



Ancient Philosophy

The Ethical Values of the Music Art of the Ancient Greeks: A Semiotic Essay

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ABSTRACT: Humanity requires for its satisfaction Beauty and Good, that is, love, wisdom, and courage. Put differently, the necessity of order, equilibrium, and harmony. These values ground one of the most elevated planes of the spiritual life: music. Its moral force in the education of the mind, soul, and behavior of the human person has been emphasized by the ancient Greek philosophers. This important message exists as a pattern crossing the centuries. I will try to reveal the unity 'ethics'/*ethike* - 'music'/*melos* by using the semiotic organon.

Suggested by the very remarkable interest taken in the music in the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, our attempt—*a semiotic attempt*—would succeed in getting us closer to the meaning of what is called "the ethos of music" in the civilization of ancient Greeks.

The model of semiosis allows us the investigation of the 'sign': *music*, in its structure, in its act and its functionality which means *communication* and *signification*. Thus we can identify 'the music-sign' through the *expression of the sense*—the sense that "is conceived as an evidence, as the feeling of comprehension, in a very natural way" (1)—and through the *significance*. Thus, our guidance implies 'sign', 'expression', 'signification'—the triad that brings together the coordinates of *semiosis*; defined, it, by Charles S. Peirce through the cooperation of the sign, its object and its interpretant (2) and by U. Eco: "the process through which the empirical individuals communicate and the processes of communication become possible thanks to the systems of significance" (3). This semiosis is put in evidence by different semiotic models: the "semiotic triangle" proposed by Ch. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, continuing in some way the Aristotelian and the Augustinian representation about the treble nature of the verbal sign; "the semiotic trapezium" of K. Heger and K. Baldinger (4); "the hexade" stated by R. Jakobson in connection with the poetic function in language (5), the hexamenous model of the "pedagogic situation" in Olivier Clouzot's conception (6), model turned to account in Romanian semiotics by Petru Ioan in the form of "hexad of the 'semiotic situation'" (7).

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Suggested by the very remarkable interest taken in the music in the works of the ancient Greek philosophers, our attempt—a *semiotic attempt*—would succeed in getting us closer to the meaning of what is called "the ethos of music" in the civilization of ancient Greeks.

The model of semiosis allows us the investigation of the '*sign*': *music*, in its structure, in its act and its functionality which means *communication* and *signification*. Thus we can identify 'the music-sign' through the *expression of the sense*—the sense that "is conceived as an evidence, as the feeling of comprehension, in a very natural way" (1)—and through the significance. Thus, our guidance implies 'sign', 'expression', 'signification'—the triad that brings together the coordinates of *semiosis*; defined, it, by Charles S. Peirce through the cooperation of the sign, its object and its interpretant (2) and by U. Eco: "the process through which the empirical individuals communicate and the processes of communication become possible thanks to the systems of significance" (3). This semiosis is put in evidence by different semiotic models: the "semiotic triangle" proposed by Ch. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, continuing in some way the Aristotelian and the Augustinian representation about the treble nature of the verbal sign; "the semiotic trapezium" of K. Heger and K. Baldinger (4); "the hexade" stated by R. Jakobson in connection with the poetic function in language (5), the hexamenous model of the "pedagogic situation" in Olivier Clouzot's conception (6), model turned to account in Romanian semiotics by Petru Ioan in the form of "hexad of the 'semiotic situation'" (7).

The *semiosis 'music-ethos'* at the ancient Greeks appears in its totality—we shall see—by the approaching of the 'sign-function' at the level of main components of music (modes, rhythms, genres, sonorous registers, the instruments utilized) and, therefore by the integrative signification of music. The semiotic analysis—through the valences of the theoretical configuration of the structure on which a conception is based, offers the possibility of (re)building the musical cultural fact in the horizon of the *communication* (in a larger sense, exchange of message in the act of transmission - reception), beyond which a system of *signification* is established (the developed significations proving to be in correspondence with an ensemble of ethical values); so, the 'ethos-music'—at the ground of communication and significance—reason for a well-known truth by the semioticians, that is: "all that can be connected to the human society or thinking can not exist without considering the human attitude of significating and communicating"(8).

We take, here, the art of music as a sign-object, as a sensitive representation with many values: normative, attitudinal, behaviourist, which ought to be understood by deciphering the profound senses for a certain ethos: *the ethos* of the Greek spiritual structure, communicated through *music*.

From the very beginning, an observation should be made (with openings for the incredible semantic force of the art of music) about the term that, later, it will be named after it: name, 'significant', for a universe of discourse, 'reference', initially the Greek *mousike* (mousikh) meant "art of Muses" often used by Plato in his dialogues, in relationship with philosophy considered to be "megiste mousike" ("the supreme music").

Also, we should underline a general note for the conception originated in ancient Greece, note put into the spotlight at the semantic-pragmatic dimension, regarding the mysterious power of music over human beings

and its utilization from a moral point of view, that is: the distinction made by the antique Greeks—at the level of the receiver / listener subject—between two phases, stages of 'subjective intension' (as we might call them) determined by the musical reality: the first one being passive, when the listener feels the pleasure of music and gets into a special spiritual disposition, and the second, an active one, producing a more or less immediate effect on the listener's will. Hence the classification of the genres and styles that Th.Gerold (9) is referring to, a universal composition can have as a moral consequence: an increase of the energy, of an active force ("ethos praktikon"), an ensuring of the soul's stability and firmity ("ethos ethikon"), a weakening of the moral balance ("ethos malakon") or an extatic state of being ("ethos enthousiastikon"). So, the musical *modes* were composed implying an ethos, a depressed, a calm, or an enthusiastic one - here, a transposition in the 'semiotic model' of a subjective 'signification' / 'intension' pole, connotation, behaviourist answer, tendency of action. Actually, there is an interesting correspondence between every musical mode and its emotional force, expressed by the critics: the Dorian, virile and warlike; the Hypodorian, majestic and stable; the Mixolidian, pathetic and sad; the Frigian, agitated and bachical; the Hypofrigian, active; the Lydian, funeral; the Hypolydian debauched and voluptuous (10). Among them, the *Dorian mode*—virile, grave, stately, warlike, instructive, severe, keeping the soul well-balanced—was considered the *national mode*; it is the mode which is suited for the perfect citizen, the mode so much eulogized by Plato in *The Republic* and by Aristotle in *Politics*.

The *music-ethos semiosis* can be deduced from the Pythagoreans' conception. For them, the whole universe is harmony; such as the movements of the celestial bodies those of the human soul are regulated through the numbers' musical relations. Granted only to the first four numbers (1, 2, 3, 4; whose sum is 10, symbol of universal life, of the macrocosm)—the *tetractys* / *tetraktis*—a unique miraculous universal power, Pythagoras made up the scale that bears his name, in which the melody is generated only by the rolling of these numbers, the relations expressed by them being absolute and perfect consonances. Pythagoras's name is also related to the famous "music of spheres" that will accompany the movement of the eight celestial spheres and there are his disciples who created that myth of music of spheres, supposing that the rigorous order that chairs the sounds' linking reflects a superior order, according to which the celestial bodies are supposed to move and explaining thus the enigmatically influence of music upon the human soul. One of disciples, Archytas saw in the musical language the most substantial proof of the numerical essence of the universe. Generalizing the mathematical and acoustic aspect of music, the Pythagoreanism saw in the art of sounds the image of number, which is considered to be the essence of the universe. The universal harmony was transposed in the term *kosmos*, and the natural order would contain moral and rational senses through "harmony-kosmos", a "binding" that would join together in a whole "the sky and the earth, the gods and the people", made up by agreement and good order, by wisdom and spirit of justice.(11)

The Pythagoreans—as later, Plato and Aristotle—attributed moral force not only to the "modes", but also to the musical rhythms. At the syntactical level, in our analysis besides the singsong we ought to take into account the rhythms—the including in the work of the fundamental rhythmic elements: lengths, beats, bars, parts, etc. Aristoxenus has the merit of having distinguished the main notions of rhythm. Discerning between the equal genre (the report is 1/1)—calm and resolute; the double genre (2/1)—vivid and loose; the sesquialter (3/2)—feverish and enthusiastic, we can talk, at the semantic and the pragmatic level, about an ethos of rhythms. "The Greeks' sensitiveness seems to have been accessible in a particular way to the finest impressions of the rhythm and the melody; they didn't find here only sensual pleasure, infinitely varied, but also a strong moral emotion that sometimes incited the soul and intensified it and sometimes brought it quietens and equilibrium" (12). Anyway, we learn this idea from Aristotle in *Politics*. "The rhythms—he writes—vary in the same way as the modes do: some smooth the soul, the others shake it; and the movement of the latter may be either more vulgar or of a better taste" (13).

There it is configured an authentic theory of a musical ethos that develops thanks to the other participants in the process of creating this art. For instance, *the instruments* utilized here stimulate senses and significations with an ethic resonance. Two were the main instruments in the Ancient Greece: the lyre (sometimes, the *kythara*), Apollo's instrument, organ of ethos; and the *aulos* (a flute), belonging to Dionysos's cult, organ of pathos. This distinction of senses is in concordance with the main modes—the Dorian and the Frigian—as we can learn from the IIIrd Book of Plato's *The Republic*. In his turn, the exegete William Fleming, referring to this separation, remarked: "For the Athenians, this means a separation between their aspirations and ideals—an instrument with that musical mode (the Dorian, our note) implied clearness, restraint, moderation; the other one incited the senses and stirred the passions" (14). About the utilisation of the instruments in correlation with the moral power that is exerted upon the man, Plato formulate a series of exigencies when reminding the mythical competition between Apollo and Marsyas—the former playing the lyre and the latter the flute—ended with Apollo's victory, this event making the author of *The Republic* reject all the instruments resembling the flute as belonging to "a Dionysiac zone" of music; these instruments—in his opinion—would be the ones which those states (of soul) that must be avoided, could be expressed with, namely the intensely love states that could provoke "the coming out of oneself" (*the ekstasis*) of the listener. Interpreting Aristotle's texts, we can notice the same principles (in the Classic period), principles that are to be paid attention at especially when choosing the modes, the rhythms and the instruments. Anyway the message is clear: "Among these refinements of art we must take only what is necessary to feel all the beauty of the rhythms and of the songs

and to have a more complex sensation concerning the music than this physical excitement which even the animals feel as well as the slaves and the children;.../ The flute must be eliminated. .../ It is not a moral instrument; its role is only to stir the passions" [13: 203].

The semiotic scheme also facilitates the maintaining of an ethos of *registers*, through the significations (ethic qualities) granted to the three regions of pitches: acute, grave and medium. This way, we can understand Ptolemaios's observations: "the same melody has an active effect in the acute scale and a depressive one in the grave scale, because a high sound stimulates the soul, while a low sound weakens it [apud C.Sachs, op. cit.]; as well as the distinction attributed to Aristide the Quintilian: the distinction between grave, medium and high, that would oppose three genres of melodies: *hypatoid*, *mesoid* and *netoid*, that would coincide with the three *tropoi*: tragic, dithyrambic, nomic; in a certain way a resembling observation had made Aristotle in *About soul*.

As for the musical *genres*, through the significance of ethos, we notice a predilection of antique Greeks for *diatonic*, "virile" and "austere", as Plato characterises it in his dialogue *Protagoras*. But, gradually, the enharmonic and chromatic genres have been admitted (as in the cases of modes, of instruments, etc. that have increased and perfected). These ones, the enharmonic and chromatic genres have invaded the singsong "with its caresses and its anguishes, its murmurs and its burst of tears"[12: 155].

The real understanding of the music-ethos semiosis at the ancient Greeks can not be reached without taking into consideration the semantic openings of their conception on *kalokagathia* / *kalokagaqia*—identity of beauty and good under the sign of harmony, as an ideal of luminosity, of symmetry, of equilibrium, of order. In *The Banquet*, the authentically music, the one necessary for the free people, is defined as an expression of a purified love, respectively, of a man's bents to virtue, to beauty, being called even "science of the elements of love". Plato conceived its characteristics—the rhythmic singularity, the symmetry of phrases, the harmonious character of the general sonorousness, the absence of the dissonances, of the violent accents and of the frantic movements—as the expression of human's dignity and superiority as a rational being.

Persuasive capacity for what we have called "the ethos of music" in ancient Greek civilisation have the famous theories: *the theory of imitation (mimesis / mimhsiv)* and that of *purification (catharsis / kaqarsiV)* by means of music, upon which insisted Heraclit of Ephes, Democrit (who seems to have written *About rhythms and harmony*), Plato (in the dialogues *The Banquet*, *The Republic*, *The Laws*) and, especially, Aristotle (in *Poetics* and *Politics*); also, later, Sextus Empiricus (in *Against the musicians*), Plotin (in *The Enneads*), Porphyry, Iamblichos, Proclus.

In this context, we will also remind of the conception regarding the status of music in the antique Greek state, as well as that referring to the educational force of this art. We have testimonies from the Greek thinkers, Pythagora's successors, who conceived music as a superior instrument of education. Damon, for instance, "tries a complex intercorrespondance between music and the category of politics and social within the framework of which the first, sustaining its main purpose in ethos, ensures the rational enlightenment of the other two. Music, itself, stimulating the principles of virtue and thus serving for some superior ideals acquires a distinct status, different from the one it had when it accompanied the religious manifestation or it utilised divertimento".⁽¹⁵⁾

And the characterisation of the musician—as we find it in Plato's dialogues—becomes a persuasive argument for our study; an argument that directs us, again, towards the fundamental signification of the terms: 'symbol', 'reference', 'name' in a semiotic model; the terms of 'music', 'musician', initially close to those of philosophy and philosopher *in point of sense*: "the art of Muses and the gymnastics had been given to people especially for enthusiasm and love of wisdom than for soul and body. The one who combines best the gymnastics with the art of Muses is by all means a perfect musician, master of harmony" ⁽¹⁶⁾. And moreover: "The harmonious soul is wise"—says the philosopher in *Gorgias*, and for Laches, in the dialogue with the same title, a true man of Muses is the one capable of creating a perfect harmony, to realise a concordance between his behaviour and his words, with simplicity, in the Dorian mode, that is in that truly Greek harmony.⁽¹⁷⁾

It is transmitted an worthy message throughout the centuries, a message based upon the art initially nominated through a concept (by itself ethic significant): *armonia* / armonia .

We wanted to emphasize the communication through music of an impressive ethos, which humanity can follow as a model; and in connection with the concept of harmony itself, a communication in concordance with the way of signification—a good opportunity for the way in which the semiotician Ch.Morris considered 'communication': "the utilization of the signs for establishing the signification's communion". ⁽¹⁸⁾

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