Christian Rhythm at the End of Antiquity (4th – 6th cent. AD) – part 1

Thursday 1 September 2016, by Pascal Michon

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Previous chapter

In 325 or 337 AD, the emperor Constantine the Great converted to Christianity. In 380 AD, Theodosius I, together with Gratian and Valentinian II, made it the only legitimate imperial religion. From that period on, the spread of Christianity over the empire had a tremendous impact on rhythmology.

Most of Christian thinkers heavily borrowed from previous rhetoric, music and metaphysical theories but they substantially transformed them to fit their particular needs, collectively in church as well as personally in the relationship with their new monotheistic God. Rhetoric as well as music were now used to please and teach the crowds but they were also ways for the believers to progress in their faith. Greek metaphysics was brought into play in order to give more rational strength to the Christian beliefs, although under strict control of the Bible.

This resulted in a neglect for the old empiricist and naturalistic Aristotelian views on rhythm and an intensification of the return to Plato's idealistic conceptions that had already started with previous pagan thinkers.

Rhythm as Celebration of God – Ambrose's *Hymns* (4th c. AD)

Aurelius Ambrosius (c. 340 – 397 AD) was a bishop of Milan and became one of the most influential ecclesiastical figures of the 4th century. Before being made bishop of Milan by popular acclamation in 374, he had been a Roman governor of Liguria and Emilia. Staunch opponent of Arianism, he is credited with promoting "antiphonal chant," a kind of chanting in which one side of the choir responds alternatively to the other. He also composed many hymns where we find traces of the early Christian conceptions and practices of rhythm.

According to Spitzer, to whom I borrow most of the material of this section, Ambrose was one of the few early Christian thinkers to make music, so to speak, come back from heaven to earth. He transformed what still was, in the neo-Platonic tradition, a theoretical paradigm describing the functioning of the world and the life of human beings within it, into a practical paradigm shaping

every day religious practices.

> The Greeks ascribed to music the highest place in the universe, as in the *Timaeus*; and yet, though we are indebted to them for much philosophical speculation about music, it could be said that they have left us comparatively little of the music which should illustrate their philosophy. But in the hymns of Ambrose, we have a "performance," an "incarnation" of that world harmony about which the Greeks had speculated; and the Church, which was represented in his hymns as echoing the music of the universe, served, actually, as the theatre for the performance of these hymns (as it was to serve later as the original stage of medieval drama). Thanks to Ambrose, music came to be performed, a thing of every day, a perennial affirmation of, and response to world music. (Spitzer, 1963, p. 25-26, last sent. vers. 1944)

Ambrose's desire to reflect on earth celestial harmony allied with his practical nature led him to invent the Christian hymn.

> It is easily understandable—though nonetheless forever a subject of admiration—that Ambrose, who thought World Harmony to be reflected by earthly music, was logically led to invent the Christian hymn: for what else is the hymn but a response in sounds and thoughts to divine Grace? (Spitzer, 1963, p. 24)

Ambrose transformed poetry and music into a powerful communication device between God and the Christian community.

> Ambrose, whom Professor Rand has humorously described as an efficient "executive," had the productive idea of having world harmony "performed," as it were, *hic et nunc*, in his Milan community, which would thus become representative of the whole of Christianity responding to God: each community hymn henceforth becomes thus an active proof of that harmony of grace which embraces man and nature. It is the immortal merit of Ambrose to have assigned to Christian music the task of embodying the Greek world harmony: music's assignment henceforth is to perform what is in its very nature to express: the praise of the Creator of musical world harmony. (Spitzer, 1963, p. 25)

This new religious and theoretical context radically changed the meaning of rhythm. The concept of "world harmony" was borrowed from Pythagorean, Platonic and neo-Platonic speculations on the perfect movements of the heavenly bodies and the role played by rational numbers and proportions in music. Numbers were classically considered, so to speak, as the "exchange gears" that allowed to present simultaneously the stars and the planets as playing a kind of harmonious melody and the human melodies as reflecting that of the heavenly bodies. But for Ambrose, because he believed in Incarnation, in its periodic reenactment in the holy Mass, this exchange role was now attributed to humans' capacity to replicate through music *here and now* the harmony of the world. Songs, i.e. poetry, melody and rhythm, were endowed with an entirely new role: that of allowing the human beings to communicate with God and God to descend again among the human beings. This transformation of the role of musical rhythm impacted back on the operation of the universe. The

term *numerus – rhuthmós*, which had been commonly limited to the human sphere, while heaven was characterized by *circuitus – períodos* and *numerus – arithmós*, began to be used in both cases.

The new Ambrosian poetry conserved older rhythmic features like fixed metrical scheme, intensive use of metaphors and absence of rhyme, but it was chanted with a "bizarre Oriental music" i.e. with yet unheard melody and rhythm.

> The absence of rhyme, the nobility of the words, the fixed metrical scheme were conservative features with the Ambrosian hymns, while the introduction of a bizarre, Oriental music (which must have inspired the words) was a revolutionary deed. We can understand now that the idea of world harmony asked for representation in sounds echoing like the rock of the Church to the waves of the sea under the "applause of Nature." (Spitzer, 1963, p. 25)

Moreover, noticeably, the new music was "freed from the shackles of metrics," hence making a new space available for rhythm "apart from the text."

> The tremendous development of music is not thinkable without the Christian idea of world harmony: as Ambros says in his *History of Music* (quoted by Vossler), music was "freed from the shackles of metrics": in words such as *Halleluja*, or in the final lines of psalms, music went its own way, apart from text. (Spitzer, 1963, p. 45-46)

Michael Stuart Williams has recently underlined the role played in the Ambrosian hymns by "accentual stress patterns rather than quantitative meter." Being intended "for popular and untrained participation," they rest on the new ways to pronounce Latin language that developed from the 3rd century on and that gave more importance to stress and less to quantity of syllables.

> The hymns of Ambrose of Milan may usefully be seen in the context of other forms of rhythmic chant and song found in the social world of the Roman Empire: above all, they may be connected with popular songs and with acclamations, whether theatrical, political, or religious. Ambrose's hymns in particular share with songs and acclamations a number of formal features, being regular in form and based on accentual stress patterns rather than quantitative meter, and being similarly intended for popular and untrained participation. (Williams, 2013)

Parallel to this change in musical rhythm, Spitzer rightly emphasizes the surprising and remarkable development of rhythmic dancing during mass. He recalls the inclusion "in the performance [of] gestures, mimics, dance, expressing supernatural beauty; the ritual dance of the priests and, consequently, a rhythmic response by the audience." All these new practices were "impersonations of World Harmony as [was] the *χορεία* in the Platonic music of the spheres."

> Just as there is, in the hymns of Ambrose, a union of conservative traits of style with innovations, so, in his handling of World Harmony we find the pagan idea combined with a new Christian

> enthusiasm ; the Christian Church has thus become a stage for the *"Gesamtkunstwerk"* of the hymn, in which music, words, the echo of the stone, perhaps even gesture and dance, collaborate. All the colorfulness and opulence of paganism is contained therein, but forced into the will of the one God. There is *in nuce* the aesthetics of Jesuit art: *omnia in majorem Dei gloriam.* I insist on dance being virtually included in this art. In Ambrose we have seen nature give "applause" to the hymns like an audience to a theatre performance; from this, it was only a step to include in the performance gestures, mimics and dance expressing supernatural beauty; the ritual dance of the priests and, consequently, a rhythmic response by the audience, is as logical in early Christian impersonations of world harmony as is the *χορεία* in the Platonic music of the spheres. (Spitzer, 1963, p. 26-27)

Naturally, the older belief in a heavenly choreography is adapted to the Christian framework and changed into a "dance of the angels," while there is plenty of evidence that early Christians, especially the Greek, used to dance in imitation of Christ allegedly dancing after the Last Supper with the apostles. "The dance, in the oldest Church, was a means of proclaiming, by imitation, the harmony of the world."

> The Christians will replace the dances of the spheres by the dances of angels ; and thus it was logical, especially in the case of the Greek Fathers, that ritual dances were introduced into the Church: the apocryphal *Acta Johannis* represents Christ, after the Last Supper, inviting the apostles to form a circle around him, joining hands; then he sings to them a hymn with lines such as "Grace leads the chorus … I will play the flute [the pagan instrument!], dance ye all!" Saint Basil writes: "*Quid itaque beatius esse poterit quam in terra tripudium angelorum imitari – What can be more of a blessing than to imitate on earth the dance of the angels*"; Clement of Alexandria: "*Idcirco et caput et manus in coelum extendimus et pedes excitamus in ultima acclamatione orationis – For this reason, when we shout at the end of a speech, we raise our head and hands towards heaven and dance on our feet*"; and Saint Paulinus, likewise: "*Ferte Deo, pueri, laudem; pia solvite vota, / Et pariter castis date [carmina] festa choreis – Praise the Lord, children, acquit your vows of piety, / Give also, chaste dancing choirs, the concert of your songs*." (though Augustine castigated the liturgic dances of the neophytes for their pagan implications). Thus the dance, in the oldest Church, was a means of proclaiming, by imitation, the harmony of the world: had not David sung and danced in praise of God? (Spitzer, 1963, p. 27-28, my trans. and my mod.)

Ambrose adapted the classical neo-Platonic views to the Church needs. The education of the individual by rhythm and melody which aimed at developing a philosophical *ethos* was now meant to bring up Christians. Musical and dance rhythms were used both to make the believers participate in the periodic coming of God on earth and to periodically regenerate the Christian community.

Rhythm From Rhetoric to Music – Augustine's *De musica*, 1 (386-389 AD)

Aurelius Augustinus Hipponensis or Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430 AD) was one of the most famous Christian theologian and philosopher of Antiquity. He was probably Berber, although from a family who certainly had received Roman citizenship in 212 with the Edict of Caracalla. Still a young man, he went to Carthage to continue his education in rhetoric. He then became a Manichean and lived a

hedonistic lifestyle for a time. In 375, he opened a school and taught rhetoric for nine years. In 383, he moved to Rome, where he expected the best rhetoricians to live and practice. His stay in the Urbs allowed him to read neo-Platonists and maybe Plotinus, although he could not easily read in Greek. He went the next year to Milan, where he was hired as a rhetoric professor at the imperial court and where he met Ambrose.

This chance encounter was certainly a turning point in his life. In 386 Augustine converted to Christianity and began to develop his own approach to philosophy and theology. He rejected Manichean dualism and replaced it by neo-Platonic views. The world was not composed of two parts ruled by two opposite gods, one good and perfect, having his throne in the skies, and the other evil, governing the earth. As Plotinus had shown, it was one single unitary organism, hierarchically organized through the varying participation of the beings in the Original Soul, Intellect and Good. Naturally, because he was a Christian, he rejected the ultimate immanent perspective of the neo-Platonists and substituted it with a clear opposition between the transcendent God and his creatures.

In 388, he returned to Africa where he was ordained a priest in 391 and in 395, finally became bishop of Hippo Regius in Numidia. He remained in this position until his death in 430. He wrote extensively and built a theological, ecclesiastical and pastoral work that constitutes one of the ultimate peaks of Antique Roman culture.

The treatise *De musica – On Music* belongs to the early works. Augustine projected to present the liberal arts from the Christian viewpoint. However, he never achieved his project and did not even finish his first treatise. *De musica* was composed in two steps. The first five books were written while preparing for baptism in 386; the sixth book after his conversion and his return to Africa. Marrou claims that its religious content is evidence of a late composition, maybe in 408-409 (Marrou, 1938, p. 489 in the German ed.). This probably explains why, while the first books are devoted to a definition of music and a study of rhythm and meter relying on number and proportion, the sixth book is entirely different, in style and content. It bears a much more religious tone than the previous ones, which principally reflect the knowledge of a recognized professor of rhetoric.

To begin the study of *De musica*, it is worth noting that it starts with a harsh rejection of all empirical aspects of music. This rejection is so radical that it has often incited specialist to deny that the treatise could be properly regarded as a music treatise. Strikingly, Augustine goes on by opposing Aristotle's most famous point in *Poetics*. One remembers that the latter characterized what we call performing arts as "imitations" or better yet, "re-presentations" *(mimêseis)* (see chap. 3).

> Epic poetry, then, and the poetry of tragic drama, and, moreover, comedy and dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and harp-playing, these, speaking generally, may all be said to be "representations." *[μιμήσεις – mimêseis]* (*Poetics*, 1447a, trans. W.H. Fyfe, my mod.)

The main virtue of performing arts was to bring *kátharsis* through *mímêsis*. Since it provided imitation or re-presentation of reality, art, especially "poetry in itself," appeared to Aristotle as intrinsically liberating. And rhythm, in turn, was considered the deepest and most solid basis of this mimetic and cathartic process, i.e. endowed with positive ethical and political effects. Indeed,

poetry, theater, music and even dance, since they often mingled together, were not possible without the mediation of "language seasoned with all kinds of spices." In other words, there was no story, no character, no event, in short no *mímêsis* and no *kátharsis*, without the rhythms and harmonies of language.

Instead, Augustine disqualifies imitation and gives precedence to pure music over language, even if his treatise covers mainly metric issues. Musicians or actors trained by imitating their masters may perform quite well when on stage, but they only follow their body, their senses and memory. They do not possess the science of music which only belongs to reason and therefore to the most inner soul. If some imitation may occur, that must be imitation of a higher reality which is paradoxically to be found within us.

> — **Master**. All those who, following only their senses and engraving in their memory only that which pleases them, regulate the movement of their bodies according to this pleasure and a certain talent for imitation *[vim quamdam imitationis adiungunt]*. Those do not possess science, in spite of all skill and practical knowledge they can display, if they do not see in the pure and true light of intelligence *[intellectus puritate ac veritate]* the principle of the art about which they boast. If, then, reason shows us that singers in theater have only a talent of this kind, you may, without hesitation, I think, deny them science and consequently that musical art which is only the science of modulation. (*De musica*, 1.4.8, my trans.)

We see that Augustine is not exactly talking about the same thing as Aristotle. But the change in perspective is in itself striking and revealing. Whereas the latter intended poetic imitation to mean *re-presentation of reality* through story and characters, i.e. the possibility and legitimacy of creation of new human life forms—here and now as well for the future—the former focuses his attention on imitation in *musician or actor training*. Moreover, unlike Aristotle's poetics, he does not appraise art according to a fundamentally historical couple: present and future, but to a philosophical and religious dualistic perspective opposing body and soul.

This shift entails debatable ethical consequences since it makes any human attempt to create out of experience and thanks to senses and memory, new life forms illegitimate. *Mimêsis* is not particularly human, Augustine argues, we share it with animals. It is only a kind of mechanical ability that allows to perform certain tasks without the use of reason.

> — **Master**. If memory follows the senses and fingers obey memory, when they are already softened and prepared by exercise, the flute player performs, whenever he wishes, with all the more rightness and pleasure because he possesses to a higher degree the faculties common to us with the beasts *[cum bestiis]*, as we have just demonstrated, the taste for imitation *[appetitum imitandi]*, the senses and the memory *[sensum atque memoriam]*. (*De musica*, 1.5.10, my trans.)

A few lines below, Augustine reactualizes Plato's rejection of mimetic rhythms and melodies. We remember that the latter held performing arts as treacherous activities that disturb individual as well as society and that should be strictly controlled by the State. Likewise, Augustine disregards both the performance of actors who only "tickle the ears of the crowds," and the appreciation and

applause of the audience, which has “the taste of ignorant people” and exerts sheer “popular tyranny.” All of them must be curbed by the Church.

> — **Master**. We have recognized that actors can, without possessing musical science, nicely tickle the ears of the crowd *[sine ista scientia satisfacere voluptati aurium popularium]*. […] Well! The applause of the crowd *[plausus populi]* and all these rewards that are offered in theater, do they not seem to depend on chance and the taste of ignorant people *[imperitorum iudicio]*? — **Student**. In my opinion there is nothing more hazardous, more uncertain, more exposed to the caprice of popular tyranny *[plebeiae dominationi]* than all these favors. — **Master**. Would the actors sell their songs *[cantus suos]* at such a price, if they knew the music? (*De musica*, 1.6.11, my trans.)

Actors and poets do not provide their audience with *kátharsis*, they are just interested in money and glory. Similarly, audiences are not purged by art in any way, they are just distracted from the one endeavor they should turn to, which is to find God within themselves. All are devoid of any real “science of music.”

> — **Master**. When you have persuaded me or demonstrated that an actor has not acquired the talent he has, or does not show it to please the public, for money or applause, then I will grant you that one can possess the music while being an actor. If, on the contrary, as it is infinitely probable, there is no actor who does not contemplate, as the end of his profession, money or celebrity, you will be forced to acknowledge that the actors do not know the music, or that we must ask the crowd for glory and other ephemeral goods, rather than seek in us science. (*De musica*, 1.6.12, my trans.)

Jacques Darriulat notices the same denunciation of theater, poetics and Aristotle in the later *Confessions* written between 397 and 400. What was considered cathartic is now seen as sheer evil because it diverts the soul from finding God inside herself, makes her imagine false solutions to end her sufferings and incites her to perversely enjoy the representation of pain.

> Aristotle’s *Poetics* enables us to understand the exemplary value of tragedy in the eyes of a pagan: it shows what a heroic “character” can be. Augustine’s *Confessions* allow us to realize the radical evil that tragedy insinuates into creature’s heart: it diverts from God and perverts us through cruelty. Augustine’s criticism then focused on three points. Tragedy is, first and foremost, possession: it diverts the soul from its interiority, in which, though, the incarnate God dwells, and precipitates it into a fascinating exteriority. Secondly, tragedy is projection: it hallucinates on an imaginary stage the Passion that makes her internally suffer. Thirdly, tragedy is perversion: it corrupts pity and turns it into cruelty. (Darriulat, 2007a, my trans.)

This rejection of Aristotle, particularly his empiricism and his poetics, is, naturally, combined with a return to Plato and the development of a very abstract theory of music which disregards both “poetry in itself” and music as it is concretely performed. Actually, Augustine claims, artists do not know anything about art. The philosopher, who has become now a theologian, because he is

instructed both in mathematics, rhetoric and true religion, knows much more about it.

Book 1 provides a full demonstration of this extraordinary claim. To tackle the issue, Augustine argues that usual practices by musicians are far from the real essence of music. Indeed music does not require only "modulation" but "fine modulation." Yet, such fine modulation is beyond mere "measuring of words and sounds" and needs to be elaborated directly from arithmetics.

> — **Master**. So there is a profound difference between modulating and modulating finely. Modulation is found in all singers, provided they are not mistaken concerning the measures of words and sounds *[in illis dimensionibus vocum ac sonorum]*: but fine modulation belongs only to that liberal art which we call music. (*De musica*, 1.3.4, my trans.)

This starting point which gives precedence to mathematics and abstract knowledge upon real artistic practices, whether past or current, explains why Augustine disregards the *Aristotelian poetic paradigm of rhythm*—along naturally with the materialist *Democritean physical paradigm*—and elaborates his thought entirely within the framework of the *Platonic metric paradigm.* Rhythm is explicitly defined as a regulated or rightly measured succession of time-sequences or time-lengths.

> — **Master**. Music is the science of regulated modulation *[Musica est scientia bene modulandi – modulor*, lit. to regulate, to measure off properly*].* […] Have you ever heard that word, or did you hear it only about singing and dancing? — **Student**. Yes, more so. But as I observe that to modulate comes from *modus*, right measure, and that there is a measure to be kept in all that one does well, while in singing and dancing there is an infinity of low, though attractive things, I would like to understand perfectly what you mean by modulation: for this single word contains almost entirely the definition of an art as extensive as music, and it is not a question of merely learning the secrets of the singers and the actors. (*De musica*, 1.2.2, my trans.)

Augustine quickly specifies the concept he is aiming at. Modulation is "the art of movement" or better yet, "the art of performing regular movement," i.e. movement "keeping measure" and that is "capable of exciting interest, and consequently of pleasing by itself."

> — **Master**. As for the observation which you have made, that there is often in songs and dances some coarseness which cannot be called modulation without degrading this almost divine art, it is perfectly right. […] Thus we can define modulation as art of movement *[movendi peritia]*, or at least the art of performing regular movement *[ut bene aliquid moveatur]*. For it would be impossible for us to say that an object obeys a regular motion, if it did not keep a certain measure *[si modum non servat]*. […] It is therefore probable that the science of modulation *[scientiam modulandi]* consists in ordering movement properly *[scientiam bene movendi]*, in making it capable of exciting interest, and consequently of pleasing by itself. (*De musica*, 1.2.3, my trans.)

Music—i.e. what we call now music as much as dance and poetry which all are based on "motion"—is then described as "science of regulated movement." But, since Plato in *Laws*

(664a-665a) defined rhythm as *kinêseôs táxis* – order of movement (see chap. 2), music becomes therefore *science of rhythm*.

For the first time in Antiquity, at least to my knowledge, the priority of harmony or melody upon rhythm is reversed. Music which has been, since the Pythagoreans up to Aristides Quintilianus, primarily theory and practice of succession of notes is surprisingly considered first as succession of time-lengths and accentuations. The balance between the two sides of music has changed. As a matter of fact, it is quite noticeable that Augustine starts one of his first essays by sketching a general theory of "modulation," i.e. rhythm, and maybe as much remarkable that he never achieved the second part of his treatise which was supposed to address harmony. Naturally, this does not change the general theoretical framework of rhythm theory; on the contrary, it reinforces the Platonization that was already under way since the 3rd century.

Next chapter