

# *Music and the Idea of a World*

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“Music, too, is nature.”

Victor Zuckerkandl, *Sound and Symbol*

This lecture explores the differences between two perspectives on music: one ancient, one modern. The texts I have chosen are Plato's *Timaeus*, a dialogue that freshmen will read in seminar toward the end of the year, and Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*, a great book not on the program. Each of these works presents an all-embracing account of the world—a cosmology—that highlights the bond between world and music. I hope that my study in contrast will lead us to a deeper understanding of music as it relates to the whole of all things, our human condition and our happiness. I also hope that it will show why music is the most comprehensive of the liberal arts, and why it is the case that to speak about music is to speak about everything.

My talk has three parts. In the first, I focus on the central role that music plays in *Timaeus*' cosmological optimism. According to *Timaeus*, the world of Becoming is a beautiful work of art ruled by the supreme goodness of intelligent divinity. In Leibniz's phrase, it is the best of possible worlds. In the second part, I turn to Schopenhauer's cosmological pessimism, according to which the world is not the shining forth of intelligent purpose but the work of a blind urge that Schopenhauer calls the will. Music, for Schopenhauer, is the most potent and truthful of the arts because it is a “copy [*Abbild*]

of the will itself.” In the third part of my talk I offer, by way of a coda, some thoughts on music and world in the context of the Bible.

### Part One. Rootedness and Musicality

The *Timaeus* is Plato’s most overtly musical work. Music is prominent in other dialogues as well, notably in the *Republic* and *Laws*, and in the *Phaedo*, where Socrates calls philosophy “the greatest music” (61A); but it is so much a part of the form and substance of the *Timaeus* that the dialogue may be said to be all about music.

The projected drama of the *Timaeus* is a performance by three illustrious political men, whose task is to entertain Socrates with a feast of speech: Timaeus of Italy, Hermocrates of Sicily and Critias of Athens. A fourth was supposed to have joined them, but he is a no-show. The men who did show up form a trio of poet-rhetoricians, who have agreed to gratify Socrates’ desire to behold his best city, which he had described on the previous day, engaged in the words and deeds of war (19B-20C). The star of the show is officially Critias, who boasts about how he will harmonize the particulars of Socrates’ city in speech with those of an ancient unsung Athens. This Athens of old, Critias claims, really existed once upon a time and nobly fought against the insolent kings of Atlantis. But Timaeus upstages Critias with his long speech about the cosmos and proves the superior poet. How can one top a magnificent, richly detailed speech about the whole of all things—the cosmology that is the unmatched model for all cosmologies to come?

Early in the *Timaeus*, we hear about the importance of music in human communal life, as Critias recollects what his great-grandfather and namesake experienced when he was a young boy. This Critias joined other boys in a music contest in which they sang

poems recently composed by the lawgiver Solon (21B). The contest was part of the boys' initiation into their family tribe and took place during a festival in honor of Dionysus, the god of intoxication. It depicts the very moment in which impressionable youths are officially rooted in their tribe, and by extension their city. Through the act of singing, the opinions of Solon take root in these young souls and become authoritative. They become things not merely heard and obeyed but imbibed, incorporated and cherished. A similar ritual enrooting is at work, as we shall see, in the speech of Timaeus.

We know from the *Republic* that music, which for the Greeks includes poetry, is dangerous. Because music has the power to shape the soul for good or ill, to make it orderly or disorderly, an account of the best regime must include a critique of music as one of its prime components. At one point Socrates tells us why:

“So, Glaucon... isn't this why nurture in music is most sovereign?  
Because rhythm and concord most of all sink down into the inmost part  
of the soul and cling to her most vigorously, bringing gracefulness with  
them; and they make a man graceful if he's nurtured correctly, if not,  
then the opposite.” [3. 401D5-E1]<sup>1</sup>

The passage underscores the tremendous power of music and shows why music is crucial to moral-political education. It recalls the final book of Aristotle's *Politics*, which treats the musical education of those who are to be free human beings and good citizens.

Plato and Aristotle realize that we are on intimate terms with music. The intimacy verges on the supernatural, since music seems to be a kind of magic that causes the listener to be held and spellbound. Music, like Orpheus, enthralls. Aristotle observes at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* that sight is the privileged sense, the one that we hold most dear and that most reveals the differences of things. Musical hearing can lay claim to another kind of privilege. Music has an intense personal inwardness, an immediate

emotional effect and a power to form our character, opinions and way of life. In moving our affections it moves our whole being. This is the ground of the danger that music poses. In music there is no safe distance between perceiver and perceived, as there is in sight. There is also no refuge: we cannot turn away from music as we can from a thing seen, since music is not spatially bounded but sounds everywhere. Moreover, in listening to a piece of music, we are not free to survey its parts at will, as we can with an object that is seen, but must wait for a moment to sound.<sup>2</sup> The tones come when *they* want to. And yet, listening to music is more than mere passivity, for it affects us by virtue of its forms and structures. Listening, in other words, is an act, in which we not only feel but also perceive. This is the paradox that is music, which can overwhelm our reason and self-control but always through the order and precision of its tones and rhythms. To borrow terms made famous by Nietzsche, music could not be Dionysian if it were not thoroughly Apollinian, which it must be if it is to be an art at all.

As I mentioned earlier, Timaeus' speech—or, as he famously calls it, his “likely story” (29D)—is an effort to put the world of Becoming in the best possible light. It is a defence of Becoming in response to Socrates' indictment in the *Republic*. In that dialogue Socrates tells Glaucon that genuine education turns the soul away from Becoming or flux and toward the changeless realm of Being (7.518C). It leads the potential philosopher out of the cave of opinion and up into the sunlight of truth. The likely story takes us in the opposite direction—from Being down to Becoming. It tells us how a craftsman-god, who is without envy and very ingenious, and who gazed on archetypal Being, brought order to the primordial chaos through a combination of providence and the beautiful structures of mathematics. Timaeus calls his speech both a *mythos* or story and a *logos* or account.

Socrates calls it a *nomos*, which in Greek means law and song, as well as custom and convention (29D). The word implies that Timaeus' cosmology is a form of quasi-political music. This music establishes our right relation to the cosmic whole whose offspring we are. It makes us law-abiding citizens of the world—good cosmopolitans. By playfully re-enacting the birth of the cosmos, Timaeus is attempting to persuade his listeners, Socrates in particular, that the world of body and flux, properly understood, is worthy of our serious attention, emulation and praise. All the mathematical constructions and stories are songs that commemorate the Great Founding. By “singing” these songs of law and order, we celebrate our cosmic roots. Moreover, since the world for Timaeus is a god (34B), physics comes on the scene as the truest act of piety.

Musical references abound in the likely story. The primordial chaos is said to be unmusical or out of tune (30A), and the movement of the stars resembles a choric dance (40C). The elusive receptacle or matrix—the cosmic “mother” who shakes the four elemental bodies into their proper places when they wander, like wayward children—gives the world a rhythmic sway (52C-53A). The sway is evident in all cyclic movement: our heartbeat, breathing and walking, in the vibrating string and pendulum, swings and cradles, and the undulating surface of the sea. The construction of the regular geometric solids is also music. Here Timaeus ingeniously harmonizes these beautiful sphere-like shapes—tetrahedron, octahedron, icosahedron and cube—with the observable properties and behaviour of the four elements: fire, air, water and earth (53D-E).

The greatest musical moment in the story is the construction of the musical scale out of ratios of whole numbers (35A-36B). It is based on the Pythagorean discovery that the intervals that make up melody—octave, perfect fifth, perfect fourth, etc.—are

produced by string-lengths that are in small whole number ratios. Much can be said about the god's act of scale building, especially in light of the problem it solves, namely, the natural incompatibility of some intervals with others. Here I must rest content with a brief summary. Timaeus' god builds the world soul out of musical ratios, having first mixed together forms of Being, Same and Other. He then cuts and bends the scale-strip to form the rotation of the celestial sphere and the orbits of the planets (36B). These periodic movements, which constitute time, are not only the music in the sky but also the reflections of divine thought, whose image we carry around in our sphere-shaped heads.

For Timaeus, musicality is the sum of human virtue and the ground of happiness. By musicality I mean the adjustment of all our actions to the regular, periodic movements of the heavens. To be virtuous and happy is to conform to the cosmic law and to move in sync with the music of the whole. It is to live a life that is in every respect well timed, symmetrical and balanced—the life of a star. We achieve balance when, for example, in devoting ourselves to study, we also make sure we get enough rest and physical exercise (88A). The most essential human musicality comes from astronomy. This is not because the beauty of the whole is most apparent in the visible heavens, but because the heavens are the home of thought in its healthiest, most regular form. To think the heavenly motions, to discern the ratios in the sky, is to be one with that condition of intellectual health and consummate musicality enjoyed perpetually by the world soul.

I have said that the likely story is a song that celebrates our cosmic roots. But it is also the story of a fall. In the book of Genesis, there is creation and fall; in the *Timaeus* creation *is* fall. As I noted earlier, world building starts at the top and goes down—just like a Greek musical scale. It goes from Being to Becoming and from the best things in

the world to the worst. The lower, subhuman animals are generated by intellectual devolution. This is the process in which human beings lose their divine intelligence by having lived an acosmic, disorderly life and must re-enter Becoming in an animal form suited to their moral and intellectual degradation. The likely story begins with the heavens and ends with shellfish, creatures that contain the souls of humans who in their previous lives exhibited what Timaeus calls a “total lack of musicality” (92B).<sup>3</sup> But even these lowest beings enhance the beauty of the whole, since without them the cosmic scale of life would lack its lowest notes and be incomplete.

According to Timaeus, our souls originated as pure intellects, each living in its own star. In being born, we become profoundly disordered. We leave off being star-lords and become mindless, inarticulate babies, beings incapable of controlling any of their movements. That is why education is necessary—because, as fallen stars, we must recover “the form of [our] first and best condition” (42D). Mathematical astronomy is the most important part of education because it is the means by which we humans, whom Timaeus calls heavenly plants, return to our roots in the sky (90A). It is also the highest form of therapy. By engaging in astronomy, the human intellect, which grew ill at birth, comes to itself and recovers its circular movement, former health and proper functioning as the guide and navigator of daily life. We study astronomy so that by “imitating the utterly unwandering circuits of the god [Cosmos], we might stabilize the wander-stricken circuits in ourselves” (47C). Music that is heard and felt plays a similarly therapeutic role. The gods gave us music “not for the purpose of irrational pleasure...but as an ally to the circuit of the soul within us when it’s become untuned, for the purpose of bringing the soul into arrangement and concord with herself” (47D-E).

On this note of music as therapy, I conclude the first part of my talk. I now turn to a very different account of music and world.

## Part Two. From Divine Circles to the Wheel of Ixion: Music in a World of Woe

The first and main volume of *The World as Will and Representation* is divided into four books.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Mann, the greatest admirer of Schopenhauer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, called it “a symphony in four movements.”<sup>5</sup> Mann, himself a cosmological pessimist, was keenly sensitive to the role that music plays in the work. In his essay on the philosopher, he observes that Schopenhauer, who was very musical, “celebrates music as no thinker has ever done” by making music metaphysically significant. Mann proceeds to speculate: “Schopenhauer did not love music because he ascribed such a metaphysical significance to her, but rather because he loved her.” For Mann, will rather than intellect is the source of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics of music, where will signifies everything in us born of passion and feeling. The supremacy of will over intellect is the most important respect in which the world of Schopenhauer differs from the world of Timaeus.

As its title indicates, *The World as Will and Representation* depicts the world as having two distinct sides or aspects. One side, representation, is the topic of Book One. As representation or *Vorstellung*, the world is everything that is *vorgestellt*, “placed before” us and made present in the daylight of consciousness. Although a more accurate rendering of the word would be “presentation,” which suggests original coming-to-presence as opposed to derivative imitation, I have chosen to keep the traditional term. Representation is the realm of perceived objects—finite determinate *things* and all their properties, which appear in space and time and interact according to the principle of

sufficient reason, that is, through the relation of cause and effect. Representation is the world as a well-ordered surface. It is what most of us would call the world simply.

Schopenhauer turns to the other, inner aspect of the world in Book Two. He uses terms from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*: whereas representation is the world as appearance or *phenomenon*, will is the world as thing-in-itself or *noumenon*. Will, here, is not a psychic faculty. It is not my will or your will, or God's will, since for Schopenhauer there is no God. Will is the universal force and infinite striving that underlies all things and rises to self-awareness in man. Schopenhauer calls the will "eternal becoming, endless flux" (164). As the world's "innermost being" and "kernel" (30-31), will is the source of meaning (98-99).<sup>6</sup> Will reminds us that life is more than the cool perception of objects: it is also feeling and care. Objects of representation are vessels of my care. They are meaningful, important to me in all sorts of ways. This object I desire and strive to possess, that one I avoid. This event I hope for, that one I dread. This human being I love, that one I despise. My body is the embodiment of my care. It is the seemingly concrete reality to which I am intimately joined and which I care about in a thousand ways. My living body reminds me that I am constantly in the condition of seeking to preserve my life and to stave off harm, pain, frustration and death. My being and my life consist in striving to be and to live. I cannot escape striving, not even when I sleep, for it is more obvious in dreams even than in waking life that representations matter to me and are the creatures of my care. Dreams *are* my hopes, fears, anxieties and desires made into a private movie, often a surreal one. Most of us would say that as a human being with a certain nature I am subject to this care. Schopenhauer is far more radical: for him, I am this care, this infinite striving to be and to live as *this* individual with *this* body.

Dreams are to desire what the whole phenomenal realm is to the noumenal will. Schopenhauer reminds us repeatedly that what we call life is a dream. The will is not the cause of the world, since causality operates only within the dream world of phenomena or appearances. There is no intelligible principle or intelligent god (as there is for Timaeus) that is responsible for the natural order. Nature is unaccountably there, just as human beings are unaccountably there, “thrown” into existence. The will does not cause nature but rather objectifies itself as nature—just as our care objectifies itself in dreams. Hence the phrase, “the world *as* will and representation.” The self-objectification of the will is the basis of Schopenhauer’s cosmology. The will objectifies itself in a fourfold way: as inorganic nature, plant life, animal life and human life. Schopenhauer constructs an ingenious isomorphism or analogy between these four grades of nature and the tones that make up the major triad with its octave (153). The work of the will is especially noteworthy in the case of our bodily parts, which are so many ways in which the will objectifies itself: “Teeth, gullet, and intestinal canal are objectified hunger; the genitals are objectified sexual impulse; grasping hands and nimble feet correspond to the more indirect strivings of the will which they represent” (108). This striking rendition of the human body is a modern counterpart to Timaeus’ outrageous stories about our bodily parts, which are mythically represented as manifesting, and ministering to, our souls. But whereas Timaeus is tongue-in-cheek, Schopenhauer is in deadly earnest.

The identity of will and meaning shows why music is metaphysically significant. As Schopenhauer writes in another work, music, especially melody, “speaks not of things but simply of weal and woe as being for the *will* the sole realities.”<sup>7</sup> From the standpoint of the will, being is meaning. Music is unique among the arts because it depicts the inner

world of care—*pure meaning* apart from all objectivity. It represents not the rational world soul but the passionate world heart.<sup>8</sup> Music, moreover, is not an elitist Pythagorean who speaks only to her learned inner circle but rather the “universal language” that is “instantly understood by everyone,” intuitively and without the aid of concepts (256).

In my account of the *Timaeus* I highlighted the therapeutic function of astronomy and music, both of which minister to fallen man. They are a corrective to the cosmic necessity of our having been born as mortal beings subject to mortal flux and mindless desire (42A ff.). Being born, for Timaeus, is in one sense a gift—the gift of organic life. But it is also, for the reasons I mentioned, our burden and our fate. Being born is a mixed blessing. For Schopenhauer it is an outright curse. To be born is to become an egocentric individual afflicted with insatiable desire, in particular sexual desire. To be is to be subject to “the miserable pressure of the will” (196). The will, as I noted earlier, is infinite striving—striving with no ultimate good or end. Moments of contentment and joy appear, but only as passing tones, ripples in a sea of frustration, ennui and renewed desire. To live is to suffer. Schopenhauer here reveals the hard edge of his pessimism and his “tragic sense of life.”<sup>9</sup> He cites approvingly poets like Calderon who define original sin as “the guilt of existence itself,” and who affirm that it would be better never to have been born.<sup>10</sup>

Schopenhauer’s recurring image of life as suffering is the wheel of Ixion. Ixion was King of the Lapiths. After being shown hospitality by Zeus, he lusted after Hera and tried to seduce her. For this attempted outrage Zeus bound Ixion on a wheel of fire and consigned him to Tartarus. Only once did the wheel of torment stop—when Orpheus descended to the Underworld and charmed its inhabitants with his song.<sup>11</sup> This, for

Schopenhauer, is the human therapy that all fine art offers, in particular the art of music. Music represents the will as thing-in-itself, meaning apart from all things and pictures, and is for this reason metaphysically significant. But music also gives us momentary relief from the fiery wheel on which we are bound, the wheel of infinite longing. In music, as in all aesthetic contemplation, we are no longer self-interested individuals but “pure, will-less subject[s] of knowing,” subjects who are “lost in the object” (209). In art, as Schopenhauer puts it, “We celebrate the Sabbath of the penal servitude of willing; the wheel of Ixion stands still” (196).

The third part of Schopenhauer’s book is devoted to the arts, which are beyond the principle of sufficient reason. This is evident in music, where tones, though tightly connected, have no causal relation to each other. The opening phrase of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, for example, does not cause the second.<sup>12</sup> Unconcerned with causality and deduction, art is the intuitive apprehension of the Ideas, which Schopenhauer takes from Plato, for the most part from the *Timaeus*. The Ideas are the eternal archetypes of nature—the four grades of the will’s self-objectification that I mentioned earlier.<sup>13</sup> In the human realm they are the universals of experience. Shakespeare’s plays, for example, are a distillation of what is eternally true of human life. In the complex ambition of Macbeth, jealousy of Othello and tragic integrity of Cordelia, we behold archetypes of will at its highest grade.<sup>14</sup> Art is therapeutic because, as the aesthetic contemplation of universal Ideas, art detaches us from the particular objects of our care. That is why we take pleasure in even the saddest music, which calls upon us not to weep but to listen.

Art, however, is not an enduring release from Ixion’s wheel and offers only “occasional consolation” (267). The fourth part of Schopenhauer’s book takes us from

artist to saint, who alone is truly happy—if one can call resignation happiness. The saint has neutralized the will to be and to live through the knowledge that objects of care are nothing but illusion (451). He needs no artworks. This neutralization of the will makes the saint good. In the obliteration of his ego, he is released from his private sufferings and free to take compassion on the suffering of other human beings and even on that of animals (372).

I now turn to Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music, which appears in Volume One of his book and again in Volume Two. These chapters contain the most fascinating discussions of music one will ever read. They are an attempt to identify music as a source of truth, indeed the deepest truth: "The composer reveals the profoundest wisdom in a language that his reasoning faculty does not understand, just as a magnetic somnambulist gives information about things of which she has no conception when she is awake" (260). Schopenhauer illustrates his general ideas with many references to specific musical phenomena. I shall address only a few of them.

I begin with music as imitation. According to Plato and Aristotle, music, in its tones and rhythms, imitates the dispositions and passions of the soul. As Aristotle observes in the *Politics*, melodies and rhythms are "likenesses of the true natures of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and moderation and all the opposites of these and the other states of character" (8.5).<sup>15</sup> Aristotle is referring to the Greek musical modes—Dorian, Phrygian, Mixolydian, etc., which achieve their different effects through a different placement of half steps in their scales. The Dorian mode, Aristotle says, gives the soul "a moderate and settled condition," whereas the Phrygian "inspires." A difference in mode can be heard in our familiar opposition of "bright" major and "dark"

minor. This huge musical difference hinges on no more than whether there is a whole step or a half between the second and third degrees of the scale. It is gratifying to hear Schopenhauer, a philosopher, respond to this fact with fitting amazement (261).

What Timaeus and Schopenhauer add to the imitative relation between music and soul is the connection between music and world. We are responsive to music because the so-called external world has an interior, as do we, and is always already music-imbued. For Timaeus, music in the form of the diatonic pattern—the recurring order of whole and half steps—is woven into the fabric of the cosmic soul, of which our souls partake. That is why we respond to the diatonic modes. We look with longing at the stars because that is where our souls come from, and we take delight in identifying Same and Other in the things of the world because our souls are made of Same and Other. So too, we welcome music into our souls because we detect in it the inflections of our psychic modalities—our various soul possibilities. Where there is music and listener, music calls to music. It is a case of sympathetic vibration grounded in the nature of the ensouled cosmos.

Schopenhauer differs from Timaeus in his understanding of interiority. He rejects the soul as a principle of being on the grounds that it makes real what is in fact illusory, namely, our individuality.<sup>16</sup> The principle of individuation in general, like the principle of sufficient reason, applies only to the world of phenomena, which Schopenhauer regularly calls the “veil of Maya” or illusion. In listening to music, we suspend our individuality and are in touch with will as process rather than with a stable mode of soul and character.

From a musical standpoint, Schopenhauer differs from Timaeus by going beyond the Pythagorean idea of interval as sensed ratio and treats music as the embodiment of tension or force. This modern concept of force, also known as *conatus* or endeavour, is

prominent in the physics of Newton and Leibniz and was introduced into natural science by Hobbes, who, like Schopenhauer, rejects a highest good and depicts desire as an infinite striving “that ceaseth only in death.”<sup>17</sup> Dissonance in music is a kind of tension or force. As the vector-like impulse to move in a definite direction, it is the analogue of desire.<sup>18</sup> The suspension is a good example of how dissonance works in music. In a suspension, two lines or voices start out in consonance but then produce dissonance when one of the voices moves while the other holds its note. A resolution of the dissonance then follows. Schopenhauer writes: “[Suspension] is a dissonance delaying the final consonance that is with certainty awaited; in this way the longing for it is strengthened, and its appearance affords greater satisfaction. This is clearly an analogue of the satisfaction of the will which is enhanced through delay.”<sup>19</sup>

The word “analogue” is important here. The suspension is not the image or likeness of a specific desire that is eventually gratified but rather a tonal event that communicates, in a purely musical way, a universal truth about the will. When Schopenhauer says that music is the universal language, he is not being poetic. He means that although tones are not words, they function intuitively in the same way that words function conceptually—not as likenesses of the things they signify but as symbols, bearers of universal meaning. In the case of music, this meaning is perceived and felt rather than inferred. Listening to music is non-verbal symbol-recognition.

Music as force flourishes in the tradition of modern tonal harmony. This long and glorious tradition reaches from Bach and Handel, through Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven, up to Brahms and Wagner, and continues in our own century. Tonal music, as opposed to the mode-inspired music of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, exhibits the directed

tension I mentioned earlier. There is a play of forces—tonal dynamism. Needless to say, such music is friendly to the language of will, for will is tension, and force is will that has not yet attained self-consciousness. The musicologist Heinrich Schenker applied this very term to music: *Tonwille*, the will of the tones. In tonal harmony tension is not confined to isolated events, like the suspension, but pervades the whole of a musical piece and constitutes its unity. The term “tonal” refers to the rule of a single tone, the tonic or keynote, to which all the other tones in a tonal work point or, as some theorists prefer to say, the centrality of the tonic triad, the I-chord. These tensions—Victor Zuckerkandl calls them *dynamic qualities*—compose the major scale and cause it to sound like a journey with clearly defined stages and a predetermined end: 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8.<sup>20</sup> Tension is especially urgent in degree 7, which strives toward 8, as desire craves its satisfaction. Degree 4 tends, less urgently, down to 3. Together, degrees 4 and 7 produce the dissonant interval of the tritone. This is the best example of directed tension in music, since the tritone, when combined with degree 5 in the bass, makes up the dominant seventh chord, which points to the tonic triad and so fixes the music in a key. Thanks to their dynamic relations, which operate at many levels, tones and the triads they form generate musical wholes through the artful prolongation and eventual resolution of their will-like tension.

I cannot leave the topic of musical tension, and of tone as the symbol of desire, without citing Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*. In this work we hear extreme chromaticism, constant unresolved cadences and the deceptive shifting of tonal centers. These phenomena form the tonal analogue of eros as infinite longing. As others have noted, the work pushes tonal harmony and musical tension to the absolute limit by extending the striving of tones over the course of several hours. The historical connection between

Wagner's musical drama and Schopenhauer's book, although fascinating, is beyond the scope of this lecture. Here I simply observe that the opening phrase of the Prelude, with its famous "Tristan chord" resolving to a dominant-seventh chord, is perhaps the most powerful evocation of tension-as-desire in all of music. Wagner's phrase sets up a cadence that is not completed until the very end of the work, when the crashing waves of the orchestra overwhelm the transfigured Isolde before settling into the blissful, post-climactic froth of B major. In Schopenhauer's terms, this immense prolongation of musical tension is the noumenal interior of the lovers' prolonged phenomenal eroticism. More cautiously stated, it is the analogical, symbolic representation of that interior. The universal, undying truth of the story is not in the death-bound characters but in the tones.

The central teaching of Schopenhauer's metaphysics of music is that music is "a copy [*Abbild*] of the will itself," not of the Ideas of the will, as in tragedy (257). To be sure, all the arts objectify the will, but the non-musical arts do so "only indirectly." They present universality through the medium of *things*, whether the Parthenon or the complex individuality of Cordelia. Music, by contrast, makes no such appeal and represents, imitates, the world's pure subjectivity. It does so through tones all by themselves.

We must bear in mind when reading Schopenhauer that by music he means "the sacred, mysterious, profound language of tones."<sup>21</sup> This signals the primacy of what Wagner called "absolute music" and we now call instrumental music.<sup>22</sup> Music as the language of tones, captures, for Schopenhauer, the Absolute through non-visual representations. It is the will "speaking to us" through the medium of composers, who are the will's symbolists, somnambulists and high priests.<sup>23</sup> Because tones are meaningful all by themselves, Schopenhauer can make the astonishing claim that music, in passing over

the Ideas and everything phenomenal, “to a certain extent, could still exist even if there were no world at all” (257). The reason is that music, in negating the world as thing, contains that world from the perspective of its deepest interior, its immortal heart. Schopenhauer states this with maximum concision in the other work to which I referred earlier: “Music is the melody to which the world is the text.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, tones all by themselves represent the indwelling, immortal spirit of the world. If we imagined the phenomenal world as a staged opera or a movie, then the orchestral parts and score would stand to it as inner to outer, essence to appearance, truth to seeming. As I observed in the case of Wagner’s *Tristan*, the real drama, the world in its truth, would be taking place not in what we see but in what we hear. It would be a drama of tones.

But although music transcends the world as thing, it also has a profound connection with that world—again, by analogy. Schopenhauer is fascinated by this analogism and speaks like an Archimedes who has just made remarkable discoveries and cries “Eureka! I have found it!” As I mentioned earlier, the major triad with its octave captures in symbolic form the four natural grades of the will’s self-objectification and is a mirror of the Whole. The ground bass mirrors inorganic nature. Each note of this bass functions as the fundamental to the overtones that faintly sound above it (258). This mirrors what happens in nature as a whole, where higher grades of being develop out of the lowest, and where organic nature constantly depends on the inorganic, as the upper partials depend on their fundamental. The tones between the bass notes and the melody that floats above are the musical analogue of plant and animal. These tones form the harmonic organism that binds lower bass and higher melody. They mirror the way that plant and animal life mediate between the inorganic realm and our higher, human nature.

This analogy exists within the scale itself, where the hierarchy of tones mirrors “the whole gradation of the Ideas in which the will objectifies itself” (258). To hear an ascending scale is, in a sense, to hear the entire cosmos. Even the inevitable impurity of intervals that exists in all tuning or temperament is an analogue of phenomenal nature. An interval that is slightly “off,” say an equal-tempered major third, mirrors natural idiosyncrasy —“the departure of the individual from the type of the species” (258-9). The incompatibility of some intervals with others, the very problem that makes temperament necessary, is also an aspect of the will: it is the musical analogue of the will’s “inner contradiction,” which is the whole concern of tragedy (266). Even death finds its way into the world of tones. Death occurs, says Schopenhauer, in modulation, where a change of key “entirely abolishes the connection with what went before” (261).

Finally, there is melody as the musical analogue of phenomenal man: “in the *melody*, in the high singing, principal voice, leading the whole and progressing with unrestrained freedom, in the uninterrupted significant connexion of *one* thought from beginning to end, and expressing a whole, I recognize the highest grade of the will’s objectification, the intellectual life and endeavour of man” (259). Melody, the ultimate *mythos* and symbol of human life, “relates the story of the intellectually enlightened will, the copy or impression whereof in actual life is the series of its deeds.” But melody, for Schopenhauer, “says more” because it goes beyond outward deeds and events. It also “relates *the most secret history* [my emphasis] of the intellectually enlightened will, portrays every agitation, every effort, every movement of the will, everything which the faculty of reason summarizes under the wide and negative concept of feeling, and which cannot be further taken up into the abstractions of reason” (259).

To sum up, there is nothing in the natural world, or in the inner and outer life of man, that does not find its counterpart in the all-embracing realm of tones. Music as symbol is the whole of all things. It is the world. That is why, as Schopenhauer says, “we could just as well call the world embodied music as embodied will” (262-3).

#### Coda. Another World of Longing

I end my musical-cosmological reflection with a piece of music that depicts the world as a certain kind of music, polyphony. It is Palestrina’s motet, *Sicut cervus*. Beloved by St. John’s students, the piece is a musical setting of the opening of Psalm 42 in the Vulgate: *Sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum, ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus* (“As the hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God”). The motet is a good example of what Nietzsche called Palestrina’s “ineffably sublime sacred music.”<sup>25</sup>

Every musical composition is both a world unto itself and an image of *the* world. This is the central proposition of my lecture. The world of *Sicut cervus* is that of the Bible and the biblical God. Creation, here, is good. It produces beings, not images of intelligible originals or illusory phantasms. The world is not confined to head and heart, to our subjectivity, but is “out there” and solidly real. The God of the Bible is not a craftsman who leaves the world after having made it, or an indifferent prime mover, but the God of promise and history—the God who makes covenants with his people. He is someone to whom one can pray. Salvation comes not from dialectic, or astronomy, or art, or the death of care based on the gnosis of cosmic nothingness, but from faith in God.

Although the words of the motet express longing, the tones do not represent longing as stress and strain. The music is a continually graceful gesture that transmutes

the pain of longing into a serene order of voices—voices that seem always to know their place. *Sicut cervus* is composed in two senses of the word: it is well constructed, and it has an unperturbed disposition. During the piece, motion goes on and time passes, but the overall “feel” seems beyond time and change, like a musical emanation of the *nunc stans* or eternal Now. It is as if grace were already present, and the singers were experiencing, in the very midst of their yearning, prospective joy in the object for which they yearn. Aquinas cites three criteria of beauty: wholeness, consonance and radiance or *claritas*.<sup>26</sup> *Sicut cervus* has these in abundance, especially radiance. The music seems to be suffused with warm light. It is full of feeling but also sounds intelligent, lucid and self-possessed. The movement is a continuous flow, in imitation of the waters for which the hart thirsts. The tones move, it seems, not because they have to but because they want to, not out of compulsion but out of freedom. The sound is a spontaneous unfolding, as if the four vocal parts are miraculously improvising their lines as they go along, only gradually discovering the perfectly coordinated whole they are in the process of forming. Dissonances occur to enhance consonance and beget motion, but they are not prominent, and the piece as a whole could not be described as a play of forces. *Sicut cervus* is music without will.

This brings me to the most important respect in which Palestrina’s motet is the image of a world. *Sicut cervus* is polyphony that lacks (because it does not need) the tonal-harmonic principles at work in the polyphony of Bach. Vertical relations are for the most part the result of simultaneous horizontal relations. The four voices that compose the piece enter one at a time in points of imitation. The voice that follows seems to be inspired to enter by the one that leads. The parts move in obedience to the rules of good

voice leading but do more than exhibit formal correctness. They seem to delight in each other's company and to be naturally social. At times, they even graciously step aside for each other, as if rejoicing in the being and individuality of other lines. *Sicut cervus*, in its non-urgent flow, is a musical community that captures the sound of friendship. And just as friends engage in all sorts of play, the vocal lines play off one another, often exhibiting contrary motion—simultaneous movement in opposite directions. Thanks to this friendly contrariety, which keeps the parts audibly distinct, the voices celebrate, contrary to what Schopenhauer asserts, the *reality* and *truth* of the principle of individuation, as they conspire to form a perfect, natural sounding republic of tones. The voices of *Sicut cervus*, in this respect, may be said to enact the contrapuntal play that we find among souls in Dante's *Paradiso*.

With this non-tragic image of the world, my study in contrast, with its Biblical coda, reaches its end. These two great books, Plato's *Timaeus* and Schopenhauer's *World as Will and Representation*, differ greatly in how they view being, becoming and the human condition. But they also go together because, more than other great discussions of music with which I am familiar, they invite us to consider that music is more important than even music lovers might think—that music is, to quote Mann, metaphysically significant and captures the whole of all things, not in concept but in image and feeling. Are the cosmologies of *Timaeus* and Schopenhauer, separately or together, an adequate account of music? I think they are not. There are limits to the hyper-rational Pythagorean approach to music, just as there are limits to Schopenhauer's Romantic conception of music as representing feeling and irrational will. Both accounts are nevertheless inspired efforts that hit upon certain undeniable truths.

My closing note is inspired by the philosopher Schopenhauer's personal love of music, which I share. Music, even the saddest music in the world—music that is worlds apart from *Sicut cervus* and may even be the sound of despair and crushing grief—is dear to us and makes us happy, if only for a while. Maybe this is because music, as a living presence that comes to us, offers itself to us, assures us that we are not alone: that there is something out there *in the world* that knows our hearts and may even teach us to know them better. Thanks to music, we experience what it means to be connected to the whole of all things, even when that whole seems tragic; what it means to have a soul and not just a mind; to have depth, and not mere rightness, of feeling and being; and, above all, what it means to be open to ourselves and our world through listening.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I have slightly modified the translation by Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, Basic Books, 1991.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the difference between seeing and hearing, see Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966: “For the sensation of hearing to come about the percipient is entirely dependent on something happening outside his control, and in hearing he is exposed to the happening...he cannot let his ears wander, as his eyes do, over a field of possible percepts, already present as a material for his attention, and focus them on the object chosen, but he has simply to wait for a sound to strike them: he has no choice in the matter” (p. 139).

<sup>3</sup> Translations of the *Timaeus* are from my edition for Focus Press, Newburyport MA, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The second volume consists of supplements to the four books in Vol. 1.

<sup>5</sup> “Schopenhauer,” *Thomas Mann: Essays*, tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter, New York: Random House, 1957.

<sup>6</sup> Numbers in parentheses refer to page numbers in the edition by E. F. J. Payne, New York: Dover, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 2, tr. E. F. J. Payne, Oxford: Clarendon, 1974, p. 430.

<sup>8</sup> “The heart, that *primum mobile* of animal life, has quite rightly been chosen as the symbol, indeed the synonym, of the *will*...” (Vol. 2, p. 237). The atheist Schopenhauer says at one point: “...like God, [music] sees only the heart” (Vol. 2, p. 449).

<sup>9</sup> The title of Miguel de Unamuno’s book.

<sup>10</sup> Schopenhauer quotes from Calderón’s *Life Is a Dream*: “For man’s greatest offence is that he has been born” (Vol. 1, 254). This is “the guilt of existence itself”—original sin. Death is, in effect, the correction of an error. Schopenhauer would say to the dying individual: “You are ceasing to be something which you would have done better never to become” (Vol. 2, p. 501).

<sup>11</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 10, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Schopenhauer makes this point in *The Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason*: “In just the same way, the succession of sounds in a piece of music is determined objectively, not subjectively by me the listener; but who will say that the musical notes follow one another according to the law of cause and effect?” (p. 127, tr. E. F. J. Payne, La Salle: Open Court, 1974)

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note how the Ideas for Schopenhauer differ from how Plato describes them. For Schopenhauer, the Ideas cannot be genuine beings, for that would undermine the ultimacy of the irrational will. They are simply eternal modes or ways in which the will objectifies itself. The Ideas are more like adverbs than nouns.

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<sup>14</sup> These archetypes recall Vico's "imaginative universals." See *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, tr. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Cornell NY: Cornell University Press, 1988. See Paragraphs 381 and 460.

<sup>15</sup> Translations of Aristotle's *Politics* are from the edition by Joe Sachs for Focus Press, Newburyport MA, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> "...soul signifies an individual unity of consciousness which obviously does not belong to that inner being ... The word should never be applied except in a metaphorical sense" (Vol. 2, p. 349).

<sup>17</sup> *Leviathan* XI.1.

<sup>18</sup> "Hitherto, the concept of will has been subsumed under the concept of force; I, on the other hand, do exactly the reverse, and intend every force in nature to be conceived as will" (Vol. 1, p. 111).

<sup>19</sup> Vol. 2, 455-6. An even better instance of the connection between dissonance and will is the *appoggiatura* or leaning tone. This unprepared dissonance on a strong beat delays a tone of the melody and intensifies expectation. It is the perfect musical imitation of longing. A fitting example occurs in Tamino's love song in the *Magic Flute*. Tamino gazes on a picture of Pamina and falls in love with her. By singing in response to a picture, he moves from the world as representation to the world as will. His repeated leaning tones on the words "I feel it," "ich fühle es," embody the universal truth of erotic love.

<sup>20</sup> *The Sense of Music*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, pp. 18-28.

<sup>21</sup> *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Payne, Vol. 2, p. 432.

<sup>22</sup> See *Wagner on Music and Drama*, selected by Goldman and Sprinchorn, New York: Da Capo Press, 1988, p. 171.

<sup>23</sup> For a critique of the thinker's claim that "through him speaks the essence of things itself," see Jonas, *ibid.* In his chapter "Heidegger and Theology," Jonas connects Heidegger with Gnosticism and finds in Schopenhauer's theory of music the sole philosophic precedent for Heidegger's claim that poets and philosophers embody "the voice of Being" (p. 257). Jonas comments: "Schopenhauer's fantasy [unlike Heidegger's] was innocent, for music is nonresponsible and cannot suffer from the misconception of a duty it does not have" (p. 258). There is good reason to think that music is not as "innocent" or "nonresponsible" as Jonas thinks.

<sup>24</sup> *Parerga and Paralipomena*, Vol. 2, Payne, p. 430.

<sup>25</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Summa Theologica* I, 39, 8c. For an excellent discussion of the three formal criteria of beauty, see Umberto Eco, *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas*, tr. Hugh Gredin, Cambridge: Harvard U. Press, 1988, pp. 64 ff.

