

Platonic Rhythm in the Roman Empire (3rd - 4th cent. AD)

Friday 2 September 2016, by [Pascal Michon](#)

Sommaire

- [Rhythm as Human Reflection of](#)
- [Rhythm as Male Order Principle](#)

[Previous chapter](#)

In the aftermath of the Third Century Crisis (235 - 284 AD), the Principate, which had proven inadequate to rule over an empire stretching between the Atlantic ocean and the Middle East, Northern Africa and Rhine and Danube rivers, was substituted by a new political system: the Dominate. In this system, the power was originally divided among four Emperors and four capitals under Diocletian (286 - 305 AD), then reunited under Constantine (324 - 337 AD), then divided again after Theodosius' death (395 - 476 AD). Yet, this division, which was decided after the disastrous civil wars and the disintegration of the 3rd century for purely practical reasons, did not mean any real partition nor softening of the power. Quite the contrary. At no point did the Romans consider the Empire split into four or two, but rather regarded it as a single state governed by four or two separate Imperial courts out of sheer administrative expediency. Moreover, this system ruled despotically over the Empire from 284 AD till the collapse of its Western part around 476 AD but survived, after that date, in the Eastern part for many more centuries.

In addition, we must naturally take into account the religious mutation which was clearly related to the latter, with the spreading of Christian monotheism all over the Empire and the regression of the age old polytheism.

This new political and religious context may account for several significant rhythmological changes. First, rhythm penetrated into metaphysics, whose encompassing views grew simultaneously with the extension and strengthening of the Imperial power. In this field, the reflection on rhythm became more and more abstract.

Second, it became an object of specialized and technical concern, principally in music, which became an important part of the educational curriculum for the cosmopolitan Roman elite, and in rhetoric, which did not recuperate its former political dimension—it even tended to lose its more recent role as technique of enhancement of personal and private life—but was rejuvenated by Christian orators and educators on sheer religious basis. I shall return to this point below.

Finally, most authors distanced themselves from the empiricist and naturalistic Aristotelian views which dominated the previous period and advocated a return to the Platonic roots. Aristotle was not,

properly speaking, forgotten but he was, to varying degrees, philosophically absorbed into Plato.

Rhythm as Human Reflection of Heavenly Numbers - Plotinus' *Enneads* (3rd c. AD)

Plotinus (204/5 – 270 AD) was educated in Alexandria and lived in Egypt for the first part of his life. Then, after a failed trip to Persia intended to study Oriental philosophy, he went to Rome where he had many students and spent most of the remainder of his life.

In his famous *Enneads* edited by his disciple Porphyry, he does not pay much attention to Plato's suggestions, in *The Republic* and *The Laws*, concerning rhythm of body and speech in art, education and politics. He is also alien to Aristotle's empiricist perspective and to poetic and rhetoric concerns. To my surprise, despite a careful research, I could not find in them any occurrence of the term *εὐρυθμία* – *euruthmía* and the term *ῥυθμός* – *rhuthmós* is itself very rarely used. Anyway we must examine Plotinus' contribution because his thought and his peculiar brand of Platonism will have a tremendous influence on some of his followers, particularly Aristides and Augustine.

Plotinus focuses his attention on the cosmological views exposed in the *Timaeus* and most occurrences of *rhuthmós* are linked with comments on this work. In the fourth *Ennead*, he exposes his view on the nature of the Living World, whose elements move like in “variegated dances” and “make up [together] one total dance-play.”

The Circuit does not go by chance but under the Reason-Principle of the living whole; therefore there must be a harmony between cause and caused; there must be some order ranging things to each other's purpose, or in due relation to each other: every several configuration within the Circuit must be accompanied by a change in the position and condition of things subordinate to it, [as variegated dances { }make up one total dance-play] [οἷον μίαν ὄρχησιν ἐν ποικίλῃ χορείᾳ ποιοῦντων – οἷον μίαν ὄρκῆσιν ἐν ποικίλῃ χορείᾳ ποιοῦντων]. (*Ennead* 4. 4.33, trans. Stephen MacKenna, my mod.)

The term rhythm is not used here but Plotinus is clearly referring to the Platonic “order of motion.” The Universe is a “living unity” whose general operations, larger configurations and specific groupings are organized according to “harmony and ordinance” i.e. meters, since “all the members of this living whole in their choral dance are under a rule of Number.”

Let us keep in mind what we have laid down: The being we are considering is a living unity and, therefore, necessarily selfsympathetic: it is under a law of reason, and therefore the unfolding process of its life must be self-accordant: that life has no haphazard, but knows only harmony and ordinance [ἁρμονία καὶ τάξις – *harmonía kai táxis*]: all the groupings [σχηματισμοὶ – *skhêmatismoi*] follow reason: all single beings within it, all the members of this living whole in their choral dance [καὶ τὰ χορεύοντα] are under a rule of Number [κατ' ἀριθμοὺς – *kat' arithmou*s]. (*Ennead* 4.4.35, trans. Stephen MacKenna)

As a matter of fact, a little further down, Plotinus adds that, in the Universe, the *σχήματα* – *skhêmata* – groupings are not only spatially constituted as the “out-spacing of a living-being” but also temporally as “its reason-determined rhythms and conditions,” i.e. as their impermanent shapes and states, which seems a rather conservative use of *rhuthmós*, since on the one hand, it explicitly specifies the sense of *σχῆμα* – *skhêma* – form and, on the other hand, is opposed to *σχέσις* – *skhêsis* – condition, state. But it is not clear whether Plotinus thinks of the ancient meaning of the word or if he does not appropriate it and adapt it to his philosophy. These spatial and rhythmic groupings seems indeed themselves endowed with a certain dynamism; they are “the powers of the living being.”

Holding this in mind we are forced to certain conclusions: in the expressive act of the All are comprised equally the configurations of its members [*τὰ σχηματιζόμενα μέρη αὐτοῦ* – *tà skhêmatizόμεna méré autoû*] and these members themselves, minor as well as major entering into the configurations. This is the mode of life of the All; and its powers work together to this end under the Nature in which the producing agency within the Reason-Principles has brought them into being. The groupings [within the All] [*τὰ σχήματα* – *tà skhêmata*] are themselves in the nature of Reason-Principles since they are the out-spacing of a living-being, its reason-determined [*κατὰ λόγον* – *katà lógon*] rhythms [*ῥυθμοὺς* – *rhuthmoûs*] and conditions [*σχέσεις* – *skhéseis* – conditions in the sense of states], and the entities thus spaced-out [*διεστηκότα* – *diestêkóta* – set apart, placed separately] and grouped to pattern [*ἐσχηματισμένα* – *eskhêmatisména* – assuming a certain form, figure, posture] are its various members: then again there are the powers of the living being—distinct these, too—which may be considered as parts of it, always excluding deliberate will which is external to it, not contributory to the nature of the living All. (*Ennead* 4.4.35, trans. Stephen MacKenna)

Another occurrence of *rhuthmós* may give us a supplementary hint on its transformation in Plotinus' work. In the fifth *Ennead*, as it was customary in his time, Plotinus uses the term *períodos* to denote the operation of the heaven. The “Soul,” viz. “the author of all living things [...] ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that periodic motion.”

Let every soul recall, then, at the outset the truth that soul is the author of all living things, that it has breathed the life into them all, whatever is nourished by earth and sea, all the creatures of the air, the divine stars in the sky; it is the maker of the sun; itself formed and ordered this vast heaven and conducts all that [periodic] motion [*ἐν τάξει περιάγει* – *en táxei períagei*]; and it is a principle distinct from all these to which it gives law and movement and life, and it must of necessity be more honourable than they, for they gather or dissolve as soul brings them life or abandons them, but soul, since it never can abandon itself, is of eternal being. (*Ennead* 5.1.2, trans. Stephen MacKenna, my mod.)

Then, directly borrowing from Plato, Plotinus connects the various human *rhuthmoî* to the *noêtòn arithmòn*, the “intelligible numbers” which regulate the periodic and circular motion of the Heaven. Contrarily to Pierre Sauvanet's claim, he does not use the expression *noêtòn rhuthmon* (Sauvanet, 1999, p. 92). Since “they follow models found in sense,” imitative arts and crafts as painting, sculpture, dancing, pantomimic gesturing, are devoid of any direct link with the Intelligible. But since man has the capacity to observe the “symmetry of living things” which replicate the “symmetry reigning among all beings in the Intellectual Kosmos,” there must be a particular art which has the

power to reach to heavens. Indeed, music, “which studies harmony and rhythm,” is probably the sole art which helps man to grasp on earth those heavenly symmetries i.e. “the [higher] music which deals with the intelligible numbers.” Musical rhythm appears now clearly as an earthly prefiguration of a higher and more abstract rhythm which is defined according to numbers.

Now as to the arts and crafts and their productions: The imitative arts—painting, sculpture, dancing, pantomimic gesturing—are, largely, earth-based; on an earthly base; they follow models found in sense, since they copy forms and movements and reproduce seen symmetries; they cannot therefore be referred to that higher sphere except indirectly, through the Reason-Principle in humanity.

On the other hand any skill which, beginning with the observation of the symmetry of living things, grows to the symmetry of all life, will be a portion of the Power There which observes and meditates the symmetry reigning among all beings in the Intellectual Kosmos. Thus music, [which studies harmony and rhythm [μουσική πᾶσα περὶ ἀρμονίαν ἔχουσα καὶ ῥυθμόν - *mousikê pása perì harmonían ékhousa kai rhuthmón*], is, since it examines what is universal in rhythm and harmony [ἥ μὲν περὶ ῥυθμόν καὶ ἀρμονίαν, ἔχουσα τὰ νοήματα - *êi mèn perì rhuthmón kai harmonían, ékhousa tà noêmata*], the earthly representation of the [higher] music [which deals with the intelligible numbers] [ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ περὶ τὸν νοητὸν ἀριθμὸν ἔχουσα - *hôsper kai hê perì tòn noêtòn arithmòn ékhousa*]. (*Ennead* 5. 9.11, trans. Stephen MacKenna, my mod.)

Let us notice that, unlike Vitruvius who granted to architects the capacity to carry out full “eurhythmy,” Plotinus, whose perspective is celestial, does not consider architecture as entirely apt to attain to “the Intellectual.”

The crafts such as building and carpentry which give us Matter in wrought forms, may be said, in that they draw on pattern, to take their principles from that realm and from the thinking There: but in that they bring these down into contact with the sense-order, they are not wholly in the Intellectual, except as contained in the Idea of man. (*Ennead* 5. 9.11, trans. Stephen MacKenna)

A last interesting occurrence of the term rhythm is to be found in the sixth *Ennead*. Dance rhythm is taken as example to discuss the varying degree of participation of things to The Original Good. While dance rhythm is thus indirectly related to The Good, it is once again defined, along with voice order, as participating in “correct regulation.” Both features will be taken up and developed in a much more elaborated way by Augustine a century later.

No doubt that The Good is a unity; but here it has become particularized. The First Activity is good and anything determined in accord with it is good, as also is any resultant. There is the good that is good by origin in The First, the good that is an ordered system derived from that earlier, and the good that is in the actualization (in the thing participant). Derived, then, not identical—like the [voice and walk] [φωνὴ καὶ βάδισις - *phônê kai bádisis*] and other characteristics of [a choir], [since they all are well regulated] [πάντα κατορθούμενα - *pánta katorthoúmena* - lit. *set up right*]. Here, it is obvious, [correct regulation] depends upon [order

and rhythm], [ὅτι τάξις καὶ ῥυθμός] but what equivalent exists There? (*Ennead* 6.7.18, trans. Stephen MacKenna, my mod.)

Despite the low number of occurrences of the term rhythm to be found in the *Enneads*, Plotinus plays a significant role in the re-Platonization of rhythm at the end of Antiquity. Instead of observing music, dance, poetry, public speech or even architecture as they present themselves, the focus is now on the more or less defective way they reflect the perfect and hardly accessible upper-world. The last remnants of Aristotelian empiricism are abandoned in favor of a radically idealistic perspective. I found one single occurrence where Plotinus seems to give to rhythm its ancient meaning of impermanent shape. Otherwise the human dance follows a kind of rhythm that should imitate the dance of the universe which in turn follows the perfect circular revolution of the skies. By being correctly regulated, the human rhythm can participate in The Original Good.

Rhythm as Male Order Principle - Aristides Quintilianus' *On Music* (late 3rd or early 4th c. AD)

Aristides Quintilianus, whose life is entirely unknown except that he was a Greek, left a treatise in three books entitled *Περὶ Μουσικῆς* - *Perì Mousikês* - *On Music*, maybe written around the end of the 3rd or the beginning of the 4th century AD—however, some specialists situate him in the second half of the 1st century AD. Aristides is much lesser known than Plotinus and his treatise has a much narrower scope than the very large and abstract reflection developed by the Alexandrian philosopher. But he remains a significant witness of the evolution of the music theories in the Greek speaking world. While borrowing a lot from Aristoxenus and Aristotle, he participates in the general revival of Platonic ideas (see Mathiesen, 1983).

For this section, I am using *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Music* (2011), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2012), as well as the excellent books by Andrew Barker, *Greek Musical Writings. II. Harmonic and Acoustic Theory* (1989) and Marie Formarier, *Entre rhétorique et musique. Essai sur le rythme latin antique et médiéval* (2014).

Aristides divides music theory into two parts: Theoretical (Technical and Natural) and Practical (Application and Expression). Rhythm issues are addressed mainly in Book 1 (Technical) where Aristides expounds harmonics, rhythmic, and metrics, mainly from Aristoxenian sources. Rhythmics is dealt with in chapter 13-19. Some other considerations may be found in Book 2 (Practical) which discusses music's educational and psychotherapeutic uses, its effects on *ethos*. One branch of the practical discussion concerns the use of rhythmic composition, as distinct from melodic and poetic compositions. Interestingly, Book 3 (Natural), exploiting Pythagorean harmonic analyses, links musical phenomena through numerology, mathematics, and natural science to the soul and the order of the universe. But just like Plotinus, Aristides does not use rhythm to refer to the physical realities exposed in this Book.

At the beginning of Book 1, Aristides notices that the term *rhuthmós* - *rhythm* has, in his day in Greek, three different meanings. It is first used to refer to "static bodies." This seems close to the meaning it had in Vitruvius as "due proportions" but it is now used, by a kind of supplementary enlargement, to describe the aesthetic quality of a "statue" and probably any work of art. The second concerns "all moving bodies" as walking and dancing. The last one refers, "in proper sense,"

to the “voice” that is to say poetry, song and therefore music.

Rhythm [*ῥυθμός* - *rhuthmós*] is spoken of three ways: it is said of static [bodies] [*ἀκινήτων σωμάτων* - *akinêton sômatôn*], as we say “a well-rhythmized statue” [*εὐρυθμον ἀνδριάντα* - *eúruthmon andriánta*]; of all moving [bodies] [*τῶν κινουμένων* - *tôn kinouménôn*], as we say someone walks with good rhythm [*εὐρύθμως τινα βαδίζειν* - *eurúthmôs tinà badízein*], and [in proper sense] of the voice [*καὶ ἰδίως ἐπὶ φωνῆς* - *kai idiôs epì phônês*]. [We are going to talk about this last sense.] (*Perì Mousikês*, 1.13, 1-5, trans Christopher C. Marchetti, my mod.)

Since he defines music as shaping the “matter” (*ulê*) of voice (*phônê*) and bodily movements (*kínêsis sômatos*) (3.10.20), Aristides is mainly interested in the last two definitions which clearly makes him a follower of the *Platonic metric paradigm* and especially of its development by Aristotle and Aristoxenus. Indeed, Aristides starts his discussion by developing the notion of elementary or “primary” duration, whose definition is the task of the first of the five parts of rhythemics listed in chapter 13. He then defines rhythm as succession of feet composed of *ἄρσις* - *ársis* and *θέσις* - *thésis*, raising and lowering of the foot or the finger, up-beat and down-beat, weak beat and strong beat. Finally, borrowing from Plato and Aristoxenus, he classifies, in chapters 15-16, the feet into three main genera in accordance with the ratios between the durations of their elements: the dactylic (- u u), in which the raising and lowering are balanced, i.e. in the ratio 2/2 (e.g., the spondee (- -) with long lowering and long raising), the iambic (u -) in the ratio 1/2 or 2/1 (e.g. trochee (- u), with double lowering and shorter raising) and the Paeonic (- u u u) in the ratio 2/3 or 3/2 (with double lowering and triple shorter raising). Rhythmic forms involving mixtures of genera are described in chapter 17. Finally, chapter 19 looks briefly at the three remaining parts of rhythemics, which deal with rhythmical tempo, modulation and composition.

Just like his predecessors, Aristides differentiates between rhythm and meter. The last ten chapters of Book 1 (chapters 20-29) deal with metrics. Unlike rhythm, which exists in dance and instrumental music as well as in poetry and song, meter as conceived here belongs exclusively to patterns of words. The basis of metrical analysis is not in the relation of a strong beat to a weak one, but purely in the relative durations of syllables, without reference to rhythmic categories of *ársis* and *thésis* (Barker, 1989, p. 393).

Nothing new so far. Some innovations pop up though in Book 2 which is devoted to the effect of music on the *ethos* and its role in education. As harmonics, which I do not consider here, rhythemics and metrics have an ethical side. For this practical part of his treaty, Aristides heavily relies on Plato's *Phaedrus*, *Timaeus*, *Republic*, and *Laws*, as well as Aristotle's *Politics* and Cicero's *Republic*. But music's educational role is not considered any longer primarily in a political way, as participating in the production of the City or the Republic order, but more in a personal and mystical way. It aims at making the soul fit the overall order of the universe. It is a preparation to contemplation.

But Aristides is no Christian yet; the universe order is still for him immanent and does not result from a creation by an entirely foreign god. One striking aspect of Aristides' theory is the importance he gives in his reasoning to the “natural” opposition between genders. Consistently with Aristoxenus' hylomorphic view, he argues that rhythm provides an organization to the melody which otherwise would be shapeless. “Rhythm” is form, while melody is “rhythmizable matter.” But to this

classical Aristoxenian view he adds, quoting an author who is unknown to us, a corollary: rhythm is “male,” while melody is “female.” In other words, Aristides links both the actualization of music and the ways in which it influences the soul with the sympathetic resonance of its masculine, feminine, or medial qualities.

Some Ancients called rhythm “male” and melody “female.” In fact, the melody is inert and shapeless; it plays the role of matter because of its capacity to lend itself to its opposite. The rhythm shapes and moves it according to an order, exercising the function of agent upon that which undergoes the action. (*Peri Mousikês*, 1.19.25-30, my trans.)

Chapter 15 discusses rhythms, again associating the categories identified in Book 1, and their combinations, with corresponding emotional effects. This in turn leads, in chapter 16, to the ways in which musical instruments themselves possess genders and subsequently communicate corresponding ethical characteristics.

Chapter 17 introduces neo-Platonic considerations. It returns to the soul, offering an elaborate account of its constitution and of the manner in which it builds for itself a body out of elements from each region of the universe. The purpose is to explain how it is possible that the soul is sympathetically affected by the activity of instruments. This theme is developed further in chapter 18, which reflects on the phenomenon of sympathetic vibration, and on resemblances in kind between properties of instruments and those of elements drawn by the soul from each cosmic region.

Book 3 describes the ultimate goal of music, as anticipated at the very beginning of the treatise. It is plainly neo-Platonic and is reminiscent of the views exposed in the *Timaeus* (see above chap. 2).

Music explains both the nature of numbers and the variety of proportions; it gradually reveals the *harmoniai* that are, through these, in all bodies; and [...] it is able to supply the ratios of the soul—the soul of each person separately and, as well, even the soul of the universe. (*Peri Mousikês*, 1.1, trans. Thomas. J. Mathiesen)

For Aristides, music is an art transcending time and physical nature that reveals “the seemingly in bodies and motions”, i.e. the order of the soul and the universe, as he makes clear in his initial definition of music.

Music is a science of *melos* and of those things contingent to *melos*. Some defines it as follows: “the theoretical and practical art of perfect and instrumental *melos*”; and others thus: “an art of the seemingly in sounds and motions.” But we define it more fully and in accordance with our thesis: “knowledge of the seemingly in bodies and motions.” (*Peri Mousikês*, 1.4, trans. Thomas. J. Mathiesen)

Hence the purpose of musical education, as described in Book 2, is finally to give order to voice modulations and body gestures according to arithmetic proportions. This order is the imperfect reflection of the circular movement of the celestial world (3.10.20). Naturally, such an imperfection does not belong to form, for numbers and music science are perfect (1.4), but to matter, since the earthly world is submitted to change and corruption (3.7.6-14).

As Andrew Barker argues, Aristides' work rests on "an overarching vision of the divine order of things, and of the unitary, divine source of musical structures." He quite clearly anticipates the famous tri-partition between *musica mundana* (harmony of the world, harmony of the spheres), *musica humana* (harmony in the human being between physiological functions, intellectual faculties, and passions) and *musica instrumentalis* (music proper) presented at the end of Western Roman Antiquity by Boethius (c. 480 – 524) in his *De institutione musica*.

Aristides has often been called an eclectic, and so he is, but his treatise is not just an assemblage of disparate ideas. It is designed under an overarching vision of the divine order of things, and of the unitary, divine source of musical structures in their three major instantiations: in the audible music of human practice, in the soul and in the natural universe at large. (Barker, 1989, p. 392)

Since Thomas J. Mathiesen's influential study (1983), specialists consider Aristides as clearly under Plotinus' influence.

The work is impressively detailed and unified, despite inconsistencies, by a near-Neoplatonist vision of cosmos, soul and music as manifestations of a single divine order. (*The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2012, p. 155)

*

We see how much the Graeco-Roman culture had changed since the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire. In Quintilian's times, education had already lost its former political dimension but it still retained strong social stakes. Now, with the ongoing rigidification of power and the harder competition with Christianity, neo-Platonic beliefs spread and the soul became a central issue. The change in social and political context certainly accounts for the massive re-introduction of Platonic concerns within the Aristotelian and Aristoxenian theory of rhythm.

[Next chapter](#)