De Institutione Musica, Book 1

*Boethius*

Boethius (Anicius Manlius Torquatus Severinus), Roman statesman and scholar, was born in Rome about 480 A.D. He became consul in 510, and then counselor to the Emperor Theodoric. Theodoric later accused Boethius of treason, imprisoned him, and finally executed him.

Boethius summarized ancient Greek thought on music in his *De Institutione Musica*(The Principles of Music), in which he described the Pythagorian unity of mathematics and music, and discussed the Platonic concept of the relationship between music and society. Liberal education in the time of Boethius and during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance consisted principally of the study of four mathematical subjects: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. The curriculum was known as the quadrivium, a term introduced by Boethius in his *De Institutione Arithmetica. De Institutione Musica*was the major musical treatise of its time, and remained the principal source of information about music as a mathematical subject for over a millenium. In fact, it was used as a text at Oxford University as late as the eighteenth century.

From Calvin Martin Bower, "Boethius' *The Principles of*Music, an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary," Ph.D. Dissertation, George Peabody College for Teachers, 1967, pp, 31-44. University Microfilms no. 67-15,005:

1. Introduction: That music is related to us by nature, and that it

can ennoble or debase our character.

An ability to perceive through the senses is so spontaneously and naturally present in certain living creatures that an animal without senses cannot be imagined. But a knowledge and clear perception of these senses themselves is not so easily acquired, even with an investigation of the mind. It is obvious that we use our senses in perceiving sensible objects. But what is the exact nature of these senses in connection with which we carry out our actions? And what is the actual property of these objects sensed? The answers to these questions are not so obvious; and they cannot become clear to anyone unless the contemplation of these things is guided by a comprehensive investigation of reality.

Now sight is present in all mortals. But whether we see by images coming to the eye or by rays sent out from the eye to the object seen, this problem is in doubt to the learned, although the common man is not conscious of doubt. Again if someone sees a triangle or square, he can easily identify it by sight. But what is the essence of a triangle or a square? This he must team from a mathematician.

The same thing can be said of the other senses, especially concerning aural perception. For the sense of hearing can apprehend sounds in such a way that it not only judges them and recognizes their differences, but it very often takes pleasure in them if they are in the form of sweet and well-ordered modes, whereas it finds displeasure if the sounds heard are unordered and incoherent. Thus it follows that, since there are four mathematical disciplines, the others are concerned with the investigation of truth, whereas music is related not only to speculation but to morality as well. For nothing is more consistent with human nature than to be soothed by sweet modes and disturbed by their opposites. And this affective quality of music is not peculiar to certain professions or ages, but it is common to all professions; and infants, youths and old people as well are so naturally attuned to the musical modes by a certain spontaneous affection that there is no age at all that is not delighted by sweet song. Thus we can begin to understand that apt doctrine of Plato which holds that the soul of the universe is united by a musical concord (Plato Timaeus 37 A). For when we compare that which is coherently and harmoniously joined together in sound-that is, that which gives us pleasure-so we come to recognize that we ourselves are united according to this same principle of similarity. For similarity is pleasing, whereas dissimilarity is unpleasant and contrary.

From this same principle radical changes in one's character also occur. A lascivious mind takes pleasure in the more lascivious modes or is often softened and moved upon hearing them. On the other hand, a more violent mind finds pleasure in the more exciting modes or will become excited when it hears them. This is the reason that the musical modes were named after certain peoples, such as the "Lydian" mode, and the 'Thrygian" mode; for the modes are named after the people that find pleasure in them. A people will find pleasure in a mode resembling its own character, and thus a sensitive people cannot be united by or find pleasure in a severe mode, nor a severe people in a sensitive mode. But, as has been said, similarity causes love and pleasure. Thus Plato held that we should be extremely cautious in this matter, lest some change in music of good moral character should occur. He also said that there is no greater ruin for the morals of a community than the gradual perversion of a prudent and modest music. For the minds of those hearing the perverted music immediately submit to it, little by little depart from their character, and retain no vestige of justice or honesty. This will occur if either the lascivious modes bring something immodest into the minds of the people or if the more violent modes implant something warlike and savage.

For there is no greater path whereby instruction comes to the mind than through the ear. Therefore'when rhythms and modes enter the mind by this path, there can be no doubt that they affect and remold the mind into their own character. This fact can be recognized in various peoples. For those peoples which have a more violent nature delight in the more severe modes of the Thracians. Gentler peoples, on the other hand, delight in more moderate modes, although in these times this almost never occurs. Indeed today the human race is lascivious and effeminate, and thus it is entertained totally by the representational and theatrical modes. Music was prudent and modest when it was performed on simple instruments; but since it has come to be performed in various ways with many changes, it has lost its mode of gravity and virtue, and having almost fallen into a state of disgrace, it preserves almost nothing of its ancient splendor. For this reason Plato prescribed that boys must not be trained in all modes but only in those which are vigorous and simple. Moreover, it should be especially remembered that if some melody or mode is altered in some way, even if this alteration is only the slightest change, the fresh change will not be immediately noticed; but after some time it will cause a great difference and will sink down through the cars into the soul itself. Thus Plato held that the state ought to see that only music of the highest moral character and prudence by composed, and that it should be modest, simple and masculine, rather than effeminate, violent or fickle.

The Lacedaemonians took great care to preserve this type of music when they hired, at great expense to themselves, the Cretan, Thaletas of Gortyn, who trained their sons in the art and discipline of music. In fact, this was a custom among ancient people that was observed for a considerable length of time. Thus when Timotheus of Melesia added a string to those which were already established and made the music more complex, the Lacedaemonians expelled him from their city with an official decree....

Now this text decrees the following: The Spartans were indignant with Timotheus the Milesian because he had had a detrimental influence on the characters of the boys he taught by introducing complexity into the music; and thus he interfered with their virtuous temperament. Moreover, he was guilty of changing the harmony which he found in a temperate state into the chromatic genus, which is fickle. Thus the zeal for music among the Spartans was so great that they thought it took possession of the soul itself.

It is common knowledge that song has calmed rages many times and that it has often worked wonders on affections of either the body or the spirit. For who does not know that Pythagoras calmed a drunk adolescent of Taormine who had become incited under the influence of the Phrygian mode, and that Pythagoras further restored this boy to his rightful senses, all by means of a spondaic melody? For one night this frenzied youth was about to set fire to the house of a rival who had locked himself in the house with a whore. Now that same night Pythagoras was out contemplating the course of the heavens, as was his usual custom. When he learned that this youth under the influence of the Phrygian mode would not be stopped from his crime, even by the admonitions of his friends, he ordered that the mode be changed; and thus Pythagoras restored the frenzied mind of the boy to a state of absolute calm. Marcus Tullius tells this story in somewhat different words in his book, De consifiis suis, but the story is as follows:

But I will compare the ridiculous with the sublime, since there is some similarity between them. The story is told that one time certain youths became aroused by the music of the tibia, as can happen, and they were about to break in the door of a chaste woman. Pythagoras then admonished the tibia player to perform a spondaic melody, When this was done, the slowness of the tempo and the dignity of the performer caused the raging fury of these boys to subside.

But to give briefly some similar examples, Terpander and Arion of Methymna saved the citizens of Lesbos and lonia from very serious illnesses by the aid of song. Moreover, in this same way Ismenias the Theban is said to have cured all the maladies of the many Boeotians, who were suffering from sciatica. Similarly it is said that Empedocles had the mode of singing altered when an infuriated youth attacked one of his guests with a sword for having insulted his father; and by this means he tempered the wrath of the youth.

The power of the musical discipline was so evident to the ancient students of philosophy that the Pythagoreans would employ certain melodies when they wanted to forget their daily cares in sleep, and, upon hearing these, a mild and quiet slumber would fall upon them. In the same manner, upon awakening, they would purge the stupor and confusion of sleep with certain other melodies; for these ancients knew that the total structure of our soul and body consists of musical harmony. For the very pulse of the heart itself is determined by the state and disposition of the body. Democritus is said to have told this to the physician Hippocrates, who came to treat Democritus when he was being held in custody by his fellow townsmen because they thought he was a lunatic.

But why have I said all this? Because there can be no doubt that the unity of our body and soul seems to be somehow determined by the same proportions that join together and unite the harmonious inflections of music, as our subsequent discussion will demonstrate. Hence it happens that sweet melodies even delight infants, whereas a harsh and rough sound will interrupt their pleasure. Indeed this reaction to various types of music is experienced by both sexes, and by people of all ages; for although they may differ in their actions, they are nevertheless united as one in the pleasure of music.

Why is it that those mourning in tears express their lamentation through music? This is especially the case with women, who, as it were, make the cause of their weeping sweet through a song. The ancients even had the custom of letting a tibia lead funeral processions, as these lines of Statius testify:

"The tibia, whose practice it is to lead forth the youthful dead, utters its mournful note

from a curving horn."

And someone who cannot sing particularly well will nevertheless sing to himself, not because it is pleasant for him to hear what he sings but because it is a delight to express certain inward pleasures which originate in the soul, regardless of the manner in which they are expressed. Is it not clearly evident that the morale of soldiers is built up by the music of trumpets? If it is true that fury and wrath can be brought forth out ofpeaceful state of mind, then there is no doubt that a more temperate mode can calm the raging and excessive desire of a perturbed mind. How does it happen that when someone hears a pleasant song with his ears and mind, also his body involuntarily responds with some motion similar to that of the song? And how does it happen that this same person can enjoy some melody he has already heard merely by recalling it in his memory? Thus from all these examples it appears to be beyond doubt that music is so naturally a part of us that we cannot be without it, even if we so wished.

For this reason the power of the mind ought to be directed toward fully understanding by knowledge what is inherent in us through nature. Thus just as erudite scholars are not satisfied

by merely seeing colors and forms without also investigating their properties, so musicians should not be satisfied by merely finding pleasure in music without knowing by what musical proportions these sounds are put together. . . .

