

# **Greek Music Theory and the Medieval Church: The Early European Church's Use of Greek Music Theory to Counter Emotional Responses to Music**

**Andrew Beach**

In this paper the author explores the attitudes of the early church towards music and the ways considered acceptable to interact with it. They compare the writings of Greek mathematicians with those of early church leaders such as Boethius, Capella, Cassiodorus and St. Augustine. The conclusion is that the stoic ideals purported by the Greeks carry through to the Medieval church.

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In modern times, when the average person (i.e. non-music theorist) is listening to music, they are generally not too concerned about the mathematical qualities of the music or what the ratios of consonance are in the music or what modes are in use. Though these are components of what music is in a literal sense, people generally care more about how the music makes them feel emotionally. Is this music sad? Is it happy? Does it make us want to dance? Does it make us want to cry? These are the components of music which are the most important to us. The emotional and sense (heavy, light, fast, slow, etc) qualities are what we are drawn to in music. However, in early medieval Europe the senses were considered to be an untrustworthy method of viewing music; even dangerous ones faith. For the medieval European church, music was best perceived by understanding the aspects of music such as the mathematical qualities of the notes which seem to us now to be of little intrinsic value. By adopting traditionally ancient Greek music theory and philosophy as a means to rationalize music, the medieval church gained a hold of the musical arts and sought to prevent society from perceiving music through purely emotional responses but rather view music rationally. To support this claim, this paper will present works written in Latin (the medieval church language) which borrowed heavily from ancient Greek texts, show the connection between Greek mathematics and medieval music theory that was implemented in the liturgy and show how the prominent church father St. Augustine of Hippo viewed music and the emotional responses that it invoked.

The Christian Church had an expansive influence over early Medieval European society and was attempting to combat the growing pluralism and secularism in Europe that could potentially challenge their societal and cultural influence. One aspect of Medieval European society that the church wished to influence was how music was perceived by the parishioners and the general public. In particular, they wished to instill the view that music was to be responded to rationally and not emotionally (as some listeners may feel compelled to believe). Leaders of the medieval church believed that if someone were to respond to music in a way that brought them emotional and sensual pleasure, then it would lead them away from God (and the church) and into sinful hedonism. The medieval church sought to preserve dogmas and traditional philosophical ideas, which included Greek dogmas and aesthetics and the work of early 5<sup>th</sup> century thinkers such as Boethius, Martianus Capella and church fathers such as St. Augustine of Hippo who sought to view music from a logical standpoint using rationality and less as simply an emotionally good subject.

It is important for us to understand why the medieval church adopted a theoretical system for music from Greek thinkers such as Pythagoras, and adopted other aspects of Greek culture and musical understanding because it can help us to understand how the people in the medieval church viewed the function and purpose of music and simultaneously how they viewed Greek culture and thought. Many of the Greek texts were even translated to Latin by Christian philosophers and theologians and most prominently by the philosopher/theologian Boethius.<sup>1</sup> Music that came from the medieval church was obviously meant to worship the monotheistic

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<sup>1</sup> Boethius, Calvin M. Bower, and Claude V. Palisca. *Fundamentals of music*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. xix-xx

Christian God, and yet the church used Greek names for the church modes (Phrygian, Dorian, Lydian and Mixolydian), used Greek alphabetical letters in their notation system and used Pythagorean mathematical equations to organize, compose and teach music to be performed throughout the liturgical year.<sup>2</sup> By studying the medieval church's view of music as being a rational object to be understood by reason and not solely by the senses, we can gain a better understanding of the roots of our current western musical traditions in the modern era and understand what the original purpose of western music theory was intended to be used for.

Both the aforementioned Boethius and Martianus Capella translated works by Greek writers into Latin. This demonstrates how prone medieval thinkers were to borrow from Greek writings and ideas and translate them into Latin. Boethius was a Roman philosopher who was born in 480 A.D. One of the works that he translated was *Harmonics* by Nicomachus.<sup>3</sup> He contributed some of his own ideas and retitled it *De Institutione Musica* which roughly translates to *The Fundamentals of Music*. In this work, the concept of Greek musical modes, consonance, dissonance, intervals, Pythagorean philosophy, Pythagorean music theory and many other subjects are discussed in this expansive work that is comprised of five books (which may be better understood as sections rather than totally separate works). Though the idea of music as a rational art to be viewed as such is certainly an underlining idea throughout the work, this point becomes exceptionally clear when we see that book one, chapter nine is titled "Not all judgement ought to be given to the senses, but reason ought more to be trusted. Concerning the deception of

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<sup>2</sup> Crocker, Richard L. *Studies in Medieval Music Theory and the Early Sequence*. Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1997. 79-100.

<sup>3</sup> Bower, Calvin. 1978. "Boethius and Nicomachus: An Essay Concerning the Sources of *De Institutione Musica*". *Vivarium* 16 (1). Brill: 1-45. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42569706>.

the senses in this manner.”<sup>4</sup> In the opening sentence of this chapter he states that “we should not grant all judgement to the senses-although the whole origin of this discipline is taken from the sense of hearing.” which indicates that Boethius was at least somewhat cautious to judge music by our senses alone. He goes on to define reason as “the ultimate perfection and the faculty of recognition...which, holding itself to fixed rules, does not falter by any error.” Certainly we see how important the role of reason is to Boethius when it comes to understanding how the medieval church viewed the function music. The majority of the *Fundamentals of Music* is spent exploring the musical theories of the ancient Greek thinkers which include Aristoxenus and Pythagoras.

*The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* is split into several sections which discuss topics such as geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and harmony. For the section on harmony Martianus Capella borrowed heavily from the Greek writer Aristides Quintilianus’ work *De Musica* and translated it into Latin.<sup>5</sup> Capella description of music is starkly different from Boethius’ however. The first half of Capella’s book describes music as having mystical and supernatural powers. However, his description of music as being a mystical force was controversial and ultimately did not become the dominant view of music in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century. Though there is a clear influence from ancient Greek writers to Latin writer, the ideas which are borrowed or translated from ancient Greek writers had to reflect the philosophy of music as rational. Only certain ancient

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<sup>4</sup> Boethius, Calvin M. Bower, and Claude V. Palisca. *Fundamentals of music*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> Martianus Capella, William Harris Stahl, Richard Johnson, and E. L. Burge. *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1971. 53-54.

Greek ideas that aligned with these views were accepted by the medieval church. Otherwise they would be rejected.

In Richard L. Crocker's analysis of Greek music theory in his work *Studies in Medieval Music and Early Sequence* we see numerous examples of the intertwined relationship between Greek mathematics, medieval music theory, some examples of the Greek function-names and the Greater and Lesser Perfect pitch system.<sup>6</sup> It is also observed by Crocker that "in Greco-Roman antiquity as well as in the early Middle Ages" the system that was very consistently used to refer to pitches and their names were "the traditional Greek series of names."<sup>7</sup> An example of a part of the church liturgy that uses notes in this pitch system is the chant, *Christi hodierna*.<sup>8</sup> This example demonstrates that the medieval church did use ancient Greek music theory and mathematics, which has been established as rational by Boethius so far, in the liturgy.

Viewing music as being rational subject not only helped listeners understand the technical aspects of music and how they may perform it well, but it also served the purpose of keeping the emotions of the people in check and not allowing them to understand music by their senses alone. Church fathers such as St. Augustine of Hippo (born in 354 A.D.) feared that he could give music "more honor than is fitting"; that "[his] physical delight...often deceives me when the perception of sense is not accompanied by reason."<sup>9</sup> In this passage from the influential work *Confessions* we see a similar emphasis on the importance of reason that relates closely to

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<sup>6</sup> Crocker, Richard L. *Studies in Medieval Music Theory and the Early Sequence*. Brookfield, VT: Variorum, 1997. 93.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 389.

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine, and Henry Chadwick. *Confessions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. 207-208.

Boethius. To enjoy music because of the way it makes you feel and how it effects your emotions is considered a dangerous thing, “The pleasures of the ear had a more tenacious hold on me, and had subjugated me; but you set me free and liberated me.” The liberator in this passage is to be understood as Christ; God. God is believed to be a rational being and thus would save St. Augustine from the sin of his irrational pleasures. Considering that one of the most prominent medieval church fathers in history and authoritative doctor of the church avoided viewing music through emotions and the senses gives us insight into how the medieval church viewed the function and purpose of church music.

It becomes especially evident from the writings of Boethius, Capella, Cassiodorus and St. Augustine that music was meant to be viewed rationally and not solely by the senses. Though these thinkers retained their monotheistic Christian belief, we can clearly see how much influence Ancient Greek music theory, aesthetics and philosophy had on the views of the medieval European church concerning music and how it is to be understood. The early medieval European church drew from Greek thought and incorporated it into the liturgy to gain social influence over the musical arts and prevent them from straying into what they believed to be irrationality and subjective ideal of the aesthetic value.

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