

## Musical Platonism in Modern Culture

By Edmund J. Goehring

“. . . a poet, if he is to be a poet, must compose fables, not arguments.” (Plato *Phaedo* 61b)

Not too long ago, the *Atlantic Monthly*, one of the better-known organs of modern culture and thinking about it, ran a commentary on music in contemporary society by the art critic Jody Bottum. The main objective of “The Soundtracking of America” (March 2000) is to topple music from its present-day position of cultural supremacy. Bottum contends that music does not deserve its place of superiority over the poetic arts, in particular, because it is intellectually barren. Incapable of generating meaning without help from elsewhere, music must latch on to an external, largely verbal system of beliefs for it to have coherence or utility. Without such moorings, music becomes a destabilizing force in society.

The desire to restore music to its old subservience to poetry, a position it has not held for some two centuries, resonates strongly in many circles of contemporary social/political thought, including academic ones. Not only are Bottum’s concerns related to ongoing questions about music’s place among the other arts; more broadly, they draw on a larger academic debate about the ability of any individual discipline, not just music, to generate its own meaning. The purpose of the present essay is to examine the sources and implications of this modern effort to explain music through external, non-musical standards. First, it will excavate the philosophical roots of this anti-musical prejudice. Here, the argument will be that the move to circumscribe music within the ambit of the verbal arts or a philosophical system turns on a specific reading—or, more likely, a misreading—of Platonic thought. Approaching music in this way leads both to errors about the general nature of music and also to misinterpretations of specific works. Second, this essay will suggest that there are other, more compelling ways of conceiving music, including ones that grant music autonomy from external standards without a loss of intelligibility or meaningfulness.

Bottum’s argument about music turns on two axes: an observation about its current use and a judgment about music itself. The observation is that music today—specifically, music fragmented into clips of sound—furrows

into our public spaces and our private lives. This practice causes harm, Bottum argues, because such fragments score our individual and collective psyches. Many might indeed sympathize with Bottum and, like him, want to scurry for cover from this deluge of sonic shrapnel. But then his reasoning takes an awkward turn as it goes from observation to theorization; that is, as Bottum consciously exchanges the role of cultural observer for that of philosopher about music. If presented with a line-up of suspected saboteurs of music, many might finger a consumerist society as a main culprit in this act of fragmentation. Bottum, instead, blames the cultural misuse of music on music itself. Here is one version of his striking claim that music itself causes moral decay: "People began to imagine that morality was a set of feelings rather than a system of ideas at around the time they began to be able to evoke any mood they wanted by putting a 78 on a phonograph" (58).<sup>1</sup> Our putative modern moral decline coincided with—was even caused by—the arrival of the record player.

What is the philosophical grounding for this claim? Although he does not acknowledge it explicitly, the deepest influence is a specific vision of Platonism. Platonism is an unruly term, and a good first step in getting a grasp on Bottum's adaptation of it is to note that Platonism can be very different from what Plato actually says (a point that will return below). But at least one element of Bottum's aesthetics is a common feature of Platonic thought, and that is idealism. Platonic idealism holds that the material world is a mere image of the eternal, perfect realm of ideas, ideas that exist independently of the visible world. In this ontology, an idea and its representation constitute two different things, and this dualism carries important consequences for a theory of art. For if an idea is conceived as both distinct from and superior to its image, then music, or any artistic medium for that matter, must attach itself to ideas if it is to be coherent or purposeful. Otherwise, art will please, but not instruct; it will move the listener, but not to any higher ethical purpose or vision. It will create an effect, but without a commensurate cause. So, it is Platonic dualism that provides the intellectual framework by which Bottum can criticize music for its misuse: without an idea to attach itself to, music becomes aimless, like a planet without a sun around which to orbit.

From this exposition of Platonist aesthetics, one might wonder why music would be singled out for special rebuke. Wouldn't any art be equally corrosive were it to avert its eyes from that external, transcendent standard? Much of the argument rides on how one interprets the term "idea." In Bottum's view, "idea" is identical with "word." This equation helps to explain, for example, why he wants poetry restored to its earlier supremacy among the arts (a position that aesthetics and popular culture had ceded to music around the end of the eighteenth century). Unlike music, verbal

idioms like narrative, epic, and allegory belong to what Bottum calls the “explanatory arts” (59). The phrase “explanatory arts” shows Bottum’s commitment to logocentrism in the arts, yet it is an unfortunate expression, because it shows a limited understanding of poetry, not to mention music. The phrase also marks an important instance in which Bottum’s Platonism loses sight of what Plato actually says. From a more authentically Platonic view, words, like sounds, do not exist in the realm of ideas: both are images, hazy representations of pure ideas. (The Platonic argument that writing impedes the genuine internalization of wisdom is most dramatically expressed toward the end of the *Phaedrus*, in Socrates’ telling of the tale of Theuth.) But in Bottum’s variant on Platonic thought, words get associated with the rational faculty, music with unruly passion. Hence Bottum’s claim that “music is not a rational art and cannot express an actual idea” (64).

This is a common sentiment about music. It penetrates deeply into Western aesthetics, and, whether or not it gets its Plato right, thought like Bottum’s has often been traced to Platonic dualism and ascribed to thinkers steeped in Plato. Augustine offers an obvious early example of a Platonist who wrestled with music as an expression of the corruptible and the ephemeral. To be sure, Augustine shows a welcome ambivalence toward music (a virtue mostly lacking in Bottum’s rigid Platonism),<sup>2</sup> but he ultimately assigns music only an ancillary role in a spiritual life. At its best, music can be a useful tool for aiding weak minds in the contemplation of divine words. Although just about everything else in an Augustinian cosmology also lacks such intrinsic value, music stands out as an especially treacherous art. As Augustine puts it in the *Confessions*, music can paralyze the mind by gratifying the senses (10.33).

The view of music as an evil, or at least as something incapable of goodness without proper regulation or orientation, prevailed for well more than a millennium after Augustine, in secular as well as ecclesiastical circles. Even in the eighteenth century, a time when instrumental music began to liberate itself from theoretical and practical dependence on poetry, Platonism of this sort maintained a robust presence. Rousseau notoriously likened instrumental music to an incompetent representational painting, which needs subtitles to explain it: this is a tree, this is a horse (1767). Kant also ranked instrumental music below vocal music in value. It is just entertainment, he opines, because it allows for the contemplation of form only, not of ideas (1790:1.1.2 §53). Joseph Addison gives a useful summary of this line of thought when he argues that music does not deduce principles from itself but from general principles of taste. Music, or any other art, conforms to taste, an external standard, not taste to music (1711). Indeed, Addison’s judgment closely resembles Bottum’s own assertion that “music

produces its effect without demanding a philosophical frame" (64).

This hierarchical view of knowledge reaches well beyond inquiry into a sensuous medium like music. One of its more recent manifestations in public discourse is in the area of higher education. Taking a moment to look at how it influences debates about a liberal education can set into relief the premises and priorities of Bottum's thinking about music. For example, Alasdair MacIntyre, whose thought influences Bottum's in other contexts, recently argued that an individual discipline cannot answer questions of its own significance. Be it a member of the arts or the sciences, any specialized area of inquiry needs the lens of philosophy (or theology) to correct its congenital myopia.<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre's thought in turn draws on that of John Henry Newman. From the premise that "all knowledge forms one whole, because its subject-matter is one," Newman posits the need for a special discipline or habit of thought that can set the proper boundaries for these discrete areas of inquiry:

The comprehension of the bearings of one science on another, and the use of each to each, and the location and limitation and adjustment and due appreciation of them all, one with another, this belongs, I conceive, to a sort of science distinct from all of them, and in some sense a science of sciences, which is my own conception of what is meant by Philosophy, in the true sense of the word, and of a philosophical habit of mind. (1982:38)

Philosophy, so conceived, resembles a benevolent version of Tolkien's one ring, which brings in all of the disciplines and binds them together.

To turn back to thinking about music within this framework, Bottum's distinction between representation and idea takes the form of a lament. Music in the modern world occasions moral decay because it is now untethered from what he calls a "public metaphysics—a shared belief in the coherent relations among God and nature and human culture" (64). Bottum's complaint has two aspects—a historical and an ideological one. There was a time, he asserts, when things were better, and they were better not because music itself was a different sort of thing then, but because a metaphysical framework was in place to give music coherence. Bottum's argument is problematic on both the historical and internal grounds. In formulating an objection to the nostalgic side of his argument, one could start by asking: where was this "public metaphysics," this "shared belief in the coherent relations among God and nature and human culture"? Bottum's argument never ventures out to give the content of this public metaphysics: it stays in the safe harbor of generalities. (Nor does MacIntyre say what his philosophically grounded curriculum would look like.) He

does, however, tell us which works exemplify this shared belief: the *Saint Matthew Passion*, for example, or the *Messiah*, or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. All are large works, generally public in posture, and have some kind of religious connotation. But although they are public in this loose sense (as opposed, say, to the more private world of chamber music or the intimate one of the Romantic character piece), even a casual look at these pieces shows that, if they are "saying" anything at all, they do so in a way that differentiates and discriminates, as opposed to expressing a shared public metaphysics.

Take Handel's *Messiah*. Today it accompanies any number of public ceremonies, whether sacred or secular. But Charles Jennens, the author of the text (which Handel took without alteration), conceived the *Messiah* as an attack on specific factions of religious thought, especially Dissenters, Deists, and anti-clerics, in defense of a more orthodox view of Christianity.<sup>4</sup> The existence of the *Messiah*, then, springs from a recognition of opposing world views. Bottum also mentions an Enlightenment confidence present in, for example, Mozart (69). Presumably, he means the operas. This argument holds up, perhaps, for *Figaro*, but it is hard to know what kind of optimism about human nature and its potential is present in the character of Don Giovanni. Mozart's operas resist such univocal readings as a group and even individually. Indeed, a moment in *Così fan tutte* offers a cautionary tale about this Platonist search for a shared, idealistic view of things. Early in the opera, Don Alfonso, a philosopher no less, equates the overblown confidence in female fidelity with the Arabian phoenix: "everyone says that it exists," he reports, "but no one knows where." Bottum's public metaphysics is like the Arabian phoenix.

Perhaps my objections will be perceived as an unwitting vindication of Bottum's position. These and other pieces, one might suggest, indeed aspire to a shared view of things. What counts is the ambition, not its success. If it should turn out that not everyone gets the idea behind the music—well, that is not music's fault. I think that Bottum's argument cannot be saved by this more generous reading, nor would he likely want it to be. Bottum argues not just for any metaphysics—a mere aspiration toward any metaphysics is not enough for him—but for the realization of a distinctly public one (however that is defined). The sense that things really were better once upon a time is integral to his argument.

However one responds to the historical side of Bottum's objections to music, the internal side of his argument poses a separate and potentially more intractable set of problems. The central question here is whether meaning in a musical work stems from attachment to an extra-musical framework of meaning. A way to test this theory is to look at an individual work that Bottum cites as exemplary, such as the *Saint Matthew Passion*. At

first glance, Bach's masterpiece would seem like a perfect candidate for his Platonist aesthetics. This work apparently conveys an idea and, what is more, a verbal one with a moral and theological purpose. But what, precisely, does this music *qua* theology preach? According to the historian Jaroslav Pelikan, the text meditates on the Anselmic sacrifice theory of the crucifixion. Briefly, this is how the theological argument goes: neither Adam nor his descendants can provide satisfaction for original sin. Only someone innocent can do this, and it is the death of Christ that allows God to forgive the sin of Adam without violating divine justice (Pelikan 1986:91–93).

Here is Anselm's formulation of the doctrine:

Therefore hold thou most firmly, that without satisfaction—that is, without the spontaneous payment of the debt—neither can God release the sinner unpunished, nor the sinner attain to such bliss as he enjoyed before his sin; not in that way could man be restored to what he was before sinning. (*Cur Deus Homo* 1.19)

The glosses on the biblical narrative of Bach's Passion clearly invoke this view. The massive opening chorus, for example, contains this exchange between two of the choruses:

Sehet! Was? Seht die Geduld.  
 Seht! Wohin? Auf unsre Schuld.  
 [Behold! What? Behold his forbearance.  
 Look! Whence? To our own guilt.]

Or, in the recitative "O Schmerz" (No. 19), the chorus interjects this chorale text:

Was ist die Ursach' aller solcher Plagen?  
 Ach, meine Sünden haben dich geschlagen!  
 Ich, ach Herr Jesu, habe dies verschuldet,  
 Was du erduldet!  
 [What is the source of these sufferings? Ah, my sins have stricken thee! I, Lord Jesus, am responsible for what you have endured.]

Passages like these might seem to vindicate Bottum's point, that this music derives its ability to do more than evoke emotion by attaching itself to an idea. But I think that the evidence winds up showing something like the reverse. Turning again to Pelikan is instructive. One of the tenets of his history of doctrine is that ritual and liturgy precede theology: one prac-

tices first, and then one afterward reflects on the belief expressed through the practice. The *Saint Matthew Passion* represents a profound instantiation of this theory. As pure doctrine, the Anselmic satisfaction theory is fraught with intellectual inconsistencies. For example, in so assiduously attending to the crucifixion, it renders the resurrection an afterthought. As Pelikan argues, moving the satisfaction theory of the atonement “from devotion to dogmatics, from meditation to systematic theology, created enormous problems. . . . With the elimination of its full liturgical and sacramental context, it did not make sense” (1986:100–01).<sup>5</sup> Bach’s music is tied to ritual and devotion; it is not, finally, theology in sound. This claim stands Bottum’s theory on its head: the idea does not make the music intelligible; the music makes the idea intelligible. Music does not block off our access to ideas; rather, it is a necessary means of accessing them.

There is even more to it than that: a viable theory of art needs some way of holding together image and idea. Failing to do so can produce unpersuasive analytical and hermeneutical results, as can be seen in looking at the most enduring analytical legacy of a Platonist music aesthetics. This is the theory of imitation. Although as capacious a term as Platonism itself, *mimesis* as historically applied to music generally codified the superiority of the verbal arts over the musical ones. What is it that music imitates? For most of the history of Western music, the usual answer was, the text—either an image contained in or an emotion generated by it. Imitation, so understood, has undeniable use for describing much vocal music. The *Saint Matthew Passion*, for example, is saturated with musical images that “imitate” the words of the Bible and the poetic interpolations on them. In the first musical excerpt below, taken from the monumental opening chorus, the plodding bass line evokes the labored steps to Gethsemane (ex. 1). The passage after that, from “O Schmerz” (No. 25), gives the pulsating bass line that imitates the “trembling heart” (ex. 2). Other obvious instances of music that takes its cues from the text are the renderings of earthquakes (No. 63a) and the crowing of the cock (No. 38c), as well as the halo effect that the strings provide to all but one of the settings of Jesus’ words.

Such descriptive musical language reflects the heart-felt Pietism and earnest didacticism that counterbalance the mighty austerity of Bach’s masterpiece. But this word-based approach toils mightily to account for the majesty of the work. Logocentrism taken on its own ultimately trivializes the music, making it into a kind of highlighter for the text. To take stock of the genuine value of Bach’s work, one must look elsewhere, to his mastery of polyphony, the power of his harmonies, his handling of rhythm, his melodic and thematic invention—aspects of Bach’s style that Bottum un-

Example 1: Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*, no. 1, mm. 1-6.

Orch.

I+II

3

5

Example 2: Bach, *St. Matthew Passion*, no. 25, mm. 1-2.

Tenor

O Schmerz! hier zit - tert das ge-quäl-te Herz;

Orch.

Fl.dolce I  
Ob.da c.I

p

Fl.dolce II  
Ob.da c.II

pianissimo



derplays. After all, Bach was not the first or only person to set a Passion text to music, nor is he exceptional in using descriptive musical imagery. So, it is not the character of the words that is decisive in giving this piece particular significance; it is the character of the music.

Another way of framing this objection to Platonist music aesthetics is to argue that you can't judge a tune by its words. Bottum, true to his pseudo-Platonist reading of music, has fun ridiculing tunes with inane texts. For example, what does it mean, he asks, that "MacArthur Park is melting in the rain./ I don't think that I can take it / 'Cause it took so long to bake it / And I'll never have that recipe again" (66)? This is an instance of profundity without coherence, an emotional indulgence that makes us weak-minded, according to Bottum. But he is being disingenuously selective in his examples. He does not mention Schubert songs set to Goethe texts or Monteverdi madrigals set to Tasso. One can think of instances of good music set to bad texts (this has been said of Picander's poetic interpolations in Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion*), bad music set to good texts (certain madrigals), good music set to good texts (certain other madrigals), and, of course, bad music set to bad texts. In the evaluation of a vocal work, it does not matter, finally, whether the poetry is weak or strong. As Edward Cone reminds us, the text is the composer's to do with as he will:

The words, that is, have become a part of the composer's message, utterances of his own voice. In a sense, he composes his own text. Some poems are designed to be set to music, others are written with no such intent. No matter: in either case the song composer considers that the poem is his to use. (1974:18-19)

The composer's principles are musical ones, and these do not always work in tandem with poetic ones.

The theory of imitation shows even greater cracks when one seeks to describe and evaluate instrumental music. Not that the issue was always framed as a failure of theory; for many, the fault resided in music's inability to live up to principles of imitation. The imposition of an imitative theory onto music was precisely what allowed Rousseau to equate instrumental music with a bad representational painting. The objection is misplaced, however. What needed adjusting was not instrumental music but rather a theory that, first, failed to recognize the internal sources of musical meaning and coherence and that, second, faulted music for failing to live up to these externally imposed notions. Rousseau's method of argumentation resembles Bottum's: both put music into a box that it cannot get out of and then blame music for being unable to climb out of it. A famous example of how greater verbal clarity and dependence on an external idea

**Example 3:** Vivaldi, *Spring*, II, mm. 1–3. “E quindi sul fiorito ameno prato/Al caro mormorio di fronde e piante/Dorme ‘l caprar col fido can’ á lato.” [Trans: And then upon the flowery, pleasant meadow, to the rustling of the branches and the leaves, the goatherd sleeps with the faithful dog at his side.]

Violino principale

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Largo

*Il capraro che dorme* [the sleeping goatherd]  
solo

*Mormorio di frondi e piante* [the rustling of the braches and leaves]

*Il cane che grida* [the barking dog]

*si deve suonare sempre molto forte e strappato* [always to be played very loud and sharply accented]

can render music not deep and meaningful, but banal, is Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. The second movement of *Spring*, for instance, presents the musical image of a faithful dog, whose barking is rendered by the viola and whose obedience to his master is given by the repetition of two quarter notes, in every measure, at the same spot (ex. 3). The repeated viola line in imitation of the barking dog is not an aid to understanding as much as a gimmick. Bottum is partly aware of the deficiencies of this form of mimesis, but he is also beholden to the very theory he rejects. After all, he wants music valued not as a thing in itself, but as a vehicle for transmitting verbal knowledge instead of inchoate feeling.

If the argument here is that no one should shed a tear to see Platonist models of musical analysis set to rest, what, then, should take their place? Is there a critical framework that better attends to the relation between sound and idea? Toward the end of the eighteenth century, a new conception gradually formed that began to remove music from the company of the imitative arts. Thomas Twining, for example, restricts imitation in music to the passions and ideas it raises. The medium itself is for him manifestly not imitative:

The whole power of Music may be reduced, I think, to three distinct effects;—upon the *ear*; the *passions*, and the *imagination*: in other words, it may be considered as simply delighting the *sense*, as raising *emotions*, or, as raising *ideas*. The two last of these effects constitute the whole of what is called the *moral* (i.e., as affecting the mind

rather than the body), or *expressive*, power of Music; and in these only we are to look for anything that can be called imitation. Music can be said to imitate, no farther than as it *expresses* something. As far as its effect is merely physical, and confined to the ear, it gives a simple, original pleasure; it expresses nothing, it *refers* to nothing; it is no more imitative than the smell of a rose, or the flavor of a pineapple. ([1789] 1971:49)<sup>6</sup>

Twining's interest is not in lumping the arts all together under a uniform standard but rather in attending to their unique properties. His antipathy toward a conflation of the arts prompts a barb hurled at Rousseau (identified here under the alias of Plato):

The complaint, so common, of the separation of Poetry and Music, and of the total want of meaning and expression in *instrumental* Music, was never, I believe, the complaint of a man of true musical feeling: and it might, perhaps, be not unfairly concluded, that Aristotle, who expressly allows that "Music, even *without* words, *has expression*" . . . was more of a musician than his master Plato, who is fond of railing at instrumental music, and asks with Fontenelle,— "Sonate, que me veux-tu?" [Sonata, what do you want of me?] (1775:49, n.s)

Imitation as a concept did not vanish overnight, of course, and some thinkers tried to adjust it to the perception that music was in a fundamental way a different kind of art. We see this effort in the following commentary by Adam Smith, in which the term "subject" is largely synonymous with "the object of imitation":

What is called the subject of such music is merely, as has already been said, a certain leading combination of notes, to which it frequently returns, and to which all its digressions and variations bear a certain affinity. It is altogether different from what is called the subject of a poem or a picture, which is always something which is not either in the poem or in the picture, or something quite distinct from that combination, either of words on the one hand, or of colors on the other, of which they are respectively composed. The subject of a composition of instrumental music is a part of that composition: the subject of a poem or picture is no part of either. (1980:205)<sup>7</sup>

Smith might be faulted only for placing poetry and painting among

the imitative arts. Some more modern aesthetic theories hold that, just as the subject of music is sound, so, too, are words that of poetry and colors and shapes that of painting. But Smith's main point, that music is self-referential, marks a great change from earlier theories. Describing music as that which imitates other music holds together two essential but often conflicting requirements of music (or any art): that it have autonomy and that it be coherent.<sup>8</sup> An entirely autonomous art with no frame of reference for its language would be unintelligible. Meanwhile, an entirely imitative conception of music—which is, basically, Bottum's approach and which locates the frame of reference beyond the music—would render music trivial.

These philosophical arguments about music are largely taking place on an abstract level. It is important that they not remain there: imitation began to collapse as a viable concept precisely from the recognition, based on empirical grounds, that meaning in music could be produced through music itself and characterized in musical terms. The result was a move toward more formal analytical approaches. Formal analysis does not sit well with Bottum, and one can see why. It is predicated on the integrity and meaningfulness of musical elements—of rhythm, timbre, texture, and harmony—a premise that runs contrary to his demand that music yield to a public metaphysics to gain coherence. The rejection of formal analysis betrays a deep anti-intellectualism. In the following passage, for example, Bottum compares the analysis of music to Herman Hesse's *Glass Bead Game*: it is "a complex and sophisticated rite filled with delicate connections perceived [only] by its priestly scholastics, lacking any meaning, and consuming the culture's intellectual and emotional energy" (70). One needs specific examples to counter this charge of esotericism and incoherence, and I will refer to two works, one vocal, one instrumental. In taking passages from Mozart, I do not wish to imply that Mozart's style is or should be normative. Rather, it is composers from the mainstream of Western classical music who occupy much of the contested territory in debates about music's meaning and its cultural value.

The first example is "Se vuol ballare" from *Le nozze di Figaro*. As with the above-cited passages from the *Saint Matthew Passion*, parts of this aria can yield to a logocentric reading (ex. 4). The plucking of the strings imitates the textual reference to the guitar; the second verse has the Count, at least in Figaro's imagination, leaping to the *capriola* (ex. 5); and the reigning musical image of the text—dance—is also the prevailing poetic image. Unlike the kind of imitation espoused by Rousseau and exemplified in Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, however, the images evoked in Da Ponte's text are all related to music, either via dance or via specific instruments. Mozart is not

**Example 4:** Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*, “Se vuol ballare,” mm. 1–8. [Trans.: If you want to dance, Mister Count, I’ll play the guitar for you.]

Figaro

Se vuol bal - la - re, si - gnor Con - ti - no, se vuol bal -

Horns and Strings

*p* *staccato*

la - re, si - gnor Con - ti - no, il chi - tar - ri - no le

Detailed description: This musical score consists of two systems. The first system features a vocal line for Figaro in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature, and piano accompaniment for Horns and Strings in treble clef. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'Se vuol bal - la - re, si - gnor Con - ti - no, se vuol bal -'. The piano accompaniment starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a staccato articulation. The second system continues the vocal line with 'la - re, si - gnor Con - ti - no, il chi - tar - ri - no le' and shows the continuation of the piano accompaniment.

**Example 5:** Mozart, *Le nozze di Figaro*, “Se vuol ballare,” mm. 31–42, voice only. [Trans.: If you want to come to my school, I will teach you the capriola.]

Figaro

31

Se vuol ve - ni - re nel - la mia scuo - la, la ca - pri - o - la

37

le in - se - gne - rò, sì, le in - se - gne - rò, sì, le in - se - gne - rò.

Detailed description: This musical score shows two systems of a vocal line for Figaro in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. The first system starts at measure 31 with the lyrics 'Se vuol ve - ni - re nel - la mia scuo - la, la ca - pri - o - la'. The second system starts at measure 37 with the lyrics 'le in - se - gne - rò, sì, le in - se - gne - rò, sì, le in - se - gne - rò.' The melody is simple and rhythmic, consisting of quarter and eighth notes.

imitating something extrinsic to music, but other music. Still, even this more refined conception of imitation falls short of explaining what is most expressive about Mozart’s setting. Although Da Ponte’s text refers to a dance and even specifies one, nothing in it, including the poetic meter, dictates the dance that Mozart ultimately chose, the minuet. The choice of the minuet is decisive for the character of the piece. It is the noblest of eighteenth-century dances, and Mozart amplifies this character by adding an accompaniment of ceremonial horns, which are also not mentioned in

the libretto. Read only as a text, "Se vuol ballare" describes a man bent on revenge. We know from the words that this person is probably clever, but we do not know if he is a *simpatico* type, or whether his cause is just. Only the musical setting tells us that Figaro is to be taken seriously, that he has, literally, a measure of dignity about him. Music like this creates meaning not by latching itself on to an external verbal idea but through its own medium.

This is not the arcane analysis of a glass bead game. Rather, it points out audible and transparent details of the aria. We also see in this example from *Figaro* a harmony between music's numerical properties, manifested in rhythm, and its emotive sides. Again, these are two realms, like idea and representation, that Bottum wants to keep separate:

Plenty of genuine ideas exist in music, of course; they're just not what we mean by "ideas" in any nonmusical sense. They express musical techniques and music's root mathematical structure, and exactly what they have to do with what we experience while listening is something no one has ever satisfactorily explained. (65)

In denying a connection between the numerical and the audible properties of music, Bottum is not being attentive to Mozart or to his Shakespeare (not to mention Plato). A long tradition views music as number made audible and musical rhythm as a means of conveying character and therefore as having an ethos. The ethical nature of music has been famously celebrated in the *Merchant of Venice*.

The man that hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils;  
The motions of his spirit are dull as night,  
And his affections dark as Erebus. (5.1.83-87)

This is not to reduce music to a vehicle for conveying platitudes and moralisms. Rather, the argument is that music can have an ethos, and that it can convey through its own medium—its rhythms and harmonies—a coherent idea.

This passage from *Figaro* shows that vocal music can have a meaning and character that are not dependent on words. Can the same be said of instrumental music? I'd like to consider a passage from the first movement of Mozart's Clarinet Concerto to show how strictly instrumental music can engage not only the heart but also the mind. The passage in question is one of the most stirring in the entire piece, a profound transformation of

**Example 6:** Mozart, Clarinet Concerto, I: mm. 128–33.

Cl. pr. (A)

Vl.

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

*p*

**Example 7:** Mozart, Clarinet Concerto, I: mm. 1–2.

Vlns.

Vla., Cello, Bass

Allegro

*p*

the opening theme (ex. 6). In its original form at the beginning of the movement, this theme was decorative and cast in a thoroughly modern style for Mozart's time (ex. 7). The later passage, by contrast, conveys solemnity and dignity through austere writing and through recollecting older, venerable polyphonic practices. (The entries of the main theme in the different instrumental parts of this passage are indicated with arrows in ex. 6.) This dignity results not just from texture but also from rhythm. The turn to half notes slows down the pacing of this section, and the entry of subsequent voices at the distance of the half note creates metrical uncertainty: for a few measures (around mm. 128–30), the location of the down-beat is unclear. Evoking older music and creating metrical ambiguity in this way arrest the forward progress of time, making this passage a transcendent moment. At least since Mozart's day, certain traits of Renaissance and Baroque music have been associated with the elevated and the divine. Mozart's evocation of the *stile antico* as an emblem of the sacred continues to resonate today, contrary to Bottum's concern that modern habits have

**Example 8:** Mozart, Clarinet Concerto, I: mm. 134–37.

The musical score for Example 8 consists of five staves. The top staff is for the Clarinet in C (Cl. pr. (A)), showing a complex melodic line with frequent sixteenth-note runs and trills. The second staff is for Violin I (vl.), which has a melodic line with trills. The third staff is for Violin II (vlla.), which is mostly rests. The fourth staff is for Viola (vc.), and the fifth staff is for Cello/Double Bass (Cb.), both showing a steady rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes.

made this music unintelligible.

If the meaning of this passage is clear when viewed in isolation, its larger context creates ambiguity. Immediately following this transcendent moment, a passage appears that bears little of this prior dignity (ex. 8). The units are now short and discrete, and they are repeated over a static, vamp-until-ready harmonic pattern. The clarinet joins in this new mood by supplying busy-work in the form of sixteenth-note decorations of the harmonies. To describe this transition figuratively, we have abruptly moved from the church to the comic stage.

How does one explain this juxtaposition of unlike things? Seeking some external standard—Bottum’s “idea,” in other words—is of little use here. Even using internal criteria, erasing the ambiguity of this section would breach critical decorum with no gain in the intelligibility of this mixing of styles. The meaning and character of this part of the Clarinet Concerto derive from the coexistence of these incongruous elements and depict a beauty that is at once remote and piercing. The balancing between the elevated and the comic accounts for the melancholy that suffuses this work and many late works of Mozart. It is true that one marvels in the technical facility of this passage for its own sake—how the elevated passage can seem at once unexpected and yet deeply satisfying. But this facility and ambiguity, in gratifying the senses, do not paralyze the mind. Rather, they prick the intellect into action. Having a piece run entirely true to convention would give it little emotional appeal by depriving it of intellectual interest.

The equation of music with unruly emotion is a common move in much



philosophical speculation about music. There is good reason for this, of course: music holds a position as the most abstract of the arts, but also the most physical and visceral. Still, the exclusive identification of music with emotion leaves one having to choose between music either as the locus of the sensuous or else as a mere servant to poetry. One can agree that Allan Bloom is on to something when he calls music *alogon*—the pre-verbal, inarticulate speech of the soul—without saying that that defines *all* of the experience of music. Likewise, one can marvel at the insight in Kierkegaard's distinction between Faust, an intellectual daemon and therefore a quintessentially literary type, and Don Giovanni, a musical and therefore erotic daemon, while still objecting to his exclusive association of music with the erotic. After all, every other character in Mozart's opera is also musical but does not behave in the same way. To philosophize about music should presuppose the question "which music?"; otherwise, taking too global a perspective on a musical object can obscure the details of a work, details from which meaning arises. Even those popular songs that for Bottum come closest to his longed-for universality are praised for their "deep," "tragic" possibilities (the very sort of fuzzy language about music he derides in others). This stance closes off other regions of human expression and experience: the comic, the epigrammatic, the heroic, and the ironic. It seems as if Bottum's world has only one genre in it.

In separating an idea from its medium, Platonism along the lines espoused by Bottum disallows our only access to ideas. The result is a theory that separates reason from feeling, meaning from sound. Of course we might be skeptical of music that renders an emotional effect without an adequate intellectual cause, as Wagner derisively said of French *grand opéra*. But it is one thing to say that feeling is not identical to virtue, another to say that, if something is not verbal, it cannot be ethical, purposeful, or reasonable. Bottum cites a passage from Thomas Carlyle which he erroneously thinks supports his own argument about the inherent meaninglessness of music: "Who is there that, in logical words, can express the effect music has on us?" But for "music" one can easily substitute "dance," "poetry," "God," and many other things. In the end, these Platonic arguments try to reason needs for which there might be no verbal explanation, or at least where a verbal formulation would be inadequate. People sing hymns or anthems in church or during public ceremonies rather than just recite them because singing is more than a handy aid to memory; it brings a fuller commitment of the self, and also more meaning. Music speaks to a kind of experience and understanding that is inaccessible by other means.

The paradox is that this Platonist objection to music might simplify or misrepresent Plato himself, a point that is something of a subtext in my larger argument. I would like to close with this observation by referring to

a few passages from some of the dialogues. The epigram of this essay, from the *Phaedo*, gives the sense that Socrates had a death-bed conversion about poetry, because it shows that he endorsed poetry on its own terms, rather than as an underling to philosophy. In the *Symposium*, meanwhile, the character of Aristophanes offers the stirring notion of *eros* as the soul's longing for immortality. Socrates accepts this view and then elaborates on it in a remarkable way: when we finally answer the question of why we seek this immortality, the inquiry is over. "There is no need," Socrates says, "to ask the further question 'Why does one desire to be happy?'" This is a point where verbal inquiry cannot penetrate. Finally, we see Plato exploring the limits of verbal argument in the mysterious conclusion to the *Crito*, the dialogue whose action takes place the day before Socrates' death. Here, Socrates likens the voices of the Laws booming in his head to the melodies of the Corybantes, who celebrated religious rites with ecstatic dances. Their music is so loud that Socrates, the great dialectician, has become deaf to any verbal arguments that would dissuade him from accepting death. These texts seem to conclude that verbal argument can take you only so far. For the rest of the journey, you need the arts.

#### Notes

This essay is warmly dedicated to Chris Hatch in gratitude for many hours of conversation on this and other topics. I am also deeply grateful to Steven Affeldt for his careful reading of several drafts of this paper.

1. Bottum draws consciously on Alasdair MacIntyre's formulation of and attack on emotivism, which MacIntyre defines as "the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character." See MacIntyre (1984:11–12). The emphasis is MacIntyre's.

2. For example, in *De Musica*, Augustine makes the argument, largely unprecedented at that time, that music and all of the arts are rational. He does so, however, by radically separating the general principles of art from its means of representation. See Ellsmere and La Croix (1988:8–12).

3. MacIntyre voiced this view in an address entitled "Catholic Universities: Dangers, Hopes, Choices," given at the conference "Higher Learning and Catholic Traditions" (University of Notre Dame, October 1999).

4. See Ruth Smith (1989:181–82).

5. Michael Long takes a similar position in describing the ritualistic aspects of early fifteenth-century sacred music, particularly that of Josquin: "[T]he late medieval polyphonic Mass was rarely conceived by or for theologians, and represented the artistic response of one individual to the mystery and promises of redemption inherent in its liturgical texts and ritual." See Long (1989:21).

6. The quotation comes toward the beginning of Dissertation II: "On the Different Senses of the Word, Imitative, as Applied to Music by the Antients, and

by the Moderns.”

7. This passage appears in section 2.31 of the essay.

8. For an elegant modern formulation of this view, see Allanbrook (1983:3–9).

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