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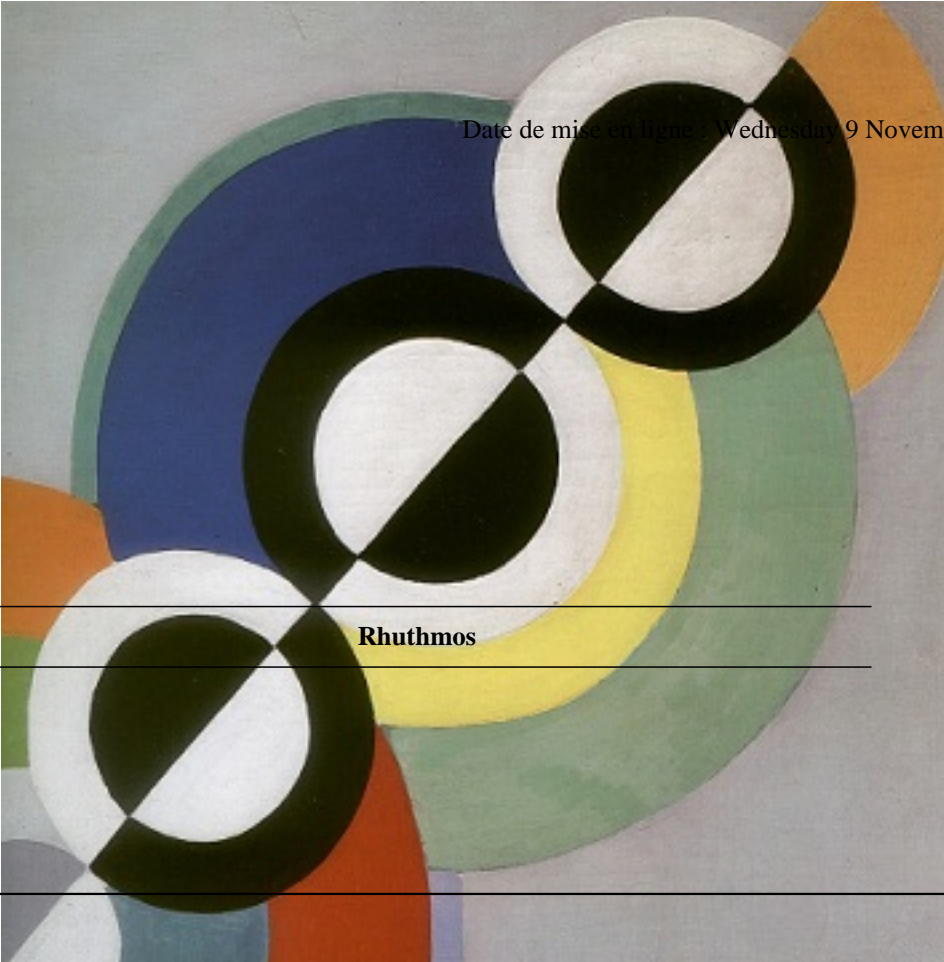
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Eurhythmy in the German Platonic Tradition

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Rhuthmos

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Eurhythm in the German Platonic Tradition

Since he gave a decisive role in his philosophy to rhythm Nietzsche had naturally to assess its variable aesthetic, ethical and political value. This amounted first to address the very famous question, known since Socrates and Plato as already mentioned at the beginning of this book, of *eurhythm* [*Eurhythmie/eurhythmische Princip*] or "good rhythm." Regularly evoked by philosophers and philologists in Antiquity and Modern Times until 19th century, it was once again introduced in the scientific debate in 1868 by Johann H.H. Schmidt who published a study on chorus in Aeschylus and Pindar entitled *Die Eurhythmie in den Chorgesängen der Griechen*.

Later on, this question has been frequently addressed afresh by many artists and thinkers, whether writers like Steiner, teachers of music as Jaques-Dalcroze or dancers as the young Laban. As we will see below, it has pervaded the *Lebensreform* movement and its theory of rhythm at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

But Nietzsche's answer to this question has been treated ever since so confusingly and in so many divergent ways that it is today quite difficult to understand what his position exactly was.

The best example of this miscomprehension is given by the assessment of Nietzsche's turn from an admirer into a harsh critique of Wagner's music. As one may know, in Nietzsche's early years, Wagner's departings from tonality, cadence and regular rhythms, his introduction of indeterminate chords, changing tempos, irregular measures, were appreciated as rightful subversion of the mechanical and tonal ordering proper to classical music what Wagner called "eurhythm" exactly as Baudelaire called "rhythm" what actually was traditional *meter* and as many ways to reconnect with the Dionysian element of Greek drama. Instead Nietzsche considered in his maturity that the Wagnerian music was utterly "modern" because, despite its seemingly freedom, it was subjected, precisely by its preference given to harmony and loose succession of stresses, to affects, passions and emotions. Praised as Apollonian frames that allowed "*the gradual awakening of the Dionysian spirit* in our contemporary world," German music and Wagner's drama were now accused to accentuate a modern trait: the hysterization of life due to their incapacity to organize speech, dance and music according to objective laws.

Consider the means of achieving effects which Wagner is fond of using (and which, for the most part, he had to invent): the choice of the movements, the timbres of his orchestra, the abominable avoidance of the logic and quadrature of rhythm, the creeping, soothing, mysterious, hysterical quality of his "infinite melody": they resemble in a strange way the means with which the hypnotizer performs his act. Is the state indeed into which, for example, the prelude to *Lohengrin* plunges the listener, especially the lady listener, essentially different from that of a somnambulant trance? I heard an Italian woman who had just listened to that prelude, flashing those adorable mesmerized eyes that Wagneriennes know how to affect: "Come si dorme con questa musica!" (eKGWB/NF-1887,10[155] Autumn 1887, my trans.)

Heidegger, who worked on Nietzsche mainly between 1936 and 1947, understood this aphorism just like before him many German thinkers since the end of the 19th century if not as a sheer rejection of the Dionysian at least as an affirmation of the necessity "to leash its force and give it form."

Since Wagner sought sheer upsurge of the Dionysian and dissipation in its element, while Nietzsche sought to leash its force and give it form, the breach between the two was already determined. (*Nietzsche*, 1961, I, p. 88, trans. David Farrell Krell, my mod.)

He accumulates metaphors illustrating the idea of becoming as pure flow ("dissolution," "flexibility," "plasticity," "fluidity," "swimming," "submergence") to show just like Plato did the necessity of "laws and borders" in order to avoid "sinking into nothingness."

Here the essential character of the conception "collective artwork" comes to unequivocal expression: the dissolution of everything solid into a fluid, flexible, malleable state, into a swimming and floundering; the unmeasured, without laws or borders, clarity or definiteness; the boundless night of sheer submergence. In other words, art is once again to become an absolute need. But now the absolute is experienced as sheer indeterminacy, total dissolution into sheer feeling, a hovering that gradually sinks into nothingness. (*Nietzsche*, 1961, I, p. 87, trans. David Farrell Krell, my mod.)

Indeed some texts of the same period seem to prove him right. In 1888, in two fragments noted down while writing *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche criticizes the "tyranny" imposed on the listener's mind by his "lack of tonality," his "inability to build" a drama and his "lack of eurhythmy" in dance.

2. The corruption of music [...]

Lack of tonality

Lack of *eurhythmy* ("Dance")

Inability to build [*des Baus*] ("drama")

Means of *tyranny*

The "fixed idea" (or the leitmotif) [...]

7. the *décadent* [*in French*]: extr irritability

Lack of tonality

Lack of eurhythmy

Inability to build [*zu bauen*]

Exaggeration of the details

(eKGWB/NF-1888,16[77] Spring-Summer 1888, my trans.)

Wagner lamentably failed in the three areas that make up the ancient orchestrics: harmony, poetry considered here

under the angle of construction and dance. In these particular fragments, eurhythm quite clearly means for body movements, what tonality does for melody and harmony, and structure/construction [*Bau/bauen*] for poetry. Rhythm seems to be placed again on the Apollonian side of rational proportions and architecture, and therefore considered as a powerful means to master Dionysian exuberance and hubris.

But one should not jump to conclusions as Heidegger and many other readers before and after him did a bit hastily. Any naive inversion seems very doubtful. The balance and endless opposition between Apollo and Dionysius elaborated in *The Birth of Tragedy* already raises strong doubts whether one of them could have been originally as much as finally given the supremacy upon the other. Moreover, the most constant objective of posterior essays has been the deconstruction of the fundamental metaphysical oppositions between thing-in-itself and phenomenon, reason and sensitivity, *lógos* and intuition, which finally simply evaporated. Lastly, the interpretation that makes Nietzsche reject his own juvenile Romanticism to embrace a more mature Classicism runs on old metaphysical categories that Nietzsche himself explicitly declared obsolete in his "Attempt at Self-Criticism" written in 1886.

How much I now regret the fact that at the time I didn't have the courage (or the presumptuousness?) to consider allowing myself a personal language appropriate to such an odd point of view and such a daring exploit that I sought laboriously to express strange and new evaluations with formulas from Schopenhauer and Kant something which basically went quite against the spirit of Kant and Schopenhauer, as well as against their tastes! (*The Birth of Tragedy*, "Attempt at Self Criticism," 1886, trans. I. Johnston)

No simplistic dualism can be assigned to Nietzsche's late philosophy and it is misleading to associate it with some kind of reactionary aesthetics, ethics and politics choosing law and order against anarchy and chaos, or, in a milder wording, balance and harmony against imbalance and dissonance. Nietzsche is not advocating a return to the classical Western rhythms Wagner did help indeed, along with other artists, to overcome in the 1850s and 1860s as the expression "logic and quadrature of rhythm" or "lack of eurhythm" seems oddly to refer to. He is now opposing to Wagner and modern German culture the more valuable kind of rhythm that existed in ancient Greece.

The question is: what then might mean *eurhythm* if it is to be opposed to the dissolution of rhythm by Wagner but at the same time not to be reduced to its classical meaning? What could be an aesthetics, an ethics and a politics based on *eurhythmoi* which would independent from the simplistic oppositions between Romanticism and Classicism, freedom of thought and social order, Individual and State? How to describe this specific kind of rhythms? And what would make them so valuable?

First we have to understand the context within and against which Nietzsche elaborates his aesthetics, ethics and politics of rhythm. This context is from one end to the other Platonic.

As we already saw in chapter 7, in "On the metaphysics of music," published in 1844, while contrasting architecture and music respectively as arts of space and time, Schopenhauer set up an analogy between architectural symmetry and musical rhythm because both were founded on "equal parts corresponding to one another" and "similarity" between "ultimate constituent elements." In this context, eurhythm clearly meant symmetry in the most recent sense.

Rhythm is in time what *symmetry* is in space, namely division into equal parts corresponding to one another, and first into larger parts that are again divisible into smaller parts subordinate to the former. Moreover, they are the most heterogeneous, in fact the true antipodes [...] architecture is in *space* alone, without any reference to time, and music is in *time* alone without any reference to space. From this springs their sole analogy, namely that as in architecture it is *symmetry* that arranges and holds together, in music it is *rhythm*; and thus we also have confirmation here that *les extrêmes se touchent*. As the ultimate constituent elements of a building are the exactly similar stones, so the ultimate constituent elements of a piece of music are the exactly similar measures of time. But through arsis and thesis, or in general by the numerical fraction denoting the time, these are divided into equal parts that may perhaps be compared to the dimensions of the stone. The musical period consists of several bars, and also has two equal halves, one rising, aspiring, often going to the dominant, and one sinking, calming, and finding again the fundamental note. Two or even several periods constitute a part that is often doubled, likewise symmetrically, by the sign of repetition. (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, II, On the Metaphysics of Music, 1844, trans. E. F. J. Payne)

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Schopenhauer recognized that musicians do not always follow such strict rules and may sometimes develop more freely their music, but he compared these rare moments, "divested of rhythm," to "unsymmetrical ruins," which implies that those moments are and should be only exceptions to the classical metric rule.

The mere feeling of this analogy has occasioned the bold witticism, often repeated in the last thirty years, that architecture is frozen music. [...] As an amplification of the analogy pointed out it might also be added that when music, in a sudden urge for independence, so to speak, seizes the opportunity of a pause, in order to free itself from the control of rhythm, to launch out into the free fancy of an ornate cadenza, such a piece of music, divested of rhythm, is analogous to the ruin divested of symmetry. Accordingly, in the daring language of that witticism, such a ruin may be called a frozen cadenza. (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, II, On the Metaphysics of Music, 1844, trans. E. F. J. Payne)

We have seen as well in chapter 5 how Hegel addressed the issue of rhythm in poetry according to strict classical criteria. In his *Aesthetics* (1818-1829), published posthumously in 1835, Hegel also established a close relationship between architecture and music under the auspices of "eurhythm." In classical Greek architecture, eurhythm meant, according to him, a general correspondence and suitableness between all parts of a building.

In all these matters, in the relation of the breadth to the length and height of the building, of the height of columns to their diameter, in the intervals and number of columns, in the sort of variety or simplicity in decoration, in the size of the numerous cornices, friezes, etc., there dominated in classical times a secret eurhythm, discovered above all by the just sense of the Greeks. The Greeks did deviate from this in individual instances here and there, but on the whole they had to abide by these fundamental relationships in order to remain within the bounds of beauty. (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 2, Part 3, Sect. 1, Chap. 2, "Classical architecture," trans. T. M. Knox)

"Eurhythm of proportion" was crucial to "unification" of the parts "into a whole."

While we may lay it down as a fundamental law that, on the one hand, the differences briefly indicated just above must come into appearance as differences, on the other hand it is equally necessary for them to be united into a whole. In conclusion we will cast a brief glance at this unification which in architecture cannot be more than a juxtaposition, and an association, and a thorough going eurhythm of proportion. (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 2, Part 3, Sect. 1, Chap. 2, "Classical architecture," trans. T. M. Knox)

Strikingly, Hegel saw the same rule applying in Medieval architecture which he called "Romantic architecture." Its "incalculable multiplicity" was "articulated regularly, dispersed symmetrically, both moved and firmly set in the most satisfying eurhythm."

Externally the [medieval] building rises freely to a pinnacle, so that, however appropriate it is to its purpose, the purpose disappears again and the whole is given the look of an independent existent. No one thing completely exhausts a building like this; everything is lost in the greatness of the whole. [...] The substance of the whole is dismembered and shattered into the endless divisions of a world of individual variegations, but this incalculable multiplicity is divided in a simple way, articulated regularly, dispersed symmetrically, both moved and firmly set in the most satisfying eurhythmy, and this length and breadth of varied details is gripped together unhindered into the most secure unity and clearest independence. (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 2, Part 3, Sect. 1, Chap. 3, "Romantic architecture," trans. T.M. Knox)

Hence, according to Hegel, who agreed on this with Schopenhauer, music shares with architecture the same eurhythmic concern for even proportions, regularity, symmetry and unification into a whole. As a matter of fact, music moulds its forms according to "the rules of symmetry and eurhythm" and this for two reasons: on the one hand, it follows "harmonic laws of sound which rest on quantitative proportions," and on the other hand, "it is itself subject in many ways to the forms of regularity and symmetry [...] in relation both to the repetition of the beat and the rhythm."

In this way sound and its figuration becomes an element artificially moulded by art and by purely artistic expression, and this is quite different from the way that painting and sculpture precede with the human body and its posture and facial expression. In this respect too music may be compared more closely with architecture which derives its forms, not from what exists, but from the spirit's invention in order to mould them according to the laws of gravity and the rules of symmetry and eurhythm. Music does the same in its sphere, since, on the one hand, independently of the expression of feeling, it follows the harmonic laws of sound which rest on quantitative proportions, and, on the other, in relation both to the repetition of the beat and the rhythm and to the further development of the notes it is itself subject in many ways to the forms of regularity and symmetry. (*Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, Vol. 2, Part 3, Sect. 3, Chap. 2, "Music," trans. T. M. Knox)

We remember as well that, developing a suggestion made by Novalis, Schelling reconnected rhythm with a speculative and religious tradition according to which it was supposed to be a formal element common to biological life, art firstly music and operation of the cosmos itself. Meanwhile rhythm was reduced to numbers, periods and cycles.

In his *Philosophy of Art* (1802-1805), Schelling also addressed the issue of the relations between architecture and music, and therefore the more specific question of the criteria to be used to judge their respective artistic quality.

Rhythm was first to be opposed to harmony because the former embodied the formal and ideal aspect of architecture, while the latter expressed its organic and human aspect. In that, architecture was not different from music. One remembers that Nietzsche claimed that "the music of Apollo was Doric architecture expressed in sound." Schelling put it the other way around but it did not change much and music and architecture were still closely related: "A beautiful building is actually nothing else than a music perceived by the eye."

§ 117. *The harmonic part of architecture refers primarily to proportions or relationships and is the ideal form of this art.* The interplay of architectural proportions essentially refers to the human body, which is the model of their beauty. The architecture, which enjoys the highest and strictest form, and aims at the truth when it follows rhythm, thus comes closer to organic beauty when it shows harmony [...]. (About architectural harmony see above all Vitruvius). The architecture is therefore closely related with music, so that a beautiful building is actually nothing else than a music perceived by the eye, a concert of harmonies and harmonic combinations, felt not in the succession of time but that of space (simultaneously). (*Philosophy of Art*, Fr. trans. by C. Sulzer & A. Pernet, p. 269)

But "rhythm" was in the end to be combined with "harmony" on the model of "melody." Schelling used the example of the Corinthian order in which "Doric rhythm" and "Ionic harmony" were delightfully and melodiously united, as "the virginal body combines the general tenderness of the female forms and the greenness and bitterness of juvenile ones."

§ 118. *The melodic part of the architecture springs from the combination of rhythm with harmony. [...] The Corinthian order combines the rhythmic forms of the Doric order to the harmonic tenderness of the Ionic order, as the virginal body combines the general tenderness of the female forms and the greenness and bitterness of juvenile ones. Indeed the more slender aspect of Corinthian columns accentuates their rhythm. (Philosophy of Art, Fr. trans. by C. Sulzer & A. Pernet, p. 271)*

Contrary to Hegel and Schopenhauer, who in the 1820s and 1840s clearly turned against Romanticism and supported classical values, Schelling, who was writing a few decades before, was still obviously more fond of the former than the latter. This viewpoint explains why he did not use, at least to my knowledge, the term "eurhythmy" and would have probably preferred "euphony," but a perfect architectural form would nevertheless entail "a concert of harmonies and harmonic combinations, felt not in the succession of time but that of space (simultaneously)," an assertion which was not that different from the idea supported by Schopenhauer and Hegel that architecture should be based as music on the symmetrical integration of the parts into a whole. Indeed, as the latter, Schelling borrowed heavily from Vitruvius.

In order to better understand what Nietzsche meant when he used the concept of *eurhythmy* we thus have first to keep in mind the dominant aesthetic tradition in 19th century Germany against which he was fighting and which mainly drew its inspiration from Vitruvius and through him from Aristotle and Plato. We have also to remember when we read end-of-19th-century German thinkers or Heidegger's later comments on Nietzsche that they all were largely inspired by the most common classical taste which prevented them to correctly understand Nietzsche's specific aesthetics.

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