

Christian Rhythm at the End of Antiquity (4th - 6th cent. AD) - part 7

Thursday 1 September 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

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From the 4th to the 6th century AD, the spread of Christianity over the West and the hardening of the state power radically transformed rhythmology. Both movements entailed, more or less directly, a rejection of the old empiricist and naturalistic Aristotelian views on rhythm and an intensification of the ongoing return to Plato's idealistic conceptions.

Ambrose, who was a high ranking civil servant before being appointed bishop of Milan, one of the capitals of the Empire, emblemizes this link. He borrows the concept of "world harmony" from Pythagorean, Platonic and neo-Platonic speculations on the perfect movements of the heavenly bodies and the role played by rational numbers and proportions in music. But he transforms what was only a theoretical paradigm describing the functioning of the cosmos into a paradigm shaping collective religious practices. In his own way, he re-actualizes his predecessors' views on the educational role of rhythm and melody but whereas the latter were interested in forging good citizens, enhancing the city-state organization, or developing the contemplation of the marvelous order of the universe, Ambrose wants to use rhythm and melody to educate good Christians and develop the Church.

More of an organizer than a theoretician, Ambrose does not write long analyses to explain what he is doing, but he transforms poetry and music into a powerful communication device between God and the Christian community. Hymns are to be sung in church not only in praise of the Lord or his creation but also to perform, "as it were *hic et nunc*," as Spitzer notices, the world harmony, i.e. to make God present again on earth as a reenactment of his Incarnation. Music and poetry are to become an essential part of the mass in conjunction with the Eucharist.

Both theoretical and practical endeavors result in several major rhythmological consequences.

1. The neo-Platonic unification of the cosmos, in which the beings are all considered as emanations of God, leads to a parallel conceptual unification. The term *numerus* - *rhuthmós*, which was commonly limited to the human sphere, is now extended to the heavens, which were, for their part, previously characterized by the terms *circuitus* - *períodos* and *numerus* - *arithmós*. Just as the human beings in church, the world is not only playing music, it is also rhythmically chanting and dancing.

2. Ambrose's hymns draw on the new ways to pronounce Latin language that developed from the 3rd century on and that gives more importance to stress and less to quantity of syllables. This is of great

significance because it anticipates the change in Western poetry from rhythms composed of varying time-lengths to rhythms constituting sequences of word stresses.

3. One witnesses the surprising and remarkable development of rhythmic dancing during mass which replicates both the “dance of the angels” and the alleged dancing by Christ with the apostles after the Last Supper.

In short, Ambrose adapts the classical neo-Platonic views to the Church needs. The education of the individual by rhythm and melody which aimed at developing a philosophical *ethos* is now meant to bring up Christians. Musical and dance rhythms are used both to make the believers participate in the periodic coming of God on earth and to periodically regenerate the Christian community.

A few decades later, Augustine, a former rhetoric teacher turned bishop of Hippo Regius, a small town in Numidia – Africa, develops further Ambrose’s contribution. His *De musica* presents what is certainly the most complete theory of rhythm at the end of Antiquity. It unites a technical sophistication, mainly borrowed from Aristoxenus, Cicero and Quintilian, with a philosophical systematization, inspired, through Ambrose, by Plotinus. But Augustine also introduces into these two traditions, following the example of his mentor, strong Christian theological and anthropological concerns which will deeply change rhythmology for the centuries to come.

Technically speaking, the *De musica* does not bring much new. It draws mainly on the classical heritage. Rhythm and meter are both based on “minimal” time-length units. Rhythm (*numerus* – rarely *rhythmus*) is a characteristic of music which rests on the concatenation of time-lengths into one regular and uninterrupted flow, while meter (*metrum*) is distinctive of poetry which needs, *in addition to that*, periodic endings. But both categories are not separate. As in Aristotle, rhythm is larger than meter which is included in the former. Finally, verse (*versum*) is a succession of regular time-lengths or feet which, exactly as meter, is regularly interrupted—meter and verse are therefore almost synonymous—but which admits a cut in the middle and is therefore composed of two members.

However, Augustine innovates by twisting the mostly Aristotelian technical categories he receives into a more Platonic and Christian direction. Whereas Aristotle, even Cicero and Quintilian, opposed rhythm and meter out of practical reasons, meter being less suited to oratory—with the exception of the *clausulae* – ends of periods—, Augustine differentiates between them philosophically and theologically. Meter, he argues, is based on mere human and historical convention, while rhythm, which pertains to mathematics, is based on reason and divine perfection.

Similarly, he uses the Aristoxenian concept of minimal time-length unit and endorses the hylomorphic paradigm by considering music as science of “regulated movement” whatever the “matter” that is considered: poetry, dance or music. But, since he advocates at the same time the Platonic definition of rhythm as “order of movement,” this characterization *de facto* implicates to consider music first as *science of rhythm*. Music which has been, since the Pythagoreans up to Aristides Quintilianus, primarily theory and practice of succession of notes is for the first time in Antiquity considered as organized succession of time-lengths and stresses. The traditional priority of harmony or melody upon rhythm is reversed. The problem here is that this emphasis on rhythm and the conceptual generalization that goes with it are but another aspect of the Platonization of

rhythmology that was already under way since the 3rd century. With Augustine “the vast unification of man and nature under a consideration of ‘times,’ intervals and identical returns,” which, as Benveniste showed, was initiated by Plato, is now complete.

Another significant transformation concerns the progressive equating of rhythm with regular beat. Meter and verse, Augustine insists, must be based, if the structures are different, on constant proportions, or better yet on repetition of the same structure. Any unevenness in the succession of times in each line and in the succession of lines in each poem must be regularized by the introduction of rests. This is a radical turn. Even if music, dance and poetry needed previously to be rhythmically harmonized when they were used in the same performance, it did not mean that this would be done by imposing sheer regularity. On the contrary, although we lack direct evidence, we have good reasons to believe that rhythm in Antiquity was never considered as entirely regular, at least until the 4th century AD. But Augustine takes into account his own experience in Milan with Ambrose and his chanting crowds. For the common people at the time, who lack metric education and speak now Latin by stressing syllables instead of using quantitative differences, traditional meter with its subtle play on length proportions is difficult to perform and even to perceive. Instead, provided that it is strictly regularized, rhythm is much more convenient to chant and pray together or alone. This transformation of rhythm into regular pulsation, which emerges in Augustine’s time, will develop further, without linear progression though, during the Middle Ages and is one of the most important rhythmological transformation brought about by Augustine.

Theoretically speaking, Augustine heavily borrows from Plotinus, whose work is very successful when he arrives in Rome. Thanks to Plotinus’ thought, Augustine is able to reject sheer Manichaeist dualism. But he substitutes it with a neo-Platonic one which, although it considers the world as unique and hierarchically organized from the One, regards any concrete experience of art as too degraded to bring any relief to our sinful nature. Even at the end of the book, when he takes into account the sensitive pleasure brought by music and poetry, particularly through their rhythmic features, he emphasizes the need to overcome it by an intense attention of the soul towards their sheer mathematical qualities. Art—I mean art as a human, social and historical practice—which was a genuine ethical and political source of inspiration for Aristotle, and still a source of enjoyment and life betterment for Lucretius, Cicero, and Quintilian, is now considered as vile and degrading. Amplifying Plato’s gesture expelling poets from his City-State, Augustine excludes from the choir of the “real musicians” all performing artists who are, according to him, only more or less skilled imitators selling their art for a few coins.

Radically opposed to Aristotle, who thought of poetic *mímêsis* as based on “language seasoned with all kinds of spices,” and as intrinsically liberating, Augustine disqualifies re-presentation and gives precedence to pure music over language, even if his treatise covers mainly metric issues. Augustine’s speculation remains utterly foreign to the empirical art of music, viz. actual music, poetry and dance, and develops an entirely idealistic conception. It substitutes artistic experience with all its frailty and unexpectedness but also its potentialities, with a burning desire to overcome its empirical and material nature by imitating very abstract forms drawn from philosophical and theological reflection on eurhythmy and harmony.

His anti-artistic drive worsens when he returns to Africa. In the *Confessions*, Augustine aggravates his denunciation of theater, poetics and Aristotle. What has been once considered cathartic or only enjoyable is now seen as sheer evil because it diverts the soul from finding God inside herself, makes her imagine false solutions to end her sufferings and incites her to perversely enjoy the

representation of pain.

Augustine's rejection of empiricism and poetics results in the elaboration of a very abstract theory of rhythm which is drawn directly from philosophical and arithmetic speculation. Rhythm is now considered as a Platonic Form. The only valuable rhythms are not human rhythms which are most of the time corrupted and arrhythmic, but those emanating from God, which contrastingly are endowed with regularity, symmetry and order. God created the world according to rhythms which were consubstantial with him and every proper rhythm still emanates from him. Consequently every being is participating in its particular and limited way to these *numeri* emanating from the One which is the only truly *numerosus* being. Beauty and Good are to be recognized through the traces they leave in our own *numeri*. Thus, God, the world and all beings are primarily rhythmic. In short, Augustine proposes nothing less than a rhythmic ontology and theology.

This neo-Platonic philosophical and theological construction accounts for three most significant rhythmological changes.

1. Augustine's extraordinary generalization of the concept of *numerus* which resumes that already initiated by Ambrose. This concept is now used to describe dance, music, poetry and theater, but also to characterize physiological (pulse, respiration) as well as cosmic phenomena (periodic return of the sun, the moon or the seasons). This semantic extension shows, so to speak, the terminus *ad quem* of a movement that we spotted as soon as the 4th century BC in Greece and that we followed step by step in the Roman world. Along with his mentor, Augustine represents a significant and critical milestone in rhythmology because he is probably one of the first and most powerful agents of the general idealistic and arithmetic confusion that still reigns on this subject.

2. The integration into a strictly hierarchical system of three important ancient meanings of the concept of rhythm: due proportion in space, proportionate sequence of time-lengths, and divine and rational rule—so to speak, Vitruvius, Aristoxenus, and Plato—at the expense of its other meanings: holistic and dynamic system of *significance*; materialistic *turbo*—Aristotle and Lucretius.

3. The overwhelming development of the *Platonic metric paradigm* and the repression of the *Democritean physical* and *Aristotelian poetic paradigms* which will be completely forgotten until their progressive re-discovery between the 16th and the 18th century.

Yet, from a Christian perspective, the Plotinian doctrine raises a certain number of issues. First, the neo-Platonic numerology must be adapted. According to Augustine, who borrows from his predecessors, the pleasure felt at a dance performance or while hearing a music piece is brought about, for educated people, by the perception of proportions between time-lengths, and, for more ordinary people, mainly by the regular beating of time. Since the Archimedean mathematics has been entirely forgotten, in the first case, only "rational" proportions, in the second case, only strictly regular beating are considered as beautiful and efficient.

However, this kind of proportional or regular arrangement of time-lengths must be organized from within by "a certain measure and form." This interior organizing principle may be found first in the decimal system. But even if this system seems to be based on the number of human fingers, which

has been decided by God, Augustine finally argues for number 3 which translates into rhythmology the one God in three persons of the Trinitarian Christian creed. More than the use of the decimal system, this Trinitarian idea is of tremendous importance to us because it will trigger countless reductions of rhythm to successions of three times and will become one of the most favorite idea of Western philosophers up to and including Hegel, when he will speculate on the particular rhythm of the development of the Spirit in History (see next vol.).

Another limit of the Plotinian doctrine is that it may result in considering God himself as entirely necessary, immutable, and timeless, whereas the scriptural tradition emphasizes the “personal attributes (e.g. will, justice, and historical purpose) of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (Mendelson, 2010).

To avoid such objectionable consequence, Augustine elaborates further one of Origen’s suggestions in his treatise *On First Principles* (ca. 225). He imagines the divine Creation as the application of *numeri* which direct the development of life and which he explicitly compares to poetic or musical rhythms. Like a musician or a poet arranging rhythmic intervals, God disposed, according to his will, beings and things in space and time. Unlike Origen who thought that God only produced spatial diversity of things and beings, Augustine claims now that God, whom he calls the “arranger or times” (*dispositor temporum*), gave and still gives rhythm to his Creation. With this dynamic and rhythmic theological system, Augustine wants to challenge the pagan philosophers who reject the idea of *ex nihilo* creation. The Creation is possible because God is rhythm and the proof of that is the overall presence of rhythm in his Creation.

The last important limit of the Plotinian doctrine, from the Christian perspective, concerns the human being, i.e. anthropology. Since “the relation of the ultimate principle to all that comes below is usually presented in terms of a sempiternal process of necessary emanations whereby lower stages constantly flow from the higher,” there is in neo-Platonic doctrines “a tendency to bridge the gap between God and the soul in a manner troubling to someone like Augustine, for whom the creator/creature distinction is fundamental” (Mendelson, 2010). In other words, the Plotinian doctrine may result in considering all beings as God himself. To avoid such an obnoxious consequence, Augustine proposes an intermediate way between strong dualism as Manichaeism and soft dualism turning into monism as Plotinian philosophy, which clears the space for a new anthropology.

In order to rebalance the Divine rhythmic, Augustine develops a very detailed analysis of the rhythmic performance of the soul. Indeed, the pleasure found in musical and poetic rhythms should not become sheer object of contempt—even if artists are and remains despicable. It helps “tearing oneself from all the disordered movements which deprive the soul of the fullness of its being” and “converting her and restituting her to God” (6.11.13). Earthly rhythmic beauty is but a reflection of the divine perfection and the pleasure we feel in hearing beautiful rhythms is an anticipation of the eternal life in God. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to understand the capacities of the soul herself to feel and judge rhythms because rhythms are means of salvation.

Augustine first situates the soul in the circuit of rhythm: physical sound, sense of hearing, pronunciation, movement of the soul and memory, and rule of God. Given her particular position in this circuit, she may perform in three different ways: she can act by herself upon the rhythms of the body; she can react against rhythmic perceptions coming from the body; and she can memorize all

rhythmic events that occurred in both previous situations.

This analysis enables Augustine to propose a list of rhythm genera, “classified, according to their relative superiority”: “rhythms of judgment” which are images in the soul of the Divine rhythms; “progressive rhythms” by which the soul governs the body without being prompted by exterior stimuli; “reaction rhythms” by which the soul opposes the impressions of the body; “rhythms of memory” which record rhythmic perceptions; and “sound or physical rhythms,” which are the acoustic and most material part of the rhythmic world.

So, not only God, the world, and the beings that are in it, but also the whole circuit of human perception is now considered from the rhythmic perspective. Both God, the cosmos and the soul commune in the same rhythmic nature. Theology, ontology and anthropology are all based on rhythm.

Naturally, this perspective reopens some of the questions that were solved by the neo-Platonic doctrine, particularly that concerning the junction point between God’s Divine rhythmic and human rhythms. In this chain, only “rhythms of judgment” are eternal, because they are images in the human creature of God’s eternal and perfect hidden rhythms. They provide the keys for salvation and eternal life. However, since they have to deal with temporal realities, the “rhythms of judgment” must be temporal as well. How is it possible?

The first part of the solution is drawn from the Christian doctrine of the soul. Rhythms of judgment are in respect to physical and perceptive rhythms in the same position as the soul to the body, who dwells in it but simultaneously remains superior to it as an active image of the Creator, within of course the limits imposed upon her by the Fall. Thus, despite their natural human limitations, the judgment rhythms provide the soul with all criteria she needs to organize rhythmically the life in time of human beings and finally reach salvation.

In addition to that—and this is the second part of Augustine’s new solution of the problem of the relationship between infinite and finite when the latter are considered as Creator and creature—the human soul is endowed with a particular power to memorize the events of her life. We now know Augustine’s point: without this faculty, the succession of time-lengths which constitute physical and reaction rhythms, would appear as sheer juxtaposition. Instead the soul uses memory to incorporate the successive sounds into one rhythmic phrase. Except when the soul acts from her own inner rhythms, she depends on memory for the synthesis of the physical rhythms which strike the ears. More generally, Augustine adds in the *Confessions*, the soul has the power to extend herself (*distentio animae*) through memory and imagination towards past and future. Therefore time is not a feature or property of the world, but results from acts of attention of the soul which allow either recollection of the past or anticipation of that which is still to come.

These anthropological features of the Augustinian doctrine have been widely commented but we must be careful not to obfuscate them with our own categories.

First, this doctrine of time does not imply any interest in temporality *per se*. Contrarily to a common prejudice, Augustine does not praise time for itself. In contrast with Democritean, Epicurean and a

few others thinkers, his only objective is to escape from duration and becoming in order to reach an immobile, serene and quiet life. The “distension of the soul” (*distentio animae*), which for him constitutes time, paradoxically opens up an essentially “non-temporal interval” within the temporal flow itself.

Second, the duration of the soul is neither smooth nor, so to speak, granular, like in the modern competing views of consciousness, it is primarily “rhythmic” (*numerosa*). Even when she is considered on her own, i.e. apart from her relation to physical, perceptive and memorial rhythms, the soul moves according to silent “rhythmic time intervals.”

Since they are from Divine origin, these “silent rhythms” seem partly to replicate within the human being ideal rhythmic criteria. But, strikingly, Augustine supports his claim by an analysis of the perception of a succession of syllables. Memory constitutes the human time not only because it enables human beings to retain traces of the past but because it helps us to recognize, appreciate and unify a series of poetic time-lengths. This reintroduction of poetry and poetic rhythm into the philosophical reasoning allows Augustine to bypass the ontological or naturalistic perspective on time, which rules upon Greek philosophy, and to introduce a linguistic and anthropological concern, which is much closer to Jewish religious creed. Time is not a real flow; it is not either constituted by the movement of heavenly bodies; it must be linked with the power to speak which is in human beings as a reflection of God’s Word.

In other words, the “silent rhythms” of the soul seem to compound two opposite influences in Augustine’s thought. On their neo-Platonic side, they appear as regulated by divine rhythms according to traditional criteria mixing mathematics, rational proportion, symmetry, uniformity, regular order. But on their Christian side, they look much less constrained because what counts now is less an *imitation* of the perfect order of the universe than the *re-actualization*, in the tiniest utterance, of God’s speech power and, by doing so, the opening of a space within the becoming itself which prefigures the timeless and eternal life in God.

The metric argument, which constantly recurs in Augustine’s reasoning, seems to be operating as a shifting gear between the two sides: poetry is arranged, as in classical tradition, according to the rules of arithmetic rational proportions or repetition, but, as in the most recent Ambrosian hymns, it simultaneously emblemizes the temporal constitutive power of human soul which evokes in turn the timeless creation power of the Word.

There is indeed a tension between the two sides of the argument, but we must also recognize something quite remarkable in Augustine’s drive towards a conception of rhythm which would be freed from the metric order and even, in a way, from strict numerical succession. Maybe because of his personal taste for poetry and language and his life-long practice of writing, he realizes that there are in human life rhythms which cannot be measured and numbered but which do not lack either form or organization. He probably also feels that human discourse is not as linear as it seems and that it must be observed as a global system which is both cumulative and dynamic. However, because he opposes Aristotle and his *Poetics*, he cannot materialize his intuitions otherwise than in a religious framework which disregards the earthly world or at least considers it as a mere passage to another and better one.

The last important Christian and neo-Platonic thinker of Antiquity and probably also the first of the Middle Ages is Boethius. In his *De institutione musica* (ca. 510), which will become the fundamental text for the study of *musica* within the *quadrivium* throughout the entire Middle Ages and late into the Renaissance, Boethius endorses the radical anti-empiricism and anti-materialism of his predecessors. Composition and performance are again considered as degraded art forms and, as a matter of fact, are not the least taken into account. Learning music is not anymore about playing an instrument, like for Aristides, nor even singing in church, like for Ambrose, but to overcome “sensory experience” in order to reach “the essences expressed in ratios pervad[ing] every level of being” and then to “ascend to the level of reason.”

In the same neo-Platonic spirit as Ambrose and Augustine, music is used to construct a hierarchical world view, Boethius’ famous threefold division between *musica mundana* (the highest and purest kind of music), *musica humana* (the intermediary kind) and *musica instrumentalis* (the lowest and degraded kind). In this world view, Boethius puts particular emphasis on *numeri*.

However, whereas Augustine still thought of *numeri* as rhythms as much as numbers and finally imagined metric-less rhythms in paradise, Boethius makes the numbers come to the foreground and the rhythms recess into insignificance. Instead of combining neo-Platonic idealism with Christianity, he transforms, for his part, the former into a kind of generalized neo-Pythagoreanism. The whole universe is now considered as having been generated “according to the system of numbers.”

Let us note, to close this section, that although, properly speaking, Boethius is not concerned anymore with rhythm, his theoretical model will be re-actualized many times to support what some specialists have abusively called a “pan-rhythmism,” based on arithmetic and endowed with a radically idealistic overtone. We will come back to this subject when we discuss the speculation of Schelling on art at the very beginning of the 19th century and that of Matila Ghyka on Golden ratio during the first half of the 20th century (for the time being see Neveux, 1995 and Sauvanet, 1999, p. 91 sq.).

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