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"Are Flute-Players Better than Philosophers?" Sextus Empiricus on Music, against Pythagoras

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1

I wish to examine what is perhaps only a small fragment of the long history of the reception of Pythagorean doctrines, yet one that may provide evidence for the endurance in the imperial age, in a Pyrrhonian-Sceptic context, of interest in a certain way of portraying Pythagoras and a certain cliché surrounding his figure. In the case of Sextus Empiricus we can perhaps speak of a sort of ideological use of his sources on Pythagoreanism: his interest is possibly distorted, and is not to be taken at face value, but it nonetheless merits some consideration, especially to shed light on the more general question of the transformation of some key concepts within the Pythagorean tradition.

My paper has two aims:

- Firstly, I shall provide some quantitative data on the presence of Pythagoras within Sextus Empiricus' corpus, with the aim of identifying the contexts in which he is explicitly invoked (possible implicit allusions form an issue too complex to tackle here). I shall try especially to identify and elucidate musical references.
- Secondly, without entering into the overall structure of Sextus' attack on the "liberal arts,"¹ or the philosophical aim he is pursuing in his confutation of any τέχνη that purports to rest on a completely dogmatic basis, I will focus on a peculiar chapter in Pythagorean *Wirkungsgeschichte*. This is represented by the critical observations that Sextus Empiricus presents in two passages of his treatise *Against the Musicians* (=M 6), with regard to the ethical standing and moral / medical power that Pythagoras apparently assigned to music.

This polemical spirit is to be viewed against the broader background of the Pyrrhonian plan to confute the concept of music, its theoretical claims, and the field of action assigned to it by dogmatic philosophers. Sextus' attack may therefore

¹ See Spinelli 2010.

be regarded as a fresh stage in a long-running battle.² A remote “archetype” for it is *PHibeh* 13 (probably the work of Alcidas), with its explicit opposition to the theoretical and moral claims of music (which are in this case set in contrast to the superiority of rhetoric). A closer antecedent may be found in a series of Epicurean objections that have been recorded in Philodemus’ *De musica* (although no definitive solution can be offered here and perhaps some serious doubts may be raised: see *infra*, §§ 3 and 4).³

2

We can start with something that has never been done before, namely to count and statistically evaluate Pythagoras’ presence in Sextus Empiricus’ references and citations.

We leave aside the occurrences of the term Πυθαγορικός, which is used both as an adjective and in a substantivized form in the plural (οἱ Πυθαγορικοί, vel sim.), since these references are not directly relevant to an enquiry into Sextus’ view of Pythagoras himself. We will, however, mention the adverbial and comparative form of the adjective, πυθαγορικώτερον: it occurs in *M* 4, 11, as a useful way of describing Plato as a philosopher who defended the concept of “one” in a rather Pythagorean fashion. Notwithstanding this exclusion, a few brief remarks on these forms are in order, as in certain cases they provide some interesting and theoretically valuable hints.

We may note the special function of the formula Πυθαγορικῶν παῖδες, which is used to introduce doctrines of considerable importance, for instance at *M* 10, 270.⁴ The doctrine described here clearly reflects a later development, one strongly influenced by the Academic tradition and in particular – as Leonid Zhmud has rightly noted – due to “the tendency to attribute to Pythagoreans and (much less frequently) to Pythagoras the Platonic teaching of the One and the indefinite dyad [that] first appears in pseudo-Pythagorean literature of the first century and in Neopythagoreanism.”⁵

Another significant doctrine introduced by the formula Πυθαγορικῶν παῖδες occurs in *Against the Musicians* (*M* 6, 30). This passage, in a general way (and perhaps due to a late re-interpretation) attributes to the “Pythagorean fraternity” the idea that “the cosmos is ordered according to harmony.”

One should also take into account that the formula *plur. gen. nominis proprii* + παῖδες is not unusual in Sextus’ *usus scribendi*. A striking example is in *Against the Ethicists* (*M* 11, 24), where we find the expression Στωικῶν παῖδες, possibly an allusion to later Stoics, and in particular Mnesarchus. By naming the παῖδες

2 For Sextus’ programme in *M* 6 see §§ 1–6, and Davidson Greaves 1986; Delattre 2007a, 100; Spinelli 2008; Bett 2013.

3 See Brancacci 1988; also Barker 1989, 457–458, n. 1; Rispoli 1992, 216–217, n. 3.

4 It is already explicitly attributed to Πυθαγόρας alone in *M* 10, 261, then to οἱ Πυθαγορικοί in *M* 10, 262 and 291, and finally to τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν στάσις in *M* 10, 282.

5 Zhmud 2012, 423, here n. 33.

(that is, “sons,” or according to some translators “disciples” / “followers”) of a given philosophical sect, this formula is intended to suggest to the reader that the doctrines under discussion were not developed by the founder or original core of the school but rather stem from later developments, either by reframing or even newly forming ideas. In the two cases just mentioned, for instance, Sextus (or his source) does not believe that these ideas may legitimately be associated with the name of Pythagoras himself.

If we now turn to consider explicit occurrences of the name of Pythagoras, we need to exercise particular caution. For in this case too we must draw a distinction between the mere mention of the philosopher’s name and the more complex formulas within which it is set.

For example, when – on two occasions – Sextus mentions Pythagorean doctrines by placing them under the authority of οἱ ἀπὸ τοῦ Πυθαγόρου, it seems he is referring to what had by then become standard doctrines, ones which Pythagoreans accepted almost by default. These include the idea that numbers are “elements” of the κόσμος, and that they cannot coincide with “numerals” or ἀριθμητά.⁶

A very different case is provided by those passages – no less than seven – in which distinctly Pythagorean doctrines are introduced by the formula οἱ περὶ (τὸν or τὸν Σάμιον) Πυθαγόραν – the latter formula occurring only in *M* 10, 248, as we shall see very soon. When Sextus uses the phrase οἱ περὶ + *acc. nominis proprii*, he is usually making a direct reference to the thinker whose name is given in the accusative.⁷ Often, however, this reference also reflects Sextus’ awareness of the fact that the particular thesis in question, while traceable to a specific philosopher, is now shared by the whole αἵρεσις that derives from or depends on him. This would also appear to be the case with those passages attributing well-established doctrines to Pythagoras, or rather to οἱ περὶ τὸν Πυθαγόραν.

The first thesis to be considered is very famous. It posits – often in the context of doxographic lists of varying length or completeness – numbers as the principles of all things. Numbers are presented – not without some inconsistency – as being either material or incorporeal.⁸ In a most interesting passage (*M* 10, 248), however, numbers are simultaneously presented as principles (ἀρχαί) and elements (στοιχεῖα) of wholes (τῶν ὅλων). This thesis introduces a long section in Sextus’ *Against the Physicists* (*M* 10, 249–284), in which – as previously noted – we find Platonic arguments and conclusions that derive from a late pseudo- or Neopythag-

6 See *PH* 3, 152 and 163: this latter passage builds on a thesis attributed to οἱ Πυθαγορικοί a few paragraphs earlier, in *PH* 3, 157.

7 For other references see Spinelli 2000, 53, n. 18 and Vogt 2015, 54, n. 13.

8 As material in *PH* 3, 32, where the Pythagorean position is distinguished from that of οἱ μαθηματικοί, who consider as principles τὰ πέρατα τῶν σωμάτων; to the contrary, they are presented as immaterial in *M* 9, 364, where the Pythagorean stance is once again distinguished from that of οἱ μαθηματικοί and their πέρατα τῶν σωμάτων, which are nonetheless also incorporeal; more generally see now Betegh 2015.

orean reinterpretation. It is nonetheless worth noting that in this introductory text the thesis in question is attributed to those οἱ περὶ τὸν Σάμιον Πυθαγόραν who are, significantly, compared to “the most knowledgeable of the physicists” (οἱ ἐπιστημονέστατοι τῶν φυσικῶν), possibly because, as we read soon afterwards (M 10, 250), they “say that genuine physicists, who research questions about the all, have to begin by examining into what things the all admits of being broken down.”⁹

In another occurrence (M 10, 45), describing the different sides in the “dissonance” or διαφωνία concerning the existence or non-existence of motion, the name of Pythagoras (always presented through the label οἱ περὶ τὸν Πυθαγόραν and presented as a champion of the actual subsistence of motion) is associated with the evidence provided by “everyday life,” by βίος. In this passage, in particular, he is reckoned among the majority of physicists (such as Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Democritus, Epicurus, the Peripatetics, the Stoics, “and a great many others”) who support the idea that motion indeed exists or subsists. Aside from this passage, however, we also find a number of other interesting ones. Again in *Against the Physicists*, for instance (M 9, 127 and 130), in a rather haphazard manner and without drawing any subtle distinctions, Sextus places οἱ περὶ τὸν Πυθαγόραν alongside Empedocles (other important fragments of whom are quoted verbatim: 31 B 136 and 137 DK) and alongside “the rest of the Italian crowd.” In this case, Sextus more or less correctly attempts to present as a “common opinion” of this group of thinkers the idea that there exists a sort of profound “communality” (κοινωνία) between men, the gods, and non-rational animals – a concept which lies at the basis of well-known dietary taboos (namely abstention from the murder of animals and the consumption of flesh). Not only that, but Sextus further stresses this view in M 9, 128 through a verse¹⁰ which may have been fabricated in the Hellenistic age, in a pseudo-Pythagorean context, and placed under the authority of Pythagoras.¹¹

We may now turn to the eight occurrences of the name “Pythagoras” alone, leaving aside for the moment both M 10, 261, which I have already mentioned, and the two passages from *Against the Musicians* which I shall be examining later (§§ 3 and 4).

For the sake of convenience, we may divide the remaining quotations from Sextus into three groups.

- A. First we may record – but without assigning them any decisive originality – the two passages (M 7, 94 and M 4, 2) in which Sextus recalls the famous Pythagorean oath attested in several sources from the Hellenistic and impe-

⁹ Both translations from Bett 2012, 125–126; on M 10, 248–309 and its possible source (Posidonius?) see also Brennan 2015, 327–329.

¹⁰ “Redden the altar of the blessed with hot bloodshed” (βωμὸν ἐρεῦθοντας μακάρων θεομοῖσι φόνουσιν, tr.: Bett 2012, 28).

¹¹ See Riedweg 2002, 159–161; on M 9, 127–131 see also Bett 2015, 49–50.

rial periods.¹² This passage is centred around the idea that the followers of Pythagoras (who are, significantly, described as οἱ Πυθαγορικοί in M 7, 94, and who – in the light of M 7, 92 – are perhaps to be identified chiefly with Philolaus, or the οἱ ἀπὸ τῶν μαθημάτων Πυθαγορικοί mentioned in M 4, 2) invoke Pythagoras as a divine figure worthy of being called upon in place of the gods to swear an oath, along with the equally famous τετρακτὺς which he had discovered (arguably together with Hippasus) and “which traditionally symbolizes the connection between harmonics, arithmology, and religion.”¹³

- B. The citation in M 9, 64 deserves a separate mention. In a section of Sextus’ work presenting “the arguments from the agreement among all humans” in favour of the existence of the gods, the name of Pythagoras is mentioned in the context of a connection both with the opinions of ordinary or common people (or “idiots,” etymologically: Sextus uses the expression ἰδιωτικὴ ὑπόνοια, M 9, 63), and with the statements made by poets (most notably Homer). Not only that, but Pythagoras’ name is mentioned again – significantly – in relation to “the mass of physicists.” Pythagoras’ name, therefore, is featured as part of a strange list which includes Empedocles, the Ionians, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and even Epicurus and “those of the Garden.” It seems to me that in this case too Sextus has not bothered to provide an accurate analysis of the positions of such a varied range of thinkers, or to draw the necessary distinctions. Instead, he has chosen to set up a sort of “dogmatic theological party,” whose leading member, in his view, is Pythagoras.

- C. I have left two strange citations concerning Pythagoras until last.

The first is the one that in my view raises the greatest problems in terms of reliability and accuracy. At the opening of the specific section of the first book of *Against the Physicists*, which is devoted to the investigation and refutation of the concept of body (see M 9, 366), Sextus presents a definition of the body “as what is capable of being acted upon or of acting.” This definition is perhaps reminiscent of the Stoic and more generally Hellenistic jargon with which Sextus is so concerned in his polemics (but see Betegh 2015, 136, n. 10). We learn here, however, that the main proponent of this definition, or indeed its ἀρχηγός / “pioneer,” was none other than Pythagoras. I must confess that I find it very difficult to account for this attempt to cast Pythagoras in the role of πρῶτος εὐρετής of a notion of the body which was no doubt developed only much later. Indeed, it is rooted in a context shaped by Hellenistic materialistic physics that is very, very remote from Pythagorean doctrines on being. With much caution, we may suggest that, in an attempt to establish an unbroken line of historical development in the materialistic approach to the body, Sextus’ source (a Stoic, perhaps) chose to trace his own

¹² See for example Aët. I 3, 8 = 58 B 15 DK and for other occurrences Zhmud 2012, 301, n. 53.

¹³ Zhmud 2012, 300; see also Barker 1989, 30–31.

philosophical pedigree back to an important, almost legendary figure such as Pythagoras, regardless of whether this theoretical backdating was correct or not.

The second odd passage occurs in a section of *Against the Grammarians* (M 1, 303). Arguing against poets and in support of the antiquity of the Empedoclean saying *simile simili cognoscitur*, Sextus here frames Empedocles' position within the context of an argument entirely devoted to φυσικὴ θεωρία. In particular, Sextus connects it to a root idea developed ἀπὸ Πυθαγόρου, but which in his view is also later to be found in Plato's *Timaeus*. Doubts may legitimately be raised regarding this attribution, but I believe it is easier to explain why Sextus makes this association. The way in which the section under consideration is constructed as a whole gives the clear impression that Sextus (or his source: maybe Posidonius, while interpreting Plato's *Timaeus*? See also Blank 1998, 335–336) is making independent and no doubt original use of the material at his disposal, with the aim of establishing – *disserendi causa* – a powerful alliance of philosophical personalities (Pythagoras–Empedocles–Plato) that stands against the explicative claims illegitimately made both by those who are technically γραμματικοί and, once again, by those who are simply “idiots” / common people.

No matter how we regard these accounts and the doubts they may raise, it seems to me that they represent a reliable background against which one can now consider the structure and specific arguments of two passages from *Against the Musicians* which I intend to examine in most detail.

3

In order to understand better the specific objections that Sextus raises against Pythagoras, I must first make a few remarks concerning the musical aspects of ancient Pythagoreanism.

Against the backdrop of the dialectical relation between philosophy and musical theory, which is well documented and certainly represents an important chapter in classical culture, it is perhaps possible to identify the more specific contribution made by the Pythagoreans. According to the helpful division suggested by Zhmud, “three basic elements of that theory which the ancient tradition linked with Pythagoras continue to be associated with his name: (1) the mathematical treatment of music, (2) the doctrine of a musical ethos, or the psychagogic and educative effects of music, (3) the famous ‘harmony of the spheres’ generated by the movement of the heavenly bodies.”¹⁴ I shall leave aside the first and third of these elements, which nonetheless are well attested in sources regarding Pythagorean authors, or at any rate authors closely connected to Pythagoreanism (Archytas, Philolaus, Plato, Aristoxenus and even later Ptolemy, Porphyry, Aristides Quintilianus and so on). These sources bear witness both to the mathematical approach adopted by the Pythagoreans and to their strong interest in astronomy. The second aspect, which is the one which I would like to stress, is possibly a

¹⁴ Zhmud 2012, 286.

more conjectural one, since it posits some kind of “connection between Pythagoreanism and ideas of the ethos of music.”¹⁵ This is the ethical aspect of music, or rather its power to shape and substantially influence individual morals. In other words, I would here like to approach what Pythagoras himself – according to Iamblichus’ *Life of Pythagoras* (§ 111) – regarded from a strictly technical point of view as a form of κάθαρσις, a form of medical treatment based on music, as well as its power to eliminate negative passions, reshape moral attitude, and finally produce a good character or ἔθος.

In this respect, the evidence from Sextus’ *Against the Musicians* is particularly valuable, and appears to be part of a much wider doxographic tradition. We may begin with Sextus’ account of Pythagoras (M 6, 7):

(7) First in order, let us begin with the things customarily babbled about music by the many. Now if, they say, we accept philosophy since it gives temperance to human life and restrains the passions of the soul, by much more do we accept music because it commands us not too violently but, with a certain enchanting persuasiveness, prevails over the same effects as does philosophy.¹⁶

The first point worth noting has to do with terminology. Sextus wishes to set out from what ordinary people usually say about music, without any real grasp of the subject, in an idle manner, babbling on without any persuasiveness. This is certainly the meaning that is always conveyed in Sextus’ prose by the verb θρυλεῖσθαι. Sextus also uses it in several other passages in order to discredit some of the Stoics’ doctrines.¹⁷

The second step of Sextus’ polemical strategy consists in comparing philosophy and music, with the aim of formulating the same positive value judgement with regard to both, yet in such a way as to establish a clear hierarchy. According to the “many” whose ideas are here presented, we should certainly welcome philosophy, on account of its capacity to restrain the passions of the soul and to nourish temperance over the course of a person’s life.¹⁸ According to the same πολλοί, however, primacy in the ethical sphere is nonetheless to be assigned to music.¹⁹ Music accomplishes the same goal as philosophy, namely to calm and purify, and does so by lending order without violence (the expression οὐ βιαστικώτερον ἐπιτάττουσα we find here is a unique formula in Sextus). Music possesses a per-

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Translations of the passages in M 6 are from Davidson Greaves 1986.

¹⁷ See, for instance, M 11, 109, 133 and 191 (other references in Janáček 2000, 77); accordingly, in our passage too are the Stoics the implicit target of Sextus’ polemic?

¹⁸ The verb σωφρονίζω used here occurs only in M 6, 10, 23 and 28; it seems to be a technical term applied to music, like others we will soon be examining.

¹⁹ See also Quint. *Inst. or.* I 10, 31; Plut. *De virt. mor.* 3, 441D–E; and some passages in Aristides Quintilianus’ *De musica* (2.3, 5 and 6).

suasive power marked by gracefulness or even charm (as confirmed by the use of the verb *θέλω*, another hapax in Sextus).

At this point, Sextus brings Pythagoras into the picture, as the primary exemplar of this attitude (or as ἀρχηγός, a “pioneer” again, not of any physical doctrine but of a moral standpoint).²⁰ Pythagoras is featured as the protagonist of an anecdote worth relating in full:

(8) Thus Pythagoras, when he once observed how youths who had been filled with Bacchic frenzy by alcoholic drink differed not at all from madmen, exhorted the flute-player, who was joining them in the carousal, to play his *aulos* for them in the spondaic *melos*. When he thus did what was ordered, they suddenly changed and became as temperate as if they had been sober even at the beginning.

When faced with the wine-induced Bacchic frenzy and apparent madness of some youths (at a κῶμος, or Dionysiac procession), Pythagoras does not resort to sober and neatly structured philosophical theory, but adopts a more direct and practical solution: he prescribes a specific musical treatment for these youths. The moral remedy for this yielding to an irrational passion, then, is provided by music, which was already viewed as an effective antidote to drunkenness by Aristoxenus – if we are to trust pseudo-Plutarch’s *De musica* (43, 1146F = fr. 122 Wehrli). To be more precise, Pythagoras orders the execution of a solo flute performance according to a specific tune, the spondaic. This typically Doric mode is suitable for libations and solemn religious events, and is further characterized by slow tempos and a relaxed rhythm, which exerts a soothing effect.²¹

On this text, one point must first be made about the terminology used. It is packed with words found in Sextus only here.²² The concentration of such terms can only be accounted for on the basis of a close dependence on the source from which the anecdote is drawn. But what is this source? I do not think it is possible to provide a certain answer to this question, but we can at least attempt to reconstruct the presence of this anecdote about Pythagoras in a few other authors, and so set down some fixed points of reference for its circulation both in Greek and in Latin literature.

The text that provides the most detailed version of an episode similar to the one related in *M* 6, 8 is once again in Iamblichus (*Life of Pythagoras*, § 112). However, it seems to me that we ought to search elsewhere, and in particular not after Sextus but before him.

²⁰ See Martinelli 2012, 13–18.

²¹ See for example Dion. Hal. *Comp.* 17 and Arist. Quint., *De musica* 1, 15; on the moderate character of the Doric mode, see also Arist., *Pol.* VIII, 5 1340b3 and 7, 1342a28–b29 (useful comments in Brancacci 2013, 16–17).

²² We find: μέθη, ἐκβακχεύομαι, συνεπικωμάζω, σπονδεῖος, ἐπαυλῶ, αἰφνίδιον, and also other terms rare in Sextus, such as αὐλητής (used in *M* 7, 146, with reference to Speusippus and νήφω (only in *PH* 1, 100 and 109).

In this case we may consider ourselves lucky, perhaps, since a similar tale to that of Sextus is attested in a fragmentary passage of Philodemus’ *De musica* (col. 42, 39–45). This text is difficult to decipher, yet clear in its overall sense, if we accept the reconstruction proposed by Delattre.²³ Once again, let me quote the passage in full, in Delattre’s French translation:

Quant à Pythagore, [il réussit à obtenir un comportement] plus docile [de jeunes gens] qui étaient ivres, en invitant [une] joueuse d’aulos [à jouer] un air spondaïque [en vue de susciter en eux les affections contraires] <à celles que leur causait l’ivresse> ...

This passage from Philodemus seems far more complex than the one from Sextus, and clearly differs from it in certain respects (starting from the gender of the flute-player, here a female). What matters for our purposes is the fact that here too the passage known from Sextus is connected to an Epicurean source. In other words, we could suppose that – not least in order to attack the alleged moral usefulness of music, as defined by Pythagoras – Sextus drew upon Epicurean material, and specifically from Philodemus’ writing.²⁴ It is clear, however, that if this were so Sextus did not simply copy from Philodemus’ *De musica*.

However, the structure of Sextus’ text, the many unique terminological occurrences included in it, and its Bacchic overtones rather suggest a different scenario, namely the existence of a common source, followed more closely by Sextus. This impression is strengthened by a comparison with the Latin version of the same episode regarding Pythagoras. This is a short and sketchy passage by Quintilian, which in turn almost certainly depends on Cicero’s *De consiliis suis*.²⁵ After stressing the need to acquire “the knowledge of the principles of music, which have the power to excite or assuage the emotions of mankind,” Quintilian writes (*Inst. or.* I 10, 32):

(32) We are told that Pythagoras on one occasion, when some young men were led astray by their passions to commit an outrage on a respectable family, calmed them by ordering the piper to change her strain to a spondaic measure, ...

²³ This is his Greek text: Πυθαγόραν δὲ [.....] [εὐ]αγωγότερον [νεανίων ..] μεθυόντων καλέσαντα τινα αὐλητρίδαν [..... ἐπὶ τὸ τὰ]ναν[τία] πᾶ[θη] ἐμποιεῖν[.....]ους τὸ σπονδεῖον[.....] μέλος[.....] καὶ τοῦτον [.....] (for the translation see Delattre 2007b, 69).

²⁴ For the Epicurean “flavour” of some of Sextus’ attacks see Gigante 1981, 215–221; see also Rispoli 1991, 1992, 2000, and 2005; Blank 1998; Delattre 2006 and 2007b; Bett 2013. On the relationship between Sextus’ approach and other authors / groups interested in ancient musical doctrines (besides Philodemus, also Aristotle, Aristides Quintilianus, Plutarch, the tradition centred around Aristoxenus’ theories), see Davidson Greaves 1986, 24–35.

²⁵ Fr. 3 (in August., *Contra Iul.* 5, 23); it was later taken up by Boethius as well (*Inst. mus.* I 1), whose version seems however more similar to Iamblichus’ report (above, 312); for other, shorter occurrences of the same episode see Ammonius (*In Porph.* 13, 24–28) and Elias (*In Porph.* 31, 11–13).

Here too we find some discrepancies (the Bacchic context is perhaps only implicit and is explicitly replaced by a more general picture of a private or family quarrel). Nevertheless, the background is still provided by the ethical and medical-moral value attributed to the use of the spondaic rhythm. We may therefore apply the same considerations as in the comparison between Philodemus and Sextus: could the latter be regarded as being more faithful to the original source of the anecdote, which sought to emphasize the Dionysian framework of the whole episode and stress the ethical and religiously sanctioned value of the musical modes suited for sacred libations, namely spondaic tunes?

Despite the divergences, the evidence considered so far appears to agree in attributing this episode to Pythagoras, the legendary thinker – especially given the role assigned to music as an outstanding (and exceptionally effective) tool, capable of having positive therapeutic effects in the treatment of the passions of the soul, particularly negative and irrational ones. Unfortunately, however, things are not that simple. In a passage from Galen, a similar episode, and one very close to Philodemus' version (including its portrayal of the flute-player as a woman), associates the anecdote not with Pythagoras but with a figure connected to Pericles' circle and well known to Socrates and hence Plato: Damon of Athens.²⁶ Damon's allegiance to the Pythagorean school, though, is a conjecture that may well be unfounded.²⁷ Nonetheless, let us read this passage (37 A 8 DK):

Damon, a musician, was once present as a female flute-player was playing according to the Phrygian style and some youths, intoxicated by wine, were engaging in senseless behaviour. He then ordered her to play according to the Doric style, and they immediately ceased their immoderate agitation.

How are we to solve this quandary? Is it simply a matter of names getting mixed up? I do not see this as a reasonable solution. A different explanation has been suggested by Lasserre, who believes that the whole episode and anecdote was originally attributed to Damon and that only later – through a (possibly conscious) act of projection – Damon's name was replaced with the more famous and important one of Pythagoras.²⁸ This explanation could apply in the case of Sextus, who never mentions Damon and does not appear even to be aware of him. But how could this apply to Philodemus, who knows Damon well and even mentions his theories with regard to the moral value of music – for instance, music played with a cithara – as a way of fostering virtues (such as bravery, wisdom, and justice)?

Perhaps we ought to suspend our judgement with regard to these two conflicting attributions; perhaps, against the background of a Pythagorean doctrine that also focuses on the "psychagogical" effects of music, we might accept that both

²⁶ On Damon and his musical theories see e. g. Brancacci 2008, Chs. 1–2.

²⁷ See Wallace 1995, as well as Zhmud 2012, 118. On the sources for the alleged links between Damon and Pythagoreanism, see West 1992, 246–247.

²⁸ See Lasserre 1954, 62–63.

Pythagoras and Damon had identified certain musical rhythms (the specifically spondaic rhythm in the one case, and the more generally Doric rhythm in the other) as a means of bringing about subjective as well as objective moral improvements. Alternatively one could draw the opposite conclusion to Lasserre's, and assume that Damon followed in the footsteps of Pythagoras and picked up or extended some of his doctrines.

4

Moving away now from the quagmire of the various issues raised by M 6, 7–8, let us briefly examine the criticism which Sextus formulates against the position he attributes to Pythagoras. We must here turn to § 23 of *Against the Musicians*, where we read:

(23) And Pythagoras, in the first place, was foolish in wishing to give temperance at the wrong moment to those who were intoxicated instead of avoiding [intoxication]. In the second place, by correcting them in this manner, he concedes that the flute-players have more power than the philosophers with respect to the correction of ethos.

In order to refute the allegedly Pythagorean idea that music has a moral value, Sextus follows two approaches of different philosophical weight. The first consists in simply accusing Pythagoras of not having applied his musical treatment at the right moment (as suggested by the adverb ἀκαίρως, again a hapax in Sextus). But the accusation probably runs deeper than this. First of all, it is in line with a Pyrrhonian objection that had already been formulated not long before (M 6, 21–22). Richard Bett sums this objection up as follows: "even if a particular piece of music may temporarily calm someone, this is due to its distracting the listener, not altering his emotional state in any genuine or long-term way."²⁹ Aside from this, however, we may argue perhaps that Sextus' attack operates on a more broadly medical plane. Pythagoras has failed in his treatment because he has not been able to free the drunken youths from their senseless passion deep down, by truly drawing them away from the evil that has struck them and eradicating it completely (according to a holistic approach, we might say: for this is the strong meaning which on several occasions Sextus appears to assign the verb ἐκκλίνω).³⁰ Pythagoras has only extrinsically (or allopathically, if you like) countered moral suffering through its opposite: a soothing remedy capable of blocking the symptoms without destroying the disease of the soul at its root. In Sextus' eyes, therefore, Pythagoras appears to deserve a markedly disparaging adjective, one used by Sextus himself in his harshest and most radical criticism: Pythagoras has shown himself to be foolish / μάταιος.

²⁹ Bett 2013, 170–171.

³⁰ Other passages in Janáček 2000, 77.

In the latter part of the text, Sextus seems to adopt a different position in his criticism. He takes for granted that Pythagoras ought to see philosophy as superior to music, and so Sextus can implicitly recall the opposite hierarchy which he had established, in a preliminary and almost programmatic manner, in § 7. If playing the spondaic tone on a flute achieves better and more morally effective results than the use of philosophical theories, this boxes Pythagoras into a corner, for he must then admit that music is superior to philosophy. In the matter of correcting the moral inclinations of someone who is dangerously straying from the straight path, then we had better forget about professional philosophers and find some flute-players.

So this whole argument is aimed directly against Pythagoras.³¹ Faced with the need to establish a moral path capable of eradicating evil passions and of replacing them with a healthy moral disposition, we have no need at all of Pythagoras' philosophical doctrines or theoretical speculations, since – by Pythagoras' own admission – a slow, solemn piece of music, played in the appropriate rhythm and tone, will prove far more effective.

I wonder then, half seriously and half in jest: would it not be better to take books away from drunkards and those in the grip of other destructive passions, and immerse them instead in the warm atmosphere of a sweet and relaxing ballad of cool healthy jazz? Might Charlie Parker's *Laura* or the marvellous version of *My funny Valentine* played by Gerry Mulligan / Chet Baker's famous "pianoless quartet" not yield better results than many dull moral treatments?

All joking aside, this refutation by Sextus brings up many of the same issues of *Quellenforschung* as those raised by the previous passages. Is this text Sextus' own work? Or is he drawing upon some previous source (as seems more reasonable to suppose, given the way in which Sextus usually constructs his polemical texts)? In this connection too, the name of Philodemus has been invoked, on some good grounds, such as similarities between the two authors' underlying arguments,³² and especially some undeniable affinities in their choice of terms: take, for instance, the double occurrence of the verb *ἐπανορθοῦμαι* and the formula *ἐπανόρθωσις ῥηθῶν* (both used only here in Sextus), where the latter expression is also explicitly used in Philodemus' *De musica*.³³ Delattre has restated his view that Sextus must have drawn upon Philodemus' writing.³⁴ While his hypothesis remains a legitimate and even attractive one, I believe it is safer to argue – to quote Bett again – that, "the question whether Sextus is making direct use of Philodemus in this part of *Against the Musicians*, or simply drawing on material that Philodemus also consulted, is not likely to be answered in any definitive way."³⁵

31 And perhaps against Plato's *Republic*? Or even against a tradition that is represented later by Aristides Quintilianus' systematic treatment of musical theories (see Brancacci 2013, 28)?

32 In Philodemus' *De musica* see especially coll. 78; 130–131 e 142 Delattre.

33 See col. 144, 24 Delattre.

34 See Delattre 2006.

35 Bett 2013, 171.

Whatever the exact relation between the two authors, it cannot be presented in terms of a passive dependence of Sextus upon Epicurean material. If Sextus ever made use of this material, he knew how to reframe it, abridge it, and redeploy it in an original way.

All this may suffice to demonstrate that Sextus was no slave to his sources, and may help us ditch the annoying label of "stupid copyist" that is all too often applied to him.

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