

Silent harmony and hidden contemplation:
Arguments for the congruence of philosophy and music

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to demonstrate the congruence between music and philosophy. The demonstration has three aspects: a discussion of philosophical and ontological aspects of music, a discussion of the importance of music in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and a discussion of philosophy itself.

The starting point for the demonstration is a discussion of the philosophy of music in relation to the ontology of the musical work, the relationship of performance to notation and the musical work, the nature of improvisation and the temporality of music. I discuss the contextualisation of the musical work concept, the aporetic character of music and consider phenomenological accounts of music and time consciousness. Following this discussion I propose an ontological concept of the musical work as a topos of musical activity.

The second section discusses music in the context of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy. It develops characteristics of music which are also relevant to theoria and philosophy. Most notable among these are the characterisations of music as play and energeia. I consider music in the context of the Aristotelian distinction between praxis and poiesis and argue for a qualified conception of music as energeia.

The concluding section of the thesis deals with philosophy itself. I discuss the requirements of philosophy to maintain the energeia of thinking in the living and breathing word in the context of Plato's Phaedrus. I attempt to demonstrate that the active conceptions of philosophy as a journey, examination of life, way of life (Hadot) and Lebensphilosophie align philosophy with a conception of music as meditatio mortis and form of temporality.

ABBREVIATIONS

Aristotle:

NE Nicomachean Ethics

EE Eudemian Ethics

Kant:

KdV Kritik der reinen Vernunft

KdU Kritik der Urteilskraft

Schopenhauer:

WWV Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung

Hegel:

VGP Vorlesungen zur Geschichte der Philosophie

Nietzsche:

GdT Die Geburt der Tragödie

UB Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen

Z Zarathustra

GD Götzendämmerung

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INTRODUCTION

*“The beginning is admittedly more than half of the whole, and throws light at once on many of the questions under investigation”
(Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics 1098b)*

1.1 The Congruence of Music and Philosophy

The following thesis articulates a lifelong preoccupation with philosophy and music. It argues for their congruence on the grounds that philosophy and music are concerned with the same: the temporal determination of life and the human search for transcendence.

An affinity between music and philosophy has been asserted by philosophers throughout the history of philosophy. The most obvious root for such a view can be found in the Pythagorean attention to music and harmonia. The Pythagorean tradition leads Plato to reflect through the mouth of Socrates that philosophy might be the “greatest music”.¹ Plato’s interest in music does not remain isolated and is followed by a sustained reflection about music which ultimately culminates in Schopenhauer’s (and to a lesser extent Nietzsche’s) view that affords music an elevated position as the non-discursive representation of the thing in itself. Schopenhauer’s view of music as expression of the will transcends the Pythagorean tradition by asserting the direct and immediate powers of musical expression over the limitations of theoretical philosophy.

From a philosophical perspective such a position appears however unsatisfactory. The activities of philosophical reflection, philosophical dialogue and exercise which characterise the philosophical life would appear to claim such transcending powers for themselves. The assertion that music and not philosophy reaches the most immediate and perhaps highest forms of consciousness and insight remains troubling where philosophy has staked a claim for transcendence. It suggests a competing interest between philosophy and music. Such a competition is naturally only possible on the basis of a common intent and may in fact be the result of the fact that music and philosophy are concerned with the same subject matter.

How then are music and philosophy related? Are they mutually informative phenomena? This thesis makes the claim that music and philosophy are in fact congruent. The phenomenon of congruence implies a sameness in respect to specific properties of a given, originally geometrical entity. When two geometrical shapes are congruent we assume that they can “fall-together” (con-ruere). Even if they appear different at first sight, demonstrating congruence involves a geometric operation which can demonstrate the identity in respect of some essential properties of the geometrical objects in question. Such a demonstration is in itself an activity of utmost interest. As in the case of geometric demonstration its validity does not only depend on the propositional content of abstract steps but on the order in which these steps are taken and succeed each other. Without such an order and way of progression towards the subject matter in question (methodos) the demonstration of congruence may not succeed and the objects in question may not “fall-together”.

Depending on the extent, relevance and comprehensiveness of the essential properties of the geometric objects in question a demonstration can distinguish between weaker and stronger forms of congruence. A strong statement of congruence would be the definition that two objects are congruent if “one

¹ Phaedo, 61a.

figure by being moved in space can be made to coincide with the second figure so that the two figures coincide in all parts.”² Similar strong definitions of congruence demand that congruent figures have the same shape and size. Weaker definitions of congruence can be developed if we assume that figures are congruent if they have the same shape but not the same size. An even weaker concept of congruence is established by a demand for merely topological congruence. In this case one figure may be obtained from the other by the use of bi-continuous transformation and both figures remain merely congruent in respect of their dimensionality.

If we apply these various possibilities of congruent relationships to our question of the congruence between music and philosophy we may naturally wonder what would determine weaker or stronger forms of congruence in this case. After all, neither philosophy nor music seem initially well enough defined in themselves to allow us to establish any but the most general relationships between the two activities and subject matters. Any argument about congruence between music and philosophy is thus dependent on a developed view of the relative subject matter. For this reason my discussion will progress through the relevant subject matters towards a demonstration of congruence. Only when I have unfolded a clear understanding of both subject matters can I assume to demonstrate the step by virtue of which relevant aspects of music and philosophy may in fact “fall-together”.

For reasons of complexity and scope, I will focus naturally on a number of selected aspects which appear mutually relevant to philosophy and music alike. My discussion aims to show how music and philosophy are determined by these aspects and how congruence is established through them. It seems clear from the outside, that while I endeavour to demonstrate varying degrees of congruence between music and philosophy, the strongest form of congruity namely complete identity can be excluded from the outset. Not only is it impossible to cover the subject matters in question to the required degree, it seems impossible to capture all characteristics of their particular identity anyway. Similar to two congruent triangles which remain individually distinguished and are not completely identical, the activity and works of music and philosophy have individual attributes through which a difference is inevitably and necessarily established. However, demonstrations of congruence are able to transcend this difference without denying it through geometric and methodical steps of operation. Despite individual difference we can show in which respect the objects in question may be congruent.

The establishment of congruence within difference may become an important issue of further reflection at the end of this thesis. In any discussion of congruence, the important issue may not be the congruence itself, but the activity or frame of reference in respect of which the subject matters are shown to be congruent. Congruence reveals underlying, homologous and meaningful structures of reference (size, shape, angles, etc). It achieves a clarification, interpretation and understanding of that which grants congruence. In this respect establishing congruence is comparable to a process of interpretation. The process of interpretation aims to expose the topic in familiar terms while preserving what is individual, authentic and unfamiliar in it. Exposing the subject matter is an encounter with a barrier, an essential substance or interpretative core which is reflected in the “autonomous life” of the interpreted topic. Interpretation seeks to achieve an original repetition. It cannot rest content with outlining arguments and views but it needs to give life to the topic of its concern.³

² This definition by the Russian mathematician Kiselyov in Suppes, 21.

³ Steiner (1992), 27.

1.2 Methodos: The path towards a demonstration of congruence

I intend to make the case for congruence of music and philosophy in three sections: In the first section I discuss ontological and philosophical questions referring to music. I start with a justification of my stubborn interest in the ontological discussion of music in view of the fact that ordinarily music is considered to be a subject of aesthetics. I will then proceed to a discussion of the musical work and its conception as a separate object in performance. I believe that this conception raises a number of issues. We need to consider the active properties of music which emerge through a consideration of the relationship between the notation of the musical work and its performance. In addition the identity of the musical work in performance appears to be in question. Given that music is played and heard and always immersed in the flux of temporal unfolding, what gives us access to a musical work that is never completely present?

The musical work and its creation come further into view in a discussion of the so-called Platonist view of music. Are musical works created, selected or discovered? Furthermore, are they universal, abstract or particular? What kind of “form” is a musical work? I argue that an ontological answer to these questions cannot stand outside the phenomenon that musical works are dialogical. They enable and direct musical performance through interpretative dialogue and projection. They also, in some circumstances, arise through musical performance itself. Musical works are significant only in relation to musical activity. I suggest that rather than follow Platonic ontology and conceive the musical work as an eidōs and the performance as its reflection, the musical work may be insightfully described as an ontological topos, a place, “realm” or opportunity for music making.

I then progress to a discussion of musical praxis and in particular the historical emergence of the concept of the musical work. This discussion suggests that music could be understood within the classical paradigm of energeia (activity) and ergon (work). My discussion of the activity of improvisation tests this paradigm and establishes that while musical activity may constitute a musical ergon, the character of this ergon is dependent on the energeia and the temporal unfolding of musical activity itself. The musical work is characterised by a combination of actuality and potentiality. This character can also be expressed as the aporetic nature of the musical work.

We can approach the question of the musical work from two directions: In the first approach we can consider the musical work to illuminate the characteristics of musical activity. In the second, we can consider musical activity and establish the resulting characteristics of musical form. Both approaches do not arrive necessarily at an identical picture. In order to qualify this ambivalent nature of the musical work further I turn to a discussion of the phenomenology of the musical work. This discussion focuses on a number of different ontological aspects of the musical work: the ontological complexity of the musical work as an intentional object and the incompleteness of the musical work. I conclude my discussion of the philosophical questions about music with a discussion of the relationship between music and time. This relationship is crucial to an understanding of music and the musical work. In describing music as temporal form we associate it most closely with a phenomenon that becomes central to my argument for the congruence between music and philosophy, namely life itself. The temporal organisation of music and musical activity is based on the time consciousness of lived time. Music reflects and imitates life- it is a form of life. This point will also become critical in relation to philosophy itself.

In the second section (Periagoge) I turn to a discussion of the importance of music in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Through this discussion I endeavour to show that the ontological conceptions of the musical work as a topos of musical activity can be derived if we consider music within the classical distinction of praxis and poiesis. The classical conception of mousike distinguishes, to be sure, an activity and art which is quite different to the one a contemporary reader might associate with music. I try to show that a discussion of Plato's conception of music can nevertheless achieve a number of things: The ontological complexity of music as musical activity and musical form (that is, temporal-harmonic form) is also present in Plato's discussion of music. Plato provides insights how mousike is at once rhapsodic and formed, intuitive and logical, truthful and untruthful, mimetic and original. The discussion shows the breadth of the phenomenon of music: music determines human life and cosmos, and constitutes an ontologically symbolic activity which represents ways of achieving agreement (homologos) and harmony in the context of personal and public life. Thus music becomes significant in the context of political governance, private life, death and philosophical understanding. Not surprisingly and given the starting point of my argument, Plato's conception of mousike contains crucial arguments for congruence between music and philosophy.

My discussion of Aristotle focuses on the question if music is a praxis or poiesis. The answer to this question is not simple. In its discussion I develop a view of music which emphasises aspects that are not necessarily associated with the modern philosophical interest in music: For Aristotle, music is an activity of leisure and makes a contribution to the bios theoretikos. It contributes to the education of the theoros. Music is not primarily seen to be an "artistic" phenomenon. It rather is a form of play and closely related to theoria.

The modern notion of music is crucially dependent on the ontological understanding that music is an art. While Aristotelian techne is a much wider concept than a modern understanding of art,⁴ it nevertheless establishes the fundamental ontological differentiation of creator or maker, creation and work which has come to guide philosophical discussion of music. Relevant phenomena such as the musical work, the role of the composer and performer as creators and the phenomenology of musical reception are ordinarily considered within the ontological context that music is indeed a form of techne. I ask what implications arise from the consideration of music as a techne and discuss the alternative that music be conceived as an Aristotelian energeia. The Aristotelian characterisation of energeia is complex and is discussed with regard to its ontological completeness, particularly in terms of its temporal existence. I also develop the view of music as energeia further in the context of a discussion of a musical ergon. I conclude the section with Aristotle's identification of the importance of music to theoria and scolia. This suggests that musical activity (energeia) is perhaps best related to the modern understanding that music is "played".

In the third section (Katabasis) I develop the notion of "play" further and consider that musical and philosophical activities are forms of "playing". This immediately suggests that neither philosophy nor music is a serious activity. However, I suggest (using a term by Gadamer) that play has a dimension of "holy seriousness" and that "seriousness" need not be confused with "practical usefulness". The "playing" of philosophy is no reflection of immaturity despite the fact that it is critically portrayed as such in contexts where the true nature of philosophy is not recognised. In this spirit Callicles in the Gorgias admonishes

⁴ Heidegger comments on the meaning of techne as follows: "The word techne means rather a form of knowing. Knowing means: to have seen, in the wider sense of seeing, which means: perceiving of presence (Anwesen) as such.... Techne is as a classical Greek experience in so far a production of being, as it retrieves being as presence in its essence into the unconcealment of its presence. Techne never refers to an activity of making." (Heidegger (1980), 44).

Socrates for “playing tricks.”⁵ However, the play-aspect of philosophy arises primarily from the impossibility of the written and spoken word to reflect the energeia of philosophy directly. I establish this in the context of a discussion of themes from Plato’s Phaedrus.

Philosophical speaking and writing are not technical in the sense that making “speeches” could reflect truth without a corresponding philosophical consciousness. Philosophical activity is an energeia that provides the soul with the ability to “take flight”. Thus, philosophy is a performance or journey of the soul. I look at this aspect of Platonic philosophy further in an interpretation of Socrates’ defence of the examined life. The examined life is a fundamental concern of philosophy. Philosophy manifests itself primarily in the philosophical life, that is, in the life which is formed by its own examination. This is firstly possible because life, thinking and philosophy are energeiai. Furthermore, these energeiai are directed activities. Their direction is maintained by the daimon (spirit) of the philosopher and his desire for the examined life. As I try to show the examined life is identical with the human life as expressed by Ortega y Gasset: “All living is one’s own living, feeling oneself live, knowing oneself to be existing... life is knowing oneself, it is evidential.”⁶

The Socratic insistence on defending the examined life is accordingly also a defence of philosophical conscience on a fundamental level. Plato’s Apology shows the examined life as the origin of philosophy and at the same time suggests that this origin has the power to transform the conscience of the listener who considers the lived life with full consciousness. The argument of the Apology affirms the necessity of the examined life to a life which is lead rather than suffered.

The Socratic conception of the examined life suggests that philosophy is a way of life. I discuss Pierre Hadot’s view of philosophy as a way of life and spiritual exercise which has been directly advanced as an interpretative paradigm of classical philosophy. I briefly argue that this conception of philosophy is also found in philosophers such as Nietzsche, Dilthey and Ortega y Gasset (representatives of the so-called Lebensphilosophie) whose main concern is not the interpretation of philosophical text but who see the phenomenon of life as a central starting point and concern for philosophy. Placing philosophy in the context of a contemplation of life allows me to conclude my demonstration of congruence between music and philosophy. The final summary returns to the starting point of philosophy as the “greatest music”. It suggests that true to the nature of the subject matters this demonstration itself only receives its sustained clarity in the activities of philosophical contemplation or musical playing.

⁵ Gorgias, 485b: “It is a fine thing to partake of philosophy just for the sake of education, and it is not disgrace for a lad to follow: but when a man already advancing in years continues in its pursuit, the affair, Socrates becomes ridiculous; and for my part I have much the same feeling towards students of philosophy as towards those who lisp or play tricks...But when one hears a grown man lisp, or see him play tricks, it strikes one as something ridiculous and unmanly, that deserves a whipping. Just the same, then, is my feeling towards the followers of philosophy.”

⁶ Ortega (1960), 217.