

Connections between Theory and Practice of Music in Augustine

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**Conexões entre
teoria e prática
da música em Agostinho**

**Conexiones entre
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de la música en Agustín**

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Abstract

This article explores two types of connection between theory and practice of music in Augustinian philosophical thought. On a first account, during the early writings of this African author, especially in the dialogue *De Musica*, there is a disconnection between musical and the practice of music, in the sense that, while the former leads human beings to the spiritual, the latter fosters us to stay in the material realm. In his later writings, for example, in *Enarrationes in Psalm*, Augustine describes the practice of music through his sign theory, forming the second account of connection. In such description, he points out that the semantic content of the musical signs is done at the same time, being pragmatic. In this way, the rational encounter of what music actually means is transformed into practice: in the convergence of theory and practice of music. Finally, the article was made as a result of the doctoral research in Philosophy in Complutense University of Madrid.

Keywords

Saint Augustine; music; sign theory; musical science

Resumo

Este artigo explora dois tipos de relações entre a teoria e a prática da música no pensamento filosófico de Agostinho. Nas suas primeiras obras, especialmente no diálogo *De Música*, durante os escritos deste filósofo africano, existe uma desconexão entre a teoria e a prática musical, no sentido de que, enquanto a primeira conduz os indivíduos para o aspecto espiritual, a prática musical os ancora no mundo material. Em seus escritos posteriores, por exemplo, em *Enarrationes in Psalm*, Agostinho descreve a prática da música por meio de sua teoria dos signos, formando a segunda relação de conexão. Nesse quadro, ele enfatiza que o conteúdo semântico dos signos musicais não apenas carrega significado ao mesmo tempo, mas também serve a um propósito pragmático. Nesse sentido, a compreensão racional da importância da música passa por uma transformação rumo à prática: no alinhamento entre teoria e prática musical. Finalmente, o artigo é resultado da pesquisa de Doutorado em Filosofia, cursado na Universidade Complutense de Madri.

Palavras-chave

Santo Agostinho; música; teoria dos signos; ciência da música

Resumen

Este artículo explora dos tipos de relaciones entre la teoría y la práctica de la música en el pensamiento filosófico de Agustín. En sus obras tempranas, especialmente en el diálogo *De Musica*, durante los escritos de este filósofo africano, existe una desconexión entre la teoría y la práctica musical, en el sentido que, mientras el primero guía a los individuos hacia el ámbito espiritual, la práctica musical los ancla en el mundo material. En sus escritos posteriores, por ejemplo, en *Enarrationes in Psalm*, Agustín describe la práctica de la música a través de su teoría de los signos, formando la segunda relación de conexión. En este marco, él enfatiza que el contenido semántico de los signos musicales no solo lleva significado al mismo tiempo, cumple un propósito pragmático. En este sentido, la comprensión racional de la importancia de la música experimenta una transformación hacia la práctica: en la alineación entre la teoría y la práctica musical. Finalmente, el artículo es resultado de investigación de Doctorado en Filosofía, cursado en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Palabras clave

San Agustín; música; teoría de los signos; ciencia musical

Introduction

From the beginning of his intellectual work until his last writings, Augustine of Hippo became interested in reflecting on music. Though he referred to these matters in a systematic way only in his early works, which is the case of the dialogues *De Ordine* (386) and *De Musica* (390), some allusions, remarks, and musicological and philosophical descriptions about these subjects are found throughout his last works, particularly in *Confessionum* (397-401), *De Doctrina Christina* (397-427), *De Civitate Dei* (412-427), and *Enarrationes in Psalms* (392-420).

Even though the subject of music was a great concern for this African author all throughout his literary production, this does not entail that his approach was always rooted from the same perspective. On the contrary, Augustine approached the matter from two different theoretical frameworks: on one hand, in the early writings, he understood music through the distinction between musical science and practical music, embedded in the definition of the *Liberal Arts*. On the other hand, in subsequent writings, he became interested in studying practical music under his sign theory.

Both perspectives describe the manner in which human beings can reach the spiritual world through music (i.e., the anagogic function of music). According to the first, by unfolding the musical science, reason captures the immaterial structures that lie beneath any material organization of sounds; and in accordance with the second, human beings access immaterial world through the musical signs and their meanings.

This change in the perspective from which music is analyzed conveys, at the same time, a change in the manner in which music accomplishes its anagogic function. This is why, in this paper, I want to show that the change in the approach to music also activates a different way for establishing the relation between theory and practice. In that way, I will show specifically that, from the first perspective, music performs an anagogic function only through reasoning; whereas from the second, such function is also accomplished in the musical practice. In fact,

based on the sign theory, Augustine understands that musical practice is, by itself, a practice of virtues that is part of the path towards a superior world.

Moreover, I will develop this argument in three different sections. In the first one, I will make a brief description of the anagogic function of the theory of music, within the outline of the *Liberal Arts*; in the second one, I will show how the emission of a sign finds its justification in charity, centered on the Augustinian sign theory; and, in the third one, I will focus on the way Augustine describes the musical practices through the sign theory and how they are associated to charity.

The musical science

In the dialogues *De Musica* and *De Ordine*, Augustine describes the way in which human beings access to the spiritual world by means of music. He defines this process within the neoplatonic coordinates as the return of the soul towards its origin, to the One, to God. The path follows the general sequence that begins with a sensitive contact with the material world and walks in the direction to the immaterial world: *Per corporalia ad incorporalia*. In this transit, he distinguishes between two types of music: practical music, which consists in the use, delight, and emission of sounds (material aspect of music); and theoretical music, which deals with the rational study of the stable and immaterial structures that organize sounds in such a way that they constitute a beautiful work. Augustine carefully examines the latter, since it takes him closer to the immaterial world.

Augustine defines the musical science in the following manner: “*Musica est scientia bene modulandi*” (*De mus. I.II.2*). In the dialogue *De Musica*, he analyzes one by one the components of the definition¹ and shows the reasons or proportions (i.e., mathematical harmony) that make the musical works beautiful and the principle from which they start, the principle of unity. Moreover, he shows how

¹ Augustine dedicates the first part of the first book *De Musica* to the analysis of the definition (*De mus. I. II. 3 — VI. 12*)

the discovery of such proportions and principles fulfills the function of encouraging the soul to return to such fields. We can break down this development into the following steps:

1. From metrics to mathematics: a) reduction of metrical figures (duration of words) into rhythmical figures (numeric measures of duration), b) discovery of mathematical proportions between durations, and c) discovery that beauty lies under the proportions of equality which, at the time, have origin in the unity;
2. Discovery of the presence of numbers and proportion in the human soul (interiority);
3. Discovery of a transcendent principle of a unit inside the soul, as a principle that allows perceiving and understanding the entities as a unit and as aesthetic objects able to produce beauty.

This path illustrates the anagogic function fulfilled by music. The first step shows disdain for the material world and the elevation from sounds towards numbers; consequently, the step two shows the path of interiority that is necessary to find the origin of the principles of beauty; lastly, the step three shows the encounter with the unity, a transcendent principle that operates as a condition of possibility in the constitution of every single entity as it is, as well as the aesthetic experience as a means to perceive —remember, produce, achieve— every object as one and as beautiful.

Let us specify two characteristics of this path. On one side, in this outline, beauty has a rational structure: the unit is a mathematical-ontological structure, and harmony is displayed in numerical sequences. Beauty does not have content; it is postulated as rational restrictions, as organization criteria.²

By virtue of the rational character of music, the musician discovers the structures of beauty by means of the use of reasoning. Though beauty can be experienced by the sensitivity under the

mode of pleasurable experience, the encounter with the last principle is always of a rational type. Only the rational encounter of this principle may be used as a reliable criterion for the organization of sound matter, and only this encounter provides long lasting happiness.

A musician is, in this vein of thought, the person who has an intelligible world by perspective, development and occupation: he is the individual immersed in the intelligibility and he is the one in charge of musical theory, of the science. Therefore, he is closer to the truth and eternity. On the other hand, instrumentalists and singers are those who set their attention on the material world, on the emission of sounds. Then, the musical practice must be transcended, even abandoned, if one does not want to take the risk of falling into a disorganized delight. They are in an ontological world different from the intelligible realm; which is why they are not valued in the ascending process to the superior world. The musicians are close to being humanized, as they become close to the rational and intelligible world, whereas instrumentalists and singers end up being comparable to animals, since they renounce such immateriality (*De mus.* I. IV. 6).

Furthermore, it could be said that, even though the principle of beauty is transcendent, human beings find it in their interior, in their soul. The anagogic path that is transited through the musical science is, then, a path of interiority, whose goal is the contemplation of the interior unity. Despite the fact that this principle is in the soul, it is universal, which means that it exists, it can be reached, and it is shared by all of mankind. However, the anagogic path displayed in the musical science is an individual path; this is, it neither involves nor implies the participation of others in each musician's journey. The other human beings might appear only as interlocutors in the dialectical reasoning practice embedded in the process of returning to interiority.

Nevertheless, in the musical science outline, the anagogic function is achieved through the road of dialectic-rational display until the interior contemplation of rational beauty principles is achieved. The

² For this, Ellsmere, P.K., and La Croix, R. (1988) state that the Augustinian aesthetic music has a formal type.

practical music is appointed either as a departure point of the road, since in its pleasure is experienced, or as an object in which the rational principles are all applied. There are no signs that show that this setting accomplishes by itself an anagogic function.

The *Locutio* in the framework of the sign theory

Augustine points out that a sign by itself is a material thing (*res*) that directs those who perceive it towards something different from themselves, towards a meaning: “*Signum est enim res, praeter speciem quam ingerit sensibus, aliud aliquid ex se faciens in cogitationem venire*” (*De doct. Chr.* II.I.1). Now, besides the existence of signs that are not produced with an intention, human beings produce signs with the purpose of expressing outwardly an interior knowledge, a content of the soul, thus somebody else can know it. The porpoise of signs is to show something outwardly (*docere*): “*Nec ulla causa est nobis significandi, id est signi dandi, nisi ad depro-mendum et traiciendum in alterius animum id quod animo gerit is qui signum dat*” (*De doct. Chr.* II.I.1).³

To understand the character attributed to musical practice under the sign theory, it is necessary to go deeper into the decisive justification of sign emission (*locutio*) since it is in this domain where the search for beauty becomes action. Then, it is necessary for Augustine to justify the intention of —the motivation— for letting others know what we have inside.

Beyond merely having the *locutio* serve as a support for social organization, the justification given by Augustine starts by considering the sign's role in the process of knowledge, until they reach the realm of the ethical need. It is in this realm that they find the foundation for their emissions.

If we take into account the skeptical criticism, which states that nothing is ever learned by means of the signs (Sexto Empírico, 1997, I.IV.38), some

critics question Augustine about the need for the emission of signs with the purpose of achieving knowledge. If nothing can be learned from the signs, what is the sign useful for in this process? (*De doct. Chr.*, Prologue, 6) In *De Magistro* Augustine outlines that, even though nothing can be learned by means of the signs, these cause individuals to remember (*commemorare*) and incite them to look for the unknown; both movements advance toward the interior, where the truth can be found. In this way, the knowledge achieved by means of the signs constitutes, as referred by Rist (1944), a second-hand knowledge, prior to that given first-hand, which is the one obtained by direct vision, by divine illumination (Rist, 1994, p. 31).

Nevertheless, the matter is not clear yet, since the critics indicate that if knowledge is eventually reached by illumination, this is, by an interior vision of the divine word, then the signs might not be required whatsoever. In the terms that such discussion is held, the critics ask: Why does not God reveal knowledge to human beings directly instead of confusing them in linguistic, social, and cultural structures that, though having been erected with this goal, are not enough in the end? (*De doct. Chr.*, Prologue, 6).

The context and the terms in which this subject is settled force us to go into sign arguments and descriptions, supported by the Jewish-Christian root assumed by Augustine. As Pollman points out, the Augustinian treatment of the signs is not only supported in its skeptic and stoic heritage, but also takes elements from this other mentioned tradition (Pollman, 2005, p. 16).

Augustine accepts that God might have settled the human condition in such a way that knowledge would not have been mediated by the communicative acts among human beings; however, he proposes that, even though God could have established it in this manner, He preferred that human mediation exist in this process, “*Et poterant utique omnia per angelum fieri, sed abiecta esset humana condicio si per homines hominibus Deus verbum suum ministrare nolle videretur*” (*De doct. Chr.*, Prologue, 6). Hence,

³ Augustine distinguishes between natural signs (*naturalia*) and data (*data*). The former are those that appear without being produced voluntarily, like smoke from fire; the latter are produced with an intention (*De doct. Chr.* II.I.1).

the question is addressed to inquire why the human mediation (*ministrare*) is relevant; in short, why the *locutio* is relevant: the act of communicating, learning and teaching one another.

After failing to find a decisive justification in a theory of knowledge, Augustine's answer is displaced into the ethical domain. The reason for this is, says the African author, that if there was no exchange of signs among human beings there would not be place for charity: "*Deinde ipsa caritas, quae sibi homines invicem nodo unitatis astringit, non haberet aditum refundendorum et quasi miscendorum sibimet animorum, si homines per homines nihil discerent*" (*ibid*). After all, the decisive reason of the *locutio* is that charity emerges in it, and the signs, at the same time manifest this. Charity, as Augustine outlines, motivates us to confess what we hold in the inside (*De f. et symb.* I.1; *C. mendacium.* VI. 14).

The above mentioned is one of the ways in which Augustine develops the idea according to which there would be a necessary and reciprocal relationship between truth and charity,⁴ in such a way that one follows the other. To find the truth and the desire to live in it, is something that leads us mandatorily to live the charity; on the other hand, only by way of charity may the truth be achieved. In fact, Augustine understands that God is reached, not only by interior contemplation, but also by charity practice. Therefore, after finding the truth in the interior, the next step is to put it into practice, by means, for example, of the emission of signs —among other ways to experience charity.⁵ A sign expresses outwardly what we have in our interior. Such expression is, by itself, an expression of charity. The emergence of charity allows Augustine to distinguish between two types of using the signs: either to govern or dominate others or to help them reach the spiritual world.

4 Relationship that has its origin in the Holy Trinity (*De Trin.* IX-XI; XV)

5 The book *The Faith* and the other works as well as *Of the Spirit and the letter* are oriented to show that faith works through love. It is a recurring theme in Augustine (*De f. et symb.* I.1ss; *De f. et op.* XIV. 21; XXII. 40) Such a link simultaneously is a fruit of the Trinity unity (*De Trin.* Books IX, X, XI; XV).

Musical signs in the relation between theory and practice

Allusions to the symbolism of musical instruments appear in the Augustinian texts at the beginning of the decade of 392, in the commentary about Psalm 32. Though it had been announced since that year, the inclusion of music in the conceptual domain was done afterwards, approximately in 397 in *Confessionum* and in the first books of *De Doctrina Christiana*. However, the strongest description of this sort is found in the period ranging from 410 to 416, when he develops the subject of the symbolism of instruments and vocal forms through the exercise of commenting on the psalms 34, 46, 67, 72, 87, 91, 99, 103, 105, 106, 122, 123, 130, 137, 143, 146, 148, 149, and 150. With such developments, Augustine is inscribed, at the time, in the patristic tradition that interprets the biblical text and, within this framework, attempts to define a sense and kind of relationship of the believer with the musical matter.⁶

In *Enarrationes in Psalms*, Augustine analyses the musical signs from a double relationship: signifier-signified (semantic function of signs) and signs-agents (pragmatic function). In this way, in a first exercise, he presents the meaning of musical signs (organ, flutes, drums, zither, psaltery), some forms (chants oh hymns, psalms and alleluias) and vocal structures (the choir). Similarly, he indicates the utility of instrument practice and singing and the relation that must be established between them and those who listen and execute them. In this second relationship, he highlights the description of forms and vocal structures, since these are the most used in liturgy (Mckinnon, 1965, p. 5). For this reason, in this writing, I will briefly focus on these last elements. I will attempt to show that the description of the signified (semantic function) implies an experience of who participates in the singing (pragmatic function).

6 The religious allegorism of music has been widely described by the academics of this period. In this respect, the studies by Theodore Gèrôld (1973), Solange Corbin (1962) and James Mckinnon (1968) are a good source of work. See references of this work.

Augustine took part in the Ambrosian hymns singing practice. Afterwards he took time to describe and define them:

Hymnus scitis quid est? Cantus est cum laude Dei. Si laudas Deum, et non cantas, non dicis hymnum: si cantas, et non laudas Deum, non dicis hymnum: si laudas aliud quod non pertinet ad laudem Dei, etsi cantando laudes, non dicis hymnum. Hymnus ergo tria ista habet, et cantum, et laudem, et Dei. (Enarr. in. psalm. 148. 17)

In this definition, it may be observed that the conditions under which a hymn is defined are not technical, but rather they refer to an inner experience. In this way, the exterior sign, the hymn, is constituted by an internal state. The sign expresses such state. Therefore, singing the hymn is the expression of the adherence to a faith and the intention to let it know (praise).

The Alleluia chant provides an additional element. As described by Augustine, the most relevant musical characteristic of this chant consists in prolonging in a *melisma* form the last letter “a” of the word alleluia.⁷ This prolongation or *iubilatio* manifests interior happiness:

Qui iubilat, non verba dicit, sed sonus quidam est laetitiae sine verbis: vox est enim animi diffusi laetitiae, quantum potest, exprimentis affectum, non sensum comprehendentis. Gaudens homo in exultatione sua, ex verbis quibusdam quae non possunt dici et intellegi, erumpit in vocem quamdam exultationis sine verbis; ita ut appareat eum ipsa voce gaudere quidem, sed quasi repletum nimio gaudio, non posse verbis explicare quod Gaudet. (Enarr. in. psalm. 99. 4)

Such happiness would not be a psychological but rather an ontological state: The happiness of the individual, who finds the truth and dwells on it, lives the present existence anticipating the future life. In this context, it is the experience of life through hope. The alleluia chant is the expression of one who lives the hope of a future life of perpetual joy (Enarr. in.

psalm. 123. 3). For such joy, there are no meaningful words, thus it can be expressed only through a vowel.

On the other side, the psalm is described by Augustine as the chant in which, apart from confessing the truth made by the mouth when singing, the confession is also made through the works: “*quicumque manibus operatur opera bona, psallit Deo; quicumque ore confitetur, cantat Deo. Canta ore, psalle operibus*” (Enarr. in. psalm. 91. 3). Psalm and psaltery chants make up one single unit in human life, as constituted by the truth that dwells on the inside and the works carried out on the outside by virtue of charity. The two elements, faith and charity, are necessary, both in the way that adherence to truth leads to charity works, and in the way that works must be supported by faith: “*Caeterum qui non habent caritatem, portare psalterium possunt, cantare non possunt*” (Enarr. in. psalm. 143. 16.). The descriptions about the psalms insist that the adherence to the truth implies the practice of charity.

The choir is, eventually, a unity sign based on charity: “*Chorus est consensio cantantium. Si in choro cantamus, concorditer cantemus. In choro cantantium quisquis voce discrepauerit, offendit auditum, et perturbat chorum*” (Enarr. in. psalm. 149. 7).

Let us examine this subject. The choir is a structure where all the members become one in the chant, where they achieve harmony. However, it is not Augustine’s concern to define what this unity and harmony are from a technical-musical point of view. On the contrary, his descriptions are again made in the domain of the signified. In this way, the choir unity and harmony mean that the singers have the same idea in their inside: unity is the unity of what exists in the soul; such shared idea is signified by means of the choir chant.

On the other hand, the commentary to Psalm 87 points out that the singers’ idea that must be shared in order to have unity and harmony in the chant. Like in *The city of God*, where the only city where harmony would exist is the one grounded on charity, the only unity that entails harmony in the choir is the one offered by charity: “*Chorus autem concordiam significat, quae in caritate consistit*” (Enarr. in. ps. 87. 1).

⁷ In music a melisma is referred as the prolonged singing of a vowel.

As we have highlighted, the signs are emitted in a way that others can know the internal truths. With this, there is participation in the choir, thus others know what the chant means. But this meaning is, at the same time, a life experience. Love is signified in it, but only by loving can one participate in it. Therefore, in the choir, the signified becomes practice. The signified charity becomes practice in the music. The expressed sense is a lived sense; the semantic content becomes pragmatic content⁸. Under this premise, Augustine exhorts the listeners to live the psalm chant: “*et si [psalmo] orat psalmus, orate; et si gemit, gemite; et si gratulatur, gaudete; et si sperat, sperate; et si timet, timete. Omnia enim quae hic conscripta sunt, speculum nostrum sunt*” (*Enarr. in ps. 30. II. III. 1.*). The musical practice is, in brief, a type of sign whose meaning is embedded in the execution per se. Therefore, for such vocal forms to appear, it is necessary that those who chant have once experienced faith, hope, and charity; and, at the same time, live up to these practical demands of the virtues—in this case, the chant.

In this way, musical practice is no longer a source of pleasure, nor is it the place that must be proclaimed by external rational principles. It goes beyond that; it is the expression, per se, of the content of the soul. It is the realization of what the soul has internally achieved. Internal content and external practice become necessarily merged.

Provisional Conclusions

Let us close this paper emphasizing the possibilities that sign theory, applied to the liturgical chant, opens concerning music’s anagogic function.

The first outline states that theoretical music is the only one that can take human beings closer to the spiritual world and that this is done through interiority. The external direction, towards the practice, would consist in pointing out that he, who has found the principles of beauty, arranges his musical practice moved by the principle of the rational unity. In

this context, though there is a connection between the exterior and the interior, where the former is a manifestation of the latter, the movement to the external world is not conceived under an anagogic function but merely as an arrangement of the inferior world in alignment with what is superior.

The second perspective brings in a new element: since the chant expresses charity and *is* charity in practice, it opens a way or road to reach God. Therefore, aside from the necessary encounter with the truth, an external path is required on the anagogic road; charity put into practice: the musical practice. Contemplation and action come together, and the exterior and interior paths join under this function. Thus, the musical practice acquires here new sense and value.

This opening embodies a change for the agents that intervene in music. While in the first outline, the musician, as the one dedicated to theory, was the only one able to return, in the second the singer, through his practice, attains the divine. Now he is conceived as the one who exteriorizes by means of signs—musicals—the true interior word in order to communicate it to others, and in that exteriorization, he lives the signified.

Nevertheless, in the sign theory, Augustine reconciles music theory and practice. He reconciles the encounter of the interior truth with its external manifestation, moved by charity, thus both movements are conceived now as a road to the divine. This was not a subject that was included in the approach given in the Liberal Arts framework.

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⁸ In this regard, Cameron (2001, p. 458) points out that “The psalter is not only informative but also performative”.

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