



# Silence as the greatest music: The harmony of philosophy and *Mousikê* in Plato's *Phaedo*

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Plato's *Phaedo* has always attracted special attention not least because of its challenging topic: the meditation on death and the portrayal of dying. In thinking about this particular convergence of reflection and reality important philosophical questions emerge. How can we conceive death? What can we say about dying? Why are we thinking about death and dying?

It seems that a coherent approach to death and dying is equally problematic in reflection and reality. The common attitude is one of silence. We ignore the reflection and accept the reality when it happens. But the suggestion in the *Phaedo* is that we must practice in reflection what we are to live in reality. Socrates in fact goes further by asserting death as the central topic of philosophy. He states that "those who practice philosophy aright study nothing but dying and being dead" (*Phaedo*, 64a, trans. Fowler). This suggests that the contemplation of death in the *Phaedo* mirrors the examined life in the *Apology*.<sup>1</sup> Its silent maxim may be that the unpractised death is not worth dying. The striking portrayal of Socrates' death<sup>2</sup> shows that an examination or practice of death is not only possible but that such an examination will transform our attitude towards dying. This transformation is underlined dramatically: the dialogue commences with its main character imprisoned. It ends with this character admonishing a disciple to pay a debt for a process of recovery, of healing and of liberation.

But what is it exactly in the *Phaedo* that enables this transformation,





given that the arguments for immortality designed to appease any fears and uncertainties about death remain ultimately unsatisfactory?<sup>3</sup> What enables a comprehensive, realistic practice of death and dying specifically? Does the *Phaedo* make a case for a particular mode of thinking? I will try to show that the *Phaedo* achieves its practice and transformation because it is not just a work of philosophy but also and importantly a work of *mousikê*. This must strike us as a startling claim: music as we know it would require sounds. However, the *Phaedo* remains silent. In addition silence plays a significant part in the dialogue. Is this a problem for our claim that it is a work of music? Perhaps not, for most musical works contain silence and at least one notorious piece of music, John Cage's *4'33"*, is a work of complete silence. If the *Phaedo* is to be a work of music or *mousikê* we will need to clarify the importance of silence in it. But before I turn to this important question, I must outline in which way the dialogue suggests a view of itself as *mousikê*. I intend to do this in three sections: I will firstly consider the question if and how Socrates is a musician. I will then consider two musical phenomena in the dialogue and discuss their philosophical relevance. After this discussion I turn to the question in which sense silence in the *Phaedo* can nonetheless be conceived as music.

### **I. Socrates as a musician: Nietzsche's music-making Socrates**

There are three clear references in the *Phaedo* that portray Socrates as a musician in some sense: the first occurs when Socrates answers the suggestion from Cebes that he has been engaged in the composition of *mousikê* (60d). The second, brief reference alludes to Socrates as a singer who charms away the fear of the hobgoblin of death (77e). And the third (85a) draws an analogy between Socrates and the swans, their consecration to Apollo, their prophetic abilities and their characteristic song which becomes its most beautiful immediately before their death.

The reference to Socrates' music making at the beginning of the dialogue is based on an account of a dream. When asked if reports of his music making are true, Socrates responds:

*"The same dream came to me often in my past, sometimes in one form and sometimes in another, but always saying the same thing: 'Socrates', it said, 'make music and work at it.' And I formerly thought it was urging and*





*encouraging me to do what I was doing already and that just as people encourage runners by cheering, so the dream was encouraging me to do what I was doing, that is, to make music, because philosophy was the greatest kind of music and I was working at that. But now, after the trial and while the festival of the god delayed my execution, I thought, in case the repeated dream really meant to tell me to make this which is ordinarily called music, I ought to do so and not disobey." (61a)*

Socrates' interpretation of the dream makes a crucial distinction between two types of *mousikê*: *mousikê* as that which he is always doing, that is *mousikê* as philosophy, and *mousikê* as "that which is ordinarily called music" or demotic music.<sup>4</sup> Socrates' interpretation of the dream suggests to him a demand to start practicing demotic *mousikê* in addition to philosophy.

Nietzsche has interpreted this last-minute turn to music as an important step signalling Socrates' understanding of a limit to a philosophy of reason, logic and justification. In the *Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche famously pitches the "despotic logician Socrates", this "eye of the great Cyclops"<sup>5</sup> against an authentic conception of music rooted in Dionysian inspiration. Through a culture-historical analysis of the development of classical Greek tragedy, Nietzsche argues that a Socratic influence on Euripidean tragedy is responsible for a decline of an originally inspired and intuitive artform represented by Aescylos. The essential characteristic of Aescylos' tragedy is the Dionysian—a force that affirms primordial oneness and is uncovered in artistic intuition and inspiration. Socratism confronts the Dionysian through its rational and critical attitude and through a demand for complete and comprehensive justification. According to Nietzsche Socrates shines the light of full consciousness into all areas of life and only allows intuition or instinctive knowledge to serve as a warning signal or negation. This rejection of the positive, constitutive powers of intuition and inspiration expels the spirit of music from the classical tragedy. It is responsible for a decline of its artistic truth:

*The optimistic dialectic drives with the whip of its syllogisms music from tragedy: that is, it destroys the essence of tragedy, which must only be interpreted as a manifestation and concretisation of Dionysian states,*





*as a visible symbolisation of music, as an imaginary world of Dionysian intoxication.*<sup>6</sup>

According to Nietzsche it is however remarkable that the Socratic tendency encounters limitations in the conception of the music-making Socrates as described in the *Phaedo*. Initially, Nietzsche interprets Socrates' engagement with *mousikê* in accordance with his interpretation of the frequent references to the *daimon*. These suggest that Socrates experiences "a feeling of lack, an emptiness, a half-hearted accusation, a possibly unheeded duty" in the face of art and music. The experienced lack, a negative experience of "not understanding" signals that there are limits to his logical nature and that life cannot be comprehensively questioned and understood:

*perhaps—he had to ask himself—is that which I cannot understand also not immediately the inconceivable? Perhaps there is a realm of art, of wisdom, from which the logician is banned? Perhaps art is even a necessary correlation and supplement of science?*<sup>7</sup>

The doubt about the comprehensive powers of rational understanding and a consciousness of its limitations in understanding and explaining the world and the human being, show the character of a music-making Socrates in a renewed light. Despite the initially dialectic conception which opposes the Dionysian characteristics of music, tragedy and art to the conscious and critical forces of Socratism, Nietzsche's conception of the "music-making Socrates" now becomes a symbol for a transcendence of this division. The music-making Socrates is transformed into an ideal in a quest for the unification of knowledge and instinct, intuition and reflection. The rebirth of tragedy, which follows the realisation of a decline of art as a result of theoretical Socratism, is facilitated by a music-making Socrates who closes the gap between a theoretical and a tragic conception of the world. Nietzsche's conception of Socrates thus acquires a dual significance reaching beyond a simple and negative identification of the latter with the forces of intellectualism to constitute a symbol of rebirth. Socrates, the gadfly undermines the truth of the tragedy, but Socrates, the musician, leads to its rebirth. Nietzsche writes in the *Birth of Tragedy* that:



only after the spirit of science is lead to its limits and its demand for universality is destroyed, we can hope for a rebirth of tragedy: for which artform we would need to posit the symbol of the music-making Socrates, in the previously suggested manner.<sup>8</sup>

Nietzsche's culture-historical analysis of tragedy aside, the point seems worth noting that the music-making Socrates signals a turn towards a particular synthetic understanding which transcends mere propositional knowledge. This is further underlined if we recall that the original passage in question has Socrates refer to "philosophy as the greatest music". While Socrates understands his dream to suggest a pursuit of demotic music, the revelation that he considered himself to be a musician always already may push his philosophy into a new light. As a philosopher-musician Socrates may indeed transcend ordinary boundaries of knowledge and understanding and achieve a unification of reflection and intuition of the kind Nietzsche identifies.

## II. The singer of charms

The *Phaedo* contains a further reference to Socrates as a musician, or more precisely as a singer of charms. This notion of a seductive musician whose music transforms the listeners has its origins in an orphic conception of music. According to mythology, Orpheus, the son of the muse Kalliope, was an extraordinarily charismatic musician. His singing and performance on the *kithara* was reputed to have moved, people, animals and plants and even melted stones. Within the fate of Orpheus we find a tension between the forces of Apollo and Dionysos. Traditionally and on account of his association with the *kithara*, Orpheus is initially associated with Apollo, however by virtue of his intoxicating and ravishing music making he ultimately is a disciple of Dionysos, the God of intoxication and rapture. Mythology reports that Dionysos resented the imbalance in Orpheus' dedication to Apollo and stirred the maenads against him. These raving followers, intoxicated and orgiastically transported, dismembered Orpheus' body which floated to the island of Lesbos with his head still singing.

The Dionysian or orphic forces of music are similarly manifested in the



myth of the sirens, who lured sailors to their death with their seductive songs and in the figure of the satyr Marsyas. According to mythology, the Aulos-playing Marsyas was challenged to a musical contest by Apollo (who played the *kithara*). According to some interpretations, the muses declared Apollo the winner of this contest and Apollo flayed the luckless Marsyas as punishment.

A Dionysian, satyr-like quality is attributed to Socrates in the *Symposium*, which is rich in important allusions to music. Here the intoxicated Alcibiades compares Socrates to the musician and satyr Marsyas:

*Are you not a piper? Why, yes, and a far more marvellous one than the satyr. His lips indeed had power to entrance mankind by means of instruments; a thing still possible today for anyone who can pipe his tunes: for the music of Olympus's flute belonged, I may tell you, to Marsyas his teacher. So that if anyone, whether a fine flute player or paltry flute-girl, can flute his tunes, they have no equal for exciting a ravishment and will indicate by the divinity that is in them who are apt recipients of the deities and their satisfactions. You differ from him in one point only—that you produce the same effect with simple prose unaided by instruments.*  
(*Symposium*, 215c)

While Alcibiades vividly describes the erotic attraction which emanates from Socrates' musical characteristics ("For when I hear him I am worse than any wild fanatic", 215e) he also draws our attention to the fact that Socrates himself seems entirely sober while inducing intoxication in others—a phenomenon that increases the attraction but also fills Alcibiades with some despair or even resentment and suggests that while Dionysian, Socrates remains nevertheless in command of the forces in question. Unlike the rhapsode whose music making requires that "he has been inspired and put out of his senses, and his mind is no longer in him" (*Ion*, 534b) Socrates is described by Alcibiades as an ambivalent musician and being—as a real satyr. His music leads to the inspiration, even frenzy of others but it does not absorb his entire being and leaves himself free to contemplate the limits his own "possession" (*katechetai*).

The ability to charm away the hobgoblin of death alluded to in the *Phaedo* (77e) is based on this erotic force of music and on musical experience





in the context of ambivalence. Cebes initially asks Socrates in a light-hearted manner to “persuade (*peithein*)” the imaginary inner child not to fear death. Persuasion (*peithein*) would suggest the need for an argument and interpreters have frequently suggested an allegorical interpretation in which arguments are to function as such charms<sup>9</sup>. However, interestingly Socrates answers with an exclamation suggesting a rhetorical emphasis. His answer suggests that it is not a question of attempting to persuade by fair argument but by “singing charms (*epodes*)” to this child every day. While Plato recognises that the argument for the immortality fails, this does not necessarily suggest that this will increase our fears. We will wish to replace, naturally, the argument with a better one testing the convictions that our understanding conceals further, however, the certainty which is required to put to rest any fears of death is a certainty arising from the activity of philosophy itself—not from any particular argument. Socrates refers to singing charms every day—no one charm will do. The practice of philosophy as a practice of dying and being dead, the daily exposure to philosophy as the greatest music and the music resulting from the engagement with daily philosophical argument will transform our existence from a child with fears of the hobgoblin of death to a philosophical person with Socratic capacities and characteristics who is able to face death. This achievement and not the attainment of a certain argument for the immortality of the soul is for Socrates the greatest need which should be obtained without sparing money or toil<sup>10</sup>. The songs alluded to here then are the silent, yet musical transformations resulting from consistent philosophical engagement.

### III. Socrates' Swan Song

The third reference in the *Phaedo* to Socrates as a musician is metaphorical. Socrates explores analogies between himself and the swans, the birds of Apollo. Swans are renowned for their song immediately before their death. A swan song is a final and most significant musical performance. It occurs in the face of death but—as Socrates explains—contrary to common views swans do not sing out of grief but out of joy. In fact swans





*sing at other times also, but when they feel that they are to die, sing most and best in their joy that they are to go to the god whose servants they are...I do not believe they sing for grief... but since they are Apollo's birds I believe they have prophetic vision, and because they have foreknowledge of the blessings in the other world they sing and rejoice on that day more than ever before. And I think that I am myself a fellow-servant of the swans, and am consecrated to the same God and have received from our master a gift of prophecy no whit inferior to theirs ... . (85a-b)*

This seems a fairly clear statement. Socrates claims to be a disciple of Apollo and to possess prophetic gifts like the swans. By implication, we can assume that he also believes that his "song" is at its most beautiful as a result of his confidence and joy in being reunited with Apollo. The latter point is the most important one, perhaps. The reference to the swans and their songs follows a significant and long silence (84c) from Socrates, the expression of discomfort by Simmias and Cebes about the earlier arguments on the immortality of the soul (84d) and a reference to Socrates' "misfortune" (84e). Socrates' point of referring to himself in an analogy to the swans seems clear: no matter what the fate of the actual argument on immortality may be he is not unfortunate. The activity of philosophy, its ability to purify the philosopher and the life of philosophy are a sufficient grounding for cheerfulness and joy in the face of death. The swan-song indicates that it is not necessary to achieve propositional certainties about death or dying. What matters is the practice beforehand, the life that preceded the death. The swans, "who sing at other times also" (84e) merely express and celebrate a certainty and understanding they have always had.

Socrates' swan-song expresses the same. Socrates too has always maintained that the philosopher "practices dying and being dead". This practice has generated a confidence and even joy about the detachment of the soul from the body which is the reality of philosophy and a feature of death. While Socrates' swan-song shows further arguments about the immortality of the soul in a new light, their propositional content appears only of secondary relevance. As they are developed in the dialogue they are not even particularly strong arguments and they will not contribute





certainty or provide further guarantees for immortality in any case<sup>11</sup>. To demand such an outcome would be ignoring Socrates' point that:

*he who prepares himself most carefully to understand the true essence of each thing that he examines would come nearest to the knowledge of it.*  
(65e)

In addition we would ignore the frequent reminder that "true virtue exists only with wisdom" (69b), that is, that a truthful life remains independent of rewards and punishments, of fears of pain or desire for pleasure. It is lead with a view of exposing itself to principles of reason alone while arguments do not directly relieve its existence. They serve to develop the condition of the person as they examine conditions and convictions. In fact, the condition of an argument becomes an occasion to practice and develop the condition of the person. The former is a challenge, perhaps an instrument that develops the latter and assists the philosopher in his purification and in his practice of dying. The pursuit of argument is a journey on a raft in which we "sail through life in the midst of dangers" (85d) in the absence of a stronger vessel. The main concern is the condition of the person making this voyage. This seems the central point of Socrates' argument against *misologia* which makes the point that a "hatred of argument" arises from a mistaken view that the failure of arguments is to blame for the lack of "truth and knowledge of reality" rather than the fact that "we ourselves are not yet in a sound condition" (90d).

When the condition of the person considering any arguments becomes the focal point of our interest, any portrayal of this condition must turn thus to a mode of expression that can reflect this altered subject matter or focus. Spiritual conditions are best expressed by music, it seems, and hence the reference to Socrates, the musician and singer. The *Phaedo* stresses on a number of occasions Socrates' condition especially so after the long silence at *Phaedo* 84c: Initially Socrates experiences a "mixture of pleasure and pain" (60d), however, following the silence and the reference to the swans and their song, descriptions of Socrates' condition become more frequent. He looks keenly and smiles (86d). While the companions are "uncomfortable" (88c) Socrates addresses them in a "pleasant, gentle





and respectful manner" (89a) which draws much admiration from Phaedo himself. The discomfort of some of the friends makes room for light-heartedness in the course of the discussion ("Cebes laughed" 101b) and when finally the moment comes to drink the poison, Socrates behaves unlike some who become angry and curse the person serving the poison (116c) and instead drinks the poison "very cheerfully and quietly" (117c).

The portrayal of Socrates' death is then an excellent example of a central demand of Socratic philosophy: the requirement that deeds and words of the philosopher must be in harmony. It is this harmony that Plato identifies in the *Laches* (interestingly also in the context of identifying *misologia* or hatred of argument) as the characteristic of a true musician:

*For you might think me a lover, and yet also a hater, of discussions: for when I hear a man discussing virtue or any kind of wisdom, one who is truly a man and worthy of his argument, I am exceedingly delighted; I take the speaker and his speech together, and observe how they sort and harmonise with each other. Such a man is exactly what I understand by "musical"—he has tuned himself with the fairest harmony, not that of a lyre or other entertaining instrument, but has made a true concord (symphōnon) of his own life between his words and his deeds. (Laches, 188d)*

The musician becomes a metaphor for a person in a "sound condition". According to Laches' view, then, there is a need for anyone engaged in arguments (*logoi*) to become a musician so that such *logoi* are based on a concord of words and deeds. This is the same argument that Socrates advances in the *Phaedo*. Socrates himself would need to be described as a person of such concord and as a musician in this sense. Furthermore, the *Phaedo* is designed to show this musicality of Socrates in a most difficult circumstance: his own death. Just like a complex work of music challenges the musician in his talent and skill, Socrates' death presents a formidable challenge to the music-making Socrates.

The interplay between the condition of the person and her philosophical arguments is a significant feature of the *Phaedo*. These two dimensions are woven together skilfully with argument, mythical, poetic and allegorical description and commentary creating a polyphonic composition.<sup>12</sup> The





feature of this multidimensional structure, which like a work of music comes to presence in the temporal unfolding of the reader's imagination and reflection, is that propositional articulation forms only a part of the meaning of this dialogue. A large part appears to be constituted by rhetorical—or better—musical phenomena which throw direct light on the complex subject matter in question.

#### **IV. *Mousikê* and philosophy as the greatest music**

The discussion of Socrates as a musician has suggested that a music making Socrates transcends the common view of him as a purely rational thinker engaged in challenging argument. It will also allow us to contextualise the value of argument further. The view that the musician primordially seeks to establish a harmony between his words and his deeds is reflected by the fact that Socrates' philosophical questioning is always also directed towards examining his own existence and that of his interlocutors with a view of forming his and their philosophical constitution. In relation to the finitude of this existence, however, such questioning faces a particular challenge. No argument for the immortality of the soul achieves compelling certainty. Yet, given the seriousness and urgency of the issue in the *Phaedo* such certainty appears required. What then guides the confidence and even cheerfulness of the dying philosopher Socrates in the face of his own death? I have suggested above that it is his consistent practice of philosophy as the greatest music. With the practice of philosophy as music, the existence of the philosopher becomes transformed through an experience that transcends the simply rational. In the following I wish to discuss this view of philosophy as music further from three angles: through a consideration of *mousikê* itself, through two important musical phenomena in the *Phaedo* (*harmonia* and *symphônein*) and through a consideration of silence in the *Phaedo* that may provide us with an essentially musical meaning of silence in this philosophical dialogue.

Before we can confidently discuss Socrates' statement of "philosophy as the greatest music" further, we need to pose the question what *mousikê* actually means in this context? The Greek term *mousikê* can include three





different levels of meaning: it can refer to a form of sound, to an artistic practice and to the art of the muses as a whole. Most of the information about these various aspects of *mousikê* is derived from indirect descriptions and variously through vase illustrations, through mythology, through music-theoretical treatises or through the writings of the philosophers. As a form of sound *mousikê* refers to purely instrumental music, however, in Greek musical culture that was a fairly rare and only emerging practice and one which did meet significant criticism on account of its imitative nature. It is important to note in this context that Greek music was homophonic, that is, its instruments played in a unison rhythm and /or melody. This also means that harmony was largely a melodic concept referring to intervals and the proportion of pitches played in succession rather than simultaneously. *Mousikê* as purely instrumental music and sound attracted the criticism of Plato as evidenced by the disqualification of the flute girls in the *Symposium* or by the identification of its imitative characters and modes in the third book of the *Republic*.

Secondly, though, *mousikê* refers to a holistic, artistic practice encompassing dance, recitation and song. This was referred to as *melos*—perfect *melos* if it encompassed song, dance and recitation. The clarity of language and the way in which music was able to support the text was evidently of utmost importance. Much of Greek musical theory is dedicated to establishing which modes of music and which rhythmic emphasis is best able to reflect the meaning of text and preserves a sense of rational pathos or sobriety. In that sense *mousikê* was also part of the Greek tragedy. Such practice was still dependent on imitative characteristics of music, however, with a capacity to imitate good character and a good disposition, the value of *mousikê* particularly to education would improve in Plato's view and achieve even an important status. According to Socrates:

*education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained and otherwise the contrary. (Republic 401d).*

This makes it important to identify from the outset the ethical value



of specific characteristics of music. Imitation which leads to confusion, an artificial increase in sensuous excitement or a destruction of temperance must be rejected. Rhythm which reflects orderliness must be promoted and one must not "pursue complexity nor great variety in the basic movements, but must observe what are the rhythms of a life that is orderly and brave." (*Republic* 300e). It is the connection between speech and rhythm that is crucial here for a *mousikê* that is in Plato's view at all times a servant of *logos*:

*Good speech, then, good accord and good grace and good rhythm wait upon a good disposition, not that weakness of head which we euphemistically style goodness of heart, but the truly good and fair disposition of the character and the mind. (Republic 400e)*

Musical modes reflect character and are similarly identified as harmful or beneficial to character or habit (*êthos*). There are some that reflect drunkenness or laxness (Lydian and Ionian modes) and others that are even "useless to women" such as the Lydian mode (*Republic* 398e). Modes that:

*fittingly imitate the utterances and the accents of the brave man who is engaged in warfare or in any enforced business and who, when he has failed either meeting wounds or death or having fallen into some other mishap, in all these conditions confronts fortune with steadfast endurance and repels her strokes (Republic 399b)*

are to be welcomed in the education of the young.

Imitation – according to Plato – removes us from truth. If a poet imitates a character instead of narrating the story himself, this becomes questionable particularly if the *ethos* that is reflected is bad and should be rejected. Imitation, if condoned at all, is only acceptable if it is of worthy content and truthful behaviour. If the guardians of goodness in a society are to imitate anything, they:

*should from childhood up imitate what is appropriate to them—men, that is, who are brave, sober, pious, free and all things of that kind; but things unbecoming the free man they should neither do nor be clever at imitating, nor yet any other shameful thing. Lest from the imitation they imbibe the reality. Or have you not observed that imitations, if continued from youth*

*far into life, settle down into habits and (second) nature in the body, the speech, and the thought. (Republic 395c)*

The third level of meaning refers to *mousikê* as the entire realm of the arts of the muses. This includes culture and education. *Mousikê* in this sense complements gymnastics and forms the soul whereas gymnastics form the body. A person who is “*a-mousikos*” is primarily uncultured and uneducated—not only unskilled in music or unmusical in an artistic sense. In fact, *mousikê* in this wider sense is not an art but an entire human disposition or character. Someone excessively exposed and educated in *mousikê* would have a “soft soul” whereas someone excessively exposed and trained in gymnastics would be uncouth, rough and insensitive. In this wider sense *mousikê* refers to the balance between cognitive, emotional, ethical, personal and cultural attributes of our existence and character.

As the art of the muses, *mousikê* embraces a number of human intellectual and spiritual endeavours: poetry, comedy, music in the narrow sense, recitation, dance, philosophy, astronomy and history. According to mythology, the nine muses, daughters of Zeus and Mnêmosynê, personify these different endeavours and are variously able to inspire and transform the human consciousness into rapture or *enthousiasmos* for these activities. This inspiration is not itself a guarantee of truth, though, for the muses appear to be ambiguous beings as Hesiod indicates in his *Theogony*:

*The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing, sweet songs, while he was shepherding his lambs on holy Helicon; the goddesses Olympian, daughters of Zeus who holds the aegis, first addressed these words to me: ‘you rustic shepherds, shame: bellies you are, not men! We know enough to make up lies which are convincing, but we also have the skill, when we’ve a mind, to speak the truth.’<sup>13</sup>*

The possibilities of the muses to speak the truth or alternatively “make up lies which are convincing” indicates a danger and opportunity for philosophy. Not all divine inspiration that stems from the muses, it seems, can be taken as truth. The philosopher must subject any *enthousiasmos* to reflection and investigate whether such inspiration is of genuine value to truth or whether it is in fact misleading. The possibility that an

inspired conviction is mistaken for truth finds a most eloquent reflection in Nietzsche's warning that "convictions are more dangerous enemies to truth than lies."<sup>14</sup>

### V. Musical connection in the *Phaedo*: *harmonia* and *symphônein*

Two musical phenomena achieve elevated significance in the *Phaedo*: *harmonia* and *symphônein*. Both describe forms of connection, although the latter refers to an activity of relating and the former to a mode of connection. Socrates discusses *harmonia* in the context of the possibility that it describes the mode of existence of the soul. Simmias had advanced the hypothetical argument that if the soul was *harmonia*, it would perish with the disappearance of the physical elements that constitute it akin to the harmony produced by the lyre and its strings. If the latter perish, any resulting musical harmony perishes with them. Since the soul is assumed to be a *harmonia*, it could be similarly argued that it will perish when the body perishes. Socrates addresses Simmias' argument from three aspects: he firstly reminds him that since all learning is recollection (a view that is emphatically shared by Simmias) the soul must in fact pre-exist. A pre-existence implies immortality (a questionable point, incidentally). He secondly uses the notion of harmony as a compound to argue that the soul, however, cannot be a compound if it indeed pre-exists:

*You must, my Theban friend, think differently, if you persist in your opinion that a harmony is a compound and that the soul is a harmony made up of the elements that are strung like harpstrings in the body...For harmony is not what your comparison assumes it to be. The lyre and the strings and the sounds come into being in a tuneless condition, and the harmony is the last of all to be composed and the first to perish. (92b)*

And finally, Socrates argues that the soul cannot be a harmony made up of any elements. If the soul was a harmony, the possibility of a greater harmony would imply the possibility of a soul that was "more completely and to a greater extent a soul than another, or less completely and to a less extent" (93b).

With all three arguments Socrates tries to defend the view that the soul is independent from the body and can rule the body but not vice



versa. Ultimately, Simmias' suggestion that the soul was a *harmonia* or a compound of physical constitution is shown to have consequences that contradict Socrates' entire approach to philosophy and naturally the central concern of the *Phaedo*. Simmias finds himself in a position in which his metaphorical conception of the soul as *harmonia* does not appear to harmonise with arguments or experiences that have been identified through a "sound course of argument" (92d) already.

The central concern of the *Phaedo* is to show the possibility of a separation between the body and the soul: in the work and life of the philosopher this separation is consistently practiced and in dying and death it is realised. Such a separation is in fact experienced as a form of liberation. However, if the soul perishes in this separation, the project of philosophy is meaningless, the philosopher is identified as idle and there is no need to engage in philosophy. Given this self-contradiction, then, the soul can thus not be a harmony (95a).

This last argument is somewhat peculiar. Is it not entirely circular? What if the notion of *anamnesis* on which the entire refutation of the *harmonia* assumption hinges is rejected? In addition why should the pre-existence of the soul require its post-existence or immortality? These points are arguments that could challenge Socrates' refutation, however, they ignore the central point of the discussion, namely, the activity of philosophy itself.

If the soul is a *harmonia* in the sense outlined by Simmias, that is a "blend or composition of contraries"<sup>15</sup> with such contraries conceived to be dependent on the body, then a separation between body and soul is not possible without mutual destruction. In the activity of philosophy however, it is clearly shown by Socrates that such a separation is not only intended but achievable. This showing is a musical showing, as I have outlined above—a substantiation by virtue of a performance. A dimension of this performance is reflected in the theory of *anamnêsis*. The understanding is further completed by the entirety of the dialogue itself and by the way in which Socrates "makes music" and claims for himself a congruence between word and deed, a musical existence. It is this congruence and the performative conception of philosophy which allow Socrates to invert



the argument: the performance of philosophy as a practice of death and dying transforms itself into a proof for the immortality of the soul. Like a work of music, which validates its musical material and themes through its entire unfolding and does not construct an argument with only one outcome, the hidden inversion is musically sustained.

The rejection of the soul as a *harmonia* does not preclude that the body and soul cannot constitute themselves a *harmonia*. In fact, such a possibility would become clearer within a more abstract view of *harmonia* outlined by Erixymachus in the *Symposium* which identifies *harmonia* as consonance (*symphônia*) and consonance as a kind of agreement (*homologia*).<sup>16</sup> However in this context (and in the well-known discussion of *harmoniai* in the *Republic*<sup>17</sup>) *harmonia* means no more than a “fitting together”<sup>18</sup> of the various parts of the body. And this “fitting together” itself has not been conceived adequately so far: *harmonia* has—as Socrates says—“been moderately gracious” (95a), *only so*, one should add for clarification. Had *harmonia* been more gracious the conception of the soul as a *harmonia* may have inspired a clearer view and avoided the possibility of dissonance with the activity of philosophy.

## VI. *Symphônein*

Socrates' refutation of Simmias' metaphor conceives *harmonia* as a connection of physical elements (albeit with musical functions), yet this connection is not musical in essence. A musical conception of *harmonia* would need to shed further light on how connection is achieved and which particular musical features qualify it. In addition a musical conception of *harmonia* would have required a reference to its abstract foundation, especially given the fact that Simmias and Cebes are pupils of Philolaus, the Pythagorean. In Pythagorean thinking, *harmonia* is not just a matter of sounding concordance, but is reflected in a more profound, mathematical proportionality. It would seem that such an abstract proportionality would not be dependant on the concrete existence of any body, but merely on their ideal or possible existence. A fully musical characterisation in accordance with Pythagorean understanding of an equivalence of music and mathematics is not achieved in the metaphor in question or



in its subsequent refutation. What is achieved is an affirmation of the requirement for a higher *harmonia*: that between the philosopher's life and his death. The elements of this *harmonia* are—as we have repeatedly stated—the philosopher's convictions, words and actions.

A more specifically musical phenomenon (*symphônia*), or more precisely a further way of connecting that appears musically more convincing than Simmias' *harmonia* metaphor is identified in the context of the engagement with Cebes' objection and more concretely in Socrates' account of a "second sailing". This account follows a second silence and caesura in the text as Phaedo informs us that "Socrates paused for some time and was absorbed in thought" (95e). Following this silence, Socrates explains how his intellectual method of inquiry actually progresses and how it substantiates itself in particular in relation to the investigation of cause (*aitia*):

*So I thought I must have recourse to conceptions and examine in them the truth of realities. Now perhaps my metaphor is not quite accurate; for I do not grant in the least that he who studies realities by means of conceptions is looking at them in images any more than he who studies them in the facts of daily life. However, that is the way I began. I assume in each case some principle (logos) which I consider strongest, and whatever seems to me to agree (symphônein) with it whether relating to cause or anything else, I regard as true, and whatever disagrees (diaphonein) with it, as untrue. (100a)*

With this methodological outlook Socrates approaches the question how particular, everyday being is constituted or how the absolute forms are related to appearances. He reiterates something he has always maintained, namely, that things are what they are on account of the "presence (*parousia*) or communion (*koinonia*) (call it which you please)" (100d5) of absolute Being in or with the world of everyday being or appearance. Socrates implies that this is "the safest answer" he can give (presumably safest in the context of the "second sailing") and he playfully hypothesises that another identification of cause which appeals for an explanation of everyday being or appearance to the constitution of appearance and everyday being itself would generate fear. Socrates admonishes Cebes



about remaining mindful that such explanations from appearances are in fact the root of this fear and suggests that he must continue to focus on the nature of the transcendent principle in question:

*You would distrust your inexperience and would be afraid, as the saying goes, of your own shadow; so you would cling to that safe principle of ours and would reply as I said. And if anyone attacked that principle, you would pay him no attention and you would not reply to him until you had examined the consequences to see whether they agreed (symphônein) with one another or not (diaphonein); and when you had to give an explanation of the principle, you would give it in the same way by assuming some other principle which seemed to you the best of the higher ones, and so on until you reached one which was adequate. You would not mix things up, as disputants do, in talking about the beginning and its consequences, if you wished to discover any of the realities; for perhaps not one of them thinks or cares in the least about these things. They are so clever that they succeed in being well pleased with themselves even when they mix things up; but if you are a philosopher, I think you will do as I said. (101d3-102)*

Socrates describes here the approach and context of explanation and refutation: When faced with many explanations and arguments, the sound way to remain in contact with truth is to establish how the consequences of explanations harmonize with each other in their totality. This musical understanding governs Socrates' own positive conceptions (as seen in the first passage dealing with hypothesis) and his approach to the refutation of the conceptions advanced by others. What is the character of such connections of explanations and arguments? It has been pointed out that the meaning of *symphônein* is potentially complex and moreover not completely consistent between the two passages cited<sup>19</sup>. These impressions become emphasised when we attempt to interpret *symphônein* in a purely logical or propositional context. However, the intention of the passage is directed beyond such a context.<sup>20</sup> What is at stake in identifying whether something agrees (*symphônein*) or does not agree is the validation of the connection between reason and experience or perception as reflected in propositions. This validation cannot be effected if we withdraw to a purely logical or propositional analysis. Even a purely formal analysis of propositions about the world



of appearance contains judgments about the content of such propositions that affect their consequences but remain initially hidden from the view of propositional analysis. In fact an interpretation of the world and a quest for cause cannot rely on an analysis of propositional form alone or hope to sustain its insights in formal justification. *Symphônein* is thus no mere formal agreement but one which includes the import and content of the propositions and hypotheses in question. To establish this type of agreement is infinitely more difficult than a purely formal analysis or an analysis which constantly confuses the "beginning and its consequences"<sup>21</sup>. What is required is a view that can perceive how propositions harmonize in their interpreted meaning. This is an interpretative challenge, a challenge that needs to perceive the sensible meaning of propositions in light of qualified perceptions of reality and contexts of experience. The *Phaedo* as a whole attempts to illustrate such an intellectual project in relation to the immortality of the soul. It exposes how thinking, articulation and reality actually harmonize (*symphônein*) and how the recognition of this *symphônia* sustains the existence of the philosopher. This agreement is musical in nature, for it is beyond the reach of a constructive, formal separation and it is in its proportionality inclusive of the whole which constitutes it. This accords with the way in which Pythagorean mathematical proportion articulates musical consonance while itself reflecting the entirety of the context in which this proportion is expressed: A Pythagorean harmonic proportion<sup>22</sup> does not only disclose the nature of its parts (the division required to produce a given perfect interval) but also discloses the hidden totality that binds the proportion together (the string as a whole).

## VII. Silence as *mousikê*

We are now able to consider in which sense the silence of the *Phaedo* qualifies as music and how it sustains a view of the dialogue as a musical work. As I have discussed above the *Phaedo* is marked by three silences: The first silence follows Socrates' threefold argument for the immortality of the soul and precedes his reference to the swan-song. The second silence precedes the description of the "second sailing" and follows a summary of





Cebes' unease about the absence of a cogent argument for the immortality of the soul. The final silence occurs at the very end of the dialogue and follows Socrates' death itself. Admonishing his disciple to pay the debt of a cock to Asclepius, the God of healing, Socrates no longer responds to his friends and falls silent.

What is the significance of these three silences? One way to answer the question is to consider what precedes and follows each silence and how each silence binds dissonant sections or thoughts together. In other words, each silence can be conceived as a connection<sup>23</sup> or as a *harmonia*. And indeed, each of the silences brings into harmony that which has been said with the yet-unsaid.

The first silence considers the philosopher's relation to his own mortality in the light of a life of philosophy and in the face of incomplete proofs for the immortality of the soul. This dissonance, however, is harmonized in the metaphor of the swans. The human philosopher is no self-sufficient being. He is a servant to the God Apollo and as such his incomplete knowledge of his own immortality is no issue of concern. His philosophical arguments do not prove the existence of immortality, but his philosophising commences with its assumption and concludes with its realisation. This activity itself, in which the body is experienced as a limitation and as a prison, is sufficient to sustain the confidence and joy that the philosopher shares with the swans at the prospect of being liberated.

The second silence also follows from a dissonance, namely the realisation that Cebes' demand for "a proof that our soul is indestructible and immortal" (95c) has not yet been fulfilled and the fear that such a proof is required to sustain the confidence which is essential to philosophy and the philosopher in the ongoing existence of the soul. This silence is followed by Socrates' account of the "second sailing", his own intellectual method which elaborates what a proof in relation to generation and decay can and should in effect look like. The silence binds together the account of the "second sailing" and the danger that an absent proof for the immortality of the soul will show the philosopher's confidence to be senseless and foolish. In response to the silence the philosopher shows





himself to be superior to the “contradiction-mongers” whose ignorance prevents them from seeing that they in fact “mix everything up” (102). The philosopher by contrast articulates a method of establishing the truthfulness of an inquiry. Even a hypothesis about the human soul and its immortality will need to substantiate itself according to this method of establishing agreement between new and existing conceptions. Until such an inquiry is completed, the existing balance favoring the strongest hypotheses must prevail and the cause for the soul being immortal must be identified in the presence or communion of absolute immortality.

The final silence is a *harmonia* that must bind together Socrates' immediate attitude in the face of death and the interlocutors' (and readers') silent realisation that the *logoi* of the dialogue have not achieved by themselves any proof for immortality that had been expected. It is of course by far the most extensive and open-ended silence and it in fact constitutes the greatest music of the dialogue yet. It reaches beyond the dialogue to the reader. This silence binds the reader to the fate of Socrates and motivates her continued puzzlement and perplexity, her turn towards philosophy. Why does Socrates raise “the cup to his lips and very cheerfully and quietly” (117c) drain it given that proofs for the immortality of the soul are not conclusive?

The final silence appears to be the end of the dialogue but what exactly comes to an end? A report on the death of Socrates, to be sure, but on the level of the reader's consciousness, the silence is no end and the dialogue is continuing. The effect of the silence on the reader can be likened to the impact of music as it is identified by Hegel:

*If we abstract from that which can be understood and we let our guard down, the musical work of art absorbs us and takes us with it, regardless of the power which art as art ordinarily has over us. The peculiar power of music is a primordial (elementarisch) power, that is, it rests with the element of tone, in which this art moves. The subject is moved by this element not only in this or that particularity nor is it caught by a particular content, but it is in its simple self, the center of his spiritual being, lifted into the work and moved into activity.*<sup>24</sup>

The power of the final silence of the philosopher is primordial



(*elementarisch*). It impacts on the entire sphere of the reader's existence, it captures the reader as a whole in the same way as Hegel alleges the musical work captures the listener. This musical engagement effects a conversion in the audience and in the reader. In fact Socrates' statement indicates that a purification has been achieved, a healing of Socrates' friends and by implication a healing of his engaged readers.<sup>25</sup> This healing is the conversion to the life of philosophy. It follows directly from the silence of the dialogue and from Socrates' practice of philosophy as the greatest music.

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## Endnotes

- 1 *Apology* 38a: "And if again I say that to talk every day about virtue and the other things about which you hear me talking and examining myself and others is the greatest good to man, and that the unexamined life is not worth living, you will believe me still less."
- 2 Ann Hartle has argued that Phaedo's report is deceptive and that in fact Phaedo is not a disinterested spectator and conceals Socrates' own fear of death (Hartle, 32-34).
- 3 This point is made by many commentators, notably Gadamer, 11.
- 4 Burger, 8.
- 5 Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 78.(in the following GdT)
- 6 Nietzsche, GdT, 81.
- 7 Nietzsche, GdT, 82.
- 8 Nietzsche, GdT, 95.
- 9 Bostock is an example of an exposition which seems entirely and exclusively interested in Plato's arguments. He fails to discuss this reference to charms altogether. A more sophisticated attitude is found in Frede (Frede, 64), who draws attention to the ironic context and to the childish nature of the fear. Frede suggests that Socrates "defends himself against this ambivalent compliment" to be the best charmer by referring to the presence of competent people among the Greeks and the barbarians. But Socrates also suggests that nothing should be spared to "search through all of them" and he also suggests that the interlocutors themselves are in an even better positions to become such charmers and alleviate their own fears. In my view Frede's point indicates the context of a productive interpretation by bringing intentions and outcomes of the three arguments which are coming to a stop here into view. She writes: "A proof in the narrow sense is not in Plato's intention, as the emphasis of the mere relationship between the changeless and the intelligible shows. Socrates is far from suggesting that the soul is 'almost' an idea and therefore eternal and immortal. Plato is rather intending to emphasise the relationship between the soul with the things that enable the best possible life, that is to emphasise the understanding of the ontological dichotomy between sensuality and intelligibility and to emphasise the necessity to concentrate on the latter" (73, *my translation*) and later: "With these considerations Plato has in the first instance illuminated conditions and has made clear that the question, if death is the end of all things, depends on the nature of the soul. These three proofs also show progress insofar as it becomes clear that it is not mere life, but the good life which is the basis for the question of immortality" (76, *my translation*). Broecker refers to a certainty (*Gewissheit*) that is required in order to sustain Platonic philosophy. In his discussion of this point in the text, Broecker notes—as other commentators have—that "the proof does not succeed and even Plato himself seems aware of this fact. It is an attempt, but even if it failed, Plato maintains that it was on the right track and it does not follow that the attempt was not taken seriously, but that one must repeat it and continue on this path until one reaches the aim. Somehow, Plato thinks, it must be possible to build a bridge

from the certainty about the existence of the forms to the certainty of the immortality of the soul." (Broecker, 183, *my translation*). While this seems correct, the question remains what this certainty is and how it is grounded. As I try to show in this paper the certainty sought may well be a musical - not a propositional certainty. The propositional, argumentative certainty is never convincingly attained in the dialogue. Does this mean, that attempts to pursue it are useless? Clearly not as Socrates points out in the discussion about *misologia* since failure of an argument may indicate two things: the failure of the argument alone or an insufficient condition of those who conceive it. Philosophy as it is outlined in the *Phaedo* is primarily concerned with the latter and thus arguments (Broecker is right in this) need to be repeated.

- 10 See also Brann, 18
- 11 See Hartle, 20 who argues that "the arguments for the immortality of the soul are not very good arguments, and, since Socrates himself refutes them within the dialogue, we can infer that Socrates is aware of their weakness."
- 12 Reale (1996), 67 points to a musical analogy in his discussion of the formal separation of the first and second part of the dialogue: "The themes under consideration occupy almost half of the work, however, they are followed by a spiraling repetition, be it on the level of argument, be it on the level of mythical representation and ethical reflection. Plato separates the first from the second part with a magnificent intermezzo (84c-91d) which one can read and appreciate like an intermezzo of a great musical work. It is constituted by four phases, two poetic ones and two conceptual ones: the metaphor of the most beautiful song of the swans before their death, symbol for the last word of Socrates about the immortality of the soul before his death (84c-85d), the theoretical doubt by Simmias and Cebes (85e-88b); the metaphor of the cutting of Phaedo's hair as a sign of grief should the repetition of the argument miss its aim (88c-89c); finally the encouragement by Socrates to trust reason, to avoid rejection of reason and skepticism while understanding perfectly well that one must be able to justify the limits of one's possibilities (89c-91c)."
- 13 Hesiod, *Theogony*, 24-30.
- 14 Nietzsche, *Human-All-too-Human*, Book I. Aphorism 483.
- 15 Aristotle, *de Anima* 407 b31, see also Gottschalk, 182.
- 16 *Symposium*, 187b 4.
- 17 *Republic*, 398-400.
- 18 Heidegger's discussion of *harmonia* in the context of Heraclitean fragments is relevant here: "Alas, the essential aspect of *harmonia* is not its relationship with sound and tone but the *armos*, the connection (*Fuge*), that through which one fits into the other, when both fits into the connection so that there is a connection" (Heidegger, 141, *my translation*).
- 19 See particularly Gentzler, 266, Bostock, 169 and Bailey, 96-97 who discusses the use of this word in Plato's *Cratylus*, 436 d1 ff.
- 20 Bostock, 170 makes this clear when he states: "Indeed if we use the word 'consequence' strictly, to mean what follows by logic alone, then most hypotheses—taken just by themselves—have no interesting consequences at all. What we normally have in mind when we speak of the consequences of a hypothesis are not strictly consequences of that hypothesis by itself, but consequences which follow from it together with other things that we believe anyway."
- 21 Bostock's translation of this sentence seems clearer than Fowler: "You wouldn't jumble things as the contradiction-mongers do, by discussing the starting-point and its consequences at the same time, if, that is, you wanted to discover anything" (Bostock, 167).
- 22 Pythagoras' experiments with a monochord are said to have resulted in the discovery of the relationship between perfect intervals and proportions of string-lengths as articulated by simple numerical proportions, ie. Octave 1:2; Fifth 2:3, Fourth 3:4, etc.
- 23 A Heideggerian "*Fuge*" or jointure.



- 24 Hegel, 154/55.
- 25 Madison makes the point that Socrates' statement refers to the first person plural ("we owe a cock") (Madison, 430) indicating that Socrates is not referring to his own healing and is thus not—contrary to Nietzsche's interpretation in Aphorism 340 of the *Gay Science*—denigrating our physical existence. In fact the "we" refers to Socrates and his friends and acknowledges that a collective healing or conversion has been achieved. It continues to refer to the second person singular ("pay the debt and don't be careless."). The latter part of the statement in fact refers to an individual (Crito or anyone else) and admonishes this person not to be careless with his own life, but to pursue the life of philosophy. For Madison this "last phrase is the anthem of Socrates' philosophical mission, the best advice he had to give, indeed the fruit of his wisdom: Do not be careless with your life, purify yourselves and give thanks to the god of healing for his assistance in your conversion" (Madison, 435).

