

“How Pythagoras Cured by Music”: Pythagorean Music in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*

KIMBERLY D. HEIL

Interpretive schemata for reading Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* are plentiful. Some of the more popular of those schema read the work along the divided line from Plato’s *Republic*, taking as programmatic the passage from Book Five in which Boethius discusses the ways in which man comes to know through sensation first, then imagination, then reason, and finally understanding.¹ Others read the work as Mneppian Satire because of its prosimetron format. Some scholars study character development in the

KIMBERLY D. HEIL is a PhD candidate in Philosophy at the Institute of Philosophic Studies at the University of Dallas; she received a BA in Philosophy from the University of Nebraska at Kearney and an MA in Philosophy from the University of South Florida. She is currently a Wojtyła Graduate Teaching Fellow at the University of Dallas, where she teaches core curriculum philosophy classes. She is writing a dissertation on the relationship between philosophy and Christianity in Augustine of Hippo’s *De Beata Vita*.

The title of this piece is taken from a section subtitle in the work *The Life of Pythagoras* by the second-century Neopythagorean Iamblichus.

¹ See, for instance, McMahon, *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent*, 215. He references two other similar but competing interpretations using the same methodology.

work as it echoes Platonic-style dialogues. Still others approach the work as composed of several books, each representing a distinct school of philosophy.² Furthermore, seeing it as an eclectic mixture of propositions from various schools of philosophy re-purposed and molded to suit Boethius’s own needs, regardless of the literary form and patterns, is commonly agreed upon in the secondary literature. However, a lacuna is apparent in the lack of attention paid to one particular, historically significant school of philosophy in its influence on Boethius, that of the Pythagoreans.

In this paper, I will examine the musical elements of Boethius’s *Consolation* as they reflect certain Pythagorean teachings familiar to Boethius, drawing primarily on the biography of Pythagoras written by the second-century Neopythagorean Iamblichus. First, I will provide an initial justification for seeing these elements—which are variously identified in secondary literature as Platonic, Aristotelian, Stoic, and/or Augustinian—as Pythagorean. Although these Pythagorean elements may have been mediated through other philosophical schools, there is sufficient justification that Boethius would have been familiar with these ideas as Pythagorean, and he may have drawn them directly from Pythagorean sources. I will then examine the opening prose of Books One through Four to see how Lady Philosophy’s use of music reflects Pythagorean teachings on the use of music.

There are a number of possible reasons for the neglect of Pythagorean influence in Boethius in general. Many of the elements can be found in other, later philosophies. Much of Pythagoreanism was variously absorbed by Plato, Aristotle, Middle Platonic, and Neoplatonic schools, Stoicism, and early Christian philosophers such as Justin Martyr and Augustine. Often, the transition of an idea from its Pythagorean roots to the later philosophies was mediated multiple times, as with many of Augustine’s ideas that were from Augustine’s immediate Platonist sources. Furthermore, Pythagoras himself was an oral teacher; it is thought he may have written and delivered a couple of speeches, and perhaps penned some poetry under the name Orpheus, but he did not leave any dialogues, philosophical treatises, or other written

² See for example, respectively, Payne, *Chaucer and Mneppian Satire*, 55–85; Curley, “How to Read the *Consolatio*,” 222–243, and Crabbe, “Literary Design in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*,” 237–274.

documentation of his own teachings.³ Rather, we have only what is told by his followers several generations removed, and much of what is found in those writings is conflicting.⁴

However, there are reasons justifying my identification of these elements as particularly Pythagorean. For one thing, Boethius was familiar with Pythagorean thought. He translated two works by Nicomachus, a Neopythagorean of the second century A.D: his treatise on arithmetic (*De institutione arithmetica*) and his textbook on music (*De institutione musica*).⁵ Also, it has been suggested that by the time Boethius was writing in the early sixth century, Pythagoras's reputation and influence in the Greek philosophical tradition was widely recognized.⁶ People knew that, for instance, the main character in the *Timaeus* of Plato was patterned after Timaeus of Locri, a Pythagorean, and the *Timaeus* was the most popular of Plato's dialogues during Boethius's time.⁷ Not only was Boethius familiar with Pythagorean ideas, but his audience was also attuned to their presence in philosophical discussions of the day.

What seems to be the clearest reason, however, for thinking that Boethius was intentionally drawing on Pythagorean thought in his *Consolation* is that the primary element of Pythagoreanism that appears, the use of music as a medicine by Lady Philosophy, is one of the elements of Pythagorean thought with which Boethius was most familiar, since he had translated the work on music by Nicomachus. Furthermore, he incorporated that work into his own textbook on arithmetic.⁸ It is true that Boethius would have been familiar with Plato's discussion about music in the *Republic*, where Socrates identifies the effects different kinds of music have on the soul and the uses for which music is proper—or, at least, Boethius cites the *Republic* elsewhere in the *Consolation*. However, this does not outweigh the strength of Boethius's familiarity with the use of music primarily through Pythagoras. It does not appear that Boethius would have drawn this from the other major schools whose influence can

³ Fideler, "Introduction," 19.

⁴ Fideler, "Introduction," 19.

⁵ Huffman, "The Pythagorean Tradition," 67.

⁶ See, for instance, Fideler, "Introduction," 19, and Huffman, "The Pythagorean Tradition," 66.

⁷ Frede, "Disintegration and Restoration," 432.

⁸ Guillamin, "Boethius's *De Institutione Arithmetica*," 137.

be seen in the *Consolation*. It is not a particularly Stoic doctrine, and certainly not one well-known among Stoics. Diogenes of Babylon, a Stoic of the second century BC, composed treatises on music that incline towards the use of music in taming the passions that are quoted by Philodemus, a later Epicurean, but the texts have been lost.⁹ Although music is part of Augustine’s liberal arts education, and in his treatise *De musica* he defends the use of music as leading the intellectually strong and morally pure Christian to a height of love of God, he is famous for not having been particularly keen on the effects of music on the passions as recorded in the *Confessions*.¹⁰

The Pythagoreans, however, regularly employed music to properly condition the passions of the soul for their ascetically virtuous life. For them, music was good not simply for elevating the soul to contemplation of God—although it could serve that purpose—nor was music only indicative of the proper proportions in arithmetic, as ordered towards a cosmology—although this is a part of what Pythagoreans gleaned from their work with music.¹¹ Neither did they approach the study of music and its effects as a merely theoretical exercise. One of the things Pythagoras is most noted for having left to his followers was a regimen of life that was still followed centuries later.¹² The initial consideration of a Pythagorean seeking to live that life was through a prescription of music and other medicines to purify their body and soul. As Iamblichus, a biographer of Pythagoras, wrote in the third century:

Pythagoras conceived that the first attention that should be given to men should be addressed to the senses, as when one perceives beautiful figures and forms, or hears beautiful rhythms and melodies. Consequently he laid down that the first erudition was

⁹ Dorandi, “Chronology,” 50. See also DeLacy, “Stoic Views of Poetry,” 246–248.

¹⁰ Augustine, *De musica* 6.1.1; Augustine, *Confessions*, 226.

¹¹ See Fideler, “Introduction,” and Huffman, “The Pythagorean Tradition.”

¹² And not the Pythagorean theorem! Until relatively recently, Pythagoras was primarily noted for being an expert in religion and religious practices, having led an extremely ascetic lifestyle based on his beliefs in metempsychosis, and there are legends about his capacity to perform miracles. Pythagorean emphasis on music and arithmetic was a later development; early Pythagoreans were more concerned with ethics and religion. See Huffman, “Pythagoras.”

that which subsists through music's melodies and rhythms, and from these he obtained remedies of human manners and passions, and restored the pristine harmony of the faculties of the soul.¹³

This was accompanied by medicines meant also for diseases of the body as "preparations" for the soul, and Pythagoras is reported as having used particular harmonies both morning and night for his followers to "liberate them from the day's perturbations and tumults."¹⁴ These melodies also attuned the Pythagorean to the orbits of the celestial spheres, helping to raise him to "comprehend the first and genuine archetypes of things" seen in the spheres.¹⁵

Certain melodies, Iamblichus also writes, "were devised as remedies against . . . despondency and lamentation."¹⁶ This appears to be exactly what Lady Philosophy is doing in Boethius's *Consolation*. She applies music and melody regularly—at the opening and in the course of each of the first four books—in an effort to calm Boethius's passions and to cultivate within his soul the capacity to ascend to proper knowledge of the order of the cosmos and contemplation of God. She refers to these uses of song as medicines for what ails him, which is the same language Iamblichus uses to describe Pythagoras's use of music as a medicine, and the role music plays in the daily lives of those living a Pythagorean lifestyle. Lady Philosophy's first words to Boethius remonstrate and banish Muses who were cultivating Boethius's grief from his bedside: "Who let these theatrical tarts in with this sick man? Not only have they no cures for his pain, but with their sweet poison they make it worse . . . Leave him to *my* Muses to care for and restore to health."¹⁷ Far from a common Stoic position in which one detaches from emotions in order to live in harmony with nature and become godlike,¹⁸ Lady Philosophy is

¹³ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

¹⁴ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

¹⁵ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

¹⁶ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 85.

¹⁷ Boethius, *Consolation*, 135, emphasis in translation.

¹⁸ See, for example, Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, §15: "Remember, you must behave as you do at a banquet. Something is passed around and comes to you: reach out your hand politely and take some. It goes by: do not hold it back. It has not arrived yet: do not stretch your desire out toward it, but wait until it comes to you. In the same way toward your children, in the

advising Boethius to cultivate his passions with proper care, and by doing so, return to health.

To make this claim about the Pythagorean elements of music in the *Consolation* is not the only possible stance on Boethius’s influence. In his essay “Philosophy of Music in the *Consolatio* of Boethius,” David Chamberlain claims that Boethius is primarily drawing on both his Christian background and a harmonization of Aristotle and Plato in his use of music in the *Consolation*. He examines the metra of the *Consolation* for ways in which they exhibit the different kinds of music Boethius identified in *De musica*. Chamberlain sees the *Consolation* as a fulfillment of the promise Boethius made in his own treatise, *De musica*, to return to the moral aspects of music.¹⁹ Although those influences may be present—my thesis does not exclude other possible influences—Chamberlain does overlook the connection Boethius and Lady Philosophy make between music and medicine, or healing.

This theme recurs in the beginning of Books Two, Three, and Four. At the beginning of Book Two, Lady Philosophy pauses to re-examine Boethius to see if her diagnosis of his ills and her medicine were appropriate. Then, she remarks that he is prepared for a stronger medicine, the “sweet persuasiveness of rhetoric” that harmonizes “with the music native to our halls.”²⁰ She ends the book with a song about the “regular harmony” of the chain of love that binds all things. “Best of comforters of weary spirits,” the character Boethius exclaims, “how well you have revived me with the weight of your arguments and also with the delights of your songs!”²¹ When a Pythagorean underwent treatment at the hands of Pythagoras, different music and instruments were used morning and night. Pythagoras spent time first diagnosing the physical, emotional, and spiritual ills of his patient, then he implemented music, physical exercises, dietary habits and medications, and intellectual formation. As a Pythagorean lived out his prescriptions, every evening

same way toward your wife, in the same way toward public office, in the same way toward wealth, and you will be fit to share a banquet with the gods. But if when things are set in front of you, you do not take them but despise them, then you will not only share a banquet with the gods but also be a ruler along with them.” trans. White, p. 15.

¹⁹ Chamberlain, “The Philosophy of Music in the *Consolatio* of Boethius,” 83.

²⁰ Boethius, *Consolation*, 177.

²¹ Boethius, *Consolation*, 227, 229.

music was played that was intended to quiet his sleep, and in the morning he was roused from the night's torpor by "certain peculiar chords and modulations."²² Pythagoras—who was also rumored to have miracle-working powers—identified which chords, modulations, and harmonies to use by his close affinity with "sublime symphonies of the world . . . the universal harmony and consonance of the spheres."²³ Different music was seen as necessary to perform different functions, some to raise the spirits and others to calm and comfort the listener and prepare him for prophetic dreams.²⁴ Although Lady Philosophy does not seem to be seeking to arouse prophetic dreams within Boethius, she is certainly trying to raise his spirits and calm his distress in the course of the dialogue.

Book Four brings the music of Book Three to a close as the narrator praises Lady Philosophy for her "softly and sweetly singing these verses."²⁵ Book Three was intended to show Boethius what true happiness is, unity of goods in goodness itself, which is God,²⁶ and Lady Philosophy had promised to lead Boethius there.²⁷ Music, however, proves in Book Four to be limited, as are discourse and language itself.²⁸ In this respect, a Pythagorean philosophy of music is insufficient for Lady Philosophy to complete her cure of Boethius. She, like Pythagoras, needs something more; Pythagoras needed some kind of divine hand upon him to reach into the heights of the heavens to hear the music of the spheres, and he alone was held in Pythagorean tradition as having been able to do so.²⁹ Yet Lady Philosophy and Boethius are both pleased with the effect of the music on the patient as helping to lead Boethius to the "form of true blessedness."³⁰

Lady Philosophy employed music in the course of the *Consolation of Philosophy* in order to effect her cure for Boethius's ills. She was not

²² Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

²³ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

²⁴ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

²⁵ Boethius, *Consolation*, 313.

²⁶ Boethius, *Consolation*, 285.

²⁷ Boethius, *Consolation*, 229.

²⁸ Boethius, *Consolation*, 357.

²⁹ Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, 72.

³⁰ Boethius, *Consolation*, 315.

concerned with extirpating his passions, as a Stoic might, but rather with bringing Boethius's soul back into a harmony in which his passions are beneficial to his well-being. This Pythagorean understanding of the use of music, as seen in Iamblichus's *Life of Pythagoras*, is a medication employed by one who understands its use as a preparation of the soul in a holistic manner: it was beneficial for forming the passions appropriately as well as necessary for the Pythagorean to ready his soul for higher pursuits. Although other philosophical schools were interested in the use and effects of music on the soul, the Pythagorean school was most actively involved in applying this theory in their daily lives. This discovery contributes to a lacuna in the otherwise rich literature on the *Consolation*. Boethius was familiar with this Pythagorean philosophy, and employed it to good use in his *Consolation*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus. *Consolation of Philosophy*. Trans. S. J. Tester. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Chamberlain, David S. "Philosophy of Music in the *Consolatio* of Boethius." *Speculum* 45, No. 1 (Jan 1970): 80–97.
- Crabbe, Anna. "Literary Design in the *De Consolatione Philosophiae*." In *Boethius: His Life, Thought, and Influence*, ed. Margeret Gibson. Oxford: Basil Baswell, 1981. 237–274.
- Curley, Thomas F. III. "How to Read the *Consolatio*." *Interpretation* 14 (1986): 211–263.
- DeLacy, Phillip. "Stoic Views of Poetry." *American Journal of Philology* 69:3 (1948). 246–248.
- Dorandi, Tiziano. "Chronology." In *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*. Ed. Keimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfield, and Malcom Scholfield. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2008. 31–54.
- Epictetus. *The Handbook (The Enchiridion)*. Trans. Nicholas P. White. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2010.
- Fideler, David. "Introduction." *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, Ed. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie. Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988: 19–56.
- Frede, Dorothea. "Disintegration and Restoration: Pleasure and Pain in Plato's *Philebus*." In *The Cambridge Companion to Plato*. Ed. Richard Kraut. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 425–463.
- Guillaumin, Jean-Yves. "Boethius's *De Institutione Arithmetica*." In *A Companion to Boethius in the Middle Ages*. Eds. Noel Harold Kaylor and Philip Edward Phillips. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2012. 135–162.
- Huffman, Carl A. "The Pythagorean Tradition." In *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*. Ed. A. A. Long. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 66–87.

— — —. “Pythagoras.” The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.),
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2014/entries/pythagoras/>>.

Iamblichus. *The Life of Pythagoras*. In *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, Edited and Trans. Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie. Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1988: 57–121.

McMahon, Robert. *Understanding the Medieval Meditative Ascent*. Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 2006.

Payne, F. Anne. *Chaucer and Mneppian Satire*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981. 55–85.