

SOUND, MOVEMENT, AND JOURNEY OF THE SOUL

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Musica est Ars Bene Movendi

Progressing through a tunnel of a Palaeolithic painted cave, sometimes crawling on the ground while making sounds, listening to echoes in order to discover the resonance of the tunnel, is a functional use of sounds.¹ And in ancient traditions, as it still is in a few oral ones, music was mostly functional: there was a precise purpose for which it was to be performed. Be it a song to the child in her/his mother’s womb, sounds made by the woman during the moment of birth, the song to lull the child to sleep, working songs at home or in the fields, and of course, music for dance or war songs, trumpet voluntaries for retreat or for victory, laments for departure or death, healing songs, chants of prayer or praise addressed to the Spirits and to the Invisible World; all these demonstrate that the power of sound and music were—and sometimes still are—used functionally with a precise intention to obtain a specific effect. It is possible to show that in most cases, the functional aspect has objective—in the scientific meaning of the word—bases. These bases are built essentially on the notion of modality (see below): it is clear that e.g. the tone of a lament—the singer may indeed cry with tears—or the sounds of joyful dance music or of trumpets of victory actually impress in different ways and to a great extent as intended.

However, within the learned traditions of antiquity, especially the learned spiritual traditions, music progressively gains its autonomy, although, through modality, it remains in close relationship with its modal functional aspects. It is therefore very interesting that we have a definition of music belonging to one of these traditions of antiquity. St Augustine (fourth century AD) gives the following famous definition of music in his *De Musica* (I, 3, 4): “Musica est ars bene movendi,” which we can translate as “Music is the art of good movement.” “Good” here is understood in its Platonic sense: the *good* is what leads to the divine.

Contrary to a common opinion amongst musicologists who states that Augustine confuses music and dance, this definition is certainly one of the deepest concerning music. It indeed refers to 1) the movement of the sound in the body, and essentially to 2) the relation between the movement of the soul and sounds, particularly sounds of the voice.

Concerning the *movement of sound in the body*, it is easy to understand and to experience this twofold movement. The higher sounds of the voice vibrate in the higher parts of the body (throat and lower part of the head), while the lower ones vibrate in the lower part of the body (chest and back). It is a very simple and convincing experience to put one’s ear on a person’s upper middle part of the back and listen to the sound this person produces; the sound moving, let us say, in the range of a fifth: it goes up and down along the spine and the back of the singer. This notion of higher or lower sounds is a reality relating to the body and perception of sound; hence it is not purely conventional when we say that sounds are *high* or *low* (on the piano, higher sounds are on the right, on a guitar as it is played nowadays, the higher sounds are on the lower part of the instrument). Moreover, because of its movement, the sound structures the spine and therefore the body, already since early childhood. But while all this was about the movement of sound related to pitch, there is also a second movement of sound which is

¹ Reznikoff, 2014a, pp. 101–109

independent of pitch: the movement of vibrations of different vowels and consonants in the body. A simple experiment makes this evident: put your left hand on your chest and your right hand on the top of your head and simply say slowly or, even better, sing on the same pitch, alternatively A and M, and you feel the vibration going from the chest to the head and back again. Singing A O U M, you may feel the vibration raising up, respectively from the chest (A) to the throat (O), to the lower part of the face (U), and finally to the upper part of the head (M). This revealing experience shows the relationship between vowels and consonants and their locations in the body. Although the main features of this relation, as shown here, are clear, the relation is complex and subtle: each bone vibrates in its own way with different spectra of harmonics. It brings to our outer consciousness the importance of the *perception of sound*, actual perceptions of vibrations *in the body*, and this relationship, which we use in sound therapy, is also relevant to the approach of modality and possibly to the meaning of sounds.²

The second movement St. Augustine refers to, the *movement of the soul*, is not a notion familiar to us nowadays, but it is an essential one in antiquity and implicit in St Augustine's definition. It refers to the permanent changes in our consciousness, which goes through states, for instance, of happiness, joy, exultation, and then of sorrow, tears, anxiousness, wrath, fear, or courage, peace, and so on: emotions which correspond to different psycho-physiological inner states and different expressions of the voice. As mentioned above, the voice in a lament, in fear, or a joyful voice sounds differently; this change is not cultural; in all countries it sounds essentially the same. These different expressions by tone, timbre, pitch, or intonation are characteristic of the corresponding psycho-physiological inner states and give a musical elementary characteristic of each state. This defines the core notion of *modality*.³ For each *mode* in music its *core* is given by some timbre and one or two intervals slightly higher or lower that characterize the ethos, the inner state, which the mode is supposed to express. Thus, the *movement of the sound* reflects the change or movement of consciousness, and this makes the notion of *movement of the soul* so important in the Pythagorean and Platonic vision of the World, a notion still kept by St. Augustine and in the foundations of Christian sacred Art, since its ultimate meaning is the *becoming of the soul*. The *good* movements Augustine speaks about are those of consciousness that eventually leads the soul into the Everlasting Light of the Divine One. This journey of the soul of course takes place through a strong practice of meditation, *theoria*, contemplation, prayer, charity and devotion. In this field of devotion, music, of course, has to be understood in its higher meaning: given by the Muses i.e. given from the Divine.

From Sound and Movement to Musical Notation and Liturgy

The movement of the sound in the body, movement which is not visible, becomes visible when the hand follows it. For instance, as in the example above, following the movement of A O U M, the hand or both hands raise up from the lower chest to the throat and higher, a little above the head, in a gesture of offering and praise, actually offering the sound of the voice, the sound of a sacred word or syllable. This is the first and simplest devotion. The movement of the hand that follows the movement of the sound in the body is called *chironomia* (from χείρ, hand, and *nomos*, the law, and here sign). Chironomia practiced by Cantors and Masters of chant eventually gave the conductor's gesture. From chironomia, from its gesture, came naturally the ancient musical notation, namely notation in *neumes* (9th century). The very first notation that led up to the neumatic is called *ecphonic*; a higher sound—it refers to the body—is notated / *virga*, or acute accent, and a lower sound notated \ *punctum*, or grave accent as it still is in French; and then ^ *clivis* notates successively a higher and lower sound, and V *pes* a lower and a higher, and so on ...



Figure 1. Solsemhula cave in Norway. The procession of painted humans on the right wall is walking towards the recess at the bottom of the cave. In this recess the resonance is particularly strong. Photo by Adjun Selfjord



Figure 2. Chartres cathedral, the 12th century. Photo from private Collection

² Reznikoff, 2005

³ Reznikoff, 1987



Figure 3. A crucifix from the beginning of the 7th century, collection of the Dublin National Museum. In the centre of the heart of Christ spirals and triskels represent the Divine Breath, the Breath of the Holy Spirit; it reveals a true spiritual anatomy. At the top the aureole is represented by a triskel, here a symbol of the Trinity. This crucifix is one of the greatest masterpieces of Christian art. Image courtesy of Dublin National Museum

From this, a beautiful and clear notation in neumes appeared in the 9th, 10th, and 11th century. Our modern notation comes from this principle: the higher in the body, the higher on the parchment or, now, on paper. So, this notion of *movement of sound* is always present in our practice and notation of music; it comes of course from inner and outer perception of the voice in the body. First it was an oral-written notation, not showing precise intervals, because melodies were memorized orally. Progressively lines were introduced to make notation visually clearer. Writing in neumes on beautifully ornate manuscripts in the Western Carolingian tradition was certainly in relationship with the Irish tradition of interlaced designs, which, by the way, reached Norway and Northern countries and later the north of Russia. These complex interlacings and endless spirals, which already appear on pre-Celtic megaliths, have a high spiritual meaning. They represent the expanding movement of Divine Breath and Word, the Breath of the Holy Spirit, as we can see them on Irish sacred parchments or bronze; they appear inside the Cross or in the inner divine body of Christ, and from the Cross, or from Him, spread gloriously throughout the whole Universe (Fig. 3).

All these movements that come from the Sound of Praise and, as we have seen with St. Augustine, recall the Becoming of Soul, these movements represented on illuminated parchments or engraved stones, could be seen extended in great ancient liturgies, liturgical movements, steps, and various processions. Still, in the year 1970 at the Convent of Saint Teresa of Avila, sisters entered the church half walking, half dancing, bending to the right and then to the left, proceeding into the church in a remarkable way. One must remember that churches were adorned by paintings, icons, frescoes, by the living light of candles and by a deep contemplative chant. Actually, the connection between sound, movement, and space is rooted in our deepest levels of consciousness; indeed, for a foetus in mother's womb, the main perceptions are those of sound and movement, and since the baby does not see at all, it is only with the help of sounds that he/she perceives sounds from above (mother's voice) or distant sounds (other voices, instruments ...), progressively discovering the notion of space.⁴ Great ancient liturgies, particularly Christian liturgies in Romanesque or Gothic churches, illustrated this deep and wide vision of space, sound, movement, light, and colours (see Fig. 2).

As we have lost traditions of embroidering, handcraft, and traditional (not touristic) folklore, following seasons and agricultural life, traditions of illuminated liturgical manuscripts, contemplative ancient chant, liturgies, and liturgical movements are lost long ago, with a few exceptions kept in some Orthodox or Eastern Christian Churches. However, one of the best and most ancient illustrations of this can be unexpectedly discovered in deep painted caves.⁵ They are often like huge cathedrals in height and width. Discovering or exploring them by means of echoes in almost complete darkness, but with small lamps like candles and possibly torches, in front of frescoes of painted animals was certainly a real liturgy, reminding of a return to Mother Earth's womb, addressing spirits of represented animals, in a unity of space, colour, sounds, and movement and reaching the deepest levels of consciousness, where, corporal and non-corporal, the soul is supposed to dwell. It is remarkable that Plato, about his Cave, speaks of echoes and shadows of animals (Rep. VII, 514–515). And since for Pythagoreans and Plato the Soul is essentially musical, following harmonic proportions, let us with them and with prehistoric Tribes, in a wide gesture of praise, sing joyfully to the Invisible.⁶

⁴ Reznikoff, 2005

⁵ Reznikoff, 2014b

⁶ Reznikoff, 2001; Reznikoff, 2021:

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Figure 4. Oxocelhaya Cave draperies. Pays-Basque, France.
Image courtesy of Zigor (France)

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