker analyses Aristoxenus’ position on the perception and evaluation of music as it can be pictured on the basis of both the *Elementa harmonica* and those materials collected in the *de musica* of the Pseudo-Plutarch which can be regarded as Aristoxenian.³ As for perception, Barker is particularly exhaustive in treating the different aspects involved in the evaluation of music according to the Aristoxenian theory: the mere perception of sounds (αἴσθησις), the ability to understand the role of each sound in the current melodic and harmonic context (διάνοια) and the relation of what has been heard to what follows (μνήμη). Each of these elements is indispensable for a profound comprehension of every performance, as they enable the listener to “follow” (παρακολουθεῖν) the development of melody. Barker’s analysis is particularly effective and shows how modern Aristoxenus’ thought is, as it is difficult to resist the temptation to compare this theory, whereby the very act of perception is inseparable from the interpretation of the meaning of the single element in relation the whole, to modern Gestalt models. However, this kind of understanding does not ensure the listener an ultimate understanding of music. The last step is to grasp the accordance between the performance and the *ethos* the music is expected to have. Such an evaluation is based on the idea of “appropriateness” (οἰκειότης), and is the part of musical judgement which has to do with ethics. At the end of his contribution, Barker compares Aristoxenus’ theory to Plato’s account of musical judgement as it is described in the *Laws*. In both authors the ultimate criterion for evaluating music does not come from technical skills, but has to be reached through philosophy.

An authoritative specialist in ancient organology and musical practice, A. Bélis gives an interesting outline of the relationship between musicians — especially aulos-players — and their audience from the fourth century BC onwards. With the advent of professional *auletai*, a dramatic change seems to happen in ancient musical life. Unlike

the amateurs of the classic period, the professional players of the Hellenistic age had to develop a brilliant and spectacular technique in order to win competitions and gain popularity. Moreover, they often showed a tendency to lure the audience by amplifying the effects of mimetic music with body gesture: to sum up, musical execution ended up taking the form of a theatrical performance. Convincingly, Bélis singles out a series of passages and anecdotes from ancient sources in order to illustrate the reception of this process among Greek intellectuals: according to a conservative bias against pure virtuosity, the most popular *auletai* were regarded as bad men and their behaviour on stage, though successful among the crowds, was thought to offend the Muses. The technical flawlessness of musical performance was less important, in the opinion of ancient elitist critics, than its moral significance.⁴

The two following contributions, M.-A. Zagdoun's on the Stoic philosophy of music and D. Delattre's on the Epicurean one, are complementary to each other and form a sort of diptych. After describing Zenon's conception of music as a rational art, an expression of the divine *logos*, and Poseidonius' different position, whereby music does not belong to the rational part of a human soul, Zagdoun dedicates the latter part of her paper to Diogenes of Babylon, whose ideas are known only from Philodemus' *De musica*. As far as we know, in Diogenes' view music was able to bring the young men's passions under the power of reason, so it played a crucial role in education; on the other hand, it retained its rational aspect, consisting of its technical and ethic sides. In Zagdoun's reading, Stoic thought on music is strongly influenced by Aristotle; however, music itself seems to remain at a quite lower level than pure philosophy in the construction of the ideal model of the Stoic *sophos*. In his contribution, which anticipates part of the introduction to his forthcoming edition of the fourth book of Philodemus' *De musica*, Delattre deals with the polemic carried out by Philodemus himself against the Stoics; because of the loss of Democritus' and Epicurus' works on the subject, the *De musica* turns out to be the first attempt known to us to put at stake the traditional views about the ethic relevance of music. After briefly introducing Diogenes and placing him in the context of the Medium Stoicism, Delattre outlines his conception of the value of music (this section of his paper partially overlaps Zagdoun's analogous paragraphs), then he summarizes the points of criticism raised by Philodemus. The Epicurean philosopher attacks Diogenes on both levels of physiology (the ear gives nothing but rough sensations, so there is no point in theorising a "cognizant hearing" as the Stoics do) and of logic (Diogenes provides no evidence for what he is arguing for and the quotations he adduces often contradict one another); most importantly, music has nothing to do with being a philosopher, that is, from an Epicurean viewpoint, with the achievement of true *sophia*. Philodemus' reason for choosing Diogenes as a polemic target, although he had died about one century before, is probably that Diogenes was very well known among the Roman intellectuals Philodemus was trying to address. At the end of the essay readers will find a very useful appendix in which the contents of Philodemus' book IV are schematised.

J. Dangel's contribution is the first one dedicated to a Latin subject, and the only one covering the so-called classical period. Dangel's starting point is the closeness between the voice of the rhetorician and the sound of musical instruments, as it is described by Latin writers and poets. She focuses on some comparisons between the voice and the lyre we read in Cicero or Quintilianus and appropriately refers to the musical nature of Latin language and its accentuation system. As she points out, some etymologies we find in Varro's *De lingua Latina* account for the Latin conception of the poetic voice, which has to do with the idea of music (*carmen* means "song" or "poetry") as well as with the idea of truth (*verbum* "word" is connected to *verum* "truth" in Varro's paronymological speculation). On these grounds, Dangel examines different poets from different periods of Latin literature (Ennius, Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Seneca, Ovid) in order to explain the importance of musical metaphor and imagery in their poetics. Though containing some interesting insights on important issues related to Latin poetry (such as an effective discussion of the symbolic meaning of the instrument called *avena* in Virgil's first *Bucolic*), Dangel's essay does not seem to address that particular issue which would have justified its presence in a volume about " *musikè et aretè*", that is, whether or not (and, if so, how) the contiguity between voice, music and poetry was thought to reflect upon the perception of music as something endowed with an ethic value. So, the reader — or, at least, this one — is left with the doubt if this contribution entirely coheres with the rest of the book.

With G. Rispoli's paper on Augustine's *De musica* we enter Late Antiquity. Augustine's treatise initially addresses music through the study of vocal sounds; in this respect, it belongs to an important tradition, dating back to Pythagoras and Lasus of Hermione up to Varro and Quintilian. Rispoli carefully follows the development of Augustine's argumentation and is particularly exhaustive with reference to the discussion of the different kinds of rhythm and of his theory of musical perception and understanding, which seems to be influenced by Stoicism, as Rispoli points out (144-146). In my view at least, Augustine's theory was also influenced by Aristoxenus, especially on memory. Augustine describes the path leading from the perception of the rhythm of concrete music to the contemplation of the silent rhythm of the soul, which allows man to grasp the consonance between the *tropos* of his own soul and that of God and the whole universe. As Rispoli opportunely notices, even though this theory might seem very Platonic, it does not underestimate the importance of sensible perception; moreover, the artist who has caught the perfection of inaudible harmony through reason (*ratio*) must endeavour to bring that perfection to the sensible world. Such an aspect is extremely important and in my opinion might be connected to one of the most important treatises of Antiquity, Ptolemy's *Harmonica*, in which something similar is theorised; on the other hand, Rispoli's remarks go in the same directions as what A. Gregory has recently noticed about the role of perception in Platonic theory of knowledge.⁵

The subsequent essays cover the age of Renaissance. C. Trottmann deals with the ethic relevance of music as an act of praise of God in Nicholas of Cuse's *De venatione sapientiae* (*The Hunt for Wisdom*). When music is used to praise the Creator, it becomes,

in Nicholas's view, a moral act, as it helps man fulfil his natural task (“...la louange est-elle pour le Cusain une attitude naturelle”, 154-155). The philosopher pictures the act of playing and singing in praise of God as an exercise of moral improvement, thus riding out the quarrel between the so-called “intellectualists” and “volontarists” about the supremacy of moral or intellectual virtues.

P. Caye moves from the controversial attitude towards music and its effects on political institutions bequeathed by Plato to Renaissance thought. According to him, the Renaissance succeeded in solving Plato's aporia on music by substituting it with architecture, that is, with an art of perfect measurement instead of one in which measures are imperfect. Caye dedicates the latter part of his contribution to describe the two kinds of harmony that music and architecture respectively underpin. While harmony in a musical sense aims at harmonising the different forces within human soul, the architectural harmony — which Caye defines as “linear” — helps cope with the passing of time and ensures a sort of protected space where life can be experienced through the continuity of the eurhythmic structure of buildings — what Leon Battista Alberti called, in Ciceronian words, *concinntas*.

F. Malhomme's and P. Gozza's contributions are in some way complementary to each other, as they cover respectively the first and the subsequent generations of Humanistic philosophers. Since the beginnings of Italian and especially Florentine Humanism, the city of Florence tended to portrait itself as a new Athens and a new Rome at the same time, as Malhomme points out. Accordingly, intellectuals proposed a model of society whereby family and education were central issues and music occupied a particularly crucial position; their thought on music was influenced by such ancient authorities as Boethius, Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato. The teaching of music was seen as a part of the so-called *quadrivium* and it was conceivable only in connection to the other disciplines, according to an ideal of a broader *paideia*. Humanistic pedagogy retrieved the conception — dating back to Aristotle and brought to Latin world by Cicero and Quintilianus — that music is essential to a good man's and a good citizen's education (*bonus vir, bonus civis*), provided that it is not practised exclusively and to a professional level, but along with such other disciplines as gymnastics and rhetoric. Thus Malhomme gives an effective portrayal of the earlier phase of Humanistic thought, before that shift towards those Neoplatonic positions which would substitute the pristine, essentially civic conception of virtue with a more literary version. Gozza discusses the relationship between music and pleasure in Marsilio Ficino's *De vita* and Lorenzo Giacomini's *La purgazione della tragedia* (“The purification of tragedy”). The comparison between these authors allows Gozza to account for a shift from a Platonic model (Ficino), whereby music is able to bring the soul to virtue because of the pleasure it can stir up, to an Aristotelian one (Giacomini), according to which the ethic relevance of music is due to its cathartic powers. What these views have in common, in Gozza's opinion, is the understanding of the role played by the pleasure stirred up by music as a key to moral perfection.

Erasmus's attitude toward music, as it is treated by J.-C. Margolin, shows its link to the ancient moralistic tradition dating back to Plato and Plutarch's *Moralia*, especially for the role attributed to music in education. As for Erasmus's strong criticism of the use of instruments in religious performances, it is true of course that his ironical depiction of the music performed at wedding parties and feasts in general "est très révélatrice de son caractère et de son humeur, de ses goûts et de ses 'allergies'" (p. 218); however, I think that research on Church Fathers' writings would reveal some direct references to such authorities as John Chrysostom, Clement of Alexandria, Arnobius, Lactantius, etc. The criticism of instrumental music as a wretched relic of Paganism is very common both in Greek and Latin Fathers. Luther's thought on music, unexpectedly, has a series of issues in common with Erasmus's (for example, the idea of the divine nature of music and the rejection of polyphony). On the other hand, while the Reform carried out by Luther implied a larger usage of music than in Catholic rituals, Erasmus never aimed at reforming Catholic liturgy. Margolin's innovative conclusion is that Luther turns out to be more of a Humanist, as it were, than Erasmus itself.

The large temporal arc over which the volume spans is completed by A. Charrak's study in Kepler. In referring to ancient authors, Kepler criticises the excessive mathematical symbolism of the Pythagoreans' theory of musical intervals as it is to be found in ancient sources and especially in Ptolemy's three-book treatise, the *Harmonica*. One might wonder if an explication of what this symbolism exactly was could have helped the reader's understanding of Kepler's position. The "mathematization" of harmonic theory has to do with the idea that such musical intervals as the octave, the fifth, the fourth and so on, are consonant and are better than any others because of the mathematical structure of the corresponding ratios — for example, because they all are in the so-called superparticular form, i.e. $(n+1)/n$. Actually, Ptolemy himself had been quite critical of such speculations.⁶ What Kepler labels as symbolism is something slightly different, that is, the series of parallels drawn by Ptolemy between musical systems and the structure of the zodiac, the parts of soul and the system of virtues in the last chapters of his treatise; it is with reference to these chapters that Kepler speaks of an *exercitium componendi poeticum vel oratorium*, "a mere exercise in poetic or rhetorical composition".⁷ Anyway, Charrak provides an effective description of the "geometrization" that Kepler opposes to the Pythagorean's mathematization. As for modality, Charrak underlines how Kepler was able to understand the historical process which had led to the polarization of the modes between major and minor, depending on the third degree of the scale — an achievement far from being taken for granted among the theorists of his time; moreover, he laid a stress on the idea of variety (*varietas*) of melody as a consequence of the reduction of ancient modality to two modes only.

A brief essay by P. Magnard on the idea of cosmic harmony closes the volume. Magnard follows the development of this idea in the age that saw the passage from polyphony to accompanied monody (XVI to XVII cent.). In Mersenne's work, what Magnard calls "le fétichisme des intervalles harmoniques réputés sideraux" (p. 246) is abandoned in favour of a different kind of harmony, to be sought in the depths of man's heart, in the realm of variety and expressiveness.

At the end of the book we find a short *Index des noms* in which ancient and modern authors, ancient gods and mythological figures are listed together. Maybe the reader would have found some utility in an *Index locorum* as well, given that almost all the contributions are very rich in quotations of the sources.

The press has generally done good work; there are only few misprints (for example, the abbreviation of Aristoxenus' *Elementa Harmonica* is printed erroneously as F.H. instead of E.H. in Barker's paper, pp. 64, n. 1 and 65), which are easily detectable and can bring no damage to the reader's understanding. Ancient Greek is correctly typed everywhere, but criteria for transliteration do not seem to be always the same throughout the book (e. g. *theorein*, p. 94, vs. *theôria*, p. 97).

As it often is the case with miscellaneous books, the essays collected in this volume are of different — though generally high — quality; some of them seem to be a synthesis of their authors' previous research rather than establishing any points of novelty. Given the chronological disposition of the contributions, the reader might notice the absence of any essay on Medieval music aesthetics, as well as of any treatment — which would have been particularly desirable — of the conception of musical *ethos* at the first stages of Christianity. The book as a whole is not entirely successful in giving a coherent picture of the atmosphere of a colloquium: there are no cross-references, not even in those cases in which one could have reasonably expected to find them (for example, when Magnard refers to Margolin's study on Erasmus at p. 240, n. 1, he surprisingly does not refer to the essay in the same volume, but to a 1965 book of Margolin's himself). However, *Mousikè et aretè* remains an indispensable reading for those who want to know about the *status quaestionis* of the debate on the *ethos* of music.

Authors and titles:

A. G. Wersinger, *Avant-propos* (7-16).

S. Perceau, *Héros à la cithare. La musique de l'excellence chez Homère* (17-38).

E. Moutsopoulos, *Beauté et moralité musicales. Une initiative damonienne, un idéal athénien* (39-44).

A. G. Wersinger, "Socrate, fais de la musique!" *Le destin de la musique entre paideia et philosophie* (45-62).

A. Barker, *Aristoxène et les critères du jugement musical* (63-75).

A. Bélis, *Mauvaise musique, mauvaises moeurs* (77-86).

M.-A. Zagdoun, *Éthique et théories de la musique chez le Stoïciens* (87-98).

D. Delattre, *La musique, pour quoi faire? La polémique du jardin contre le portique chez Philodème de Gadara* (99-117).

J. Dangel, *Le poète architecte et enchanteur. Méta-poétique et méta-sens* (119-133).

G. Rispoli, *Le Maître et l'alphabet* (135-150).

C. Trottmann, *La louange, acte intellectuel et acte éthique, dans le De venatione sapientiae de Nicolas de Cues* (151-165).

P. Caye, *Eurythmie et temperantia du modèle musical au modèle architectural de la politeia* (167-174).

F. Malhomme, *Musique, savoir et virtù . La musique dans la pédagogie de l'humanisme italien*. (175-192).

P. Gozza, *Mousikè, Hedonè et Aretè. La psychologie de la musique chez Ficin et Giacomini* (193-204).

J.-C. Margolin, *Musique et Humanisme. À propos d'Érasme et de Luther* (205-227).

A. Charrak, *Les causes et les effets de la musique selon Kepler* (229-238).

P. Magnard, *L'harmonie du monde* (239-246).

Notes

1. A. Veneri, *La cetra di Paride: l'altra faccia della musica in Omero e nei suoi interpreti antichi*, in B. Gentili and F. Perusino (eds.), *Mousiké. Metrica ritmica e musica greca in memoria di Giovanni Comotti*, Pisa – Roma 1995, 111-132.

2. R. W. Wallace, *Damone di Oa e i suoi successori: un'analisi delle fonti*, in R. W. Wallace and B. McLachlan (eds.) *Harmonia mundi*, Rome 1991, 30-53. Wallace has recently provided a detailed discussion of Damon (*Damon of Oa: a Music Theorist Ostracized?*, in P. Murray and P. Wilson, (eds.), *Music and the Muses. The Culture of Mousike in the Classical Athenian City*, Oxford 2004, 249-268; see also my review in *Aestimatio* 2, 2005, 109-119, also available [online](#).

3. On the presence of Aristoxenus in the *De musica* see e.g. A. Meriani, *Tracce aristosseniche nel De musica pseudoplutarcheo*, in *Sulla musica greca antica. Studi e ricerche*, Napoli 2003, 49-81.

4. Presumably because of the main topic of the volume, Bél.'s analysis of the role of the *aulos* is more focused on philosophy and music criticism than on political aspects. Therefore I would suggest, as a further reading, E. Csapo's *The Politics of the New Music*, in *Music and the Muses* (see above, n. 2), 207-248.

5. A. Gregory, *Plato's Philosophy of Science*, London 2000.

6. See e. g. *Harm.* 1.6, p. 13 Düring.

7. Quoted by I. Düring, *Ptolemaios und Porphyrius über die Musik*, Göteborg 1934, p. 279 f.