

Music as Love – On Some Strange Fragments of Medieval and Renaissance Musical Speculations

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Abstract

The paper attempts to sketch a picture of avatars of the platonic god Eros in a collage of accidentally chosen texts and interpretations. The pieces of the puzzle could be loosely called musical theories of platonic inspiration and are held together by the same basic philosophical intuition. In the works of Boethius and then in the Renaissance, Eros is manifested as an answer to the classical question *quid est musica*. The collage of the presented texts displays the presence in the platonic intuition of the hidden congruence of the various dispersed modes of our existence, concluding that each fragment of human existence (philosophy, science, music) constitutes nothing else than the avatar of universal Love. Hence this paper acts as a shield against the ever-growing forces of rationalistic, thought, which also under the influence of early seventeenth-century scientific revolution were to reshape the reasoned discourse that induced a disciplined and professionalized fragmentation in man's existence.

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The following collage of almost accidentally chosen texts and interpretations – which, as we have to admit, do not belong to the continuity of an unbroken historical tradition – is nevertheless, as we assume, held together by the same basic philosophical intuition. The pieces of the puzzle could be loosely called, musical theories of a platonic inspiration. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is not so much to demonstrate the philological filiation or family resemblances between these disparate fragments, than merely to sketch a picture of avatars of the platonic god Eros who now manifests himself not only as an allegory of the philosopher or a naïve cosmological principle as he did in antiquity, but also as an answer to the classical question *quid est musica?*,

beginning with the works of a medieval author, Boethius, and then dwelling on its splendid rebirth in the time of Renaissance.

In his *De musica* and *De arithmetica* Boethius offers two definitions of music, which instead of delimitating its field, as normal definitions should, considerably enlarge it. According to the first definition, music is all „quantity related to quantity”, that is, all numerical proportions.¹ According to the second, which constitutes at the same time the starting point of our present investigation, music is nothing but *armonia plurimorum adunatio et dissidentium consensio*,² „the unison of many things and the concord of separated things”, especially the power that binds all things out of the two original and contrary „natures” of Plato’s *Timaeus*, the „Same” and the „Other”.³ With other words, music would be, according to Boethius, the arithmetic and/or love present everywhere and in everything. To illustrate this point we will present the equally encompassing classification of music by Boethius.

Musica mundana is the harmony of the macrocosm (especially the music of the celestial spheres), while *musica humana* refers to the harmony of the microcosm (the human body and the relation between body and soul), and, at last, *musica instrumentalis* denotes music in the ordinary sense of the word in which we use it today, music which actually sounds and is produced by both instrumental and vocal means.⁴

Musica mundana, the “music of the universe” exists mainly in three forms: the motions of the spheres, the binding of the elements, and the variations of the four seasons.⁵ The music of the spheres is sonorous, although, according to the well-known Pythagorean tradition, not audible

¹ Boethius, A. M. S.: *De institutione musica libri quinque*, ed. G. Friedlein, Teubner, Leipzig, 1867. II. iii; and also Boethius, A. M. S.: *De institutione arithmetica libri duo*, ed. G. Friedlein, Teubner, Leipzig, 1867. I. i., pp. 8.139.6.

² Boethius: *De arithmetica*, II. xxxii, p. 126.17. and 2-16.

³ According to Plato „the soul of the universe was joined together according to musical concord” (*Timaeus*, 35b).

⁴ Bukofzer, Manfred F.: *Speculative Thinking in Medieval Music. Speculum. A Journal of Medieval Studies*. XVII (1942), p. 167. See also: Chamberlain, David S.: *Philosophy of Music in the Consolatio of Boethius*. ??? p. 81–84. For the importance of the classification of Boethius see Ellinwood, Leonard: *Ars Musica*. ??? p. 293.: „[...] this became a primary subject of discussion by the *magister artium*. Pietzsch [*Die Klassifikation der Musik von Boetius bis Ugo von Orvieto*] lists thirty-six writers from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries who mention and discuss these and other categories, frequently quoting Boethius [...] word for word.”

⁵ Boethius: *De musica*, I. ii, p. 187.23.

on earth or to human ears („ad nostras aures sonus ille non pervenit”), but it is also the splendid visible *coaptatio* of the stellar bodies, such that nothing equally coordinated („compaginatum”) and „tightly knit” („comissum”) can be imagined.¹ The music of the elements is the also inaudible harmony of their „diversities and contrary powers” („quattuor elementorum diversitates contariasque potentias”).² This kind of worldly music directly produces the third, the variety of seasons, a consonance in which, as in a properly tuned lyre, no part is either useless or able by its excess to destroy another part. What winter binds, spring loosens, summer heats, and autumn matures („quod constringit hiems, ver laxat, torret aetas, maturat autumnus”), and the seasons alternately bring forth their own fruits or aid those that do („temporaque vicissim vel ipsa suos afferent fructus, vel alii ut afferent subministrant”).³

The music of human body and soul, the *musica humana* also appears in three forms. One is the fit proportioning or blending („coaptatio”, „temperatio”) of the „incorporeal life of reason” („incorporea rationis vivacitas”) with the corporeal body, like one musical consonance of high and low notes („veluti gravium leviumque vocum”). The second is the joining of parts within the soul itself, of rational and irrational parts, „as it pleases Aristotle to call them” („ut Aristoteli placet”); and the third, both the thorough mixing of the elements („corporis elementa”) and the fixed proportioning of members in the body alone („partes coaptatione”).⁴

Finally, sonorous music or *musica instrumentalis* with its three subdivisions (string, wind, and percussion) that imitates world music, has extraordinary power over the whole of man’s existence precisely because all human souls possess a kind of *musica humana*, some internal musical proportionings, that pick out and delight in the external music that resembles them („eo, quod in nobis est iunctum et convenienterque coaptatum, illud excipimus, quod in sonis apte et convenienterque coniunctum est, eoque delectamur”).⁵ Such indeed is the power of music that the man’s soul actually becomes the same as the melodies he hears, and also great changes of morals can be worked by music, says Boethius, because music is the only mathematical art related both to man’s

¹ Ibid., I, ii, p. 187.16-188.7.

² Ibid., I, ii, p. 188.7.

³ Ibid., I, ii, p. 188.10-188.26.

⁴ Ibid., I, ii, p. 188.10-188.26.

⁵ Ibid., I, i, p. 180.3-10.

existence as well as truth („speculationi verum atque moralitati coniuncta”).¹

So in the *Consolatione* Philosophy herself exhorts men to rule by the same rule that rules the sky: *amor* also becomes implicitly musical since it creates the same concord that music creates in *De musica* (the concords of seasons, elements and stars). And since this *amor* also produces holy concord among people, spouses, and friends,² then these concords too are implicitly musical, further aspects on the human music based, on his turn, on the harmony and concord of the separated in the whole of the universe. Finally, at the end of his poem, Boethius shows explicitly that the music, i.e. *amor* of the world is the model for men to imitate: „O felix hominum genus, / si vestros animos amor / Quo caelum regitur regat.”³

World music, *musica mundana* and, therefore, human and instrumental music as imitations of the former, are grounded on and maintained by „mutual love”, „common love” or „concordia” as basic existential characteristics. Other late Latin medieval writers, especially the poets, find a similar relationship between love and *musica mundana*. Martianus Capella attributes to Hymen the firm bonds between the elements (music of the universe), the gods, the soul, and body (human music), as well as the sexes (*De nuptiis*, I.i); Bernard Silvestris, *Commentum super sex libros Eneidos*, ed. Riedel (Greifswald, 1924), says that one aspect of Venus in the poem of Virgil, the „lawful Venus”, signifies „natural justice” („iustitiam naturalem”) or „music of the universe” („musicam mundanam”) as it appears in „elements, stars, seasons, and living things” (p. 10); Alan of Lille describes world and human music as marriages (*De planctu*, PL 210, 453C, 442D–443A) and the chaste love between Nature and Hymen is *melodia concordiae* (481A); Ailred of Rievaulx makes divine love the immediate cause of all concord in the world (*Speculum charitatis* xxi, PL 195, 52B); and Jacopus of Liège finds that *musica mundana*, the music of elements and

¹ Ibid., I. i, p. 179.20.

² „Hic sancto populos quoque / Iuncots foedere continent, / Hic et coniungii sacrum / Castis necit amoribus, / Hic fidis etiam sua / Dictat iura sodalibus” [„By Love are peoples too kept bound together by a treaty which they may not break. Love binds with pure affection the sacred tie of wedlock, and speaks its bidding to all trusty friends.”] Boethius: *De consolatione philosophiae*, trans. W. V. Cooper, The Temple Classics, London, 1902. II. m.8.22-27.

³ „O happy race of mortals, if your hearts are ruled as is the universe, by Love!” Ibid., II. m.8. 28-30.

seasons is created by „quedam innata amoris et concordiae conditio” (*Speculum musicae*, l.xiii).

But let us now turn to an other (?) long and venerable tradition of writings, that, beginning with Plato’s *Symposium*, treats the nature of love, its kinds, sources, powers, intellectual and spiritual benefits. Leone Ebreo’s *Dialogues on Love* was written possibly in Hebrew around 1502, though only published, as *Dialoghi di amore*, in 1535. Leone speaks of the essence of love, after Plato, as a pursuit for beautiful and good. He even goes further and describes together with Ficino the beautiful and good as harmony, and harmony as music.¹ Leone implies that by the unity with God through „intellectual love”, one in pursuit for wisdom performs an act of music.²

Here is how Leone explains the essence of the fable recounting the love of Pan for the nymph Syrinx: „Into these pipes, from the river’s reeds, Syrinx was transformed and the breath (*spirito*) instilled pleasant sound and harmony. The intellectual breath (*spirito*), which moves the heavens, causes the consonant musical correspondence of those pipes. Pan made his panpipe with seven of them, which means the operations of the seven planets’ wheels and their marvellous harmonic concordances. Hence they say that Pan bears the rod and panpipe on which he always plays, for nature continually makes use of the ordered mutation of the seven planets for the continuous mutations of the lower world.”³ And the allegorical, higher sense of the fable that again brings music and love into

¹ Ficino speaks, for example, of the harmony that results from properly combined intervals: „The makers of music turn high and low pitches, different in nature, into friends through certain intervals and modes, from which the structure and sweetness of Harmony derive.” Ficino, Marsilio: *Sopra lo amore ovvero Convito di Platone*. Ed. Giuseppe Rensi, Milan, 1992. 50-51.

² Spinoza derived his doctrine of the intellectual love of God as elaborated in his *Ethics* after „l’amore intellettuale” in Leone’s third *dialogo*.

³ Leone Ebreo (alias Judah Abravanel): *Dialoghi di Amore*. Venice, 1535. From Dialogue 2.: „i calami de le canne del fiume, ne quali fu convertita siringa, ne qual’ calami lo spirito genera suave suono, et harmonia, perchè il spirito intellettuale, che muove i cieli, causa la sua consonante correspondentia musicale, de qual calami; Pan fece la fistula, con sette di loro, che vuol’ significare la congregatione de gl’Orbi de sette pianeti, et le sue mirabili concordantie harmoniali, et per questo dicono che Pan porta la vergha, et la fistula con la quale sempre suona, perchè la natura di continua si serve de l’ordinata mutatione de sette Pianeti, per le mutationi continue del Mondo inferiore” (fol. 39r). For english translation see *The Philosophy of Love (Dialoghi d’amore)* by Leone Ebreo. Trans. F. Friedeberg-Seeley and Jean H. Barnes, London, 1937.

a close relationship is based on Leone's premise that „Pan, which in Greek means »everything«, is the universal ordering nature of all earthly things.”¹

Another Renaissance author of Jewish origin, Yohanan Alemanno, who instructed Pico in Hebrew Kabbalah, published a commentary, around 1490, on the Song of Songs, entitled *Heshek shelomo*, or „Solomon's desire”.² Here, Alemanno traces the operations of Love as music and of music as a superior song, which the lover craves: „The superior song arouses watchfulness and the desire for a kiss, which is its end. [...] Desire begins by achieving a mutual relation between things that exist, as in the relations [intervals] of music, for they lead to desire. Thus a lovely, pleasant relation [interval] produced by a musical instrument imparts to whoever has a palate the desire to savour the sweetness and pleasantness of these relations. Such a one will awaken and long for them, as a person who has a palate awakens and longs to savour the relations [intervals] of music [...] and strives to have the player infuse in his or her person the player's spirit and soul, from the player's to his or her own mouth, so as to teach one the knowledge and wisdom needed to understand these same relations [between things that exist].”³

Alemanno also relates the story of a „beautiful and intelligent maiden” who yearns for perfect love: „She sits in her house, within her walls, while her maiden friends tell her about humans who delight in love and about the shepherd on whom they heap unending praises. Desire burns in flames of fire within their hearts when they remember the love that arises from the glory of his beauty and his splendour. While the maiden burns for the shepherd, behold! He who knows how to play like David on all musical instruments descends from the mountain to the people as he is wont. His song grows and strengthens with him; his hands and fingers pluck the sounds of his voice on the harp and lyre in his hand.

¹ Ibid., fol. 38r.: „Pan che in Greco vuol' dire tutto, è la natura universale ordinatrice di tutte le cose mondane”.

² Similarly, Renaissance composers began to occupy themselves with setting to music the Song of Songs, though in this case the increasingly free and passionate style used in these compositions suggests that many musicians substituted an earthly image for the allegorical onewhich official interpretation attached to it. See Lowinsky, Edward E.: *Music in the Culture of the Renaissance. Journal for the History of Ideas*, 1954. p. 524.

³ Alemanno, Yohanan: *Heshek shelomo* („Solomon's Desire”). London, British Library, MS Or. 2954. fol. 167v.

Then she heard the voice of the song beat on the walls of her heart and said to her friends who did not hear as she did: »Did you hear what my ears grasped, a particle of the good from the voice of a man who sings in songs about the passionate lover's heart? Incline your ears to his strings, for his song is loftier, more praiseworthy, and more glorious than all songs that people sing, and it is impossible not to attribute it to anyone but the perfect of all perfect ones in wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and the whole practice of song, and He is the perfect king whom I loved.«¹ The perfect song lies, then, in the communion with God: the maiden is the people of Israel, the shepherd with his song awakens love for Him. He who knows how to play like David on all musical instruments and who descends from the mountain is Moses. The song of love he plays to the people is the Torah.

And finally, in an essay *Della magia d'amore*,² Guido Casoni, composer of phantasmagorical treatises and poetry from Venice, demonstrated how music, along other arts and sciences, is generated by love. According to the full title of the work „it will be shown how Love is a metaphysician, a natural physicist, an astrologer, a musician, a geometrist, an arithmetician, a grammarian, a dialectician, an orator, a poet, a historiographer” and so on for a total of thirty-nine designations comprising love as an agriculturist, a wool manufacturer, an architect, a glass maker, a necromancer, a chiromancer, and a prognosticator.³

Della magia is a dialogue on love in the tradition of Plato's *Symposium*. It was set in Serravalle, following a banquet, in the beautiful gardens that adjoined the house of Signor Sertorio Pancetta, „gentil'huomo ornato di belle lettere”.⁴ Sertorio acts as *discipulus*, or „student” asking questions and interpolating brief remarks, while his

¹ Ibid., fols. 169v-70r.

² Casoni's work comprises fifty-six folios, with music treated on fols. 31v-40r. Translations are from Don Harrán: Guido Casoni on Love as Music, A Theme „for All Ages and Studies”. *Renaissance Quarterly* 54 (2001). pp. 883-913.

³ „nelle quale si dimostra come Amore sia metafisico, fisico, astrologo, musico, geometra, aritmetico, grammatico, dialectico, rettore, poeta, historiografo, iurisconsulto, politico, ethico, economico, medico, capitano, nocchiero, agricolto, lanifico, cacciatore, architetto, pittore, scultore, fabro, vitreario, mago naturale, negromante, geomante, hidromante, aelemante, piromante, chiromante, fisionomo, augure, aurispice, ariolo, salitore e genetliaco.” Through his *dialogo* Casoni intended to expatiate the ont he thirty-nine manifestations of Love announced in the title, but it seems that he tired after the first six, and the treatise remains unfinished.

⁴ Casoni, Guido: *Della magia*, fol. 1v.

brother Giovanni acts as *magister*, or „teacher”, answering questions and providing lengthy explanations. Casoni’s argument for the universality of love rests on the following theses: Love is the oldest of all gods, the one „whom Orpheus, Parmenides, and Hesiod called the God of all humans and gods”(„Dio de gli huomini, et delli Dei”);¹ „he” stands at the origin of all arts and sciences, „he” directs all persons and divinities; Love is indivisible, indeed, all persons and their activities are bound by „his” unity; Love elevates its practitioners to wisdom; the love of God permeates the entire universe and by its means all creatures attain their perfection; God, therefore, is Love.

Similarly to Leone Ebreo, Casoni reads Love’s secrets into the ancient myths, to the ethereal music of the spheres that Boethius has called *musica mundana*: „I say that the ancient poets under the veil of fable [...] concealed the lofty mystery of the way Love proceeded in teaching the heavens their sweetest harmony.”² Regarding human and instrumental music, Casoni argues deductively that since Love is harmony, and harmony is music, it follows that Love is music. Music was invented by Love then, for „harmony is consent, consent is the concord of low and high sounds, and concord was established by Love.”³ Furthermore, the result of music, when harmonious, is delight. Just as Love causes delight, so does music, incited by Love. Music is Love’s preferred medium („Love adopts music as »his« best instrument not only to spread »his« rule among mortals but also to preserve it”).⁴ As Love, so music is everywhere, on earth, in the heavens, and in the human soul. Music is nothing else, than the order, proportion and beauty of things. In **contemplating** a beautiful woman, says Casoni, „you will hear a most gentle harmony resound in the ears of your souls, and, together with me, you will commend Love who, in teaching lovers how human beauty ought to be like, uncovered the secrets of *musica humana*.”⁵ On

¹ Ibid., fol. 5r.

² Ibid., fol. 33v.: „dico, che gli antichi Poeti sotto il velo della favola [...] ascosero l’alto mistero del modo, che tenne Amore in insegnare a i Cieli la dolcissima loro armonia.”

³ Ibid., fol. 31v.: „essendo che l’armonia è concerto, il concerto è concordia del suono gravo e de l’acuto, et la concordia è instituita da Amore.”

⁴ Ibid., fol. 32v.: „Et non solo adopra Amore la Musica come ottimo instromento, per dilatare il suo imperio tra mortali, ma anco per conservarlo.”

⁵ Ibid., fol. 36r.: „e uditere risonare nelle orecchie delle anime vostre una soavissima armonia, e meco commendarete Amore, che ne l’insegnare a gli amanti quale esser debba l’humana bellezza, scoprì i secreti de l’humana Musica.”

consonance, Casoni notes that just as it „is a uniform and gentle mixture of high and low sounds, so amorous consonance is a thoroughly sweet and gentle relationship between the lover and his beloved.”¹ On the string of instruments, he submits that „they are so called from [the strings of] the heart. Hence the musician, in mixing swift and slow movements, secures amidst the sounds formed by the strings nothing else but love. From this one understand that Love instituted *musica instrumentalis* to secure love amidst hearts.”²

Casoni also recounts the story of Leone Ebreo in a very similar manner: „The poets claim that Pan, compelled by Cupid, took fire with love for Syrinx, a most beautiful virgin, who inhabited the mountains of Arcadia, and by fleeing from him she was transformed into marshy reeds. After taking seven of them and joining them with wax, he constructed a panpipe and, putting it in his mouth and infusing life into the reeds with his breath, he played sweetly. The highest sense of the myth is as follows: Pan, which in the Greek tongue, means »everything«, is the universal nature that regulates all worldly things; the same nature, once conquered by Cupid, i.e., stimulated by the desire for perfection, becomes inflamed with love for Syrinx, the beautiful virgin, who stands for the most beautiful and incorruptible heaven. That the nymph then changes into pipes capable of sound designates the heavens’ tendency to harmony. Pan takes seven reeds, which signify the wheels of the seven planets; and the result of his giving them life (*spirito*) with his breath (*fiato*) is a most agreeable sound: with nature assigning every heaven its intellectual breath, which lends it its motion, the consequence is marvellous correspondence, the sweetest musical sounds, and the most gentle celestial harmony. We are led to recognize thereupon that Love was the origin of heavens’ concordance. To make the concordance perpetual, Love saw to it that each intelligence, with insatiable affection, move the celestial wheel appropriate to it, enlivening it and striving to unite with it for eternity.”³

¹ Ibid., fol. 36r-v.: „si come la consonanza è una mistura del suono acuto, e grave uniforme e soave; così la consonanza amorosa è una convenienza de l’amante, e de l’amata totta dolce, e soave.”

² Ibid., fols. 38v-39: „le corde de gli instramenti siamo così dette dal core; onde il Musico temperando i moti veloci, e tardi, altro non procura tra i suoni formati dale corde, che Amore; da che si comprende, ch’egli ha instituito la Musica instrumentale per procurare amore tra i cuori.”

³ Ibid., fols. 33v-34r: „Fingono i Poeti, che Pan constretto da Cupido s’accese dell’amore di Siringa vergine bellissima, habitatrice de i monti de i monti

Guido Casoni, the most obscure writer among those presented, perhaps not even a „philosopher” in the ordinary sense of the word, is cited at this length because he applies in his *Della magia* a single deductive argument, indeed a single deductive measurement rod to all forms of possible human knowledge and the whole of man’s universe and even existence: their affinity with Love, the well-known platonic Eros of the *Symposium*. The hidden congruence of the various dispersed modes of our existence is found in the ancient philosopher’s intuition revived by the Renaissance, that each fragment of this very human existence (philosophy, science, music) constitutes nothing else than, as we have noted in our first paragraph, the avatar of universal Love. So this treatise acts as a buffer against the ever since growing forces of rationalistic, „peripatetic” thought, which also under the influence of early seventeenth-century scientific revolution were to reshape the lineaments of reasoned discourse that induced a disciplined and professionalized fragmentation in man’s existence.

Casoni’s and his contemporaries’ and fellow philosophers’ fragmentation was of another kind, it resided not so much in strictness of definitions and classifications, but in the multiplicity of various topics and exempla, an interrelated colourful picture of ancient cosmological myths, contemporary women and philosophical problems, behind whom a higher (platonic) Idea(1) loomed, nothing else than Love, to which all topics and exempla, the whole of man’s existence, related. All of these modes link to philosophy, which is Love, which is Harmony, which is Music – and Music as Love is a whole, not only as the sum total of its

d’Arcadia, et ch’ella da lui fuggendo si converse in palustri canne, dellequali havendo egli preso sette calami, e congiuntoli insieme con la cera, formò la fistula, et postola a bocca, dandoli spirito co’l fiato dolcemente suonò; dellaqual favola il senso altissimo è questo: Pan, che nella Greca favella significa tutto, è la natura universale ordinatrice di tutte le mondane cose, laqual vinta da Cupido ciò è stimolata dal desider[i]o di perfezione, s’infiama dell’amore di Siringa virgine bella, che è il Cielo bellissimo, et incorruttibile; laqual Ninfa poi si cangia in canne atte al suono, ch’è la disposizione de i Cieli all’armonia. Prende Pan sette calami, che s’intendono le sfere delli sette Pianeti, e dandoli spirito co’l fiato, ne risulta gratissimo suono, ch’ è assegnando la natura ad ogni Cielo il suo spirito intellettuale, che li presta il moto, nacque la mirabile corrispondenza, i dolcissimi suoni musicali, et la soavissima Celeste armonia; et così danno a conoscere, ch’Amore fu origine della concordanza de’Cieli; laquale desiderando egli, che fosse perpetua, operò, che ciascuna intelligenza con insatiabili affettione movesse l’orbe Celeste a lei appropriato, vivificandolo, e desiderando seco eternamente unirsi.”

components, but also in a way in which the components all exemplify Eros in their sundry interrelations on higher and lower levels of cosmological, natural and human activity. As for today, they do not. Or maybe music (and love), let it be pop or classical, the Beatles or Bach still do, sometimes. And sometimes we also see a not so coherent picture, the pieces of which we can only *hope*, as Kant said, that will finally fit together and give us meaning.