The Liberal Art of Music

In classical and late antique culture, music was generally understood not in terms of something composed, practiced, played, or performed, but as a mathematical discipline that was concerned with identifying, categorizing, and creating measured relations between sounds — usually the written or spoken sound of words in poetic rhythm, meter, and verse. Alongside the other mathematical-type disciplines of arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and the literary disciplines of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic, music formed part of the “core curriculum” of the seven liberal arts: those disciplines which effectively formed a common culture shared by the governing elite of educated, free citizens among whom they were studied.

Of course, music as we would now commonly understand it did exist and was practiced, though we know very little about its precise form. Wind instruments such as pipes and horns; stringed instruments such as the lyre; percussion instruments such as the cymbals and drum — all of these were played, most often in a context associated with pagan cult, the theater, dinner parties, or brothels. In churches, vocal music, or more precisely, a type of simple, one-line chant, was increasingly used to recite the Psalms, although there is no evidence of instrumental music being used in a Christian context: it was most likely simply too tainted by its pagan associations. Instrumental or vocal music was, however, quite separate and distinct from the liberal discipline of music: the former was merely a craft or technical skill, working by imitation, in bodily, temporal, mutable media; the latter, on the other hand,
was a rational discipline that studied the laws of spiritual, eternal, immutabele measure and relation. The former was therefore merely an inferior distraction from the latter — and a potentially dangerous and misleading one at that — hardly worthy of being called “music.” Only the latter could form and educate the mind in order to grasp the truth, if one was of a philosophical inclination — or, if one was more worldly minded, could form part of the educational formation that provided a passport to a career as a governor or military commander. Music, then, in its most acceptable, most widely acknowledged, highest, and purest form, was an intellectual discipline to be studied and acquired, much like geometry; it gave one a means of comprehending the eternal relations that govern reality and, more practically, a passport to higher culture and the society and occupations that went with it. No provincial governor, no lawyer, no general would be ignorant of “music,” though none would think that accomplished playing of an instrument was something to boast about or really had anything to do with “music” in the proper sense.

Any attempt to consider what Augustine (354-430), or any other Christian author of antiquity, thought of music is therefore to pose a rather different question than one might think one was asking, and to invite somewhat unexpected answers. All Christian authors were, by definition, educated men (unfortunately there aren’t any women authors from this period) — they were able to write, to preach, to catechize, to address letters and petitions, and (after Constantine) to act as legal arbitrators. In other words, they had benefited from a classical education: their intellectual, cultural formation was irrevocably that of the liberal arts; they were adept at dialectic or rational argument; they were proficient — sometimes consummate — rhetors; they could analyze and get a text along with the best grammarians; and they understood the nature of reality in terms of measured relation or “music.” All of these liberal arts or “disciplines” were therefore naturally, inevitably, applied to their understanding, exposition, and often defense of their Christian faith. This is not to say that the fathers were unaware of the potential ambiguities and dangers of such a procedure, but the question of how the liberal arts should be used and applied in a Christian context was no more, and no less, than the question of how they themselves understood and articulated their own faith: the liberal arts were not only the intellectual disciplines, but the preconceptions and prior understandings — the mind-set — that they brought to their faith. They could not simply be cast aside like an old or worn-out garment, but had to be carefully weighed, re-evaluated, and refashioned.

This is precisely what we find Augustine doing in his first works as a new Christian convert. The language of these works is that of the schools; the subjects — the happy life, order, the good, skepticism, evil, the soul, and so forth — are philosophical chestnuts. But this should not surprise: he believed, like all the fathers, that Christianity was the true, the ultimate, the consummate philosophy, which had superseded all the classical schools. Like them, it dealt with the nature of reality, the soul, providence, evil, the true, the good, the beautiful, the happy life, the ultimate good. . . . The questions were the same; the language remains very much the same too; but the answers are radically new and are shaped by Christian revelation, tradition, and Scripture. The new ontology, ethics, and aesthetics that emerge in a Christian context — and we see this happening dramatically in Augustine’s works — were to be the crucible in which classical culture, and the liberal arts that had formed it, were dramatically transformed. It is in this context — which we must not ignore if Augustine is not to be misunderstood — that we might finally turn to consider Augustine on the art of music.

What place, then, did the liberal art of music have to play in a Christian context? Like the other arts, it certainly could not be ignored by an educated Christian. Just as it had formed the basis for analyzing and evaluating the nature of reality, for appreciating its essential harmony, unity, equality, and order, for generations of free citizens, Augustine obviously felt that it would be similarly appropriate in a Christian context. On a number of occasions in the early works, most notably in On Order, Augustine uses an analysis of the liberal arts as a sort of ladder in order to effect — or at least attempt to describe — a gradual ascent to grasp divine truth. Indeed, in a characteristically ambitious manner, as a new Christian convert he entertained the grand scheme of writing a commentary on each of the liberal arts in turn. It is not certain how far this project got, and all that is now extant are the works on dialectic (and possibly grammar) and music.  

1. The project was abandoned, not so much because Augustine lost interest, but because his clerical duties did not allow the time; see Letter 101 (Patrolologia Latina 33).
exercises in order to tone his mental muscles, or, indeed as some sort of closely argued demonstration of Christianity’s rational respectability. Rather, it is clear from the outset that they are careful attempts to further his understanding of his newly embraced faith, and most especially of how that faith should be lived: they are as much religious, ethical, and mystical works that seek self-knowledge and knowledge of God as exercises of the mind. What we find in On Music (in common with the other early works) is, in fact, a rather dramatic reassessment of the role of reason and the liberal arts, in the context of their application to a Christian doctrine of creation, the fall, and the work of God’s saving grace, which leads to a rather more positive evaluation of the bodily, temporal, and mutable than one would ever have expected: careful rational analysis is used, rather disconcertingly, to demonstrate the role of faith; the liberal art of music is used, even more disconcertingly, to demonstrate the role of the created, temporal, and mutable (and thereby, perhaps to an extent, music as we would now understand it).

But this is to anticipate. What we find in books 1-5 of On Music is exactly what we would expect to find in any classical treatise by an ancient author on the liberal art of music: a minute and painstaking analysis of the properties of number (numerus) or music (musica) — the two are synonymous — and the way in which it is manifest in measured relation, in rhythmic patterns and intervals, in meter, and in verse. The emphasis is firmly upon the rational quality of music: it is a knowledge (scientia) of how to measure and relate numerical properties well (scientia bene modulandi) — in other words, in a fitting, harmonious, unified manner that observes the inherent order of reality in all its aspects (1.2.2). The element of “fittingness,” which the word bene suggests here, draws attention to the important fact that the liberal art of music was never “just” a matter of knowledge or scientia but, like all the liberal arts, had always been understood as an articulation of the nature of reality and, as such, a way of expressing not just quantitative judgments about — in this case — the nature of number, but also qualitative ones about the truth that number embodies and its ethical and aesthetic aspects.

The inextricable interrelation of the true, the good, and the beautiful was a presupposition of the liberal disciplines that was certainly not lost on Augustine, and in the final book, book 6, its implications are worked out in what virtually amounts to a small summa of Christian doctrine. The basic, but revolutionary, insight is that God is music: he is supreme measure, number, relation, harmony, unity, and equality. When he created matter from nothing he simultaneously gave it existence by giving it music, or form — in other words, measure, number, relation, harmony, unity, equality.

Thus, the whole of created reality exists because of its possession of music. It remains in existence, however, only by acknowledging its complete and absolute dependence upon its Creator, by understanding itself and all that is as existing only in relation to its Creator. Thus all that we are, all manifestations and embodiments of music, are from God and, in so far as we humbly, obediently, and lovingly turn toward him and acknowledge him as their source, they to some extent reveal him, allow us to know something of him and to relate to him aright. In book 6, therefore, in this new Christian context, music is no longer simply a liberal art that teaches us about the nature of reality through a rational analysis of numerical relation; it is an art that must be practiced in every moment of a creature’s existence if it is to remain in right relation to God and not fall back into non-being; it has become a matter of ethics as much as a quest for truth. And we must not forget that God, the True and the Good, is also the Beautiful; that the music (forma) of creation is inherently beautiful (formosus); and that this beauty is only preserved when it is loved in reference to its Creator. Both of these aspects of music — the ethical and the aesthetic — will become increasingly important in book 6 as Augustine analyzes the creature’s failure to maintain a right relation with his or her Creator, and the way in which that relationship is restored by God’s grace.

The previous paragraph is a summary of Augustine’s teaching in On Music — a necessarily brief and general summary, but important nevertheless in that, without an overview of the theological context, the seemingly remorseless rationalism, abstraction, and sheer intellectualism of the early part of On Music might certainly mislead — as indeed many scholars, who ought to know better, have been misled. A close reading of book 6 gives the lie both to the initial impression made by books 1-5 and to the often dismissive judgments of scholars that have been made on the basis of them.

2. In fact, De Musica tackles only one part of the classical treatment of music — rhythm. Augustine tells us he intended to write another work, on the other major aspect, harmony (De melo), but his obligations as a bishop made it impossible (Letter 101 [Patrologia Latina 33]).

contains the eternal rules according to which the soul judges (6.12.34), and
which preserves the sounds which have gone before, so that they can be
present to be evaluated and judged (6.7.17–8.22). But, as in the famous ascension in
Confessions 10, he then proceeds beyond memory, to investigate what the
source of the judicial power itself is. In doing this he makes a significant, but
admittedly rather unsettling, distinction between that which enjoys and
takes pleasure in the sound perceived by the soul and retained in the
memory, and that which judges it by reason. It is as if the latter is an additional
stage, ensuring that the soul does not simply remain at the stage of taking
pleasure in well-measured, harmonious sound, but that it moves beyond it
in judging it. He is emphatic that the taking pleasure and the rational
judgment are both actions of the same soul, as were all the earlier types of
perception of music he has enumerated and analyzed. "We are examining," as
he puts it,

the motions and states of one and the same nature, that is to say, the soul
... [and he proceeds to summarize the different types or levels of perception:] as it is one thing to be moved towards the reactions of the body,
which occurs in perceiving, another to move oneself towards the body,
which occurs in an activity, yet another thing to retain what has been pro-
duced in the soul as a result of these motions, which is to remember, so it
is one thing to approve or disapprove of these motions, when they are first
set in motion or when they are revived by remembrance, which occurs in
the pleasure of that which is convenient and in the dismay of that which is
inappropriate in such motions or reactions, and another thing to evaluate
whether it is right or not to enjoy these things, which is done by reason-
ing. (6.9.24)\(^5\)

Thus, there is not so much a separation between pleasure and reason as
a necessary warning that pleasure is not the end, but the means to the end,
which is to know and love God, and that we need to be rationally aware of
this and constantly judge all else against this end — even what is ethically
right or aesthetically pleasing. This is not least the case because what pleases
and delights us is a temporal, mutable manifestation and embodiment of
eternal, immutable music. Reason and rational judgment make us aware of
this (6.10.28).

If we are taken aback by Augustine’s emphasis upon the need for ascent,

4. We do not intend to present the technicalities of Augustine’s argument here; he
changes the labels or names in a rather complicated and confusing way as the argument is
gradually refined.

5. For the text and translation of book 6 I have used Martin Jacobsson, Aurelius
upon hierarchy, upon the eternal, immutable archetypes of music, and upon the importance of rational judgment; if we are dismayed by his insistence on the subjection of the bodily, the temporal, the mutable, and even of that which gives enjoyment and pleasure, we must remember that behind it all lies not so much a philosophically inspired rejection of created matter, or a Neo-pythagorean obsession with perfect number, but his belief in the Creator God — the Deus Creator Omnium — in whom all music originates and on whom all music depends; his acute awareness of humanity’s fallen state; his conviction that it is now incapable of either knowing or acting in accordance with eternal, ordered harmony, because it has become caught up, distracted, and diverted by its temporal, mutable, physical manifestations.

The Descent of the Soul — in Practice

The ascent that Augustine traces in On Music is, in fact, no different from all the other ascents that he describes: it is a theoretical ideal, a model set before fallen human beings in order to demonstrate the truth of God, the Creator, and the truth of the complete and utter dependence of every level of created reality upon him — from the physical world, to the senses, to the soul, to the mind, to the memory and reason — and of the dangers of taking anything other than God as an end in itself. And in practice, like all Augustinian ascents, the ascent through the levels of musical perception is a cogent demonstration of just how impossible it is for human beings, in their fallen, sinful state, to either undertake this ascent or ever achieve its goal in this life. Having theoretically traced the hierarchy of the soul’s perception of music, Augustine immediately proceeds, in book 6, to demonstrate its present ignorance of it and its inability to observe it. Having turned away from its Creator to the temporal, mutable, physical order, the soul now finds itself part of that order, no longer able to appreciate the unity, harmony, and equality of the eternal music that is God, but only what is manifest to it from its own, now severely limited, perspective: it is like a statue in the corner of a beautiful building, or a soldier in the ranks, or a syllable in a poem; it can perceive only in part (6.11.30). Moreover, what limited perception of music the soul does have can tend to hinder and entrap it rather than point it toward the whole. Music is undeniably beautiful — it occasions pleasure, delight, and love — but unless this delight is rightly directed, it can simply become what Augustine describes as a “carnal pleasure” (concupiscencia), an “intimacy of the soul with the flesh” that vitiates the soul, creating in it a struggle or tension that renders it blind to the eternal music of God and impotent to order itself in accordance with it (6.13.33). Rather, it becomes preoccupied with temporal, mutable music, distracted and diverted by it, preferring it to its eternal source and Creator (6.13.37-40). Augustine sums up the reason for the soul’s fall as pride: in taking created reality as an end in itself and in attempting to subject it — and other rational souls — to itself, it has failed to acknowledge its Creator and its complete and utter dependence upon him. In doing so it has fallen, not just from the truth, but from the source of its existence; it has literally diminished itself by self-destructive pride (6.13.40).

What Augustine is absolutely insistent upon is that every motion and movement of the soul, which he has here analyzed in terms of musical perception, must be ordered toward God and have God as its object, if it is not to fall back into the non-being from whence he created it: the carmen universitatis, or hymn of the universe (6.11.29), will degenerate into meaningless dissonance if it does not continually refer to its source and sustainer, who is the source of all harmony, and without whom there would be no music at all:

From where, I ask, do all these things [Augustine is talking about evidences of music at every level of created reality] come, if not from that supreme and eternal origin of rhythms and similarity and equality and order? But if you take these away from the earth, it will be nothing. Therefore God has created the earth, and it was created from nothing. (6.17.57)

The soul by itself is nothing — otherwise it would not be changeable and admit any decrease of its essence — so, since it is nothing by itself and whatever it has of existence comes from God, if it remains in its own place, by God’s own presence it is given life in its mind and conscience. . . . Therefore, to be inflated by pride, this is for the soul to proceed to the extreme exterior and, as it were, to become empty, which means to have less and less existence. (6.13.40)

Although Augustine’s insistence on the importance of looking beyond the physical, temporal, and mutable realm of music is ultimately founded upon his identification of eternal, immutable music with God and the uniquely Christian doctrine of God’s creation of all music (reality) from nothing, so that it exists only in relation to him, there were also, as we have just seen, more immediate and pressing reasons for this emphasis in his
thought: the attachment of the soul to the realm of the physical, mutable, and temporal that occasioned its fall, and which it now suffers as a painful distraction and difficulty, which weakens and vitiates it, was no doubt at the forefront of his mind in his many warnings about taking any aspect of created reality as an end in itself. Having examined the reasons for this rather disconcerting judgment upon the bodily, temporal realm, we are perhaps now in a stronger position to ask whether his attitude is, in fact, quite as negative and world-denying as it might at first appear, and whether he allows any positive role for the manifestations of music that he has identified in the soul’s perceptions of the temporal and bodily realm.

Delighting in the Music of Creation in Theory: Enjoyment or Use?

In fact, we do not have to wait until Augustine has completed his analysis of the soul’s fallen attachment to the temporal to encounter a certain ambivalence in his attitude to the latter. At each step in his description of what traps, imprisons, and weakens the soul, he is careful to make clear that what is at fault is not so much created reality itself as the soul’s mistaken attitude to and use of it. He is certainly not a Manichee, for whom the whole of material creation is substantially evil and at odds with the good: as he never tires of observing, creation is the good work of a good Creator; it is good in all its parts; it is — it exists, literally “stands out from nothingness” — because it possesses music, understood as form, unity, harmony, equality, and measured relation. In itself, therefore, creation is a beautiful, pleasing, delightful revelation of its Creator, and this is how it should be seen — and used: “What soils the soul is not something evil, for even the body is a creation of God and is adorned by its own form, however low... it is not the rhythms (music — numeri), which are inferior to reason and beautiful in their own kind, but the love of inferior beauty that soils the soul” (6.14.46; cf. 6.4.7). The answer to the manifest temptation that creation poses to the soul to love its music — its beauty and harmony — for itself, in a possessive, dominating, and ultimately destructive way, is to love it in reference to its eternal, immutably

source and Creator. The crucial distinction here is the characteristically Augustinian one between use (uti) and enjoyment (frui); we should only enjoy that which is eternal and immutable (in other words God, the Trinity) and we should use everything else toward that end, “like a plank in the waves, not by throwing them away as a burden, nor by embracing them as something well anchored, but by using them well” (6.14.45; cf. 6.11.29). The distinction is, of course, itself an ambiguous one — for how can we be said to use ourselves or our neighbor? — and it is one that Augustine is always at pains to refine and clarify in terms of love, so that the right order becomes an order of love: a love of God and of neighbor, in which we love ourselves and our neighbor “on behalf of” (propter) or “in reference to” (referre ad) God (6.13.43–14.46) and might “enjoy [someone] in God” (frui in Deo). As he writes, “The soul maintains its order by loving with its whole self what is superior to it, that is to say God, but its fellow souls as itself. For by this virtue of love the soul adorns everything that is inferior to it and not soiled by what is inferior” (6.14.46). Despite the ambiguities, then, the basic insight and intention are clear: nothing should be taken as an end in itself, but should be referred to its source and Creator, God. It is no doubt this that Augustine had in mind when he introduced the final category of the soul’s perception of music as the rational judgment of that which gives it pleasure (6.11.28–29); in other words, it must appreciate that what gives it pleasure is indeed beautiful, ordered, harmonious, and unified, but that it is not God; it is not eternal beauty, order, harmony, or unity, but simply a temporal manifestation, imitation, or image of it. It must not be loved and enjoyed for itself but toward God. What he actually says is worth quoting at length:

Let us, therefore, not look askance at what is inferior to us, but let us place ourselves between what is below us and what is above us, with the help of our God and Lord, in such a way that we are not offended by what is inferior but enjoy only what is superior. For the pleasure is like a weight for the soul [Delectatio quippe quasi pondus est animae]. And so pleasure sets the soul in its place. “For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,” where your pleasure is, there will your treasure be, but where your heart is, there your beatitude or misery will be. But what is superior except that in which the highest, unshakeable, unchangeable, eternal equa-

6. E.g., On Music 6.13–39, where Augustine analyzes the way in which the different levels of the soul’s perception of music, which he has analyzed in the first part of book 6, can all be the cause of diversions and distractions. He frequently analyzes this in reference to 1 John 2:16: “Do not love the world, for all that is in the world is the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and worldly ambition.” E.g., On Music 6.14.44.

7. These distinctions are famously rehearsed in their most systematic form in the first book of On Christian Doctrine (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 80, in Works of Saint Augustine, 1.11). We can, however, see the first detailed sketch of them here, in On Music 6.
Augustine and the Art of Music

joy from it" (6.11.33; cf. 6.15.49). Meanwhile, in this life, he sums up "the activity" that "is prescribed for...[the soul] by God, by which it is purified and unburdened and may fly back to the quiet and enter into the joy of its Lord" as the double commandment of love of God and love of neighbor as ourselves. "If," he suggests, "we direct all these movements and rhythms of our human activity to this end, we will undoubtedly be purified." It is in this context that he has already discussed the importance of distinguishing between use and enjoyment, and toward the end of On Music he describes the role of the four virtues of patience, temperance, fortitude, and justice, which should determine the right attitude of the soul to the temporal (but which will also be perfected only in the life to come). It is also in this context that he considers every aspect of created reality, every act of human creation or craftsmanship, every plant, animal, element, or particle of earth, every hair on our head and every leaf which falls, as witnessing to the supreme, perfect, eternal, immutable music of God who has brought them into being from nothing. Their very existence, their beauty, proclaims his harmony, unity, equality, and order (6.17.57-58); together they form a hymn of the universe, the Deus Creator Omnium, to whom the soul must refer the delight or love that they occasion, as to their source and end. Using and loving them in this way, the soul will be purified, sanctified, and ordered and will itself participate in divine harmony.

It should be clear from the above summary of the final part of On Music that temporal, mutable, physical reality, or music, has a central role to play in reorienting the fallen soul and in effecting its reformation and return to God. The very existence of created reality or music, its form and beauty, witnesses to its Creator; its temporality points to his eternity, its mutability to his immutability, its imperfection to his perfection; and, if rightly loved, judged, and used by the soul, it can reorder and reform its fallen attachment to it, to become attachment to God. What is involved in this movement is, at the same time, an aesthetic appreciation of the undeniable beauty of created, temporal music, a virtuous life lived in accordance with the harmony and order the soul perceives, and, above all, a rational judgment or an awareness

8. This is something which Augustine frequently emphasizes in these early works: virtuous action is an expression of right order or love and one cannot be had without the other, e.g., On Music 6.15.49–16.51; On Order 2.8.25; 2.19.50–51: "For the soul that diligently considers the nature and power of numbers, it will appear manifestly unfitting and most deplorable that it should write a rhythmic line and play the harp by virtue of this knowledge, and that its life and very self — which is the soul — should nevertheless follow a crooked path and, under the domination of lust, be out of tune by the clangour of shameful vices" (Corpus
expressed in faith and love that it is not, in itself, supreme, eternal beauty; that it must be loved for what it is, and looked in and through; that although it is beautiful in itself, it is, as yet, incomplete and finds its wholeness only in its Creator — God. It must, in short, be loved rightly — toward God. Augustine expresses these ideas in a number of ways.

Delighting in the Music of Creation in Practice: Faith, Hope, and Love.

For those who do not possess a training in the liberal arts and who do not have the necessary rational powers to follow the sort of arguments he has set forth in *On Music*, Augustine is convinced that the way of Christian life that he has described — of rightly loving, judging, and using created reality or music for the sake of its Creator — can be attained more directly, and certainly with less discursiveness or mental effort, simply by believing in God and living a virtuous life. Right faith can dispense with rational argument since it has already attained what reason is used to effect: a *scientia bene modulandi* — a knowledge of how to measure and relate number (understood as the harmony, unity, measure, and beauty of creation) to its Creator well. He admits that in *On Music* he has been writing for intellectuals, for “those whom God has endowed with a good mind,” in short, for those who, like himself, cannot refrain from the attempt to rationally understand, explain, expound, and evaluate reality in terms of the liberal arts. He has written in the hope that they will not “wear out their good minds with trifles, without any idea of what they enjoy in them,” but be enabled to refer what they discover in their study of liberal arts to God (6.1.1). Whereas faith already “knows” that the music of the universe originates in God and must be loved in him and toward him, reason seeks to rationally demonstrate this in terms of the numerical, mathematical categories of the liberal discipline of “music.” This is a contrast, or tension, that runs throughout Augustine’s work from beginning to end, and it is one in which neither faith nor reason is devalued, but their respective roles and interrelation are carefully delineated and appreciated. Although faith is mentioned only at the beginning and end of book 6, very much as an aside, we should not, as Augustine clearly does not, underestimate its importance: the right relation between the harmony, beauty, order, and unity of created reality and God is not only intuitively known but also practiced by the one who has faith in God the Creator; reason simply attempts to set forth the rational grounds for such a relationship. Faith does what reason demonstrates is necessary without the need for such demonstration.

To dismiss Augustine’s treatment of music as overly intellectual, rationalistic, dry, or mathematical is therefore to misunderstand the nature of *On Music* and to ignore the fact that it is only one side of his appreciation of music. The other side, faith (which includes hope and love), does not need a treatise to describe it: it simply is, in practice, what *On Music* has attempted to describe in theory. As he comments in the concluding paragraph of the work:

> these things have been written for much weaker persons than those who, following the authority of the two testaments, venerate and worship the one supreme God’s consubstantial and unchangeable Trinity, by believing, hoping and loving it, from whom everything, through whom everything, in whom everything exists. For they are purified not through the brilliance of human arguments but through the most powerful and burning fire of love. (6.17.59)

When Augustine dismisses the flute player or the nightingale, who simply perform music through imitation or intuition, because they do not possess a rational understanding of the liberal art of music, he is not dismissing their music as such, but their failure to understand that it originates in, and should be directed toward, God (1.4.5). Faith, on the other hand, is able to do this without engaging with the rational categories of the liberal art of music. What is needed is not so much reason as an awareness that both faith and reason provide in their different ways: that the music of the universe, the admittedly beautiful harmony, unity, measure, equality, and relation of the music of creation, is but a temporal, mutable expression of the eternal and immutable music that belongs to God.

Delight “through” the Senses: The Ambivalence of Music

We have seen that beautiful music can be either a temptation that distracts and weakens the soul or something that inspires love and desire for its divine source. The inherent ambiguity of all manifestations of music is no doubt

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the reason for Augustine's highly ambivalent attitude toward "music" as we would now commonly understand it — as written, practiced, and performed by a musician. Various passages in the Confessions leave us in no doubt that Augustine was keenly aware of the beauty of such music and profoundly sensitive to its effects. In the days following his baptism in Milan he recounts, "How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. This caused the feelings of devotion to overflow. Tears ran, and it was good for me to have that experience" (Confessions 9.6.14).10 He refers to the recent innovation of using hymns and psalms in Milan, where "the brothers used to sing together with both heart and voice in a state of high enthusiasm" as a "method of mutual comfort and exhortation," introduced "to prevent the people from succumbing to depression and exhaustion" (Confessions 9.7.15). In book 10, however, he reveals his divided mind on the subject. Analyzing the temptations that still assail him, even after his conversion, in terms of 1 John 2:16, he includes the pleasures of the ear among the "lusts of the flesh": they are clearly compelling and attractive, but he tells us that, whereas he had once been held by them, God has set him free, and he can now take them or leave them. What he goes on to say, however, reveals that in practice, his response is somewhat less disinterested and rather more ambivalent: he still values such music but is unsure how to do so and is well aware that he might tend to overdo it:

I feel that when the sacred words are chanted well, our souls are moved and are more religiously and with a warmer devotion kindled to piety than if they are not so sung. All the diverse emotions of our spirit have their various modes in voice and chant appropriate in each case, and are stirred by a mysterious inner kinship. But my physical delight, which has to be checked from enervating the mind, often deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and is not patiently content to be in a subordinate place. It tries to be first, and in a leading role, though it deserves to be allowed only as secondary to reason. So in these matters I sin unawares, and only afterwards become aware of it. (Confessions 10.33.49)

Despite the risk of being temporarily overcome by the beauty of music he hears in church, however, Augustine cannot bring himself to reject or disallow it. Instead, he wonders whether it might not be better to follow Athanasius's more sober practice of having the psalms delivered more in the manner of a recitation than of singing. But he wavers; he is well aware of just how powerful the beauty of music can be when it is used rightly; he remembers its profound effect on his soul when he was first reconciled to the faith; he observes how one can be "moved not by the chant but by the words being sung; when they are sung with a clear voice and entirely appropriate modulation," and he is forced to admit that music can be of great use in worship. The risks remain, then, but he is prepared to run them rather than give up music in church altogether. "Thus I fluctuate," he comments,

between the danger of pleasure and the experience of the beneficent effect, and I am led to put forward the opinion (not as an irrevocable view) that the custom of singing in Church is to be approved, so that through the delights of the ear the weaker mind may rise up toward the devotion of worship. Yet when it happens to me that the music moves me more than the subject of the song, I confess myself to commit a sin deserving punishment, and then I would prefer not to have heard the singer. (Confessions 10.33.50)

As with all temporal manifestations of music in the created realm, therefore, while appreciating the beauty of music as it is sung in church, Augustine never ceases to emphasize the need to move beyond and through it: beyond and through the temporal, mutable, and bodily toward the eternal, immutable, and spiritual. For as long as he is caught up in the sheer beauty, delight, and pleasure of the temporal manifestations of music, for that moment he knows that he is distracted from God and risks taking it as an end in itself.11

The key word in Augustine's assessment of music here is "through" (per): it is not by rejecting and dismissing music that he moves toward God, but in and "through" it. Indeed, as we have seen above, in his fallen state he is acutely aware that this is now the only way to God: human beings have become part of the temporal, mutable realm and can return to God only from

11. We see precisely the same ambivalence in Augustine's reflection on the art of rhetoric, for example, in book 4 of On Christian Doctrine (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 80). There is a fine balance between rhetorical fireworks which delight and move the mind, and stating the truth in plain and simple words. The same applies to his allegorical exegesis of Scripture. The truth seems to be communicated more effectively when it also delights and moves the mind.
within it and through it. That music delights and moves and inspires is a positive thing if it is referred to God and not taken as an end in itself. We have seen that Augustine later formulates this crucial distinction in terms of use and enjoyment, but there are earlier distinctions, which he elaborates specifically in relation to the liberal arts, that go some way to clarifying what it involves. In On Order he distinguishes between delight of the sense and delight through the sense (per sensum) by giving the example of hearing: “whatever has a pleasing sound,” he writes, “that it is which pleases and entices the hearing itself. What is really signified by that sound is what is borne to the mind through the messenger of our hearing... our praise of the meter is one thing, but our praise of the meaning is something else” (On Order 2.11.34). The distinction is between the sound and that of which it is a symbol, between sense and meaning, between musical relations in created reality and divine and eternal music. The second book of On Order offers an extended demonstration of this truth in a manner very similar to On Music, by describing an extended ascent through the seven liberal arts: from the “shadows and vestiges of reason” in the senses, which must be judged and passed beyond, to ultimate truth and wisdom in God (On Order 2.15.42).

We have encountered the same distinction in the sixth book of On Music, when Augustine insisted, in his analysis of the soul’s perception of music, that the pleasure of the senses must be judged and evaluated by reason. He makes a similar distinction between what the senses “announce” and what reason “judges” in book 5 (On Music 5.1.1), and, as we have seen in relation to the Confessions, his attitude to music in church is also described in these terms. Indeed, this is an attitude that sums up his approach not only to music but to the whole of temporal reality, including his theology of creation, the incarnation, the sacraments, Scripture, and preaching — all are temporal, mutable manifestations of eternal, immutable truth to fallen humanity; all occasion delight, but they, and the delight they inspire, must not be taken as ends in themselves; rather, their divine source must be believed, loved, and sought after, not by setting them to one side or rejecting them, but within and through them.

Whether this movement is one of faith, hope, and love, or whether it is

12. Augustine constantly emphasizes these aspects of divine revelation — especially the incarnation and the “mysteries” or sacraments — in relation to fallen humanity’s dependence upon authority or faith, rather than reason, in early works written at the same time as On Music, e.g., Against the Academicians 3.20.43 (Corpus Christianorum Latinarum 29, in Works of Saint Augustine, 1.3); On Order 2.5.15-16; 2.9.26-27 (Corpus Christianorum Latinarum 29, in Fathers of the Church 1).

13. This is specifically identified with the trinitarian operation of grace in early works written around the same time as On Music, such as On True Religion 113 (Corpus Christianorum Latinarum 32, in Works of Saint Augustine, 1.8) and On the Morals of the Catholic Church 1.13.22-14.24 (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinarum 90, in Works of Saint Augustine, 1.19).

14. I would like to thank Steven Guthrie for allowing me to read two chapters of his doctoral thesis relating to Augustine’s De Musica. They were an enormous inspiration and help in the writing of this paper. For Confessions, see Confessions. Corpus Christianorum 17, in Henry Chadwick, trans., Saint Augustine: Confessions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).