

THOUGHTS FROM PYTHAGORAS

By VICTOR BENNETT

THE philosopher who turns his attention to music finds that his thought may take flight in two directions. He may, first of all, attempt to give an account of what music is in itself and what its effect is upon human nature. This is the inward side of musical philosophy; but if he is presumptuous enough to be satisfied with what he is able to surmise in this way or despairful enough to abandon further attempt, there remains for him an outward side to study. This outward side consists of the relation that music bears to philosophy as a whole or, if it be objected that there is no such thing as philosophy as a whole, then to philosophic ideas at large. If his thoughts proceed in this direction, they must encounter some such question as "What importance has music as an element of the universe?" As for his answer, it is not made any more easy to frame by the fact that the majority of eminent philosophers have attached little or no importance to music. Even Plato, who recognizes the high educational value of music, makes no attempt to relate it to ultimate reality. It is true that in relating the Myth of Er he introduces the celebrated doctrine of the Harmony of the Spheres, but this is made a mere incident in his statement on the Immortality of the Soul and it evidently fails to hold his interest.

Our philosopher, however, is not without consolation. Around this idea of the Harmony of the Spheres there clusters a tradition which, if it be but a minor one, has for music some impressive claims to make. This tradition, it is true, is not very coherent, but it may yet become so. Its threads are scattered, but they may yet be gathered up. It is a tradition which is as much the province of poets as of accredited philosophers, but which, nevertheless, has behind it a force of intuition which ensures its survival after each recurring age of rationalism. When it develops, the philosopher is bound to remark, it has a surprising way of doing so by leaps and bounds, but its origin is not merely ancient but venerable. To begin at the beginning is to return to the source of so very much that is mysterious and valuable in the world of ideas; to return, that is, to Pythagoras.

In that legendary sage the learned satirists of ancient and modern times have found a favourite object of exercise. No doubt that is not precisely the kind of immortality he would have welcomed, nor is it his just reward. What brought it upon him was his innocence as to the sobering effect which rationalistic modes of thought have upon philosophy, though indeed it was he who put system into the nebulous notions that prevailed in the Orphic cult. He would have agreed with Montaigne that philosophy is but sophisticated poetry, and not felt that the connection was a damaging one. Other thinkers have been pleased to ally philosophy with science or logic, but philosophy has never been more than half made up of these quantities. The other half of philosophy consists of spontaneous ideas, which often can neither be proved nor disproved, and of this creative side of philosophy Pythagoras is surely the prophet, so that he remains, as he was in his own day, at the centre of the philosophic storm. Indeed a man who can project his influence over 2,500 years without leaving a written record of his teaching, and without having more than a few of his sayings recorded for him, belongs to a very select gallery of human genius. Such an effect was possible only

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to a man with an abundant fertility of ideas and a passion in expounding them which set men on fire. He was himself intoxicated in the wine-cellar of wisdom, and it could have been no ordinary experience when his disciples gathered to hear him speak and beheld the universe yield up its secrets in a unique composition of music, mathematics and metaphysics.

That Pythagoras was a shrewd and practical seeker after truth and no vain dreamer is shown by his discovery that musical intervals depend upon numerical ratios and by his conjecture that the heavenly bodies were of a spherical shape. When, therefore, we come to consider the Harmony of the Spheres, the doctrine by which he is best known to posterity, it is important to distinguish the essential value of the fancy from the artificial wrappings it had acquired by the time it comes to light in the tenth book of Plato's 'Republic'. Its inclusion there may be in the nature of a grave Platonic joke or as an example of the "useful myth". At any rate it is permissible to doubt whether all the extravagances with which the idea is there decked out are to be attributed to Pythagoras himself, for few great men have had followers more exuberant or less prudent. The eight concentric whorls which, in the account given in the 'Republic', make up the heavenly bodies may have been a Pythagorean conception, for eight was one of his favourite numbers; but it seems that some less skilled artificer inserted into each whorl a siren who, with inexplicable conservation of breath, piped forever a single note as she travelled, thus contributing with her sisters to the production of one lost chord of music; for humanity could not hear the sound, for the simple reason that it never varied and never ceased.

The ancient fancy may have been pleased with the notion that the large spaces of the skies were redeemed by the feminine touch of these choristers, but the fact is that their presence among the spheres has put a brake upon the efforts of subsequent philosophers to manoeuvre the basic idea of planetary music. The written sources of an idea, indeed, command such respect that so fine a mind as Milton's could in 'Arcades' not only borrow from the fantastic astronomy of the Myth of Er, but when moved to amendment stipulated that there were not eight sirens but nine. A philosopher, however, can do little with a siren, and it is evident that these particular sirens have been all too successful in keeping philosophers in thrall. Let us by all means dismiss Plato's octet as a Republican prejudice and Milton's team of nine as a Renaissance extravagance. It is still to Milton we may turn, for as well as being deeply impressed with the notion of the Harmony of the Spheres, he was exceptionally sensitive to music of more human origin, and he has elsewhere more illuminating things to say.

If in 'Arcades' Milton puts into verse a description of the sirens and the spheres more or less the same as Plato gives, in another poem of great importance in this connection, namely 'At a Solemn Music', he shows how the same ideas may be converted without excessive strain into terms more familiar to Christian thought. In the latter poem the sirens have taken upon themselves the form of angels, and these angels serve not the "distaff of Necessity", according to the old and curious pagan belief, but the throne of the Christian Godhead. Moreover, the heaven in which they sing is now no longer confused with the stellar system, and the inaudibility of their singing on earth is due not to the even quality of their harmony but to a tone-deafness of the human race, which is the result of sin. This composition of Christian and Pagan thought is a characteristic achievement of Milton's, yet it is made at considerable expense to the doctrine of Plato and Pythagoras. By removing the angelic music from

the physical universe Milton bereaves it of much of its present interest. As it is no longer an element of the observed world, it has lost most of its philosophic utility.

Between 'Arcades' and 'At a Solemn Music' there is, however, a middle way of interpretation which Milton exhibits in the poem 'Hymn on the Morning of Christ's Nativity':

Ring out, ye crystal spheres!
Once bless our human ears,
If ye have power to touch our senses so;
And let your silver chime
Move in melodious time;
And let the bass of heaven's deep organ blow.

In this instance there is music within the compass of the fixed stars, yet the traditional sirens are neither acknowledged nor transmuted, but simply ignored. Shakespeare's well-known lines from 'The Merchant of Venice' are even more pointed:

There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubims,
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But while this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Plato's scheme has undergone a useful refinement. Here we have light on what Pythagoras meant, or if not what he meant, then on the essential thing at which his thought aimed. Our national poets have no paltering with sirens. They perceive that there is no need for such blustering busybodies, so incompetent to survive a critical inquiry. In addition they have disencumbered us of the eight concentric whorls. But there remain the spheres and there remains the music. With these as all our need the essence of Pythagoras becomes luminous.

Every orb is allowed to sing, and to sing of itself. No mouth articulates; it is the motion of the spheres that makes the music of the spheres. The motion and the music are coincident, in fact identical. The heavenly bodies sing as they move and because they move, and since they move always, they make music always, each with its own tone blending into the inconceivable hymn of the whole heavenly system.

Milton and Shakespeare were giving expression to the conception of the Harmony of the Spheres which had become current in their day, but it is natural to ask by what authority the ancient Greek version of the matter had been amended. To find an answer to this we must recall that somewhat astonishing text from the Book of Job: "When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy." Some Biblical commentators have suggested that "morning stars" is here but a figurative expression meaning angels, others that these words should be understood literally but that the word "sang" is figurative. The true meaning of the passage cannot certainly be established, but by Christian scholars it was for long associated with the Pythagorean belief, which it was held to confirm, and it is still legitimate to take this view. There can in any case be little doubt that the excitement caused by this text mingled with the stream of Pythagorean and Platonic thought and modified it. While, in the lines quoted, Milton and Shakespeare were drawing mainly from the Greek source, in effect their conceptions had been purified by a scriptural one. It is interesting, to say the least, that the Book of Job was written, as it is believed, a thousand years before the time of Pythagoras.

The remoulding of the idea of the Harmony of the Spheres by the Renaissance may seem to involve no large alteration, but in fact that

alteration has some extreme consequences. While the ancient idea of music in the heavens is preserved, another cause has been substituted. The music was formerly the work of the sirens ; now it is the result of simple planetary motion. Now like causes in like circumstances should have like results, and if simple motion can produce music in the heavens, and if the test of audibility does not apply to it, then why should not simple motion have the same effect elsewhere in the physical universe and more particularly on the face of this earth ? If motion is a cause of music, it becomes impossible to deny to all things that move, which is to say all things that exist, their own appropriate music-making. It is no longer possible to keep the music to the skies. The chamber music of the stars becomes the concerto grosso of the whole hierarchy of existence, manifesting itself with the utmost proximity and ubiquity. The faint exalted hymn of the sirens becomes a universal symphony, in which everything that walks, crawls, swims, flies or merely agitates is a frantic performer, living to music, by music and for music ; for everything that lives moves, and everything that moves harps or sings. This hypothesis is the converse to an established fact. For it is an established fact of acoustics that all music is a kind of motion, and the hypothesis we are being led to frame is that all motion is a kind of music. The music is everywhere and there is nothing but music anywhere. All existence is motion ; all motion is music : therefore all existence is music. To this triple identification the shade of Pythagoras beckons us on.

It is a matter for regret that Wordsworth was not more versed either in music or in philosophy than he was, for of all English poets since Milton he who could discern in "the soft inland murmur" of the Wye "the still sad music of humanity" was best fitted to find expression for the idea of a universal music in nature. He dimly perceived that everything in nature had about it some gratuitous intelligibility, of which science knew nothing. The nibbling sheep, the cloud drifting across the sky, the flower waving in the field, the orchard trees in blossom, everything was speaking, but in some fashion which he could not understand. The greatest beauty in nature lay in that it was peopled with lives that bore some cryptic message, yet because that message remained unread nature also inspired reverence and even fear. It did not come home to Wordsworth that this appealing quality of living things might be understood as something more than language, as an inborn music expounded in the very activity of living, and overwhelming man's religious feelings with a grand eulogy of the joy of existence. Had his intuition been deepened in this way, an even more notable poem than 'Tintern Abbey' might have been the result.

The Harmony of the Spheres, from which so much has been developed, has been described as the place where the science, the philosophy and the religion of Pythagoras meet, and it must duly be asked whether the Harmony of the Universe (as it now appears) is, in fact, a credible idea. At first it makes but a fanciful impression, yet there is considerable scientific as well as philosophic support for the view that analysis of the universe can go no deeper than in resolving it into one vast whorl of motion, which is everywhere the signature of existence. We know, moreover, that such sounds as we hear are but the effects of motion, and that outside the range of our hearing are numberless other "sounds" which we might hear if our ears were attuned differently than they are. Every movement must overcome some kind of friction and thereby cause some effect of sound, which would be perceptible to a sense of hearing suitably adapted to react to its frequencies. It is, therefore, not inherently unreasonable that the planets,

and after them the whole alphabet of creatures, cause by their motion some excitation which is potentially audible, and which can provisionally be called "sound".

Of course, all sound is not musical sound, yet the difference is not so clear as has been popularly supposed, and may prove to be a purely theoretical one. Supporters of the latest music still frequently remind us that what at first sounds to our ears as an unmistakable noise may on a longer acquaintance become lucid and harmonious, and this revision of judgment necessarily depends not on any change within the composition of the piece but on a change within our ears and minds. According to this view progress in music consists of a continual extension of its frontiers over the world of dissonance, and the logical outcome of such a view is that by a strenuous development of aural perception the whole world of noise can eventually be converted into a world of harmony. It is therefore possible to maintain that all motion is potentially audible, and furthermore that all such "sound" is latent music.

Despite the sweeping nature of these developments, the Pythagorean tradition in music is yet capable of another extension. For this we must go to the work of another poet, one of the greatest of these latter days. The singular quality of the work of Rainer Maria Rilke proceeded from his eccentric conviction that the proper study of mankind was God. Most of his works consist of experiments in finding the way to the knowledge of God, and human beings and their affairs are used in a way merely instrumental to this end. The conclusions of a man who was both a mystic and a literary genius are worthy of respect, and we find that in 'Sonnets to Orpheus', written towards the end of his life, Rilke was in a state of enthusiasm over what was to him a new and profound discovery. He had found that the God he had so long pursued, the God who had been so variously apprehended as a law-giver, a judge, an embodiment of power or of wisdom, a lover, was with an ultimate realism a God of Song, the primal musician exuberant with His own interior melody and communicating to every creature of His hands a motif that was a clue to the secret of His own consuming obsession. The title of these poems shows that Rilke recognized the root his thought had among the ancients. Their legendary Orpheus was a man who, by the sweet persuasion of his lyre, drew even the rivers, the trees and the mountains to follow after him, who was sometimes accorded the honours of a deity, and whose fame gave rise to the aristocratic cult of Orphism, of which Pythagoras himself was the most gifted and impressive representative. But the Orpheus of Rilke is the God of Christianity, both the creator and the saviour of the world, and it is in such a connection as this that Rilke discovers music to be not only the evidence of His outward action but the law of His inward being.

Thus in Rilke the Pythagorean tradition reaches its final limit and consummation. It was inevitable that it should in this way eventually embrace both the natural and the supernatural orders and subdue them both to music. The evidence of the artist's soul must lie in the artist's work, and the evidence of the Creator's self must lie in the world of his creation. If that creation appears to be a vortex of motion, and that vortex of motion converts into a fugue of musical sound, then one must either refuse to draw any conclusion at all or else conclude that the Creator is Himself a musician.

The hypothetical relation of created things to the Creator is summed up by Aquinas in the beautiful doctrine of Representative Assimilation. By this it is conceived that every creature bodies forth one of the attributes of God and thus possesses by its way of life some clue to God's nature.

Thus the way of a bird in the air, of a river in its course, of the deer on the green, of a ship in the sea or a man with a maid, are all types of motion which imitate some feature of the Creator's own nature ; and we obtain a new view of this doctrine if we regard the characteristic action of every creature as a kind of song, inaudible certainly and imperfect perhaps, but to be heard somewhere and somewhen, and having always its perfect counterpart laid up in the divine nature and manifesting the justice of the divine organism, while even here and now leaving literal possibilities of life becoming, in Kingsley's clumsy but not irrelevant phrase, "one grand, sweet song".

While what is essential in the Harmony of the Spheres is capable of no further development than this, it is desirable to find some common term between this enigmatic music of the universe as it thrives in its seasonal business and the human music which we have a better right to understand. Those who are steeped in the tradition of Pythagoras will see in our human music an attempt to create an image of the universal music or some aspect of it. In the way that a globe imitates the form of the earth and at the same time reduces it to the scope of our understanding, so human music-making creates a miniature universe in which audible tokens represent to our minds the typical movements which give life to the whole Creation. Such an exercise, by representing certain motions, inevitably calls to mind the creatures known to embody such motions. Thus it is that music, while parading a disarming vitality and comeliness of its own, impresses our minds with a sense of the important and insinuates into our imaginations a recollection of the experiences of life.

To dogmatize that music conveys a definite sense is to invite some spirited denials, but the literature of music, as well as the commonly-discovered attitude of composers and their publics, is very lenient to such an assumption. At least one composer, namely Debussy, wrote his finest music with the philosophy of music indicated in the previous paragraph clearly in his mind. Giving to that assumption, then, that broad sense which the sensitive believer gathers from his musical experiences, we may reach our point in declaring that music, that is human music, is the imaginative counterpart to all the forms of motion which inhabit nature and human existence. All motions are forms of life, and each instance either does or might find its counterpart in the symbolic sounds and stresses of music, which in like manner obey the laws of motion.

Nor is it that the mimetic power of music plays only around the outward side of nature. The invisible but potent motions of the human passions, involving their concomitant values in the field of ethics, and the characteristic progressions of the tragedies and comedies of the human spirit are perhaps to an even greater extent the playground of musical reflection. Thus music becomes a theatre in which the common thrills of existence are attractively realized, with a certain vagueness which is becoming to the subtlety of the element yet with a definiteness which troubles the imagination.