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Psicomusicologia nella Grecia Antica. A cura di Angelo Meriani. Università degli Studi di Salerno. Quaderni del Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Antichità

Andrew Barker, Angelo Meriani, *Psicomusicologia nella Grecia antica. Quaderni del Dipartimento di scienze dell'antichità*. Napoli: Guida, 2005. 205 pages ; 24 cm.. ISBN 8871889894 €11.90.

Review by

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In this book Angelo Meriani has translated into Italian a series of lectures given by Andrew Barker to Salerno PhD students in 2002. Barker addresses here a particular aspect of Greek musical thought, concerning the relationship between music and the human soul and the ways music was supposed to affect and modify the features, not to say the very constitution, of the human soul. This is not a new field of investigation, of course, especially for those concerned with Pythagorean psychology or Platonic political theories; but Barker's approach has its own elements of novelty, as I will show.

A glance at the general structure of the volume shows that Barker takes Plato's writings as his starting point. There are four main sections, entitled respectively: "Musica e carattere nella *Repubblica* di Platone", "La teoria musicale prima della *Repubblica* di Platone", "Tra etica, psicologia e cosmologia: Aristotele e Platone", and "Musica, terapia e cosmo: Teofrasto, Aristide Quintiliano, Claudio Tolomeo". Each of the first three sections is divided into two chapters, the last one into three, so the whole volume consists of nine chapters. The eighth chapter also contains an exhaustive "Appendix" on Aristides Quintilianus' musical terminology.

In the first part Barker deals with the Platonic idea of the "similarity", οἰκειότης, between music and human soul, and provides an absolutely new point of view on this conception, which is the basis for the whole theory of musical *ethos* and for that reason generally regarded as obvious by most scholars. An accurate analysis of the semantic fields of both musical scales and attunements on one side, and of moral values on the other, leads the author to the conclusion that the very complicated metaphors operating in the third book of Plato's *Republic* only really make sense if we assume that the philosopher conceived the two parts of the soul he was referring to, the θυμοειδής and

the φιλόσοφον, not as simple objects, like a single note in a scale, but as complex systems, like the tetrachords which are joined to make a complete scale or ἁρμονία. A further study of some incoherencies in Socrates' speech about the right balance of gymnastics and music in the education of the citizens points out that the philosopher's thought on music cannot be regarded as a monolithic system, but as an attempt to combine several distinct theories coming from different sources, some of which might have been older than Plato himself.

The second part follows the results of the first. Barker's thesis is that pre-platonic materials and ideas are to be found in dialogues earlier than the *Republic*: in particular, the main character of Plato's *Laches* seems to claim that there are various degrees of coherence between a man's words and actions, as there are between two groups of musical sounds which are perfectly attuned *per se*, but do not necessarily correspond to each other. Thus, we do not have a strict opposition between coherence and incoherence, that is, metaphorically, between right and wrong attunements, but instead a wider range of possibilities, some of which are more acceptable than others. A sliding conception of both moral and musical values of this sort is very likely to belong to a sophistic milieu, which suggests that the sophist Damon of Oa may be the most important source not only for music theory as it is displayed in the *Republic*, but also for the musical passages in the *Laches*. But the conception of ἁρμονία, and in general of music, as a confluence of opposites, and the idea that a musical pattern, although well attuned, may not necessarily fit every kind of person or social context, could hardly have come to Plato from Damonian thought; this is Barker's reason for addressing a totally different scientific tradition, that of pre-Socratic medicine. Some passages of Hippocrates' *De victu* are very carefully investigated, and the analysis shows how much Plato's *Symposium* and *Republic* owe to the medical tradition.

In the third part the author moves from Plato to Aristotle, whose statements about musical ethics, as we read them in the *Politics*, are given a clear and subtle outline. Barker very opportunely lays a stress on the different conceptions of musical "imitation", μίμησις, in Plato and Aristotle: while in Plato's works the scales are supposed to have an ethos, regardless of the melodies actually performed using them, Aristotle seems to suggest that ethos is something belonging to the melody itself, determined by the particular succession of sounds both in the time and in the pitch range. It is on these grounds that one of Aristotle's disciples, Aristoxenus, created a new way of judging musical ethos, based on empirical analysis of the melodic path, as it were, of particular melodies rather than on *a priori* assumptions about the scale in which it is composed. The fifth chapter is followed by an explanation of Plato's musical and mathematical conception of the universe as it is described in the *Timaeus*. This chapter is very useful for those who are not familiar with the basic notions of musical ratios. Barker here shows himself capable of treating even very difficult matters in a clear and rather friendly way, and of distinguishing what is worthy to be closely exposed and what requires only a rapid outline — quite a rare gift among scholars. Barker allows that the so-called "music of the spheres" in the *Timaeus* is totally abstract from any actually audible phenomenon (it is a "music theory without sounds", just like

Plato's "astronomy without stars"). But his point is that the music of the spheres does affect the human soul and allows it to get a sounder constitution, even if it operates at a much higher and more "rational" level than Aristotle's κάθαρσις does. This difference gives the author the opportunity to move to the fourth and last section, which is about the relation between music, therapy and the cosmos.

While no hints are found in pre-Platonic medical tradition concerning the possibility that music has any healing powers, this idea is quite widespread in 2nd century AD sources, such as in Aristides Quintilianus' *De musica*. In providing a characteristically clear exposition of Aristides' way of healing both physical and psychical illnesses by "exposing" the patients to specific kinds of musical performances, Barker convincingly shows that several passages in Aristides are likely to derive from Theophrastus, one of Aristotle's most important pupils and his successor. After an opportune exposition of Aristides' ideas as to the human soul and how each soul "chooses" a particular kind of body and perceives various phenomena through a judging faculty called ἔννοια, Barker takes the complex notation system of the *De musica* into account. This system individuates "male" and "female" notes, endowed respectively with their own psychological features, so that it is possible to create melodies for specific therapeutic purposes just by choosing the opportune notes, or avoiding the unnecessary ones. This conception is evidently based on the assumption — reported as early as Aristotle's *De anima* — that soul is blown into the human body by god, and that the body behaves in the same way as an *aulos*.¹ This chapter comes to an end with a couple of fresh, ironic pages, in which the readers are warned against regarding Aristides' system as an entirely heavenly scenario, since, we are told, it also reflects a strongly misogynist and chauvinist background, as usual in Greek civilization.

In the last chapter, Barker discusses the epistemological fundamentals of "psychomusicology" in Aristides and in Ptolemy's *Harmonica*. He points out opportunely that neither the former nor the latter goes beyond generic and superficial analogies between the human soul and the patterns of musical scales. In Ptolemy's treatise, for example, many complicated mathematical processes are described in order to divide the musical fourth (ratio 4:3), which provides various genera of tetrachords; but Ptolemy does not take any of them into account in the final part of the *Harmonica*, in which he explains the similarities between the musical intervals, the parts of the soul and the positions of zodiacal signs.

The volume is completed by an essential, up-to-date bibliography, and by a useful index of ancient sources and modern scholars cited. Although it discusses very specific subjects, some of which require at least a basic knowledge of Greek philosophy and music theory, this book makes pleasant reading and there are no more footnotes than is necessary. Italian readers can also appreciate the great accuracy of Angelo Meriani's translation.

Notes

1. I would note here a few verses (vv. 843-851 *passim*) from Prudentius' *Apotheosis*: *adde et distinctum quem musica tibia flatum aut tumidum largo sublimat flamine bombum [...] haec cum te videas mortali in corpore posse, cur non Aeternum potuisse infundere credas qualem animam voluit?* Of course I am not in the position to claim this is a direct reference to Aristides, but it's difficult not to see in this passage by a much later Christian author, the persistence of the metaphor of God as an *aulos* -player.