

Music and Plutarch's Platonic Cosmos

Bram Demulder

At a symposium in Chaeronea, Plutarch's home town, the guests once had a discussion about the appropriateness of 'things heard' (*akroamata*) at dinner. Or, at least, that is what Plutarch reports in *Quaestiones convivales* (7.8), the nine-book work devoted to sympotic questions in which he often stages himself as a character.¹ Near the end of this particular discussion, the character 'Plutarch' defends the presence of lyre and aulos at the banquet on the grounds of tradition: the lyre has been around since Homer and the *aulos* is part and parcel of traditional libations. There are, however, certain restrictions. The lyre should avoid dirges and laments and stick to soothing, innocuous songs (*euphēma*). Similarly, the *aulos* is welcome as long as it 'keeps due measure, and avoids emotional display, so as not to rouse into ecstasy (*parexistas*)' (713A).² Instead of instilling anything, *aulos* and lyre should be used to calm down the part of the soul which 'has no notion of reason and no response to it' (*axynetōn logou kai anēkoon*: 713B).³ This already fairly limited endorsement of music is restricted even further when 'Plutarch' comes to his second point. In a consciously controversial statement, he bans instrumental music from the dinner table:⁴

¹ Throughout this chapter, I will use 'Plutarch' to refer to the character as distinguished from the author. On several aspects of *Quaest. conv.*, including the tensions between history and fiction and between Plutarch (the author) and 'Plutarch' (the character), see Klotz and Oikonomopoulou 2011. On music and musical terminology in *Quaest. conv.*, see Smits 1970, 82–8, García López 1999 and 2002. On *Quaest. conv.* 7.8 and how it relates to contemporary culture, see Pernigotti 2009.

² Greek texts and translations for Plutarch's works are taken from the LCL editions. I have tacitly substituted '*aulos*' for 'flute'; other modifications are indicated.

³ A similar calming effect of music is described in *De superstitione* 167B–C (with Van der Stockt 2009, 402–7); cf. also *De virtute morali* 441E on Pythagoras. In *Quaest. conv.* 7.5, on the other hand, a discussion about the dangers of arousing music ensues after an *aulos* performance has gotten out of hand; see Smits 1970, 54–7, Barker 2016 and 2018.

⁴ With the untranslated particle (οὐ) μήν, with which this passage begins, 'the character-narrator anticipates (and contradicts) the possible conclusions that his addressee(s) may draw from the facts presented earlier' (Wakker 1997, 223; cf. Denniston 1954, 28–30). Aristotle, for one, seems to allow for purely instrumental music (*Pol.* 1339b20–21). Plato's stance is more complicated. In *Leg.* 669d–670a

If I may express my own opinion, I should never commit a party to the music of *aulos* or lyre by itself without words to be sung (χωρίς λόγου και ᾠδῆς), as if it were committed to the whim of a stream on which it floats. We must form the habit, whether working or playing, of enjoying the words (*logou*) and including words (*logōi*) in our pastimes. We should regard melody and rhythm as a sauce so to speak, added to the words (*tōi logōi*), rather than use or prize them for their own sake. (713B-C; transl. modified)

A moment ago, 'Plutarch' was still recommending music for its effect on the non-rational part of the soul. Now, all of a sudden, *logos* is all he can talk about and music is radically subordinated to it. In the end, it does not even seem to matter very much whether or not words are sung: in whatever form, they should be omnipresent in our lives. These words, not the music itself, appeal to 'our rational part' (*ton en hēmin logon*: 713C). Music receives another blow in the final part of the speech. If a symposium is already entertaining through the presence of philosophical discourse – as it should be⁵ – it would be plain wrong to introduce musical entertainment.⁶ The right time for music is when the party runs the risk of being disrupted by quarrels. Overall, 'Plutarch's' philosophical appreciation of music might be rather disconcerting to the reader looking for a vigorous defence of music. There is no doubt that music is playing second fiddle: talking about music is preferable to listening to it.⁷

the Athenian warns against instrumental music not because it lacks the potential of beneficial expression, but because this kind of expression is much harder to understand for humans; see Pelosi 2010, 59–62 and 197. 'Plutarch' seems to have slightly different reasons: he treats instrumental music not as something which is (too) hard to understand, but as something which cannot be an object of understanding.

⁵ See esp. *Quaest. conv.* 1.1 on 'Whether philosophy is a fitting topic for conversation at a drinking-party'. Cf. Kechagia 2011.

⁶ Cf. *Coniugalia praecepta* 143D, as well as the previous question of *Quaest. conv.* (7.7), where the issue of the *aulos* player, sent away in Plato's *Symposium* (176e) and belittled in *Protagoras* (347c-e), is brought up. The character 'Plutarch' does not take part in this question, which is a discussion between two Stoics.

⁷ Cf. *De tuenda sanitate praecepta* 133F: '[I]t is less onerous to exchange opinions about an *aulos* and a lyre than to listen to the sound of the *aulos* and the *aulos* itself.' In the anti-Epicurean dialogue *Non posse suaviter vivi secundum Epicurum* 1095C-1096C, the character Theon, an intellectual ally of Plutarch, criticises Epicurus for banning music from the symposium. On closer inspection, however, what Theon recommends are *discussions* about music instead of music itself (1095C: προβλήμασι [...] μουσικῆς; *ibid.*: μουσικῶν καὶ ποιητικῶν προβλημάτων; 1095E: περὶ συμφωνιῶν διαλεγόμενου; 1096A: κριτικῶν καὶ μουσικῶν λαλιῶν; 1095A: οἱ περὶ χορῶν λόγοι καὶ διδασκαλιῶν καὶ τὰ διαύλων προβλήματα καὶ ῥυθμῶν καὶ ἄρμονιῶν; 1095A-C: several examples of such musical topics for discussion); cf. Van der Stockt 2009: 410–13. (On Plutarch's criticism of the Epicurean disdain for matters of music, see also *Non posse* 1094F-1095A with Jufresa 2001.) Similarly, in *Quaest. conv.* 9.15 (on the elements of dance), Plutarch prefers a speech about dancing to a dance performance, as Schlappbach 2011 (see now also Schlappbach 2018, 25–74) points out. On dance in *Quaest. conv.*, see also Martins de Jésus 2009.

In what follows, I want to show that, indeed, an unconditional defence of music cannot be found in Plutarch. This is largely the result of his reading of Plato's *Timaeus*, the text at the very heart of his philosophy.⁸ This claim may sound surprising, given the ethical and even cosmological value Plato attaches to music in this dialogue.⁹ For instance, Timaeus mentions that music has a beneficial effect on the wise, since its sounds are an 'expression (*mimēsin*) of divine harmony in mortal movement' (*Ti.* 80b). Plutarch, to be sure, acknowledges the potential implied by this statement: music can reflect divine harmony. As we will see, however, he also acknowledges its limitedness: we should keep in mind that music is only a (necessarily imperfect) *mimēsis* of divine harmony. Putting the two on a par would be as foolish as confusing a sensible object with an intelligible form.¹⁰

The sympotic discussion on *akroamata* shows us a fairly non-technical expression of this general view: 'Plutarch' subsequently rejects the ecstatic force of music, postulates the pre-eminence of *logos* over music itself, and emphasises the strictly remedial role of music. This may read like a slightly more pessimistic version of *Timaeus* 47c-d, where Timaeus complains that nowadays most people use music for 'irrational pleasure' (*eph' hēdonēn alogon*), points out that as regards the benefits of sounds *logos* plays a bigger part than music itself (*logos* contributes 'the greatest part', τὴν μεγίστην μοῖραν), and describes the harmony expressed by music as 'an ally in the fight to bring order to any orbit in our souls that has become unharmonized'.¹¹ However, some peculiar aspects of Plutarch's take on the view expressed in *Timaeus* will emerge in due course.

In order to outline the role of music in Plutarch's philosophy, and particularly in his Platonic cosmology, I will take up these three themes, albeit in a different order. First I will look at how Plutarch, interpreting Plato's *Timaeus*, combines the subordinate status of music to *logos* with its cosmic importance. For this purpose, I will continue along the lines of Federico Petrucci's chapter in this volume and show in what sense the demiurge is compared to a musician in Plutarch's *De animae procreatione*

⁸ On the paramount importance of *Timaeus* for Plutarch's Platonism, see Hershbell 1987, 235 (with further references in n. 3); Ferrari 2004. For an introduction to Plutarch's Platonic philosophy, see Froidefond 1987, Dillon 1996, 184–230, Ferrari 2000, and Opsomer 2005a.

⁹ See Barker 2000b, Pelosi 2010, and Lyon 2016.

¹⁰ On this combination of potential and limitedness see Hirsch-Luipold 2002, esp. 159–62.

¹¹ Translations of Plato are from Cooper 1997; for the Greek, the Oxford Classical Texts edition is used. Plutarch paraphrases part of this passage from *Timaeus* in *De superstitione* 167B. The interpretation of *Ti.* 47c-e is, of course, much more complex than I make it seem here; see esp. Pelosi 2010, 68–113.

in *Timaeo*.¹² This will lead, in the second section, to the theme of music as a remedy, which I will approach through Plutarch's interpretation of the music of the spheres. As we will see, the idea that music is first and foremost a remedy will prompt Plutarch to question the notion of heavenly music and to confine music to the earthly realm. In the third section, I will dwell briefly on the connection between ecstasy and music in order to show that Plutarch, once again cautious about giving music too elevated a status, tries to distance music from the notion of divine inspiration or enthusiasm (*enthousiasmos*). As this line of argument will reveal, music plays an important yet strictly limited role in Plutarch's philosophy: music is a road to divine harmony, but due to its sensible character it can only ever be an indirect road.¹³

2.1 The Demiurge and the Musician

While the first part of *De animae procreatione* discusses how the demiurge created the mixture of the cosmic soul by blending together intermediate being, sameness, and difference (*Ti.* 35a-b), the second part turns to the *divisio animae*, the final composition of the cosmic soul through the mathematical distribution of that mixture (*Ti.* 35b-36b).¹⁴ After having discussed the numbers used by the demiurge to distribute the mixture, as well as the way in which these numbers should be arranged, Plutarch turns to the question of the function (*dynamis*) of these numbers. Let us jump right to the very last sentence of the treatise:

Just as one is ridiculous, then, who looks for the ratios (*logous*) of 4:3, 3:2, and 2:1 in the yoke and the shell and the pegs of the lyre (for, while of course these too must have been made proportionate to one another in length and thickness, yet it is in the sounds [*phthoggōn*] that that concord [*harmonian*]

¹² On this work, see Cherniss 1976, 133–57, Hershbell 1987, Ferrari and Baldi 2002, 7–91, and Opsomer 2004.

¹³ Smits 1970, written in Dutch, is the only monograph about music in Plutarch. It provides an admirably extensive overview of musical theory and practice in Plutarch's works. Written as a study in the history of musicology, however, it does not engage thoroughly with the philosophical issues I am tackling here. Other, more limited overviews of the subject are García López 2000, Durán Mañas 2005, Araújo da Rocha Júnior 2008, and Görgemanns and Hirsch-Luipold 2010. As a collection of Plutarchan passages on music, Weil and Reinach 1900, liii–lxix, is still valuable. It should be noted that Weil and Reinach firmly believed that the treatise *De musica* was written by Plutarch, whereas today most scholars consider it to be spurious; see Fera 2011, although D'Ippolito 2011 holds a different view. Cf. also Tassi 2009, an index of Plutarchan passages involving sound.

¹⁴ See Moutsopoulos 1959, 352–75, Lippman 1964, 20–9, Barker 1989, 58–61, and Pelosi 2010, 189–95 on how this passage from *Timaeus* relates to Plato's views on music. On its connection with Plutarch's views on musical theory, see Smits 1970, 10–25.

is to be observed), so is it reasonable (*eikos*) to believe that, while the bodies of the stars and the intervals of the circles and the velocities of the revolutions are like instruments commensurate in fixed <ratios> with one another and with the whole though the quantity of the measurement has eluded us, nevertheless the product of those ratios and numbers used by the artificer is the soul's own harmony and concord (*emmeleian kai harmonian*) with herself, whereby she has filled the heaven, into which she has come, with countless goods and has arrayed the terrestrial regions with seasons and measured changes in the best and fairest way for the generation and preservation of things that come to be. (*De an. procr.* 1030B-C; transl. modified)

Most of the section on the *dynamis* of the numbers used by the demiurge is devoted to interpretations of the *divisio animae* which are centred on astronomical observations (1028A-1029D). As it appears from the comparison just quoted, Plutarch's criticism of these interpretations is nuanced. On the one hand, they are not completely wrong; the heavenly bodies are harmonious in the same way as well-tuned musical instruments are. On the other hand, it would be misguided to assume that the heavenly bodies are the reason for which (cf. 1028B: *heneka toutōn*) the demiurge forged the cosmic soul. That would be like saying that music exists for the sake of musical instruments.¹⁵

The comparison of divine *harmonia* and musical *harmonia* (I will call this 'comparison 0') comprises three aspects: (1) the heavenly bodies are compared to the musical instrument, (2) the cosmic soul is compared to music (*phthoggoi*), (3) the demiurge is (implicitly but unmistakably) compared to the musician. In the course of *De animae procreatione*, Plutarch makes three further comparisons which can be paired with the three aspects which I have just enumerated. These further comparisons can help clarify what Plutarch is doing here.

(1) The heavenly bodies can be compared to a musical instrument. The idea that the harmonious cosmic soul is prior to the heavenly bodies and is the cause of the goods present in them and the harmony exhibited by them is

¹⁵ The point that it is ridiculous (*γελοῖος*) to look for the essence of music in the instruments can be compared to the position which Plutarch defends in *Quaestiones Platonicae* 9 (on which see Opsomer 2012, 328–30). There, he interprets a passage in *Republic* (443d), 'where Plato likened excellently well the consonance of the rational and mettlesome and appetitive to a concord of intermediate and topmost and nethermost strings (ἁρμονία μέσης καὶ ὑπέρτης καὶ νήτης)' (1007E). In the course of his interpretation, Plutarch suggests that it is 'ridiculous (*γελοῖον*) to allot to local positions the status of first and intermediate and last, seeing that the topmost itself, while on the lyre it occupies the position further above and first, on the pipes occupies the one underneath and last and that intermediate, moreover, wherever it is located on the lyre, if tuned in the same way, sounds higher than the topmost string and lower than the nethermost'. For the strings of a lyre used in a moral context see also *De virtute morali* 444E-F, *De genio Socratis* 589D-E.

fully in line with Plato's *Timaeus* (34b-c). It should be noted, however, that Plutarch understands this priority of the cosmic soul over the cosmic body as a chronological and not merely ontological priority: the demiurge forged the soul before he started working on the cosmic body (*De an. procr.* 1013D-F).¹⁶ If we follow the logic of the comparison, then, the harmony which can be found in sounds (*phthoggoi*) precedes and causes – odd as it may seem – the musical instrument which plays these sounds (*phthoggoi*).¹⁷

Earlier in *De animae procreatione*, Plutarch tells an anecdote about Zeno of Citium which is interesting in this regard. Zeno made his pupils attend a performance by *aulos* players 'to observe what a sound is produced (*phōnēn aphīēsi*) by bits of horn and wood and reed and bone when they partake of ratio and consonance (*logou metechonta kai symphōnias*)' (*De an. procr.* 1029F). This is brought up as a comparison for the demiurge's work on the pre-cosmic soul (the irrational soul-stuff which the demiurge used to forge the cosmic soul) and, through this, on soulless matter. The suggestion is that a musical instrument, in a way, only comes into being when a skilled musician starts playing it. It is the musician who applies the *logoi* of which his tool partakes and by which the *phōnē* is caused. All the instrument really does is *apheinai* ('produce', or more literally 'put forth').

Plutarch dishes up the same story in *De virtute morali* (443A), only now Zeno is sending his pupils to a performance by a *kithara* singer (*kitharōidos*) instead of an *aulos* concert. In that treatise, which shows interesting parallels with *De animae procreatione*, Zeno's field trip is not brought up in the context of the demiurge's work on the pre-cosmic soul, but as an illustration of how the body and the irrational parts of the soul can be made to work together with reason.¹⁸ In this version of the story, it becomes clear

¹⁶ Cf. *Quaest. Plat.* 4.1002E-1003B, *De an. procr.* 1016A and D, 1023A-C.

¹⁷ Plutarch, then, would seem to disagree with Simmias in Plato's *Phaedo* (85e-86d), who states that the harmony is obviously destroyed along with the musical instrument and infers from this that the soul, which he thinks is a kind of harmony, dies with the body. Although, as Plutarch knows well (see n. 49 below), the thesis that the soul is a harmony is eventually rejected, this does not explain why Simmias and Plutarch would have a different take on how harmony relates to the instrument. Rather, they are thinking of different kinds of harmony. While Simmias means the attunement of the material instrument, Plutarch is referring to music in a more abstract sense (i.e. not tied to a particular instrument). See Rowe 1993, 203 for these two meanings of harmony; cf. also Gottschalk 1971. On the different ways in which Plutarch uses the word *harmonia*, see Smits 1970, 34-41.

¹⁸ On the connections between *De animae procreatione* and *De virtute morali* see Opsomer 1994 and 2012, 313-15. On how this anecdote about Zeno (= *SVF* 1.299) relates to Stoic views on music see Scade 2017, 200-1. However, one should be aware that, both in *De animae procreatione* and in *De virtute morali*, the anecdote is used in an anti-Stoic context in which Plutarch argues for the existence and importance of an irrational part of the (cosmic and human) soul. That being said, Plutarch is careful not to distort the anecdote by ascribing such a view to Zeno: in both works, he inserts the anecdote in such a way that it can be taken to pertain, strictly speaking, only to the non-rational and

how the source of harmony can be the musician rather than the instrument: musical instruments themselves are ‘void of soul’ (*apsycha*); what they actually do is ‘reproduc[e] the judgements, the experiences, and the morals of those who use them (τὰς κρίσεις ἀναφέροντα καὶ τὰ πάθη καὶ τὰ ἦθη τῶν χρωμένων)’. Once again, it is the musician who by using *logoi* – and in this version of the story Plutarch hesitantly allows the non-rational parts of the soul to play a role as well – causes music to appear in soulless matter, thus turning that matter into a musical instrument.¹⁹

(2) Plutarch also offers a more complex version of the comparison between music and the cosmic soul:

As some sound is not speech and not significant but speech is an utterance in sound that signifies thought, and as concord is what consists of tones and intervals and a tone is one and the same thing, an interval the diversity and difference of tones, and the mixture of these results in song and melody, so the affective part of the soul was indeterminate and unstable and then was bounded when there came to be limit and form in the divisible and omnifarious character of the motion.²⁰

Here, the ingredients of the cosmic soul are linked to the elements constituting music. Interestingly, Plutarch insists on including the human voice as an essential constituent in the comparison. According to Plutarch’s interpretation of *Timaeus* 35a-b, the demiurge created the cosmic soul in two steps. First, he blended divisible and indivisible being. Only after establishing this preliminary mixture as a basis was he able to add the two more extreme ingredients, sameness and difference. Plutarch compares the first phase of the soul’s creation to the composition of the lyrics to the song. These lyrics (*logos*) are a combination of sound (*phōnē*) and thought (*dianoia*). The second phase is compared to setting the lyrics to music by applying tones (*phthoggoi*) and intervals (*diastēmata*).

soulless rather than irrational soul. It is the context added by Plutarch which makes it clear that the anecdote serves to illustrate the harmonising of the irrational soul.

¹⁹ On Plutarch’s hesitance see Babut 1969, 145, who also points out that, in this passage, Plutarch is manifestly more tolerant than Plato in his selection of accepted instruments.

²⁰ *De an. procr.* 1026A, transl. modified: ὡς δὲ φωνὴ τις ἐστὶν ἄλογος καὶ ἀσημαντος λόγος δὲ λέξις ἐν φωνῇ σημαντικὴ διανοίας, ἄρμονία δὲ τὸ ἐκ φθόγγων καὶ διαστημάτων καὶ φθόγγος μὲν ἐν καὶ ταῦτόν διάστημα δὲ φθόγγων ἐτερότης καὶ διαφορά, μιχθέντων δὲ τούτων ᾠδὴ γίγνεται καὶ μέλος οὕτως τὸ παθητικὸν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀόριστον ἦν καὶ ἀστάθμητον, εἶθ’ ὀρίσθη πέρατος ἐγγενομένου καὶ εἶδους τῶ μεριστῶ καὶ παντοδαπῶ τῆς κινήσεως. On this passage, see also Opsomer 1994, 40–1, Demulder 2017b, 206–9 (with a discussion of the parallel passage *De tranquillitate animi* 473F–474B).

(3) For the comparison of the musician and the demiurge as well we can turn to a passage earlier in the treatise. As has been noted, Plutarch's interpretation of *Timaeus* is temporal. According to his reading of Plato's dialogue, which is opposed to that of most ancient Platonists, there really must have been a beginning of the cosmos.²¹ The demiurge did not, however, create the cosmic soul and the cosmic body *ex nihilo*. Rather, he took over and ordered both the pre-cosmic soul and the pre-cosmic body. In this respect, Plutarch points out, he acted like a musician, who 'is expected not to create sound or movement either but to make sound tuneful and movement rhythmical' (*De an. procr.* 1014C).²²

By now, two things will have become clear which seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, the comparison between music and the cosmos is not made casually: it occurs several times throughout the treatise and, as such, it seems to be important for Plutarch's understanding of Platonic cosmology. On the other hand, the picture which appears when we piece the several iterations of the comparison together is rather blurry. Several inconsistencies regarding the most crucial aspects of the exegesis of *Timaeus* can be pointed out. In the comparison with which we started the discussion (comparison 0), the ontological and temporal priority of soul over body (and that of music over the musical instrument) was the whole point. This is hard to square with comparison 3: there, the generation of the cosmic soul and the cosmic body is compared to the generation of tuneful sound and rhythmical movement (Plutarch does not spell out which corresponds to which). It would be hard to conceive of either rhythm or sound as coming first in a musical performance. Moreover, the same comparison insists on including both body and soul in the analogy, whereas comparison 2 compares only the soul to music, and the original comparison even distances the body from soul / music by comparing the former to the instrument. This comparison of the body to the instrument, in turn, does not quite fit with comparison 1, where the instrument is compared to the pre-cosmic soul, which is harmonised by the demiurge. However, the anecdote about Zeno itself (in comparison 1), if detached from the context, could again suggest that the instrument is soulless. To make matters worse, the instrument from comparison 1 is the *aulos* in a performance of *aulētai* (*De an. procr.* 1029F): the human voice does not play a role here, nor does it really in comparisons 0 and 3, while it is essential to comparison 2.

²¹ On the two main strands of interpretation of Timaeian cosmology see esp. Baltes 1976. Cf. also Boys-Stones 2018, 184–211.

²² Cf. *De Iside et Osiride* 373C-D, where Osiris plays the role of the demiurge. See Petrucci's chapter in this volume.

Where does this leave us? Is Plutarch being sloppy and inconsistent?²³ I would rather suggest that the blurry picture is an indication that, while music and the cosmic soul can be compared, their different ontological statuses severely limit the comparison. Plutarch is very much aware that the demiurge *is not* a musician. This is why, after reporting the ancient practice of ‘put[ting] musical instruments into the hands of the statues of the gods’, he adds that this does not mean that the gods play ‘the lyre and the *aulos* but that no work is so like that of gods as concord and consonance’ (*De an. procr.* 1030B; transl. modified). Similarly, in *De primo frigido*, he wishes to avoid confusion after reporting that some call the demiurge ‘harmonizer and musician’:

He does not receive these names for bringing sounds of high and low pitch, or black and white colours, into harmonious fellowship, but because he has authority over the association and disunion of heat and cold in the universe [. . .]. (946F; transl. modified)²⁴

By creating harmony on a human level, the musician is certainly doing a good job, which can to some extent be compared to the demiurge’s creation of harmony on a divine level. This does not mean, however, that the musician’s job is even close to being on the same level as that of the demiurge. This sounds fairly obvious, but a perfect comparison between the musician and the demiurge could easily obscure this. Rather, the apparent inconsistencies point to different aspects of the general, necessarily imperfect comparison. In Plutarch’s philosophy, for instance, it makes perfect sense to compare the musical instrument both to the heavenly bodies (comparison 0) and to the pre-cosmic soul (comparison 1): the demiurge makes both partake in harmony (cf. *De an. procr.* 1014C), which is the point of comparison 3, where, however, the reference to an instrument is omitted.

The fact that Plutarch chose to couch his reflections on music in comparisons is significant in itself. As Rainer Hirsch-Luipold has shown, Plutarch’s use of imagery is closely connected with the notion taken from Plato’s *Timaeus* that the sensible cosmos is a likeness (*eikōn*) of an intelligible model (*Ti.* 29b).²⁵ If this is taken into account, the original

²³ On contradiction and consistency in Plutarch see Nikolaidis 1991 and the contributions in Opsomer, Roskam, and Titchener 2016.

²⁴ The Loeb translator ironically adds to the confusion by translating ‘he does not receive these names merely for bringing [. . .]’ (my emphasis), which is not warranted by the Greek.

²⁵ Hirsch-Luipold 2002, 159–224. Cf. esp. Plutarch, *Adversus Colotem* 1115B–1116B, *De Iside et Osiride* 372F.

comparison reveals two *eikōn* relations. The first is expressed through the content of the comparison: as Plutarch explicitly states earlier, the ratios which we can observe in the visible parts of the cosmos are likenesses (*eikones*) of the *logoi* of the cosmic soul (*De an. procr.* 1029D-E). The second is suggested by the form of the comparison: music is an image of the cosmic soul.

These two parallel *eikones* – the sensible cosmos and music – can be taken to mirror the parallel treatment of sight and hearing as ways of using the sensible realm to learn about the cosmic soul in *Timaeus* 47a-e. A good discourse involving an *eikōn* – an *eikōs logos*, as *Timaeus* would describe it – is indeed valuable as a hermeneutical effort, since it allows us to explore things in our investigation which we could not otherwise explore. At the same time, however, such a discourse is also limited: at best it can aspire to be likely.²⁶ Plutarch, therefore, makes sure to introduce his statement about the harmony of the heavenly bodies with the words ‘it is likely’ (*eikos esti*) and adds that ‘the quantity of the measurement has eluded us’. The same limitations apply when music is considered as an *eikōn* of the cosmic soul. We cannot possibly expect the results to be perfect or even fully consistent.²⁷

Plutarch's position on the cosmic significance of music is subtle. There is, to be sure, a connection between the harmony of the cosmos and the harmony expressed by music, but this should not lead us to confuse the work of the demiurge and the work of a musician (i.e. someone concerned with music, a sensible phenomenon).²⁸ The relation between the two is one between paradigm and image. Insight into the nature of this relation is of paramount importance and cannot be furnished by music itself. This might explain, then, why a *logos* about music is more important than music itself.

²⁶ On this much-discussed issue, Burnyeat 2005 is a seminal paper which has evoked many responses such as Betegh 2010, which has the particular merit of showing how εἰκῶς is at the same time a positive standard and a limitation.

²⁷ Cf. *Ti.* 29c: ‘Don't be surprised then, Socrates, if it turns out repeatedly that we won't be able to produce accounts on a great many subjects – on gods or the coming to be of the universe – that are completely and perfectly consistent and accurate.’

²⁸ One could turn this around and argue that the demiurge is the only true musician, in the same fashion as Socrates is Athens' only true politician by abstaining from politics (*Gorgias* 521d). This is not, I think, what Plutarch is suggesting. As we have seen, in the only two passages where the demiurge is presented as a musician (*De prim. frig.* 946F and *De an. procr.* 1030A-B), this is a characterisation which Plutarch does not make in his own name but which he ascribes to tradition. Moreover, both times he feels the need to nuance this traditional characterisation by going on to distance the god from music as he understands it (i.e. as a sensible phenomenon).

2.2 The Song of the Muses

The same subtle position feeds into Plutarch's reception of a notion which establishes a very strong link between music and cosmology and which, as we shall see, also plays a role in *De animae procreatione*: the so-called music of the spheres.²⁹ This Pythagorean notion could not be ignored by a Platonist like Plutarch, given its importance for Plato's myth of Er (*Republic* 614b-621b). From Plato we learn about Sirens standing on the rims of the eight whorls which are parts of the spindle of the universe. Each Siren emits a single tone and the eight tones together form a harmony, which serves as the background to the song of the Fates, who sing about the past, the present, and the future (617b-c).

In his own eschatological myths, Plutarch enjoys playing with this motif. The myth which concludes *De sera numinis vindicta* tells a *post mortem* story very similar to Plato's myth of Er. In Plutarch's myth, the character who is guided through the cosmos suddenly hears a woman's voice. It turns out to be the Sibyl, who is singing (*aidein*) about the future while being stationed on the moon (566D-E). Similarly, in *De genio Socratis*, a myth is told about a certain Timarchus, who descended into a cave and experienced something which he could only describe as the temporary release of his soul. During this release, the heavenly bodies appeared to him like islands

[. . .] and he fancied that their circular movement made a musical whirring in the aether, for the gentleness of the sound resulting from the harmony of all the separate sounds corresponded to the evenness of their motion. (590C)

Again, in the myth at the end of *De facie in orbe lunae*, we learn that during a lunar eclipse the moon accelerates because the good souls inhabiting the moon at that time complain that they cannot hear the 'harmony of the heaven' (*hē peri ton ouranon harmonia*) as the moon is traversing the earth's shadow (944A).

The consistent presence of the music of the spheres in Plutarch's three great myths suggests that it has a certain place in his thought.³⁰ However, this should also give us pause: a Platonist indulging in myths should never be taken at face value. Indeed, all three myths are preceded by a disclaimer distinguishing them from *logos* (*De sera* 561B; *De gen.* 589F; *De fac.* 940F).

The music of the spheres from Plato's myth of Er receives a seemingly less veiled treatment at one of the symposia evoked by Plutarch. The ninth

²⁹ For a recent introduction to this notion see Viltanioti 2015, 1–10 and Pelosi 2018.

³⁰ Cf. Vernière 1977, 175–6.

book of *Quaestiones convivales* is aptly dedicated to the nine Muses. In this last book of sympotic questions we find ourselves in the company of a young 'Plutarch'. The host of the symposium which takes up the entire book is Plutarch's teacher Ammonius. We learn that the symposium was held during some festival of the Muses and the subjects are appropriately 'musical' in the broad sense of the word, including poetry, language, cosmology, and music proper. Unfortunately, three of the talks about music are lost. Only titles remain for the discussions about the division of melodies into diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic (9.7), about the difference between 'consonant intervals' (*emmelē diastēmata*) and 'melodic intervals' (*symphōna diastēmata*) (9.8), and about the causes of 'consonance' (*symphōnēsis*), including the question why the melody, as the Greeks perceived it, goes with the lowest pitch when two notes sound together (9.9). The last question of *Quaestiones convivales*, a light-hearted finale, offers a discussion on dance (9.15).³¹ When the music of the spheres is mentioned, however, it is in a discussion about music *sensu lato* rather than *sensu stricto*.

After singing Hesiod's verses about the birth of the Muses, Ammonius and his guests begin to ponder how many Muses there actually are (9.14).³² In the course of this long discussion, the connection between music and cosmology (specifically the cosmology of the myth of Er) comes up repeatedly and in various forms.³³ It is worthwhile to follow the course of the three speeches which touch upon this.

(1) In his first contribution to the discussion, 'Plutarch' starts from the ancient belief that there were three Muses instead of the conventional nine. This is an element he takes over from what his brother Lamprias said earlier (744C-F).³⁴ Lamprias, moreover, criticised traditional accounts which associated the Muses exclusively with music, thus incorrectly limiting their domain of influence. For this mistaken view, he cited some people (*enioi*) who believe that the reason for the number of Muses lies in the three types of melody (diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic). The Delphians,

³¹ Cf. n. 7 above.

³² As Teodorsson 1996, 345 points out, this unusually long *quaestio* is the culmination point of the whole work. On *Quaest. conv.* 9.14 see also Smits 1970, 78–9, Van der Stockt 2009, 407–10, Klotz 2011, 171–7, and Dillon 2014a.

³³ Earlier in book nine (9.5), we find Ammonius and his guests discussing another aspect of the myth of Er: the fate of the soul of Ajax (*Resp.* 620b).

³⁴ There are, indeed, several attestations of three Muses instead of nine. However, Hesiod, who sparked this sympotic discussion, already mentions nine Muses (*Theog.* 75–79). See Teodorsson 1996, 353 for further references.

moreover, went wrong in a similar way by naming the Muses after the notes which limit the main intervals of a scale (*nētē*, *mesē*, and *hypatē*).

‘Plutarch’ does not approve of his brother’s attack on Delphic religion. Although Lamprias was right in pointing out that the Delphians call the Muses *Nētē* (or *Neatē*), *Mesē*, and *Hypatē*, he mistakenly concluded that this entails an exclusive association with the science of music. Rather, the Muses *Neatē*, *Mesē*, and *Hypatē* are named in accordance with the region of the cosmos over which they preside: the fixed stars, the planets, and the sublunary region respectively.³⁵ Although these three regions are ‘all knit and ordered together in harmonious formulae’ (745B), the Muses are not the cause of the music of the spheres. This much ‘Plutarch’ makes clear by referring to the myth of Er:

Plato, too, put this in a disguised form, calling them [i.e. the Muses] by the names of the Fates, Atropos, Clotho, and Lachesis; observe that it was Sirens, not Muses, that he set to preside over the revolutions of the eight spheres, one for each. (745B-C)

(2) Ammonius does not fully agree with his pupil’s interpretation of the myth of Er. According to his own interpretation of the myth and contrary to that of the young ‘Plutarch’, Plato did intend to identify the eight Sirens with the Muses, adding one additional Muse assigned to the earth.³⁶ After connecting the Sirens as they appear in Homer with the fate of souls in the afterlife, Ammonius describes their influence on our earthly life:³⁷

Here on earth a kind of faint echo of that music reaches us, and appealing to our souls through the medium of words (*dia logōn*), reminds them of what they experienced in an earlier existence. The ears of most souls, however, are plastered over and blocked up, not with wax, but with carnal obstructions and affections. But any soul that through innate gifts is aware (*aisthanetai*) of this echo, and remembers that other world, suffers what falls in no way

³⁵ There seems to be a subtle yet significant difference between the two brothers’ takes on the process of name-giving. According to Lamprias’ account (744C; cf. 745A-B, where ‘Plutarch’ reiterates it), the Muses were named *after* the notes, which could suggest that sensible music precedes its divine overseer and that the latter is an imitation of the former instead of the other way around. In his own interpretation, ‘Plutarch’ seems to be careful to avoid the suggestion that the Muses were named *after* the cosmic regions (745B).

³⁶ In *Vita Pythagorae* 31, Porphyry too places the Muses in charge of the cosmic spheres when describing Pythagoras’ experience of cosmic music. His distribution of the Muses is, however, understandably more Pythagorean. Ammonius appears to count – with *Timaeus* 36d-38e in mind – the fixed stars and the seven wanderers (Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus, Mercury, sun, moon), adding a ninth Muse for the earth. Porphyry, on the other hand, reports that Pythagoras assigned the ninth Muse to the counter-earth. See Boyancé 1946 for the occurrence of this theme in other sources.

³⁷ Cf. Viltanioti 2015, 64–6.

short of the very maddest passions of love (*tōn emmanestatōn erōtōn*), longing and yearning to break the tie with the body, but unable to do so. (745E-F)³⁸

Here, the music of the spheres is couched in the language of Plato's *Phaedrus*.³⁹ In *Phaedrus* (249d-252b), Plato describes how a small minority – the philosophers – succeed in using earthly beauty as a reminder of true beauty. Whereas Plato emphasises the vision of beauty, Plutarch's Ammonius transmits the experience to the hearing of music by postulating an earthly echo of the Muses' heavenly music. The paradoxical consequence of this adaptation is that the human reception of the Muses' heavenly music does not happen under the aegis of the Muses, who instil their own kind of madness in humans if we follow *Phaedrus* (245a; 265b). Rather, the receiver of the song of the Muses experiences the madness called love, which in *Phaedrus* is reserved for the philosopher. Accordingly, the echo is transmitted to us not as music but 'through the medium of words' (*dia logōn*). Ammonius does not elaborate on this. Does he mean words as part of music or even words about music? Or should we maybe even understand *logoi* in the sense of (mathematical) ratios?

In any case, it is clear that Ammonius is not thinking about the music of the spheres as a superior kind of sensible music caused by the mechanics of the heavenly bodies. Unlike others, he does not ask why we do not hear the sounds of the heavenly music.⁴⁰ That very question would be hard to reconcile with his conception of transmission *dia logōn*: there is no sign that there is anything to be heard. By the time he describes the reception of heavenly harmony with the word *aisthanetai*, the reader is already aware that this verb should be understood metaphorically, since the reception is done by the 'ears of the soul'.⁴¹ The apparent departure from Plato's take on kinds of madness, then, turns out to be an endorsement of Plato's true

³⁸ Right after this, Ammonius remarks that he does not agree with all these statements (οὐ μὴν ἔγωγε παντάσῃ συμφέρομαι τούτοις, 745F). This should not be taken to refer to the part just quoted, but rather to the statements presented by the young 'Plutarch': Ammonius' distancing remark marks the transition from his defence of 'Plutarch's' interpretation (the Sirens are not inhumane, contrary to what one of the interlocutors objected in 745C-D) to the points where he disagrees (the Sirens are the Muses).

³⁹ Teodorsson 1996, 364.

⁴⁰ Porphyry (*VPyrb.* 30) gives human inferiority as an explanation, adding that Pythagoras himself could hear the music; cf. also Maximus of Tyre, *Or.* 37.5; Aristides Quintilianus, *De musica* 3.20. Aristotle, who himself does not believe in the music of the spheres, reports the explanation that we are not aware of the music due to our life-long familiarity with it (*de Caelo* 2.9.290b); cf. also Cicero, *De re publica* 6.23 Powell.

⁴¹ This seems to be inspired by Plato's notion of an 'eye of the soul' (*Resp.* 533d), which is better than ten thousand regular eyes (527e). Cf. Van der Stockt 2009.

intention: claiming the Muses for philosophy and establishing philosophy as the only true ‘music’.⁴²

(3) Ammonius ends his contribution by emphasising its tentative character and invites the others to respond. This sparks the young ‘Plutarch’s’ second speech (746B–747A), in which he comes up with a third way of locating the Muses in the cosmos. After having expressed his own first impression that the Muses are the three Fates from Plato’s myth and having learnt Ammonius’ view that they are the Sirens from the same myth, ‘Plutarch’ now concludes that the majority of the Muses should be assigned to earth, since the earthly realm is most in need of guidance. Therefore, only one Muse, Urania, is placed in the heavens. The eight others are given functions on earth. As in ‘Plutarch’s’ first speech, the work of the Muses is musical in a broad sense: this time, he points out that they correct the earthly mistakes and disharmony (*plēmmeleia* and *anar-mostia*). Music in the strict sense is the domain of only one Muse, Melpomene.⁴³ Conversely, while only Urania is occupied with the cosmos in the strict sense, the others are described as bringing ‘cosmos’ in a more abstract sense: they ‘bring order’ (*kosmousin*) to human activities on earth. Melpomene, for instance, takes over the ‘pleasure’ (*hēdonē*) of the ears and turns it into ‘enjoyment’ (*euphrosynē*). Thus, the discussion closes with a wink to Plato’s *Timaeus* (80b), where music is said to bring mere pleasure to fools and enjoyment to the wise.

The sympotic discussion has followed a remarkable trajectory. In all three answers, the connection between music and the cosmos is confirmed, albeit only to a certain extent. What the answers have in common is that they all warn against excessive appreciation of music (a sensible phenomenon). In his first speech, the character ‘Plutarch’ introduces cosmology to drive a wedge between music and the divine: the names of the Muses do not refer to notes but to regions of the cosmos. Although the young Platonist faithfully invokes the myth of Er, he omits any reference to the tones emitted by the Sirens or the song sung by the Fates. Ammonius, then, comes close to embracing the music of the spheres, but he insists that the transference from heavenly harmony to earth does not happen by way of earthly music, but *dia logōn*. His engagement with Plato’s *Phaedrus*

⁴² Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 60d–61a with Murray 2002.

⁴³ This may seem an odd choice, since Melpomene became known primarily as the Muse of tragedy, but ‘Plutarch’ is probably thinking about the connection between Melpomene and the verb μέλλω (‘to sing’). Cf. Cornutus, *Theol. Graec.* 16.6–7: Μελιτομένη δὲ ἀπὸ τῆς μολπῆς γλυκειὰς τινὸς φωνῆς μετὰ μέλους οὔσης.

suggests that this process points to the practice of philosophy and not to the practice of music. In his second speech, finally, 'Plutarch', as if pointing out the ultimate consequences of his teacher's view, locates music firmly in the earthly realm.

The reader of Plutarch's sympotic questions – and the same goes for his other writings involving *quaestiones* – understandably feels inclined to pick one of the answers. This, however, is not how these zetetic writings work. Although, usually, the last answer seems to carry the most weight, all answers contribute something valuable to the discussion.⁴⁴ In this case, the choice of the young 'Plutarch' as a character makes it particularly difficult to gauge the speeches. *De E apud Delphos* is another work where the young 'Plutarch' and his teacher express different opinions.⁴⁵ In that case, the writer Plutarch appears to side with the teacher rather than with his younger self. The sympotic discussion could be a similar case. On the other hand, the young 'Plutarch' does get the last word in the debate about the Muses, whereas in *De E* the teacher explicitly corrects him. Moreover, in the last book of *Quaestiones convivales*, Plutarch makes every effort to present his younger self as a star pupil.⁴⁶ In this regard, we cannot simply subordinate the pupil's answer to the teacher's, all the more since the teacher explicitly asked for his contribution to be challenged.

A comparison with *De animae procreatione* (1029C-D) can shed some light on this issue.⁴⁷ There, Plutarch gives an interpretation of the Sirens from Plato's *Republic* which is akin to Ammonius' take on the matter: both accounts connect Plato's eight Sirens with the nine Muses, assigning one Muse to earth. Before deciding that this is Plutarch's preferred interpretation, we should take the context into account. One of the astronomical interpretations of the *divisio animae* assigns 'to earth the position of the *proslambanomenos*' (1028F), one tone below the *hypatē*, which corresponds to the moon. Plutarch dismisses this interpretation by pointing out that the *proslambanomenos* as an addition to the scale below the *hypatē* is a modern invention. The ancients, including Plato, added the *proslambanomenos* to

⁴⁴ See Opsomer 1996 for a discussion of Plutarch's zetetic method applied to *Quaestiones Platonicae*. The pervasiveness of the zetetic approach in Plutarch's work can be gleaned from Opsomer 2010, Roskam 2011, 2013, 2014, 2017, Petrucci 2016a, and Meeusen 2016, 84–92.

⁴⁵ Jones 1967, 206 estimates the dramatic date of *Quaest. conv.* 9 to be near to that of *De E*.

⁴⁶ König 2007, 52. Klotz 2011, 171–7 offers a discussion of *Quaest. conv.* 9.14 which focuses on his self-presentation as a model student, at the same time respectfully building upon and correcting his teacher's answer. König 2011 discusses self-presentation as a tension between self-promotion and self-effacement in *Quaestiones convivales*.

⁴⁷ This is a work of a completely different nature: in the introduction, Plutarch indicates that it should be read as his definitive statement on the subject at hand (*De an. procr.* 1012B).

the higher end of the scale. As Plutarch sees it, the story of the Sirens proves this.

The reason is that, in addition to the Sirens assigned to the seven wanderers, Plato adds a Siren for the sphere of the fixed stars and not for earth.⁴⁸ If the moon corresponds to the *hypatē*, Plato's *proslambanomenos* would indeed be to the higher end of the scale. However, instead of using his interpretation of Plato to correct the cosmological scale, Plutarch advises against the endeavour as a whole: instead of trying to map the structures of sensible music onto the structure of the physical cosmos, it is better to focus on the imperceptible harmony of the cosmic soul (1029D-E). One can see how, given his temporal interpretation of *Timaeus*, Plutarch would disagree with the chronology implied by the story of the Sirens. In that story, harmony arises out of the tones chanted by the Sirens, who are carried around by the heavenly spheres (1029C). What Plutarch emphasises, instead, is that 'concordant ratios' (*tois kath' harmonian logois*) precede and cause the 'harmonic motions' (*emmeleiais kai kinēsesin*) of the cosmic soul, rendering her 'concordant and docile' (*symphōnon [...] kai peithēnion*) (1029D-E).⁴⁹ The idea that harmony precedes the movements of heaven, then, amounts to a refutation of the interpretation of the story of the Sirens which is presented in *De animae procreatione*.⁵⁰ According to this interpretation the story is an attempt to map musical notions (i.e. the names of the notes) onto the structure of the cosmic soul. Plutarch's criticism of such attempts once again points to the fundamental difference between heavenly harmony and earthly music and favours an interpretation like the one advocated by the young 'Plutarch' in the sympotic discussion.

Both in *Quaestiones convivales* and in *De animae procreatione*, the 'Ammonius-style' interpretation of the story of the Sirens is followed by a critical account which warns against exaggerating the importance of music. Both accounts, moreover, emphasise the need of correction on earth. The young 'Plutarch', as we saw, assigns the majority of the Muses to earth as guides for human endeavours. The rest of the cosmos can make do with only one Muse, since the heavenly bodies 'do not need much or varied guidance' (*Quaest. conv.* 746B). Similarly, in *De animae procreatione*,

⁴⁸ Cf. Helmer 1937, 62.

⁴⁹ The idea that the soul *partakes* of harmony (e.g. *Quaest. Plat.* 1001C and 1003A, *De an. procr.* 1014E and 1016B quoting *Ti.* 36e-37a) without *being* harmony (*De an. procr.* 1013B referring to *Phd.* 92a-95a, cf. 1024E) similarly suggests harmony's priority within the framework of Plutarch's exegesis of *Timaeus*.

⁵⁰ For a different interpretation of how the story of the Sirens in *Quaestiones convivales* relates to the version in *De animae procreatione* see Opsomer 2009, 139.

Plutarch points out that, while the cosmic soul is not entirely error-free, since it contains an element of evil in the form of divisible being (1026E-1027A), it is less prone to aberrations than the human soul (1025C-D).

The young 'Plutarch's' suggestion that music and the other works of the Muses are of a corrective, therapeutic nature fits in with Plutarch's general thought on the role of music. As I have argued in the first section of this paper, music is cosmic only in the context of imagery. Music comes to the rescue, for instance, at a symposium where the conversations are 'disorderly' (*ataktōi*, *Quaest. conv.* 9.1.736E) – a word denoting chaos in *Timaeus* (30a; 43b; 46e).⁵¹ Fortunately, someone starts singing to the lyre and the party becomes a cosmos again. Immediately, the music fades to the background and the calmed guests start a *logos* prompted by the appropriateness of the words which have just been sung (736E-737B). As soon as music has done its work, it has to yield to philosophy, as the sympotic discussion at the beginning of this paper has already made clear.

2.3 The Limits of Divine Inspiration

At that introductory symposium, 'Plutarch' warned against the ecstatic potential of music. In the previous section, moreover, we have seen how Plutarch's teacher Ammonius described his understanding of the harmony of the spheres in terms of the philosopher's erotic madness instead of appealing to musical madness proper. In this last section, I will briefly consider if any trace remains of this traditional notion of divinely inspired music and how this notion is evaluated by Plutarch.

In *Amatorius*, Plutarch draws on Plato's *Phaedrus* to construct his own classification of kinds of enthusiasm. Faithfully following Plato, Plutarch distinguishes prophetic enthusiasm (attributed to Apollo), mystic enthusiasm (Dionysus), and musical / poetic enthusiasm (the Muses), attributing the best kind of enthusiasm to Aphrodite and Eros (*Amat.* 758E-759A).⁵² After giving a brief overview of this classification, Plutarch works his way back through the list, giving more details about each kind (759A-B). However, the madness which was said to be responsible for 'poetic and

⁵¹ Of course, the word ἀτακτος does not necessarily imply a reference to cosmological vocabulary, let alone to *Timaeus*. However, as I have argued elsewhere, Plutarch sees the symposium as an image of the Platonic cosmos and, accordingly, often uses cosmological vocabulary to describe it, while consciously making it difficult to distinguish between the cosmological and everyday use of certain words; see Demulder 2017a, esp. 37–8.

⁵² Interestingly, although it does not pertain to our current purpose, Plutarch adds war-related enthusiasm (attributed to Ares) between musical and erotic madness.

musical creation' is suspiciously absent from this otherwise tidy elaboration. Once again, we might be tempted to think that Plutarch was being sloppy. Once again, I would like to suggest a different explanation: Plutarch had his doubts about musical creation being a divinely inspired activity.⁵³

To make sense of this, we can turn to Plutarch's *De Pythiae oraculis*. In this dialogue, the discussion about the apparently disappointing literary quality of contemporary oracles contains a more general theory on the nature of artistic inspiration. The difference between the past, when oracles were mostly delivered 'as poetry and music' (*en metrois kai melesi*: *De Pyth. or.* 402D; cf. 405D), and the present cannot be explained by referring to Apollo. In other words: the musical aspect of the oracle (or the lack thereof) is not part of the divine inspiration. Whether or not the oracles are accompanied by music depends on the nature and the education of the Pythia.

It seems obvious that at least some degree of natural talent and musical education are necessary in order to be able to compose and play music. Still, by pointing this out, Plutarch is going against Plato's description of musical madness, which seizes 'a tender virgin soul' (*hapalēn kai abaton psychēn*, *Phdr.* 245a; also quoted by Plutarch, *Amat.* 758F). It is precisely because she has a 'virgin soul' (*parthenos hōs alēthōs tēn psychēn*) that the Pythia cannot be expected to express the oracles 'in verse of a grandiloquent and formal style with verbal metaphors and with an *aulos* to accompany its delivery' (*De Pyth. or.* 405D). For Plutarch, musical composition is a *technē* (cf. 404F; 405A), not a passive or unconscious experience.⁵⁴

What happens when Apollo inspires an oracle is the following: the god uses the soul of the Pythia as an instrument (*organon*). The Pythia, in turn, uses her voice and her body to express the oracle in a manner suited to her

⁵³ I would attribute the absence of any justification of these doubts to the fact that this would be out of place in a more or less doxographic enumeration. Moreover, this particular absence has no bearing on the general theme of the work: Plutarch just wants to get to erotic madness.

⁵⁴ After quoting Euripides' verses 'Love doth the poet teach, / Even though he know naught of the Muse before' (ποιητὴν δ' ἄρα / Ἔρως διδάσκει, κἄν ἄμουσος ᾗ τὸ πρῖν), Plutarch explains that 'Love does not implant in one the poetical or musical faculty (ποιητικὴν καὶ μουσικὴν), but when it is already existent in one, Love stirs it to activity [...]' (*De Pyth. or.* 405F). *Quaest. conv.* 1.5 is concerned with the interpretation of the same lines; see Smits 1970, 52–4 and Roskam 2013. On τέχνη in Plutarch, see Van der Stockt 1992. An amusing anecdote which suggests that not only composing music but also listening to music is a question of expertise rather than inspiration or feeling appears in *De recta ratione audiendi* 46B. Plutarch tells how a member of a chorus once received a firm talking-to from Euripides. The man had burst into laughter during the rehearsal of a song in the solemn mixolydian mode, at which Euripides scolded him for being 'stupid and ignorant' (ἀναίσθητος [...] καὶ ἀμαθής). Cf. *De sera* 549E, *Quaest. conv.* 7.8.711C.

own nature and capabilities, in the form of music or otherwise (*De Pyth. or.* 404B–405D).⁵⁵ As Jens Holzhausen has shown, this *organon* theory of inspiration is thoroughly influenced by Plato's cosmology: the soul of the Pythia serves as the matter which receives the ideas from god.⁵⁶ Now, 'the virtue of an instrument is to conform as exactly as possible (*malista mimeisthai*) to the purpose of the agent' (404C). This process of *mimēsis* brings with it an unavoidable contamination by the nature of the medium (i.e. matter in the case of the demiurge's cosmogonic work; the Pythia in the case of the god's oracular work). Any musical aspect of the Pythia's oracles is situated in this contaminating layer of the process.

With this, our story about music in Plutarch's philosophy has come full circle and we are back at the comparison between the demiurge and the musician. Like the demiurge, the god who inspires the Pythia's oracles is compared to someone who plays a musical instrument.⁵⁷ In both cases, however, Plutarch makes it abundantly clear that this comparison should not be taken at face value. A musician is at best an *eikōn* of the god: his music is always a contaminated reflection of the divine. Music, then, is not the direct result of enthusiasm. Conversely, it would be foolish to believe that ecstasy evoked by music could forge a direct connection with the divine. It should, therefore, be avoided. For Plutarch, music is a sensible phenomenon. It is, for better or worse, an 'expression (*mimēsis*) of divine harmony in mortal movement' (*Ti.* 80b).

2.4 Concluding Remarks

'[W]hat truly organizes music in the West is the tension between the inescapable body and the West's deep-seated need to control or transcend that body through intellectual idealism.'⁵⁸ Plutarch's thoughts on music are an interesting example of how this tension can be embraced rather than ignored by focusing exclusively on one of the two poles. Plutarch does not deny the connection between music and what transcends the body. This connection, however, is in the form of an *eikōn*. Music, therefore, is placed squarely in the sensible realm – divine harmony and music should not be confused – and overemphasising its importance is as

⁵⁵ The idea that the soul is the instrument of the gods, and the body the instrument of the soul, occurs several times in Plutarch; see Holzhausen 1993, 83 with n. 38.

⁵⁶ Holzhausen 1993, 83–91. On the connections between cosmology and divination in Plutarch, see also Simonetti 2017. On the role of *φθόγγος* in Plutarch's thoughts on divination, see Crippa 2009.

⁵⁷ Cf. also *De defectu oraculorum* 436E–F. ⁵⁸ McClary 1995, 83.

dangerous as neglecting it.⁵⁹ The benefit of this is that Plutarch's Platonic philosophy, although it is certainly idealistic in some sense, leaves room for music as it is experienced in tradition and culture.⁶⁰ Plutarch's particular brand of Platonism, then, allows him to avoid the 'sacrifice of the sensible component',⁶¹ which is the ultimate consequence of Plato's view on music as voiced in *Republic* 7.

At the beginning of this chapter, I connected Plutarch's views to *Timaeus* 47c-d. By way of conclusion it may be useful briefly to return to this passage and to offer a more detailed yet on some points inevitably tentative explanation of how Plutarch understood the elements mentioned there. In *Timaetus*, music – 'an ally in the fight to bring order to any orbit in our souls that has become unharmonized' – is a remedy which is received by the *rational* soul, a compound of being, sameness, and difference.⁶² This rational soul is what the demiurge forged with the ingredients which remained after his work on the cosmic soul. Having forged the rational soul, he handed it over to the younger gods who added the irrational soul and mortal body (*Ti.* 41d-42e). Plutarch, however, in his search for consistency across Platonic dialogues, ends up with a far stricter parallel between cosmic and human soul: in both cases the element of difference is associated with irrationality (*De virt. mor.* 441E-442A).⁶³ This has a consequence for how music, which as a sensible phenomenon is grasped by difference (*Ti.* 37a-c), enters the soul: on Plutarch's account it is possible for music to be received primarily by the irrational, although there is always some degree of combination of rational and irrational (cf. *De an. procr.* 1024F-1025A).⁶⁴ This may explain why, in the sympotic discussion about the Muses, the young 'Plutarch' refuses to decide whether the pleasure of music 'belongs mainly to reason or to emotion or is their common property' (*Quaest. conv.* 9.14.746F).

⁵⁹ In *Pericles* 1.4–5, Plutarch quotes Antisthenes, who, upon hearing someone being described as an excellent *aulos* player, responded: 'But he's a worthless man, otherwise he wouldn't be so good a piper'. This is followed by an anecdote about Alexander the Great being criticized by his father for playing beautifully: he should not devote himself to such trifles; the Muses should be more than pleased already if he deigns to listen to music. See Bowie 2004, 120. On music in Plutarch's *Vitae* see also García López 2003 and 2005.

⁶⁰ Smits 1970 provides many examples of this. Through a very different route from the one taken in this chapter, Petrucci 2019b reaches a similar conclusion.

⁶¹ Pelosi 2010, 112; cf. 114–51. ⁶² Pelosi 2010, 91–111.

⁶³ See Opsomer 2012, 314 for a charitable interpretation of Plutarch's endeavour.

⁶⁴ As Cherniss 1976, 237 n. f notes, Plutarch seems to disregard Plato's distinction between difference as an ingredient of soul and the circle of difference. On the combination of bi- and tripartition of the soul, see Opsomer 2012, 319–25.

For Plutarch, then, it makes perfect sense to associate the therapeutic effect of music with the irrational part of the soul (*Quaest. conv.* 7.8.713B). That this is how he understood *Timaeus* 47c-d is clear from his paraphrase of the passage in *De superstitione* 167B-C, where music is targeted at the 'disturbing and errant' (*to tarachōdes kai peplanēmenon*) part of the embodied soul. Elsewhere, for instance in the retellings of the myth of Er which I discussed, it is the irrational part of the soul which is described in these terms.⁶⁵ By understanding musical therapy in this sense, Plutarch goes beyond *Timaeus*. His interpretation, however, may well be able to recover some Platonic elements which are otherwise hard to reconcile with *Timaeus*, such as the musical education described in *Republic* 2–3 and *Laws* 2 and 7, which engages to a much greater extent with the non-rational parts of the soul.⁶⁶

Plutarch's particular take on the perception of the sensible can also explain why he seems to fear bad music more than is strictly warranted by *Timaeus* 47c-d. As *Timaeus* has it, the effect of the majority's using music for 'irrational pleasure' is probably just that music falls on deaf ears because it is not understood. For Plutarch (*Quaest. conv.* 7.8.713A), however, 'emotional display' (*pathainomenos*) opens the gates to arousal and ecstasy (*anasobōn kai parexistas*).⁶⁷ This relates to Plutarch's doubts about music as divine inspiration: in the case of music, ecstasy should not be trusted. Finally, although *Timaeus* states that speech plays a larger part in the benefits of hearing than music itself, he conceives of these respective benefits as independent from each other. Plutarch, however, sees words as an essential part of music and has little faith in purely instrumental music. Music may be an image of divine harmony, but words are how we learn about that harmony.⁶⁸ Once philosophy enters the stage, the orchestra should fall silent.

⁶⁵ *Quaest. conv.* 9.14.746A, *De an. procr.* 1029D, *De virt. mor.* 444A. Cf. *De an. procr.* 1014C and 1026C. Both *Quaest. conv.* 9.14.746B and *De sup.* 167C quote Pindar, *Pythian Odes* 1.13–14.

⁶⁶ See Lippman 1964, 45–86 and Pelosi 2010, 14–67.

⁶⁷ Cf. also *De cohibenda ira* 456B-C and *Quaest. conv.* 3.8.657A. However, as *De vitioso pudore* 534E-F shows (cf. also *An virtus doceri* 439C, both quoting *Clitophon* 407c-d, which Plutarch regarded as a genuine Platonic work; see Slings 1999, 11 n. 8), the danger of music should not be overestimated: it is not musical discord which causes conflict but discord (*πλημμελεία*) in law and justice. On musical imagery in Plutarch's political thought, see Mosconi 2009.

⁶⁸ In this respect, as in many other respects, Plutarch is fundamentally opposed to the Stoics, who give a much more elevated role to music – in some ways more in line, perhaps, with an isolated reading of *Timaeus* – as a rational phenomenon which 'can represent the structure of the divine in terms of its underlying ratios, rather than just describing that structure in words' (Scade 2017, 209 [his emphasis] on Cleanthes).