

Article

Augustine's *De Musica* in the 21st Century Music Classroom

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Academic Editors: Scott McGinnis and Chris Metress

Received: 12 January 2015 / Accepted: 27 February 2015 / Published: 12 March 2015

Abstract: Augustine's *De musica* is all that remains of his ambitious plan to write a cycle of works describing each of the liberal arts in terms of Christian faith and is actually unfinished; whereas the six books extant today primarily examine rhythm, Augustine intended to write about melody also. The sixth book of *De musica* was better known in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages than the first five, and it takes up philosophical questions of aesthetics related to the proportionate ordering discernable throughout creation. After a brief introduction summarizing *De musica*'s content and its importance in subsequent Christian writings, my presentation outlines and explains how I have used this document in my own music classes. For example, my students learn that a vital notion in Augustine's writings, and in Neoplatonism more broadly, is the spiritual benefit of academic study. That is, through study of music, one gains insight into the created order, but, more importantly, one's soul is strengthened and trained to perceive higher realities of the cosmos such as the ordering of the planetary spheres and the progression of celestial hierarchies, which span the spiritual distance from God to humanity.

Keywords: Augustine; *De musica*; music; Neoplatonism

1. Introduction

In his *Retractions* (I.5), Augustine recounts that he began *De musica* [1] as he prepared for baptism in Milan, in 387 CE (see quotation below). Augustine's ambitious plan was to write a cycle of works describing the liberal arts in terms of Christian faith. Sadly, *De musica* is his only surviving educational treatise and is actually unfinished [2]; whereas the six books extant today concern rhythm, Augustine intended to write about melody also. Written as a dialogue between master and student, the majority of

the first five books discuss the motions, quantities, and qualities of rhythm, understood generally as a fundamental element employed in musical and poetic art, e.g., the classifications and use of quantitative meter in verse composition [3]. The sixth book of *De musica* was better known in Augustine's day than the first five, and it takes up philosophical questions of aesthetics related to the proportionate ordering discernable throughout creation. In the following, I will briefly summarize *De musica's* contents and its importance in subsequent Christian writings. Additionally, I will outline how I have used this document in my own music classes at Dordt College, a Christian liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition.

2. Augustine and Music

Music was, of course, an important factor in Augustine's conversion and spiritual formation. At the famous *tolle lege* event, in 386, which Augustine describes in *Confessions* VIII, the child-like voice said "take up and read" in a sing-song fashion (*cum cantu dicentis*) ([4], p. 171). Additionally, in *Confessions* IX, Augustine mentions how singing the Psalms of David moved him profoundly while a catechumen: "What cries I used to send up to Thee in those songs, and how I was enkindled toward Thee by them! I burned to sing them if possible, throughout the whole world, against the pride of the human race" ([4], p. 179). In that same book, Augustine mentions the devotional power of singing hymns and canticles: "The voices flowed into my ears; and the truth was poured forth into my heart, where the tide of my devotion overflowed, and my tears ran down, and I was happy in all these things" ([4], p. 184). At the death of his mother, Monica, in 388, Augustine records how the entire household sang Psalm 101, "I will sing of mercy and judgment unto thee, O Lord", and how, by recalling her favorite hymn, *Deus Creator Omnium*, he was comforted (*Confessions* IX) ([4], p. 195).

Augustine's relationship to music as a liberal art was, in many ways, typical for his day. That is, in late Antiquity, *musica* was largely a mathematical art studied in the philosophical context of Neoplatonism. For example, in *De ordine*, completed in 386, Augustine presents the liberal arts as preparation for philosophical study and explains how numbers are a means by which the unity and coherence of creation can be discerned, with implications for living a well-ordered life. Additionally, it was thought, through the study of physical reality, e.g., via quantitative liberal arts, like music, a soul is trained to reach for the incorporeal. This aphorism is actually a cornerstone in Augustinian aesthetics: Get past the responses of your physical senses to perceive the higher reality; move beyond the created to the Creator. With this justification, derived from Romans 1, Augustine began a Christian textbook on grammar, which he claimed was later lost (*Retractions* I.5.3) [5], as well as a Christian explanation of music, the first six books of which were completed after his return to North Africa from Milan:

At the very time that I was about to receive baptism in Milan, I also attempted to write books on the liberal arts, questioning those who were with me and who were not adverse to studies of this nature, and desiring by definite steps, so to speak, to reach things incorporeal through things corporeal and to lead others to them. But I was able to complete only the book on grammar—which I lost later from our library—and six books, *On Music*, pertaining to that part which is called rhythm. I wrote these six books, however, only after I was baptized and had returned to Africa from Italy, for I had only begun this art in Milan. Of the other five arts likewise begun there—dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, and

philosophy—the beginnings alone remained and I lost even these. However, I think that some people have them ([6], pp. 21–22).

3. *De Musica*, Book VI

In a letter responding to Memorius, Bishop of Capua, in 409 (Letter 101), Augustine acknowledged Memorius’s request for a copy of *De musica* ([7], p. 144). Augustine had promised Memorius a revised copy of the treatise, but was apparently unable to get to it. He ended up sending only Book VI and said that this book was actually more important than the first five:

But I am sending the sixth book to your Charity at once. I have found a revised copy of it and it contains the essence of all the other books. Perhaps your serious mind will find it worth your while. As for the other five, they will hardly seem worth reading to our son and fellow deacon, Julian... ([7], p. 147).

The difference between the first five books of *De musica* and Book VI is further emphasized by Augustine in his introduction to that book, in which he explains that all his preceding discussions are but childish trifles and that their true worth lies in guiding the enquiring mind to this final culminating portion. Augustine distinguishes four types of rhythm (*numeri*): those in the process of being produced, those that are heard, those residing in memory, and those sounding in the air. These types of rhythm are ordered, in terms of excellence, and a fifth superior category is introduced, those rhythms perceived by natural judgment. The Latin word *numerus*, which Augustine uses throughout *De musica*, can mean either “rhythm” or “number”. “Rhythm” is the most common sense for *numerus* in *De musica*, and, for example, this translation is used throughout in Martin Jacobsson’s translation of Book VI (*cf.*, [8], p. 7).

In order to rank their types, Augustine explains how rhythms act in relation to the human soul and physical body; he concludes that both soul and body have their own rhythms (respectively superior and inferior) and that the soul cannot be acted upon by the body. Additionally, because it is hard to account for the fact that a physical sound can have any interaction with the non-physical soul, Augustine’s proposes that the soul acts first.

For Augustine, the loftiest action one may take with regard to rhythm is its judgment according to reason, the very action necessary to best pursue musical knowledge, according to his definition from *De musica* I.2, derived from Varro: “*Musica est scientia bene modulandi*” (“Music is the science of modulating well”). *Modulor*, in this context, may signify an application of measure to musical quantity, as in rhythm, and not simply musical singing or playing ([9], p. 7).

This preference for theorizing (or philosophizing) to practice is at least as old as Plato; in *Republic* (§597–598), Plato demonstrates that an artist imitates the appearance of a thing but does not necessarily understand the thing’s reality or nature. Similarly for Augustine, in *De musica* I.6, performers of music are inferior to those who discern and describe the structure and components of music. Additionally, the fact that performers play for praise or money is an example that they are ethically compromised in their approach to music. Though, it should be said that, on this point, the master and student conversing in *De musica* appear to disagree ([1], pp. 186–87). The student argues

for the possibility of a performer who is also educated in the theories of music, and his master does not completely dismiss the idea.

Augustine then explains how the discernment of rhythmic equality and symmetry in music is only one way in which we may identify an order pervasive throughout all creation. For example, the motions of the cosmos demonstrate an appropriate ordering for the soul; the planets move in perfect unity in imitation of eternity, and their rhythms unite earthly things in “the hymn of the universe” (*carmini uniuersitatis*):

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. And so pleasure sets the soul in its place. “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [Luke 12:34]...In this way, through the rhythmical succession of their times [*numerosa successione*], the orbits unite the terrestrial things, subjected to the heavenly ones to the hymn, as it were, of the universe ([8], pp. 65–67).

Additionally, for Augustine, those rhythms we experience in our earthly life may be beautiful, but they should not be valued inordinately. Rather, pleasing, well-crafted rhythms point us toward an inherent love of order—which the soul needs—and serve as another call to embrace reason as opposed to base sensuality.

In *De musica* VI.14, Augustine proposes that orienting the soul toward God is a matter of properly ordered love, to which all the movements and rhythms of human life are to be directed:

Now, do you think that I should speak at length about this, when the holy Scriptures in so many volumes and with such authority and sanctity tell us nothing but this, that we shall love our God and Lord with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and love our neighbour as ourselves [Luke 10:27]? Thus, if we direct all these movements and rhythms [*motus numerosque*] of our human activity to this end, we will undoubtedly be purified ([8], p. 91).

In the concluding sections of *De musica* VI, Augustine expounds three final instances of reading rhythmic equality and proportionate ordering into other aspects of creation (VI.17) ([8], p. 111ff.). (1) He references the construction of particles of earth that display “corrationality” (*conrationalitas*, Augustine’s translation of ἀναλογία, in Book VI) [10]; (2) The ordering of the elements in terms of excellence displays an overall harmony. For example, air strives for unity with greater facility than earth or water and is, therefore, superior, and the planets display the limit and supreme splendor of unified bodies; (3) The entire process of the soul’s journey back to God is also a rhythm entailing equality and order.

In a brief remark at the close of this book, Augustine goes beyond the moving planets and the soul’s quest for theosis and comments on the rational and intellectual rhythms of “the blessed and holy souls” (VI.17) ([8], p. 117). As he later clarified in his *Retractions* ([6], p. 48), Augustine is here referring to the angels who mediate as messengers between God and humankind:

These, which are mobile likewise in the temporal intervals, are preceded and modified by a vital movement which serves the Lord of all things, without having distributed the temporal intervals of its rhythms, but with a power that gives the times, over which power the rational and intellectual rhythms of the blessed and holy souls without any intervening nature receive the law of God—without which not a single leaf falls from a tree and for whom our hairs are counted—and transmit it to the earthly and infernal laws ([8], pp. 115–17).

Throughout *De musica* VI, Augustine refers to the Ambrosian hymn, *Deus Creator Omnium*, his mother's favorite, and this hymn serves as a model for what Augustine intends music to be ([8], p. 111). That is, there are rhythms at play all along the process of someone recalling and singing the chant, to the hearing of it, to the contemplation of it, and, for Augustine, the song is so well crafted that a soul easily moves from the beauty of the music, received by the senses, to contemplation of God's transcendent beauty.

4. *De Musica* in Subsequent Christian Literature

The importance of *De musica* as a music treatise and Augustine's place as an authority on music by the sixth century is confirmed by Cassiodorus in his *Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum* (2.5.10) ([11], p. 222). And, in the ninth century, the Irish polymath, John Scottus Eriugena, cited Augustine's *De musica* in his magisterial *Periphyseon*. Continuing his discussion of place and time as predicates for existence, Eriugena states that "everything that is, except God, subsists after some manner" [12] (*Periphyseon* I, §482B):

Do you see then that place and time are understood to be prior to all things that are? For the number [*numerus*, *i.e.*, rhythm] of places and times, as St. Augustine says in chapter six of the "*De musica*", precedes all things that are in them: for the mode [*modus*], that is, measure, of all things that are created is, in the nature of things, logically prior to their creation; and this mode and measure of each is called its place, and so it is ([12], p. 127).

Additionally, in *Periphyseon* III, §630D ([13], p. 53), Eriugena's description of the "natural orders" follows closely Augustine's argument, in *De musica* VI.17 ([8], pp. 109–11). For example, Augustine had described participants in the chain of being as keeping a balanced, proper order. So too, Eriugena advances a constituted order and, like Augustine, sees the chain as communicating grace and goodness to all its parts, goodness in their existence and grace in their beauty. For Augustine and Eriugena, the order of the entire sequence is proportionate and equal, thus producing a concord that encompasses every part.

Not only does Augustine's *De musica* show up in Eriugena's philosophizing in the ninth century, it is also cited in the *Enchiridion* documents. Throughout *Musica* and *Scholica enchiridion*, the authors survey theoretical knowledge of the past (e.g., defining the modes, probing connections between music and human nature, and calculating the music of the spheres) and explain issues connected to ninth-century, Carolingian musical praxis (e.g., the improvisation of *organum*). Augustine's definition of music as *scientia bene modulandi* is used to open *Scholica enchiridion*, and the discussion on rhythm at the end of Part I draws from Augustine's treatise. The relevance of *De musica* in the ninth century is further

confirmed by its inclusion in the manuscript, Latin 7200, in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, along with *De institutione musica* by Boethius, the ninth book of Capella's *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, and a treatise on the divisions of the monochord.

Augustine's standing as an authority on music, though not to the same degree as Boethius (*cf.*, *De institutione musica*), persisted through the eleventh century; Berno of Reichenau drew on *De musica* in his *Musica Bernonis seu Prologus in Tonorum* ([14], p. 36). As for the twelfth century, William Waite proposes in his book, *The Rhythm of Twelfth-Century Polyphony*, that Augustine's *De musica* may have been a source of the system of modal rhythm formulated at Notre Dame in Paris by Leoninus and Perotinus ([14], pp. 29–39). These rhythmic modes, organized into patterns of long and short durations, provided a workable solution to organizing multiple voices singing together at the same time and spurred new developments in subsequent polyphonic practice [15].

In the thirteenth century, Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253), Bishop of Lincoln, and Bonaventura (1221–1274) employed Augustine's ideas about musical aesthetics, explained in *De musica* VI ([14], p. 36). And Roger Bacon (*ca.* 1214–1294), in his *Opus Tertium* wrote:

It is necessary that one should thoroughly understand the laws of meters and rhythms...and it is impossible to comprehend these unless one knows the five books of Augustine's "*De Musica*"...Only Augustine reveals the truth of this matter. It is impossible to know what is rhythm or meter or verse truly and properly except through these books ([14], p. 36).

In the fifteenth century, Franchinus Gaffurius, an Italian music theorist, cited Augustine's *De musica* in his *Theorica Musicae*, and it was through Gaffurius that *De musica* was transmitted to Andreas Ornithoparcus, in the sixteenth century (e.g., *Micrologus*) ([16], p. 278).

5. *De Musica* in the 21st Century Classroom

This whirlwind tour of Augustine's *De musica* in past centuries should raise the question, of what benefit could Augustine's insights on music be for music students today? In fact, I have used this treatise in my own music history and literature classes, and found that Augustine's intelligent and speculative words are actually received rather well.

My first attempt at introducing Augustine to my music students was in 2012. In that class, students were assigned Brian Brennan's article, which summarized the entire *De musica* treatise and provided some cultural context [16]. In class, I passed out excerpts, mostly from Book VI, and we talked about the harmony Augustine perceived in all the created order, all the way from the human soul to the steady movement of the firmament. We observed Augustine's view that there is a hierarchy, an order to the cosmos into which we all fit as smaller parts of a larger whole, each contributing to the overall unity and cohesion.

I pointed out that the study of music in late Antiquity was an all-encompassing discipline; that is, I highlighted all the topics brought up in such a short music treatise: memory, education, God, the human soul, the universe, number and rhythm, time, and ethics. My not-so-subtle assertion was that my music students need not worry about their choice of major; if we follow Augustine's lead, the study of music helps us make sense of the world around us and our place in it.

The students, though respectful of Augustine's achievement, did have questions about the apparent division of soul and body in Augustine's dialog. For example, Augustine's assertion that the rhythms of good music point the soul upward away from fleshly desires and entanglements seemed, for my students, to deny the goodness of the material creation in which we are called to live, flourish, and pursue justice. Many of my students, therefore, identified a conversation within the Christian intellectual tradition to which they had something to say, as musicians.

Recently, in 2014, I taught the same music history and literature class and again used Augustine's *De musica*. This time I was audacious and required them to read the entire sixth book. Our conversation was very similar to the previous semester, only I spent more time placing the treatise in the context of Platonism.

Plato himself had connected music to his examinations of both the human soul and the cosmos, and his followers in later eras used musical terminology in similar ways. For example, Plotinus (204/5–270 CE), considered a founder of Neoplatonism and its first systematic writer [17], used musical terms especially in his discussion of the soul's ascension to the One in his *Enneads*, e.g., *harmonia* helps the soul perceive the universe and reality, and the soul's union with the Universal-Soul results in *symphonia*.

In taking up the question of where the human soul comes from and where it goes when our body dies, Neoplatonists elaborated an allegorical journey from the stars to an earthly body, at birth, and back to the stars, at death. For example, Plotinus asserted that there is a spiritual aspect to our humanity that points to that higher, better reality. To a Neoplatonist, therefore, matter really is bad, and mankind, as a mix of body and soul, matter and spirit, requires a purgation of materiality and a return to God through knowledge. For example, in the following excerpt from *Enneads* I.3.1, Plotinus describes the ascent we must make back to the One, via pure philosophy or a liberal art like music, by which the physical and sensible lead us upward towards the intelligible:

First of all we must distinguish the characteristics of these men: we will begin by describing the nature of the musician. We must consider him as easily moved and excited by beauty, but not quite capable of being moved by absolute beauty; he is however quick to respond to its images when he comes upon them, and, just as nervous people react readily to noises, so does he to articulate sounds and the beauty in them; and he always avoids what is inharmonious and not a unity in songs and verses and seeks eagerly after what is rhythmical and shapely. So, in leading him on, these sounds and rhythms and forms perceived by the senses must be made the starting-point. He must be led and taught to make abstraction of the material element in them and come to the principles from which their proportions and ordering forces derive and to the beauty which is in these principles, and learn that this was what excited him, the intelligible harmony and the beauty in it, and beauty universal, not just some particular beauty, and he must have the doctrines of philosophy implanted in him; by these he must be brought to firm confidence in what he possesses without knowing it ([18], p. 155).

The similarities between Plotinus's and Augustine's description of how one should properly receive music, and beauty more generally, are obvious: It all points to God, if we let it. In addition, acknowledging my students' good impulse to resist separating soul and body, I used this moment in class to stress that Augustine was, of course, a product of his own era, influenced by the intellectual

currents of his day. I also noted that the insights music and all the arts provide us really do affect how we live. To this point, Augustine's affirmation of the benefits to liberal learning is profoundly relevant for us today and an example we are wise to follow.

Other valuable lessons include how Augustine's vision for Christian aesthetics integrates his vision for Christian ethics: For Augustine, beauty is related to truth and goodness. That is, one may not separate the judgment of beauty from the other responsibilities of our lived experience, which are to be ordered appropriately (*cf.*, [8], pp. 33–35). The very experience of beauty prompts the search for something more, and to stop at the beautiful object itself, for example, is wrongheaded and unjust. This same point is taken up by Elaine Scarry in her recent book, *On Beauty and Being Just*:

Something beautiful fills the mind yet invites the search for something beyond itself, something larger or something of the same scale with which it needs to be brought into relation....One can see why beauty...has been perceived to be bound up with the immortal, for it prompts a search for a precedent, which in turn prompts a search for a still earlier precedent, and the mind keeps tripping backward until it at last reaches something that has no precedent, which may very well be the immortal. And one can see why beauty...has been perceived to be bound up with truth. What is beautiful is in league with what is true because truth abides in the immortal sphere ([19], pp. 29–31).

Finally, and perhaps paradoxically, we observed that Augustine's understanding of art and aesthetics was both objective and subjective. That is, his explanation for beauty includes the object before us, its form and function, but also our perception and reception of it. Objectively, we have a basis for true study and productive discourse about the things we encounter in the world, their structure and order. Subjectively, we are responsible for ordinate enjoyment and use; we should love the right things in the right way. Additionally, if we accept Augustine's understanding of aesthetics as embracing both the objective and subjective, we may, by implication, account for the diversity of artistic expression across human cultures. God's own beauty is infinitely vast, and the created materials at our artistic disposal are various; it only makes sense that beauty be endlessly diverse.

6. Conclusions

I plan to include Augustine's *De musica* in future music classes, in ways similar to those described above. New areas for exploration include tracing with my students how musicians and theorists engaged Augustine's ideas throughout history; if this music treatise was a source of creative inspiration for others, why not us? Additionally, though I have made productive use of Augustine's philosophically oriented sixth book, there are still the first five, which brim with ideas about rhythm as a musical element to be shaped and sounded, faithfully and fruitfully. It would appear that we still have much to learn from Augustine.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References and Notes

1. Augustine. “*De musica*.” In *The Fathers of the Church*. Translated by Robert Taliaferro. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1947, vol. 4.
2. In referring to Augustine’s educational treatises, I mean those he intended to write on each liberal art. Augustine stated in his *Retractions* that, as far as his original plan was concerned, he only completed the six books on music and a treatise on grammar, which he lost. In *De ordine* and *De doctrina christiana*, Augustine mentions music as an aspect of academic and theological study, but these treatises are not about music; they do not explicate musical theoretical principles.
3. Augustine’s discussion, throughout the first five books of *De musica*, includes rhythmic applications for both music and poetry. For example, Augustine’s discussion of “voluntary rests” in *De musica* IV.15 concerns musical practice and not quantitative meter.
4. Augustine. *Confessions*. Translated by Albert Outler. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.
5. Cf. Vivien Law. “St. Augustine’s ‘*De grammatica*’: Lost or Found?” *Recherches Augustiniennes* 19 (1984): 155–83.
6. Augustine. *Retractions*. In *The Fathers of the Church*. Translated by Mary Bogan. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1968, vol. 60.
7. Augustine. *Letters*, Vol. II. In *The Fathers of the Church*. Translated by Wilfrid Parsons. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1953, vol. 18.
8. Augustine. *Aurelius Augustinus: De musica Liber VI*. Translated by Martin Jacobsson. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 2002.
9. Calvin Bower. *Fundamentals of Music*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. The concept of modulation as transitioning from one key area to another does not apply in this context.
10. To be clear, Augustine had translated ἀναλογία as *proportio* earlier in his treatise, in Book I.
11. Cassiodorus. *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning*. Translated by James Halporn. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004.
12. John Scottus Eriugena. *Periphyseon I*. In *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*. Translated by Inglis Patrick Sheldon-Williams. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1999, vol. 7.
13. John Scottus Eriugena. *Periphyseon III*. In *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae*. Translated by Inglis Patrick Sheldon-Williams. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2005, vol. 11.
14. William Waite. *The Rhythm of Twelfth-Century Polyphony: Its Theory and Practice*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1973. With regard to the quotation from Bacon’s *Opus Tertium*, Chapter 64, Bacon mentions the five books of Augustine’s *De musica* and intends the *first* five books, since he refers to the sixth book elsewhere, e.g., Chapter 59.
15. It should be noted that Waite’s proposed connection between Augustine’s *De musica* and the development of Notre Dame polyphony in the twelfth century is not universally accepted.
16. Brian Brennan. “Augustine’s *De Musica*.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 42 (1988): 267–81.
17. The term Neoplatonism was first used during the nineteenth century to refer to the work of Plotinus and his followers. Cf., Raymond Erickson. “Boethius, Eriugena, and the Neoplatonism of *Musica* and *Scolica Enchiridis*.” In *Musical Humanism and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca*. Edited by Nancy Baker and Barbara Hanning. Stuyvesant: Pendragon, 1992.

18. Plotinus. *Enneads I.1–9*. In *The Loeb Classical Library*. Translated by Arthur Hilary Armstrong. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, vol. 440.
19. Elaine Scarry. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

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