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PLOTINUS ON HARMONIA. MUSICAL METAPHORS AND THEIR USES IN THE *ENNEADS*

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Plotinus is celebrated for the manner in which he frequently employs powerful images in order to express central notions in his philosophy, and at least one major study—by R. Ferwerda¹—has been written on this question. Particularly striking is his use of images based on light and vision to describe such things as the emanative process of the hypostases (e.g. in *Enneads*, V. 3, chapter 11), the omnipresence of true Being (e.g. in *Enneads*, VI. 4, chapter 7), and so forth. Although Plotinus makes considerably less use of images based on sound and hearing, it is to the latter that we shall turn in this essay. The result will be a sidelight on his thought which, however, is not without interest for historians of ideas.

It is likely that Plotinus derived his technique of using musical or harmonic similes and analogies to explain philosophical concepts from the Pythagorean school of late antiquity. Given their belief in the numerical structure of all reality, it is hardly surprising that arithmetical, geometrical, harmonic, and astronomical conceptions should play an important role in the Pythagoreans' philosophical method as a whole. Moreover, since that belief itself was widely reported to have arisen from Pythagoras' own discoveries about the association between string-length and musical pitch, it is understandable that musical conceptions should retain a privileged place within the sphere of the mathematical. Of course, Pythagoreanism was not the only ancient school in which musical theorization took place. One should overlook neither the survival of an Aristotelian tradition which placed more emphasis on the sensory evaluation of sound, nor the impact of approaches like that of Ptolemy which endeavoured to find common ground between the Pythagorean and Aristotelian tendencies. Nevertheless, it is

1. R. Ferwerda, *La Signification des images et des métaphores dans la pensée de Plotin*, Groningen, 1965. In line with its author's view that the metaphorical expression of metaphysical truths is merely a supplement, for pedagogical purposes, of the non-metaphorical expression of such truths, Ferwerda's book represents a catalogue of images rather than a study of their use. For a recent evaluation of the ontological and even pragmatic use of metaphor by Plotinus—together with notes on the earlier scholarship—see S. Rappe: *Reading Neoplatonism. Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 91-114.

undoubtedly to Pythagorean thought that Plotinus is primarily indebted for his musical similes or analogies.

Before turning to the Plotinian texts themselves, it may be useful to attempt a brief sketch of what one might term the contemporary Pythagorean understanding of music. This can be done most easily on the basis of an elementary treatise on harmonics which was widely read at the time and is still extant: the *Enchiridion* of Nicomachus of Gerasa.²

Having noted the difficulty of comprehending harmonics in a brief handbook and added a pious appeal to the gods for their assistance, Nicomachus commences this self-declared report of the Pythagoreans' teaching by distinguishing as two 'species' (*eide*) or 'spaces' (*tópoi*) of human utterance the continuous which consists of the utilization of pitch in speaking and the intervallic which comprises the utilization of pitch in singing. An important ontological distinction emerges here since in the case of the former type of utterance it is we who articulate the space—more precisely, impose the 'limit' (*péras*)—whereas in the latter case the spatial articulation is provided by nature itself.³ The next chapter of the *Enchiridion* deals with that music which is the highest 'among sensibles' (*en aisthetois*) and explains that there is between the positions of the seven planets and of the notes of the musical scale respectively a real analogy which is probably the source of the latter's nomenclature, and that the planets are differentiated in their 'sound-space' (*phōns tópos*) either because of their bulk, or because of their speed of motion, or because of their distances.⁴ Nicomachus now turns to consideration of the general principle that number controls sounds. From his remarks here we learn that noise is the auditory result of a frequent striking of the air, that sound is a musically stabilized utterance, that pitch is a quantitatively stabilized but non-intervallic sound, that interval is a kind of transition between lower and higher pitches or the reverse, and that scale is a composite of many intervals. We also hear something about the two main types of instrument—the plucked and the blown—which supplement the human voice as sound sources.⁵ In chapter 5, the Pythagoreans are again drawn into the account with reference to their important innovation of adding the eighth string of the lyre to the previously accepted seven strings in order to produce the 'harmony of the octave' (*dià pasōn ... harmonía*).⁶ After inserting a brief report of Pythagoras' discovery of the 'ratios' (*lógoi*) governing the musical intervals of the fifth, fourth, and tone as a consequence of hearing hammers beating on anvils, performing an experiment

with weights attached to strings, and then reproducing the results on stringed instruments of various kinds,⁷ he returns to the Pythagoreans. Here in chapter 7, the consequences for musical theory and practice of their addition of the octave to the scale and their mathematical explanation of intervals are unfolded with respect to the division of the scale into two tetrachords through 'conjunction' (*sunaphé*) or 'disjunction' (*didzeuxis*).⁸ Nicomachus goes on to align Plato with the Pythagorean musical tradition. The account of the generation of Soul in the *Timaeus* includes a demonstration of the arithmetical, geometrical, and harmonic means.⁹ Another important contributor to the Pythagorean musical tradition was Philolaus. The latter's *Physics* contains an explanation of the organization of the scale in terms of its constituent tones and semitones.¹⁰ After a further chapter devoted to the general principle that number controls sounds in which various demonstrations concerning the relation between string-length and musical pitch are unfolded, Nicomachus concludes his treatise with several detailed analyses: for example, of the extension of the diatonic 'genus' (*génos*) of scale by the addition of notes above and below the traditional eight in order to produce a system of four conjunct tetrachords, and of the distinction between the three genera of scale: the 'diatonic' (*diatonikós*), the 'chromatic' (*khromatikós*), and the 'enharmonic' (*enarmónios*) in accordance with the size of intervals composing the tetrachords in each case.¹¹ On the basis of comparison with other extant treatises, we can say that what is being expounded here is the so-called 'Greater Perfect System' of Greek harmonic theory.

Assuming that Plotinus did derive his technique of using musical or harmonic similes and analogies to explain philosophical concepts from the Pythagorean School, and that the *Enchiridion* of Nicomachus of Gerasa represents a typical product of that school in the field of musical theorization, we have to some extent prepared the groundwork for reading actual Plotinian texts. However, there are certain problems in Plotinus' usage of such conceptual models and in our interpretation of that usage which should be borne in mind. These stem on the one hand from the nature of metaphoricity in general, since the same term can fluctuate between a metaphorical and a non-metaphorical application within even a restricted space of discourse.¹² They stem on the other from the specific metaphors favoured by Pythagoreanism, since to the fact that numbers, ratios, and proportions are not only analogies for reality but constituents of reality must be added the fact that analogy as proportion is itself a numerical conception. In the

2. Nicomachus, *Enchiridion*, in *Musici Scriptores Graeci ... recognovit prooemiis et indice instruxit Carolus Janus, Lipsiae, 1895*, repr. Hildesheim, 1962.

3. Nicomachus, *Ench.* 2. 238. 16-240. 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 3. 241. 1-242. 18. On the theme of planetary harmony see among recent studies J. Miller, *Measures of Wisdom. The Cosmic Dance in Classical and Christian Antiquity*, Toronto, 1986, and J. Godwin, *Harmonics of Heaven and Earth. The Spiritual Dimension of Music from Antiquity to the Avant-Garde*, Rochester, Vermont, 1987.

5. *Ibid.*, 4. 242. 19-244. 11.

6. *Ibid.*, 5. 244. 12-245. 17.

7. *Ibid.*, 6. 245. 18-248. 18.

8. *Ibid.*, 7. 249. 1 - 250. 2.

9. *Ibid.*, 8. 250. 3 - 252. 2.

10. *Ibid.*, 9. 252. 3-16. Quotation of Philolaus' text follows.

11. *Ibid.*, 11. 255. 22 - 258. 2; 12. 260. 18ff.

12. The point has been demonstrated well by J. Derrida: « White Mythology. Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy », *Margins of Philosophy*, transl. A. Bass, Chicago 1982, pp. 207-29. However, since a line of demarcation clearly does exist relative to a specific discursive context, it would be impossible to abandon the traditional rhetorical distinction completely.

light of such methodological questions, we shall arrange the Plotinian texts meriting study into two groups: 1. Predominantly non-metaphorical descriptions of harmonic or musical phenomena; 2. Predominantly metaphorical applications of harmonic or musical terminology.¹³

The most elaborate discussion of an explicitly musical concept in the *Enneads* occurs in treatise IV. 7 'On the Immortality of the Soul'. In chapter 8⁴ the issue is the allegedly Pythagorean theory that the soul is a 'harmony' (*harmonía*) of the body, and Plotinus explains that an analogy is intended here between the soul and the lyre, and between the blending of the body's constituents and the attunement of the lyre's strings. Six arguments are mustered against this theory, the abbreviated presentation suggesting repetition by rote in the school. 1. The soul is prior to the body whereas the harmony is not prior to the lyre; 2. The soul governs and even combats the body whereas the harmony cannot relate thus to the lyre; 3. The soul is a substance but the harmony is not; 4. The blending of corporeal things produces health and not soul; 5. Each part of the body would require its own soul; and 6. The soul would require a prior soul in order to produce its harmony. The last argument—which Plotinus calls the most weighty—depends on a further analogy. Just as the musician produces the harmony on the lyre, so must the first (hypothetical) soul produce the second soul (the harmony) in the body.¹⁴

Another treatise containing elaborate discussions of explicitly musical concepts is 'On the Impossibility of Things without Body' (III. 6). Here, an important section of the argument—chapters 2, 3, and 4—is framed by two

13. Among general studies of musical metaphoricality which are of methodological relevance to the present undertaking may be mentioned: A. Schering 'Symbol in der Musik', *Sinn und Bedeutung in der Musik. Texte zur Entwicklung des musiksemiotischen Denkens*, V. Karbusicky ed., Darmstadt, 1990, pp. 37-46 and S. Gersh: *Concord in Discourse. Harmonics and Semiotics in Late Classical and Early Medieval Platonism*, Berlin, 1996.

14. Plotinus, *Enneades*, in *Plotini Opera*, P. Henry and H.-R. Schwyzler ed., Paris/Bruxelles, 1951-73 (Cf. Editio Minor, Oxford, 1964-82) IV. 7 [2] 8⁴. 1 ff. *Harmonía* is undoubtedly the most important technical term to be employed in this essay. LSJ distinguish the following senses: I. 1. Means of joining; 2. A joint; 3. (as in anatomy) Suture; 4. Framework—which can be a. physical, e.g. of the human body; b. psychological, e.g. of the female temperament; c. physical e.g. of the world's body. All the above are considered literal senses in contrast with which the metaphorical usages are II. Covenant or agreement; III. Order or settled government; IV. (as in music) 1. Stringing of an instrument or musical scale, 2. Music generally, 3. A particular type of scale—the examples given are what musical theorists would distinguish as a. 'mode' e.g. the Lydian, and b. 'genus' e.g. the enharmonic—, 4. Arrangement of words to be set to music, 5. Intonation of voice, 6. (metaphor derived from music) Concord among persons or things; V. Personification as a mythical figure; VI. Pythagorean name of number 3; VII. Name of a remedy. This dictionary-entry is enough to show that any metaphorical applications of the word *harmonía*—in the case of Plotinus the metaphorizing terms are primarily drawn from categories IV. 1. and IV. 3 above—will take their orientation from the precise articulation of the same word's polysemy. For discussion of the ancient terminological usage both within and outside music see B. Meyer: *Harmonia. Bedeutungsgeschichte des Wortes von Homer bis Aristoteles*, Diss. Zürich, 1932, J. Nebois: *Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Darstellung des Wortes 'Harmonia' und sein Ausklang bei Boethius*, Diss. Wien, 1940.

musical similes. The first simile, attributed to the ancients, is something to be rejected. Plotinus notes that according to this account, virtue is a 'harmony' (*harmonía*) of soul and vice its 'disharmony' (*anarmonía*), the simile being derived from a perceived association between individual psychic faculties and individual musical pitches. The theory is false because each faculty is a composite of parts as the soul is a composite of faculties, and one would therefore have to postulate harmonies within harmonies or virtues within virtues. Plotinus therefore concludes that it is better to find the principles of organization in higher things: the reasoning part, the intellect, and so forth.¹⁵ The second simile, being apparently the creation of Plotinus himself, is acceptable. We shall examine it in detail below.

But musical or harmonic similes and analogies can be accepted as well as rejected by Plotinus. As will become apparent in reviewing the more positive references in their approximately chronological order within the Plotinian corpus, the question of rejection or acceptance depends on the extent to which the musical materials are explicitly viewed as non-metaphorical or metaphorical.¹⁶

We first turn to treatise VI. 5 'On the Reason why Being is everywhere all present, One and the Same'. In chapter 10 Plotinus attempts to explain how the many intellects are together in the single Intellect although they seem separate when considered from below. The relation between the intellects is compared to a string on the lyre. The string remains one even if we perceive it as several when plucking it with different fingers.¹⁷ This is the earliest of several analogies in which Plotinus compares the tension in the string of an instrument to the dynamism in the order of reality.

Next in chronological order comes the second of the two musical similes which frame the argument of chapters 2, 3, and 4 in 'On the Impossibility of Things without Body' (III. 6). At this point, Plotinus is endeavouring to show that even the so-called affective part of the soul is really impassive since it is a kind of form which is entirely active and operating by mere presence. The musical simile follows. Just as the lyre's strings correspond to what is moved in the individual, so does the lyre-player correspond to what originates the individual's movement: either sensation and imagination or sensation alone, and so does the lyre's harmony correspond to what is unmoved in the individual: the affective part. The details of the simile are particularly informative here. Just as the musician can only

15. *Ibid.*, III. 6 [26] 2, 5-32. See E. Moutsopoulos: 'La participation musicale chez Plotin', *Philosophia* 1, 1971, 371-388.

16. In addition to the passages to be examined below—in which Plotinus employs notions derived from music explicitly as metaphorical devices—there are several other references to the art of music in the *Enneads*. These occur within the context of aesthetic discussions and deal specifically with the relation between sensory melody and rhythm and their paradigms in the intelligible sphere. See *Enn.* I. 6 [1] 3, 28-33; V. 9 [5] 11, 10-13; and I. 3 [20] 1, 28-34 together with the useful analysis of E. De Keyser: *La Signification de l'Art dans les Ennéades de Plotin*, Louvain, 1955, pp. 69-78.

17. *Ibid.*, VI. 5 [23] 10, 11ff.

operate on the strings because of the 'harmonia' (*harmonía*), so can the sensory only move the body because of the 'affective part' (*pathetikón*).¹⁸

It is interesting to note that this simile, which represents a certain positive evaluation of psychic harmonia in contrast to the somewhat negative judgement considered earlier, found much favour with the Neoplatonists. For example, Porphyry's *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes* provide us with what looks like a commentary on this passage articulated in a manner which renders the original both more simple and more complex. Porphyry's version is more simple in that the strings, the musician, and the harmony are now connected with the body, the animate being as a whole, and the soul respectively. It is more complex in that the strings, the musician, and the harmony are all described as harmonious in different senses.¹⁹ There is some collateral evidence suggesting that the Porphyrian treatment represents an assimilation of Plotinus' unusual simile into a more traditional Neo-Pythagorean form.²⁰

In the next group of passages which come from the large treatise 'On Difficulties about the Soul' divided into three parts as *Enneads*, IV. 3-5 by Porphyry, Plotinus exploits four kinds of musical analogy: namely, the orderly motion of the heavenly spheres, the distinction between theory and practice of music, the plucking of the tightened lyre string, and the enfolding of contraries by the unitary logos. The first and last can be understood against the background of Nicomachus' theories regarding the dynamic configuration of the planetary bodies and the containment of dissimilar tetrachords within the octave, although Plotinus as usual does not reproduce traditional teachings but rather rethinks them in a creative manner. The second and third analogies seem to derive entirely from his independent reflection upon musical phenomena of various kinds.

In chapter 12 of treatise IV. 3, Plotinus explains that the teaching regarding the heavenly spheres' harmonious motion has the following 'hidden meaning' (*ginigménos*). The cycles in which individual souls descend into bodies and reascend to the disembodied state—the lives 'determined according to measure' (*en métrois ... hōrisménoi*)—are governed by higher 'rational principles' (*lógoi*). The cycle in which the cosmos returns to the same point—in its measuring of periods' (*en métrois periódōn*)—is also regulated by such higher principles. Both cycles are actually 'under one rational principle' (*hup'hēna lōgon*) and are brought 'into consonance' (*eis sumphōnían*) with it. Moreover, it is because the harmonious cycle of souls and the harmonious cycle of the cosmos are also brought 'into consonance' (*eis sumphōnían*) with one another that souls remain 'in

tune' (*ouk ekmelōs*) and 'so to speak, emit one voice' (*hoion mian tinā phonēn aphienai*).²¹ This passage is remarkable for the number of technical notions associated with music which it contains: plurality of *logoi*, measurement, opposition of indefinite and definite, temporal periods (the first reference to the rhythmic aspect of music so far), consonance, opposition of in-tune and out-of-tune, and single Logos.²² Nevertheless, in employing this material Plotinus transforms the predominantly non-metaphorical account of planetary motion in traditional Pythagoreanism into a predominantly metaphorical description of a simultaneously psychic and cosmic process.

Treatise IV. 4 contains a number of musical similes which develop aspects of the theory outlined in the previous text. The first occurs in chapter 8. Plotinus here takes his starting-point from the comparison—quite traditional—between the motion of the heavenly bodies and the choral dance. We can think of the latter either as a temporal pattern which is completed at a certain time or as an atemporal pattern which is always complete. If we consider the heavenly bodies in terms of the souls which animate them, then it is the analogy with the second type of choral dance which is operative here. This leads Plotinus to a second musical simile...²³

The heavenly bodies are intent upon the vision inherent in their souls while they cast light upon the heavens. Because of their souls' tendency to become one, they can be compared to the strings of a lyre. Plotinus does not explain the force of this second simile very clearly. However, he probably means to compare the unity-in-multiplicity of the ensouled heavenly bodies with the unity-in-multiplicity of the lyre's tuning on the basis of the stability which they share. This makes the image of the lyre preferable to the image of the choral dance.²⁴

Another musical simile occurs in chapter 12 of the same treatise. Here Plotinus is explaining how the leading-principle of the universe does not go in search of wisdom but always possesses it. The process of searching for wisdom—the activity of reasoning—is compared to practising the lyre in order to achieve the art. Plotinus' somewhat elliptical simile clearly implies another element. That would be where the situation of possessing wisdom—an intuitive moment—is compared to the achievement of the art after practice.²⁵

Another musical simile occurs in chapter 41 of the same treatise. Here the topic is the sympathy pervading nature which explains the efficacy of prayer, and

18. *Ibid.*, III. 6 [26] 4, 30-52.

19. Porphyry: *Sententiae ad Intelligibilia Ducentes*, E. Lamberz ed., Leipzig, 1975, 18, 9, 3-13.

20. The traditional doctrine whereby there is a harmony in the soul, a harmony in the body, and a harmony between the soul and the body is famously set out at Boethius: *De Institutione Musica*, G. Friedlein ed., Leipzig, 1867, 1. 2. 187. 20-189. 9. This treatise is largely a paraphrase-translation of Nicomachus and Ptolemy and therefore documents theoretical ideals which antedate Plotinus.

21. Plotinus: *Enn.*, IV. 3 [27] 12. 12-26.

22. The meaning of the term *lógos* in Plotinus and in Greek philosophy generally is so complicated that it is impossible to produce a satisfactory one-word English translation. In what follows, we shall employ the renderings 'rational formative principle' and 'rational structure'—as well as the non-committal 'logos'—as seems most suitable in the specific context. See further p. 204.

23. *Ibid.*, IV. 4 [28] 8, 34-52.

24. *Ibid.*, IV. 4 [28] 8, 52-61.

25. *Ibid.*, IV. 4 [28] 12, 5-20.

Plotinus compares the association between one part of the cosmos and another to the string of a lyre which is plucked at one end and vibrates at the other.²⁶

Later in the same chapter Plotinus introduces a further musical simile to explain the same phenomenon. Here the association between one part of the cosmos and another is compared to the vibration which one string of a lyre can impart to another.²⁷

Also within the same chapter Plotinus inserts a final musical simile. Just as the All is a unity containing contraries, so does the harmony contain a variety of pitches.²⁸

Next in the chronological sequence we turn to treatise II. 9 'Against the Gnostics'. As is well known, this text aims to defend the beauty of the sensory realm against the Gnostics who disparage the latter, being poor exegetes of Plato's *Timaeus*. Plotinus' argument in chapter 16 is quite simple. If some of his opponents are prepared to concede the beauty of the intellectual sphere—and apparently they are—then they cannot without inconsistency deny that of the sensory which is derived from it. Analogies from the arts are now invoked, and especially from music, geometry, and arithmetic. In the first case, how can anyone who truly perceives 'the harmony in the intelligible world' (*hē en tōi noētai harmonia*) fail to respond to 'that in sensory sounds' (*hē en phthōngois aisthētois*)?²⁹ This relatively unusual application of a harmonic analogy to the realm of intelligibles is consistent with the aesthetic preoccupations of the lengthy Plotinian work divided into four treatises (III. 8, V. 8, V. 5, II. 9) by Porphyry.

In chapter 16 of treatise I. 4 'On Well-Being', Plotinus employs a musical simile to characterize the life of an individual who reaches this desirable state. In true happiness, he argues, a man turns towards the Good and becomes like the Good. He attends to his body as something useful to him but is not preoccupied with it. Such an individual can be compared to a musician who cares for his instrument—in this case the lyre—as long as it is useful to him. At some point, he may change his lyre for another one. At another point, he may abandon the instrument and sing instead. However, one must not forget that the lyre is really useful to the musician.³⁰

The late treatise 'On Providence' divided into two parts as *Enneads* III. 2-3 by Porphyry is remarkable in that, with respect to the Plotinian transformation of the theory of the harmony of spheres which it further develops, it presents both a more general context for musical thinking and particular instances of the latter. In chapter 16 of III. 2, Plotinus is discussing the 'rational forming principle' (*lógos*) which 'is not unalloyed intellect or intellect in itself, and not of the kind of pure soul but rather depends on soul, being like an irradiation from both. Intellect and

26. *Ibid.*, IV. 4 [28] 41, 1-6. On the philosophical theme see G. Gurtler, 'Sympathy in Plotinus', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 24, 1984, 395-406.

27. *Ibid.*, IV. 4 [28] 41, 6-7.

28. *Ibid.*, IV. 4 [28] 41, 7-9.

29. *Ibid.*, II. 9 [33] 16, 12 ff.

30. *Ibid.*, I. 4 [46] 16, 10-30.

soul—that is, soul conditioned in accordance with intellect—generated this rational forming principle as a life containing rationality in quiescence' (*ouk ákratos nóus oud' autonóus oudé ge psukhês katharâs tò génos, ertéménos dē ekeínos kai hoíton éklampsis ex amphoin, nóu kai psuchês kai psuchês katà nóin diakeiménos gennésántōn tōn lógon toútōn zoēn lógon tinā hēsukhēi ékhousan*). The rational forming principle is especially that unity which embraces the multiplicity of lower things and the contraries contained in the latter, and embraces them in such a manner that it is actually reinforced by their nature. In order to explain this, Plotinus employs various similes. According to the musical one, just as the 'harmony' (*harmonia*) contains high and low pitches, so does the rational forming principle contain opposite things.³¹

The next chapter of III. 2 continues the use of musical similes in order to explain the unity-in-multiplicity of the rational forming principle. There are in fact three similes: the singer in the chorus adding his own voice to the entire song; every string on the lyre being tuned in accordance with the principle directing music; and the pipes on the syrinx blending together to produce its harmony.³²

These passages collectively represent the most complex application, from the semantic viewpoint, of musical analogies in Plotinus' writings. It is a complex usage because of the polysemy of the term 'logos' which can have a. the mathematical sense of 'ratio' and b. the physical sense of 'rational formative principle', the latter being subdivisible into b¹ 'reasoning principle' i.e. of a mind, and b² 'rational structure' i.e. of an object. Among Neoplatonic texts, Porphyry's *Commentarius in Ptolemaei Harmonica* makes a clear presentation of the issue when, in order to explain the distinction between hearing and reason (sense b¹), he contrasts the proportion between numbers as used in banking (sense a), the reasoning of the Demiurge according to which the natural world is produced (sense b¹), the physical or seminal power (sense b)—described as the most important sense —, our human reasoning which imitates the productivity of the natural world (sense b¹), and the regulation of material dispositions induced by form (sense b²).³³ It is also a complex usage because of the fluidity within the

31. *Ibid.*, III. 2 [47] 16, 10 ff. We cannot enter here into the enormous complexity of Plotinus' theory of Logos, on which see especially E. Fruechtel: *Weltentwurf und Logos. Zur Metaphysik Plotins*, Frankfurt/Main, 1970, F. Turlot: 'Logos in Plotinus', *Études philosophiques* 4, 1985, 517-528; L. Couloubaritsis: 'Le Logos hénologique chez Plotin', *SOPHIES MAIETORES, « Chercheurs de Sagesse », Hommage à J. Pépin*, publié sous la direction de M. O. Goulet-Cazé, G. Madec, D. O'Brien, Paris, 1992, pp. 231-43; and M. Fattal: *Logos et Image chez Plotin*, Paris, 1998. For rejection of the older simplistic interpretation of Logos as a kind of supplementary hypostasis see J.M. Rist: *Plotinus. The Road to Reality*, Cambridge, 1967, p. 90 ff., D.J. O'Meara: *Structures hiérarchiques dans la pensée de Plotin. Étude historique et interprétative*, Leiden, 1975, pp. 93-5; Turlot, *op. cit.*, p. 518 ff.; Couloubaritsis, *op. cit.*, p. 236 ff.

32. *Ibid.*, III. 2 [47] 17, 39-41 (singer); III. 2 [47] 17, 61-70 (strings); III. 2 [47] 17, 70-85 (pipes).

33. Porphyry: *Commentarius in Ptolemaei Harmonica*, ed. I. Düring, Göteborg, 1932, 12. 6-20. For discussion of this theory see further S. Gersh: 'Porphyry's Commentary on the

metaphorical structure given that one predominantly metaphorical group of terms (the strings of a musical instrument) is applied to the higher reality of the Logos which already has applied to it another predominantly metaphorical group of terms (the mathematical ratios underlying consonance). That Plotinus is aware of the challenges involved in this kind of discourse is suggested by the words with which he introduces his definition of the Logos: 'let's be daring!' (*tetolmégsthō gār*).³⁴

Last in chronological order comes the musical simile in chapter 13 of treatise II. 3 'On whether the Stars are causes'. It is introduced in connection with Plotinus' argument that all things in the world are affected by the 'rational principle' (*lógos*) although such things cannot affect that principle in a reciprocating manner. This is because higher realities cannot fail to impart their influence although lower things may fail to receive it. Plotinus ends this argument by comparing the body's relation to soul with the lyre's relation to harmony. Something corporeal which is ill-organized may impede the action of soul upon it, just as a lyre which is badly tuned may be incapable of musical expression.³⁵

The passages paraphrased above in their approximately chronological order of composition together provide an outline-sketch of Plotinus' use of musical or harmonic similes and analogies. However, in order to complete the picture it will be useful to pass to a more synthetic mode of presentation by comparing the various structures of the similes or analogies themselves.

These fall into two types: first, those based on the musician and his instrument; second, those based on the nature of the instrument.

Similes based on the musician and his instrument occur in five of the texts. These activate different components of what can be termed a fourfold conceptual structure consisting of a. the art of music, b. the musician, c. the harmony, and d. the strings of the instrument. In I. 4, chapter 16 the musician who only sings is contrasted with the musician using his lyre. This shows the distinction between the human soul turning to the higher realm and the human soul intent on the body. Here the elements of the simile are the musician, the harmony, and the strings. In treatise II. 9, chapter 16 the musician who perceives the content of the intellectual realm is juxtaposed with the musician who responds to sensory sounds i.e. the elements of the analogy are now the art, the musician, the harmony, and the strings. This shows that beauty is inherent in both the intellectual and the sensory realm. *Enneads* III. 6, chapter 4 includes a musical simile as a means of demonstrating that the so-called affective part of the soul is really impassive. In this case, the elements of the simile are the musician—corresponding to the sensory presentations—, the harmony—representing the affective part—, and the strings of the lyre—corresponding to the body. In treatise IV. 4, chapter 12 the

musician who practises the lyre in order to achieve the art is contrasted with a musician who already possesses the art of the lyre i.e. the elements of the analogy are the art, the musician, the harmony, and the strings. This shows the distinction between searching for wisdom *via* the activity of reasoning and possession of wisdom. Finally in IV. 7, chapter 8⁴ the necessity of having a musician in order to produce the harmony on the lyre is the issue. This shows the necessity of having a first (hypothetical) soul in order to produce a second soul (the harmony) in the body. Here the elements of the simile are the musician, the harmony, and the strings.

Similes based on the nature of the instrument occur in seven of the texts. Without going into so much detail on these, we can divide them into three sub-types plus a transitional sub-type.

The first sub-type consists of similes derived from the harmony as a combination of notes (on a stringed-instrument like the lyre or a wind-instrument like the syrinx). Sometimes this harmony is seen as a simile for a *unity which contains multiplicity*. For example in III. 2, chapter 17 the unity is the Logos and the multiplicity souls, or in IV. 4, chapter 8 the unity is the universal soul and the multiplicity individual souls. Sometimes the harmony is viewed as a simile for a *unity which contains contraries*. For example in III. 2, chapter 16 the unity of the Logos contains the contraries in the cosmos; in III. 2, chapter 17 the unity of the Logos contains better and worse souls; and in IV. 3, chapter 12 the unity of the Logos contains ascending and descending souls.

The second sub-type comprises analogies based on vibration and resonance. Here, the vibration or resonance is an analogy for the *relation between one part of the cosmos and another*, i.e. the theme of *sumpatheia*. In treatise IV. 4, chapter 41 the analogy occurs in two versions. In one version, the relation holds between one string and another string of a single lyre or between the string of one lyre and the string of another. Thus, plucking the notes on a lyre will produce sympathetic vibrations on the strings of the same or of another lyre. In the other version, the relation holds between one end of a lyre's string and the other end. Thus, plucking on one end of a lyre's string will produce a vibration which can be sensed on the other end of the string also.

The third sub-type consists of similes derived from the presence or absence of tuning (on the strings of the lyre). This presence or absence of tuning is viewed as a simile for the *possibility or non-possibility on the part of a lower reality of participating in a higher reality*. If the instrument is correctly tuned it can perform the harmony, and if the lower reality is suitably arranged it can participate in the higher. On the other hand, if the instrument is *not* correctly tuned it cannot perform the harmony, and if the lower reality is not suitably arranged it *cannot* participate in the higher. This simile derived from presence or absence of tuning is employed in II. 3, chapter 13.

Besides these three sub-types of simile, there is a transitional form between the first and second sub-types. Here, the vibration of the string (the metaphorizing term in the second sub-type) is used in order to signify *the unity containing*

"Harmonics" of Ptolemy and Neoplatonic Musical Theory', *Platonism in Late Antiquity*, S. Gersh and C. Kannengiesser (eds.), Notre Dame, 1992, pp. 141-155.

34. Plotinus: *Enn.* III. 2 [47] 16, 13.

35. *Ibid.*, II. 3 [52] 13, 34-47.

multiplicity (the metaphorized term in the first sub-type). This occurs in VI. 5, chapter 10. As Plotinus explains, the string remains one even if we perceive it as several when plucking it with different fingers, just as the Intellect is one even if we perceive it as a multiplicity of intellects.

After looking at these sixteen texts, it is possible to draw some general conclusions about Plotinus' aims and methods.

Perhaps the most important fact to emerge is that Plotinus is fairly restrained in his use of similes and analogies derived from music. We may justifiably ask why this should be the case. A ready answer is provided by recalling that Plato himself — always Plotinus' primary authority on philosophical matters — has an ambiguous relation to harmonic theory. On the one hand, the undoubtedly Pythagorean theory of the soul-harmony advanced by Socrates' young friends in the *Phaedo* is rejected; on the other, the Pythagorean Timaeus constructs the world-soul from a harmonic division of the mixed substance of the same and the different in the dialogue named after him. This ambiguity on Plato's part seems to have contributed to Plotinus' hesitation, evidence of which is provided by the latter's sequence of further arguments against the soul-harmony and his reading of the *Timaeus* — the Platonic text to which he resorts most frequently — with exclusion of the harmonic elements.

Yet it would be a mistake to conclude that Plotinus sets his face against mathematics and Pythagoreanism in general, since similes and analogies drawn from arithmetic and geometry play a major role in the *Enneads*. In fact, some of the most fundamental aspects of the theory of first principles are explained using devices of this kind. We have only to think of the use of monad, dyad, and numbers to explain the emanation of Intellect from the One in *Enneads* V. 1, chapter 5, or the use of the circle to express Intellect's self-reflection in chapter 7 of the same treatise. Thus Plotinus' reservations seem to have been about harmonics rather than about mathematics in general.

In the present author's view, the use of musical similes is restricted in two main ways and for certain clear reasons.

The first restriction stems from the fact that harmonics works with ratios whereas arithmetic works with numbers, and ratios — which are inherently relational and dual — are less compatible with ultimate monism. This would imply that harmonics would be a method more fitted to expressing aspects of the lower and more multiple levels of reality than of the higher and more simple levels.³⁶

This restriction seems to be borne out by the texts which we have been examining.

36. It is at this point that a contrast with Augustine — one of the greatest ancient readers of Plotinus especially on this topic suggests itself. Augustine's approach to musical and harmonic analogies and similes differs in two ways from Plotinus': 1. The rhythmic aspect of music is more central to the images, thereby facilitating their application to psychic realities; 2. The dependence of music upon ratios constitutes less of a restriction, Augustine's first principle being triune rather than unitary.

Leaving aside those texts in which the notion of soul as harmony of the body is considered and rejected (III. 6, 2; IV. 7, 8⁴), we find in Plotinus' *Enn.* I 4, 16 the musician correlated with the individual soul; in II. 3, 13 harmony with soul and lyre with body; in II. 9, 16 harmony with the intellectual and harmony with the sensible; in III. 2, 16, III. 2, 17 and IV. 3, 12 harmony with the Logos; in IV. 4, 8 the lyre with the unity-in-multiplicity of souls; in IV. 4, 12 the musician with the universal leading-principle; in IV. 4, 41 the lyre with the unity-in-multiplicity of the universe; in IV. 4, 41 harmony with the universe; and in VI. 5, 10 the lyre with the unity-in-multiplicity of intellects. The two cases in which harmony and the lyre are correlated with the intellectual sphere (II. 9, 16; VI. 5, 10) seem to be marginal in relation to Plotinus' main thought. This leaves us with the conclusion that harmony, the musician, and the lyre are employed throughout as images of the Logos, the universal leading-principle, the unity-in-multiplicity of souls, the unity-in-multiplicity of the universe, the individual soul, the sensible sphere, and body.

The second restriction is not concerned with the *range* of application of musical similes but with the *mode* of that application. In the philosophy of the Pythagoreans, the distinction between harmony as an image of reality and harmony as a constituent of reality is not strictly maintained. Indeed, one might say that this system functions largely because of the ambivalence between metaphorical and non-metaphorical usages. In Plotinian thought, however, the distinction between harmony as cosmic image and harmony as cosmic constituent is emphasized sometimes by placing the relevant comparisons at the conclusions of major arguments and sometimes by bracketing them within those arguments. This approach clearly marks Plotinus off from the mainstream of late ancient Platonist thinkers.

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