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Disciplinary Note

# MUSICAL ORDER

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Nigel Biggar begins his theological brief by pitting freedom and order: 'Modern Western culture warms to freedom and shies away from order. Whereas 'freedom' connotes liberation, exhilaration, and vitality, 'order' connotes oppression, constraint, and sterility.' Modern freedom seems to define itself as an emancipation from rules, demanding a certain 'disobedience' to pre-established structures to assert its identity. How order and freedom relate is an aesthetic question since works of art require both elements to be in play. Music has often been a paradigmatic model to unite both elements, not simply in a composition or a performance, but in the cosmos. In the past, music theory was a cosmology.

My current work on music theory across the ancient world from Confucius to Augustine suggests various ways to conceive of order as both a form of obedience and freedom. Musical order in the ancient world was a matter of tuning. The universe was harmonious, held in proportion by mathematically beautiful ratios. To live well and govern well required humans to be tune with this cosmic harmony. This order was both pleasurable and virtuous, spontaneous and structured, joyful and tempered, exuberant and balanced.

Perhaps we need to recover aspects of ancient music theory to enjoy the moral order of the created order that we have seemingly lost in modernity. How this can be done today would take too long to explain; you would need to read my book, *Joy! Music Lessons on the Good Life* (Yale University Press, forthcoming 2024), which will take you on an ancient tour of China, Africa and Europe to discover a new theologically inflected rhythm to order our lives today. But let me point out two words that might help to point the way forward.

In Chinese music is joy. Quite literally. The word 'music' in Classical Chinese is also the character 'joy'. Although pronounced differently, the character *yuè* (樂 – meaning music) is the same as the character *lè* (樂 – meaning joy). Music and joy are in a *homographic* relationship – they look the same but sound different. So every time you look at the character 'music' in Chinese you also see 'joy' (and vice versa). We could quibble over whether this homograph is merely coincidental, but both the Confucian and Daoist classics clearly equated the two meanings and aligned them with the Way (Dao). This joy is not simply a human emotion, but a disposition. As such, it guides us in the path of

righteousness, keeping our temperament in balance. Joy, in this sense, is a virtue that follows a cosmic tuning that is objective and exacting. To make good music is to obey its regulations freely and joyfully. Music and joy, then, share the same 'being', united as a balanced and virtuous order that expresses the fundamental principles of cosmic well-being.

Such joy was not confined to ancient China. In the Jewish bible, Wisdom measured the foundations of the earth with such delight that the stars sang and the angels shouted for joy (Job 38: 4-7). Our planet was a musical measure, and a symphony of joy. Augustine, in *De Musica*, brought this joy to the well-proportioned cosmos of ancient music theory, and declared God, the creator of all things, to be music and the universe a hymn of praise. Creation was a doxological ecology, freely improvising within an established order. Joy, then, is the virtue that combines order and freedom in equilibrium.

The second word is 'nomos' (νόμος). In Greek, *nomos* has two interchangeable meanings: it is both law and melody. In his *Exhortation to the Pagans* (*Protrepticus*), Clement of Alexandria plays with the term *nomos* to describe the *Logos* that opens the Gospel of John. In the beginning was music. For Clement, Christ is both law and melody. As the original song, the *Logos* sings creation into being at the beginning of time; as the 'new song' he sings new creation into being in the event of the incarnation; and as the instrument that sounds the new song, he will keep singing in a co-creative duet with humanity until the end of time. *Nomos* as law is the order of God; *nomos* as melody is the grace of God. It is both necessity and freedom in harmony. Being in tune with the cosmos, and singing along with the *Logos*, is both a natural and moral order that is disclosed by music. What music reveals in theory as order (literally a *ratio*-nality) and expressed and practiced as doxology is *nomos* in every sense of word. It is for this reason that we should contemplate music (the miracle of its existence points to something amazing about our universe) and participate in music (the music we make connects us freely and creatively to logos of the universe).

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