

## On the role of music in Boethius' "De consolatione Philosophiae"

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The late Roman philosopher Boethius is known to musicologists mainly for his treatise "De institutione musica", probably written during the first decade of the 6th century. The treatise was to become the greatest authority in the West for music theory throughout the Middle Ages.

Boethius writes his treatise of music as a source-book of abstract mathematical knowledge. Music in this framework belongs to the four mathematical disciplines (named *quadrivium*, or "the four ways", of arithmetic, music, geometry and astronomy), required as preliminary steps, in this very sequence, to train one's mind for the height of all studies, philosophy.

From Boethius' hand, two mathematical treatises have come down to us, "De institutione arithmetica" and "De institutione musica" (later in the article referred to as "De musica"), both through detailed adaptations of Ancient Greek sources. Boethius also translated Aristotle's logical corpus, called "Organon", and some Hellenistic commentaries on them, as well as writing five treatises on logic himself. As recent studies have shown, Boethius' choice of Greek texts was determined by the curriculum of the best educational institutions of his time, the neoplatonic schools of philosophy. The two most famous of these were in Athens (closed soon after Boethius' death, in 529, after 900 years of existence, and in Alexandria; there was also one in Constantinople). The goal of their curriculum of higher studies, with preparatory mathematical disciplines and philosophical logic, was to reach philosophy. Boethius had good reasons to transmit these for Latin posterity: the loss of Greek philosophical language competence was evident, and the Romans lacked scientific Latin tools in these disciplines.

Besides being a meticulous scholar in translating Greek sources, Boethius was active in politics, but after a splendid career during the Ostrogothic regime under King Theoderic the Great, Boethius' idealism turned against him. By defending a fellow-senator Albinus, and the Roman Senate, both charged with the accusation of treason, Boethius, too, was imprisoned, and soon executed as an enemy of the state.

Boethius' most famous work is his final: "Consolation of Philosophy" (later referred to as "Consolatio" in the article), composed in prison during 523–524. As Boethius' life had been dedicated to the sciences, including music, in preparation for philosophy, it is tempting to see if there is music present in his "Consolatio", which Henry Chadwick calls a "confession of his philosophical faith" (Chadwick 1981a: 10).

"Consolatio" is a fascinating work, ranging across many literary genres. It includes elements of the literature of exile, apology, revelation, Socratic dialogue, exhortation to philosophy, to name but a few, within the apocalyptic journey of the soul to a source of revealed wisdom. It is composed in satura form, with alternating prose and verse sections. The 78 parts of "Consolatio" are divided equally into 39 prose and 39 metrical sections, presented in 5 books. In these, in alternating prose and verse, the two main protagonists, Boethius himself and Philosophy, personified as an ageless woman visiting Boethius in prison, carry on a dialogue with each other throughout the work.

Although the musical content of "Consolatio" has long been overlooked, Boethius' masterpiece merits a closer look with respect to its musical ideas. David S. Chamberlain has thoroughly illuminated "Consolatio's" musical content in his article "The Philosophy of Music in Boethius' *De Consolatione Philosophiae*" (1970). Following Chamberlain, a few scholars have already included references to his work in their studies (Chadwick 1981a, b; Heilmann 2007).

Chamberlain's method is comparative: he presents the main philosophical ideas about music in "De arithmetica", and "De musica" that find a further and sometimes a fuller expression in "Consolatio". These ideas include the origin and definitions of music and musician, the classification of music, and the moral analysis of sonorous music. My method of study was to trace the musical vocabulary of "Consolatio" and to retrieve the musical material directly from its Latin text. Some of the results inevitably overlap, and this will be indicated in the text.

First, there is the music of metres. Most of the vocabulary related to singing (*carmen, cantus, canto, cano, modular*) refers to, or is present in the metra. “Consolatio” begins musically, with an elegiac song (in elegiac distichs) by Boethius:

**Carmina** qui quondam studio florente peregi, flebilis heu **maestos** cogor inire **modos**. Ecce mihi lacerae dictant scribenda **Camena**e et veris **elegi** fletibus ora rigant.

I who once wrote **songs** with keen delight am now by sorrow driven to take up **melancholy measures**. Wounded **Muses** tell me what I must write, and **elegiac verses** bathe my face with real tears. (Translated by Richard Green)

The first word in “Consolatio” is “carmina”. Songs, once eagerly composed, have turned into tearful melodies (by the translator’s choice, here “melancholy measures”). Muses with torn cheeks dictate elegiac verses (songs of lament) that result in actual tears. (For Boethius, elegy is a lower form of poetry, as compared to his formerly composed “carmina”. The contrast of “carmina” and “elegy” in the first lines of “Consolatio” is referred to in Crabbe 1981: 248).

Later in the work, in III, metre 12, lady Philosophy sings of the most skilful elegiac musician Orpheus. Yet both of the elegiac musicians (Boethius and Orpheus) lack the ability to bring any improvement to their own mental condition.

Looking further into the vocabulary, it becomes clear that music in the metra of “Consolatio” is audible. While in “De arithmetica” and “De musica” the focus is still on the abstract knowledge of and the contemplative side of music, “Consolatio” gives a clear impression that the “carmina” (its metra) are sung, accompanied by a soft-sounding stringed instrument. Both the use of the vocabulary of sound and sounding, as of silence and listening, applied to “carmina”, underlines this. The manuscript tradition of “Consolatio” starts with the late 8th and early 9th centuries. Perhaps it is interesting to remark in passing that it exhibits a musical notation connected to its poetry. The metra of “Consolatio” were sung at the time – nearly one fourth of its poems are provided with primitive neumes in the manuscripts.

Boethius even goes one step further than in his earlier works. There is a personal attitude to music delicately present in the “Consolatio”: There are several hints that Boethius enjoys listening to music, finds delight in its sound, and it leaves him with a deep impression, awakes his attention, or fascination. Philosophy, his guest and teacher, knows this and uses music in the metra consciously to reach her mental aims (e.g. to give a draught from a sweetness of song, in order to refresh her student after a weighty discussion – in the final sentences of IV, prose 6).

Connected to music etymologically, Muses should be treated next. Once named “Camena”, Muses appear six times by name in “Consolatio”, mainly in the role of an inspirer, and once referring to a previous poem, or song (in I, prose 5). (It is important to note that “carmen” includes both the meanings of “song” and “poem” in classical Latin.) Boethius clearly distinguishes two types of Muses in “Consolatio”: the poetical, or elegiac Muses inspire songs based on passionate complaint – elegies, “fruitless to reason” – whereas the Muses of Philosophy, acting on a higher level of consciousness, master the faculties more related to reason. The figure of Philosophy herself reminds one, too (she talks of “her Muses” – “meis Musis”, healing and taking care of Boethius). Chamberlain underlines that Philosophy distinguishes two kinds of sonorous music here, “vicious” or “effeminate”, and virtuous, that fosters wisdom.

Music (*musica*) is mentioned literally three times in “Consolatio”, and on all three occasions it is closely linked to rhetoric. Philosophy makes clear the hierarchy: Music and Rhetoric appear as her personified servants, chosen by her to assist her (II, prose 1). Later Boethius acknowledges the skilful words of Philosophy, imbued “with the honey of music and rhetoric” (II, prose 3). Musician (“musicus”) is named once in “Consolatio”, in the context where music and rhetoric demonstrate how the notion or conception of them precedes their realization: logically, the notions of music and rhetoric come first, and the notions of musician, or rhetor, the practitioners, are derived from them.

Chamberlain draws a parallel with “De musica” I, 34, where the true musician is defined as the one with theoretical skills, discerning the properties of music and making conscious use of them. (Other forms of music making, the actual playing of an instrument or composing poems or songs are reduced to “abiding around the art of music”, “circa artem musicam versantur”). In “Consolatio”, as referred to by Chamberlain, lady Philosophy involves all three forms of making music, thus displaying a complete “musicus”, a fully realized musician. She plays an instrument skilfully, composes a variety of songs in the most varied metres, discerns the differences between and the influence of various musical forms, and uses music consciously to serve her intellectual, as well as her moral, aims. Thus the audible music making, referred to as “abiding around the art of music” in “De musica”, acquires a new, more complete dimension and realization in “Consolatio”.

The richest poem according to its musical content and vocabulary is III, metre 12 (mentioned by Chamberlain only in passing, in a footnote), which could also be called a masterful hymn praising the almighty power of music. Philosophy here composes a song, depicting the myth and lore of Orpheus, the most versed musician, and his art, set in a philosophical framework. The song thoroughly illustrates the power of music to penetrate and touch the inner being of all who heard it upon earth (the lion and the deer, the hare and the hound enjoy each other’s company in peace, rivers halt, trees move), and in Hades, where the most unapproachable, merciless figures (Cerberus, the Furies, and Hades himself) are moved to pity and compassion, even to the point where their behaviour is changed. Orpheus reaches his goal. The cause of his greatest joy, and sorrow, Eurydice, will be returned to him; his spouse is obtained by singing (“carmine empta coniunx”). The framework in which lady Philosophy sets this is an awareness of a higher good, an ability to focus on mental ascension. The elegiac musician is omnipotent on earth and especially in the dark underworld. There is no achievement Orpheus cannot reach – but he may lose it in a moment, when he is forgetful of the source of the highest good that is in heaven. Poetically, he is more fond of his feelings, as he looks back towards the darkness of Hades, than keeping the rule, given by Hades, who pointed to the exit – to raise and focus his sight on the daylight. The real aim of music is to ascend from the “cave” of passion to the daylight of heavenly wisdom. A perspective of heaven is a guarantee of Orpheus and his spouse’s way out of death and darkness. Orpheus provides the example of the fatal flaw of a wonderful musician by basing his decision-making on passion, instead of basing it on reason and anchoring his mind in the knowledge of the supreme good.

The poem has various parallels with Boethius’ elegy at the beginning of “Consolatio”. Elegy is in both cases attributed with being sweet, “dulcis” (“dulces venenae” – “sweet poisons” of elegiac Muses in I, prose 1, or “dulcis prex” – “sweet prayer”, sung by Orpheus at the gates of Hades); both singers feel sad (“maestus” in III, metre 12, and “maesti modi” in I, metre 1), and both Boethius and Orpheus use tearful melodies (“flebiles modi”) to express their inner anguish. It is also characteristic to both of them that in the end, this kind of music does not calm the mind of the musician himself. When in I, metre 1, Boethius is immersed in his own misery, then in III, metre 12, Philosophy presents a command of the powerful affects set to music, encompassing them with a moral and intellectual frame.

It occurs with remarkable frequency in “Consolatio” that Philosophy uses her songs to refer to higher, heavenly harmonies. As Chamberlain effectively demonstrates, this is what Boethius has earlier defined as the highest kind of music, “musica mundana”, world music, in “De musica” I, 2 and I, 34, as well as that “Consolatio” is permeated with these ideas. According to “De musica”, world music is discernible in heaven, in the seasons, and in the binding of the four elements. In “Consolatio”, the rotation of celestial bodies, their beautiful motion and proportionality, and the harmonious structure of the world, the diversity of the seasons and the union of opposing elements all testify to a divine model. Numerous poems (I, 5; II, 8; III, 9; IV, 6) in “Consolatio” illustrate this principle. The example of the macro-rhythms and the order and beauty of creation set a frame to human existence, presenting both its source and its goal. It is extremely important in “Consolatio” to lift one’s sight to heaven and discern the inaudible harmony of the universe, by making a conscious mental effort. World harmony reflects a heavenly bond, a concord of seasons, elements and planets, also denoted as love (“amor”). For instance, the ancient peace (“vetus pax”) between the orbits of the celestial bodies is renewed by mutual love in IV, metre 6, implying a musical connotation. Philosophy presents the order of the universe (world music) in the versified form, set

to audible music. This elevates and intensifies the message, as well as the pre-eminence of world music in "Consolatio".

Music participates in the structuring and dynamics of "Consolatio" with its metrical sections; but it is also present around the climax of the work, the analysis of the supreme good ("summum bonum") in III, prose 10, which is framed by two deeply musical poems. III, metre 9 is an elevated platonic hymn to the Creator, the author of the order and harmony of the universe, deriving it from a (necessarily) musical model in his mind. III, metre 12 is a hymn to the most versed music on earth that has its hidden perspective in heaven. The platonic hymn of the world music is meant to introduce, exhort and focus Boethius' mind on the supreme good at this nodal point of "Consolatio". The earthly music should keep the heavenly harmonies in mind, as an example, to grant it happiness and a lasting dimension.

In IV, metre 3 and V, metre 4, the voice can be seen as a part of the human constitution. In IV, metre 3, also a slight connection to elegiac music can be discerned, in the hierarchy of the human mind prevailing over the human voice. Kirke's poison changes the Odyssean crew into pigs. Their voice and body are changed, but their mind remains stable over these, testifying to the horrific change. In the preceding prose section, Philosophy had compared moral evil to an inability to see the light of truth, with the eyes accustomed to darkness. As long as people "fix their attention on one's own feelings rather than on the true nature of things" (in R. Green's translation), and "licence passion", their true human nature may not be preserved.

In V, metre 4, the receptive and active powers of the human mind are discussed. Every (human) action is preceded by a sense impression ("passio"). Light is exhibited to the eyes, and sound strikes the ears, moving the powers of soul in the living body. Then the mind is set in motion, mingling the species received with the species it holds within, and answers with similar motions. If a sound produces a response within the soul, and impulses are transmitted between its parts, music is necessarily present in the soul. It echoes, as Chamberlain justly indicates, "musica humana", as earlier presented in "De musica" I, 2. "Musica humana" is seen in three forms there: in the connection between soul and body, and between the various parts of the soul, and in the binding of the elements and parts of the body.

To conclude, musical ideas are clearly present in "Consolatio" in various ways. First, music is present in the many metra that are sung and heard. Metrical music structures the work, and participates in its dynamics, sometimes to intensify the message, or to enable a pause in or distance from the discussion, or simply to illustrate it. Even Boethius' personal delight in sonorous music finds delicate expression in "Consolatio" (as compared to the abstract, mental music in "De musica"). Personified lady Philosophy invites Music and Rhetoric, also personified, as her necessary assistants to serve her educational and therapeutic goals. Muses are clearly distinguished into two classes. The poetic, or elegiac Muses appear as inspirers of elegiac verses (songs of lament), while the philosophical Muses assist in more intellectual aspirations; the former are rejected, the latter promoted by lady Philosophy. The idea of the highest kind of music, "musica mundana" (the world music of the planets, seasons and elements from "De musica") is richly illustrated in the numerous metra of "Consolatio".

Music is also present at the literary climax of "Consolatio". "Musica mundana", positioned in III, metre 9, immediately precedes the nodal point of the whole discussion. The depiction of the highest form of music introduces the analysis of the "supreme good" ("summum bonum"). Following the culmination, in III, metre 12, the most versed human music is described in a hymn of Orpheus, with a moral and ethical conclusion that even the supreme goal achieved by means of music will easily be lost, unless the musician is safeguarded by the wisdom of his heart, and by reason – the knowledge of the supreme good.

Lady Philosophy makes clear use of audible music throughout "Consolatio", masterfully using all the three forms of music-making, defined earlier in "De musica": poetry, singing and playing an instrument, as well as an awareness of their qualities, or music theory, realizing the complete concept of the musician ("musicus"). Even human music, defined in "De musica" as a constituent of a human being may be discerned in a few of the poems of "Consolatio".

To conclude, the conception of music of Boethius would remain somewhat impoverished without Boethius' final work. "Consolatio" renders to music the faculties of being soulful, of transcendence, and of resounding with actual sound with an ennobling and enjoyable quality.