The sound of beauty

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The dangers associated with the sound of beauty are all too apparent in one of the earliest texts in the Western literary canon. On his way back from the Trojan war Odysseus is able to hear one of the most famous sounds of beauty in literature: the song of the sirens. Unlike the unfortunate sailors who had gone before him, however, cunning Odysseus is prepared. Earlier in the story, Circe had given him a detailed warning about the trials to come.

First you will come to the Sirens, who beguile all mortals, any who comes their way. Whoso draws near in ignorance and hears the sound of the Sirens, him wife and innocent children shall not meet on his returning home, nor shall they have joy of him, but the Sirens beguile him with clear-voiced song, sitting in their meadow; but all about is a great heap of the bones of rotting men, and their hides waste away around them. But make speed past them, and knead honey-sweet wax and smear it over your comrades’ ears, lest any of them should hear; but if you yourself wish to hear, let them bind you in the swift ship hand and foot, upright at the foot of the mast, and let cords be attached to you, so that you may hear the two Sirens’ voice with pleasure. But if you beseech your comrades and bid them release you, let them bind you then with all the more bonds.

(Odyssey book 12, lines 39–54)

The wise Odysseus, famed for his cunning, obeys these instructions to the letter and gets to hear the song of the sirens in safety. Unlike every traveller who had gone before him, Odysseus experiences the sound of irresistibly enticing beauty and lives to tell the tale.

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Deadly sonic beauty: the sound of the sirens

This tale makes explicit the link between the beauty of a song and its ability to overcome reason, to enchant, to beguile, its power to lead men astray and, ultimately, to their deaths. Sonic beauty's ability to kill the unwary – metaphorically or literally – serves as a powerful argument on one side of the coin of music's ethical value. This chapter explores both negative and positive understandings of the beauty of sound from Antiquity to the present, with a focus in particular on the later Middle Ages, which was the point when antique views of music were synthesized with Christian morality in a way that has arguably remained current ever since. What will emerge is a history of varied human judgements of music, arguments over the ethics of music's power, and arguments over music's place in defining what individual humanity is.

First, at our own peril, it is worth spending a little more time with the sirens. Reading book 12 of the Odyssey might well induce a curiosity as to what the sirens' song was actually like. What makes it so compellingly beautiful? But of course the power of this song lies partly in the fact that, except for Odysseus, no one – not even the narrator of the Odyssey – has heard it. If the narrator of the Odyssey (whom, for the sake of convenience, I shall call Homer) had heard it, he would not have been around to write the poem. And if it could be replicated directly, any audience of Homer's poem – itself a kind of song – would be running the same risk of death as the mariners. Effectively, the Odyssey's second-hand reporting of the episode acts as the wax in its own audience's ears. The text simply calls the song 'clear', which might purely be a reflection of how comprehensible its words are, because this is not only beautiful music, but beautiful music with words – that is, song. Moreover, we are told what the words of the song are.

Come hither, much-praised Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans, draw up your ship, that you may hear the voice of us two. For no-one yet has passed this way in his black ship before hearing the honeyed voice from our mouths, but he goes home having rejoiced and knowing more. For we know all the things that in broad Troy the Argives and Trojans endured by the will of the gods.²

² Ibid., 17.
The sirens' song flatteringly tempts Odysseus with the retelling of the story of his own heroic role in the *Iliad*: classicists attest to how euphonious these lines are in the original Greek, and how close to the *Iliad* in diction. If the hero is to leave Troy behind, however, he has to leave it behind in song as well as merely travelling away from it by boat; he has to reject the twin distractions of beauty and the warrior's glory carried together in the words and melody of the sirens' song if he is to return to the quotidian domesticity of Ithaca.

Beautiful sound causes the individual subject—Odysseus—to confront a conflict between desire and discipline. Only by being ready for the performance, by setting up a situation of self-control that is actually beyond his self-control, can Odysseus allow himself safely to experience what it feels like to lose control, to be free of oneself. Beautiful music defeats reason, removes self-control, and is therefore mortally dangerous. Only by binding oneself tightly to an upright mast and surrounding oneself by those deaf to music's pleasures can one survive the jeopardy that beautiful sound represents.

The argument that follows here explores some of the manifold ways in which music theory and musical practice have attempted—not always with great success—to provide the ropes that might allow the human subject to wallow in music's beauty while avoiding its dangers.

**Transcendent sonic beauty**

The dangerous sirens of the *Odyssey* were not the only ones in Antiquity: they can be contrasted with the sirens in the story of Er. At the end of Plato's *Republic* Socrates says that he will tell a story and notes that this story is specifically not one of the tales that Odysseus tells Alcinous (the tales which provide the material for much of the *Odyssey*, including the story of the sirens). Yet Socrates' tale is also of a hero: Er, a slain warrior who returns to life on his funeral pyre, able to give an account of the afterlife. This account involves a description of the celestial spheres, arranged in circles on a giant spindle, and 'on the upper surface of each circle is a siren, who goes round with them, hymning a single tone or

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9 See ibid., 17 and the references at 39 n2.
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note. The eight together form one harmony." Here the sirens' song is similarly beautiful, but not dangerous – instead its association is with the other side of death, the perfect afterlife in which it represents the harmony of the spheres.

The harmony of the spheres in the Classical world is about the harmonic nature of the movements and proportions between the heavenly bodies in the universe. The sirens who sing this heavenly harmony are representative, not of the enchanting power of an irrationality that leads to a loss of self-control, but of a divine rationality that orders the universe. For us music would be a metaphor, but for the ancients and their medieval inheritors the harmony of the spheres was more than metaphorically music. When, in the sixth century, Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius's treatise on music theory transmitted much Classical learning about musical tuning and harmonics to the post-classical world, he divided music into three kinds: *musica instrumentalis* (instrumental music, in which he included vocal music, made by the so-called natural instrument of voice); *musica humana* (literally 'human music', but by which he meant not the music that humans make, but the proportions of which they are made up – essentially the harmony of soul and body); and *musica mundana* (celestial music, the music of the spheres). Of these, only one, instrumental music, makes any sound in the sublunary world, so music was not – for the Greeks and the medievals at least – defined by sound, but rather was a feature of rational proportion, which could be (but did not have to be) manifested sonically. In placing the sirens in charge of the celestial music that forms the ultimate expression of this rationality, Plato effectively rescues their song from being irrational and fatal (as it is in the *Odyssey*) and elevates it to a divine harmony, although one that is not audible by those still living on earth.

The harmony of the spheres is at the opposite ethical pole from the song of the sirens in the *Odyssey*, but the two songs share the feature of being irresistibly beautiful. Yet this beauty is, it seems, only good after death; in the world of the living it is potentially deadly unless it is correctly regulated. Odysseus regulated himself by having his crew lash him to the mast; medieval music theory sought instead to regulate music

[1](http://www.davidson.edu/academic/Classics/neumann/CLA550/ErMyth.html)

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making: Boethius’s music treatise offers a pedagogical understanding of musical tuning – the science of harmonics – that will ensure that musica instrumentalis approaches the moral good of the music of the spheres, rather than being the song of the sirens of the sea. Inspired by the greater detail on the harmony of the spheres in Plato’s Timaeus and other Classical works available to them, several music theorists of the Middle Ages even assigned notes of the scale to the planets in the heavens, mapping the interval series that came between them in diagrammatic forms. In neo-Platonic thought, Music’s cosmic proportions, made to sound on earth, speak to the proportions in the human soul and can retune it. If music that is heard retunes the soul, and the soul controls human behaviour, the potential power of musicians is enormous and must be wielded with knowledge and judgement.

Boethius’s music treatise influenced hundreds of years of music theory, and the idea of cosmic harmony penetrated deep into the Western musical tradition as a way of arguing against the dangers of the song of the sirens of the sea and in favour of music’s divine rationality. In particular its precepts were adopted by those responsible for singing in ecclesiastical contexts, in which the use of music – plainsong – was a central daily practice.

The sound of beauty and Christianity: tension in Augustine

Given their strong Classical legacy, it is unsurprising that early Christian writers both appreciated the power of beautiful sound over the soul and worried about this power’s ability to enchant the listener, making him passive and distracted by the beauty of sound – a perilously seductive, feminine form of beauty. In his Confessions, written at the very end of the fourth century, Augustine sums this up rather neatly in two contrasting passages. First, he thanks God that

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5 The most important other sources were Pliny, Macrobius and Martianus Capella. See Susan Rankin, ‘Naturalis concordia vocum cum planetis: Conceptualizing the Harmony of the Spheres in the Early Middle Ages’, in Susannah Clark and Elizabeth Eva Leach (eds.), Citation and Authority in Medieval and Renaissance Musical Culture: Learning from the Learned, Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Music (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2005), 3–19.
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he is now cured of his former slavish devotion to the sound of beauty and is focused on the divine words that are sung:

The delights of the ear drew and held me much more powerfully, but Thou didst unbind and liberate me. In those melodies which Thy words inspire when sung with a sweet and trained voice, I still find repose; yet not so as to cling to them, but always so as to be able to free myself as I wish. But it is because of the words which are their life that they gain entry into me and strive for a place of proper honor in my heart; and I can hardly assign them a fitting one.⁶

But he goes straight on to admit that:

Sometimes, I seem to myself to give them [the melodies] more respect than is fitting, when I see that our minds are more devoutly and earnestly inflamed in piety by the holy words when they are sung than when they are not. And I recognize that all the diverse affections of our spirits have their appropriate measures in the voice and song, to which they are stimulated by I know not what secret correlation. But the pleasures of my flesh – to which the mind ought never to be surrendered nor by them enervated – often beguile me while physical sense does not attend on reason, to follow her patiently, but having once gained entry to help the reason, it strives to run on before her and be her leader. Thus in these things I sin unknowingly, but I come to know it afterward.⁷


Led by his senses running ahead of his reason, Augustine worries that the pleasure he takes in hearing liturgical singing in church is a sin of the flesh. A couple of chapters earlier in the Confessions, Augustine had already talked about the erotic pull of his past sexual life — before he converted to Christianity — as being something that Christian continence told him to stop his ears against. This stopping of the ears — like the reference to being in the bondage of beautiful sound — seems to be an indirect reference to the story of the sirens itself and reveals that sexual sin and sinful kinds of listening are deeply connected for Augustine. And just as there was one rule for Odysseus and another for his crew, Augustine too recognizes a hierarchy that makes music appropriate for some but not for others, although his hierarchy is tellingly inverted compared to that of the Odyssey. Having admitted that he sometime desires the over-extreme austerity of banning singing from the Church entirely, he remembers the tears it caused him to weep when he found his faith originally, and is forced to admit that in terms of its power to convert, singing is useful so that by the delights of the ear the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional mood. Yet when it happens that I am more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned wickedly, and then I would rather not have heard the singing.

Augustine stresses that reason must lead the senses, not the other way round, and makes it clear that reason lies in what the words of the chant are saying, while the melody appeals to the senses. The idea that music might only be acceptable because it is a vehicle for verbal truths contained in the text is of a piece with the suspicion that the early Church authorities had for untexted music, which was typically used for dancing. In such cases, the lack of a text whose higher and rational truths might excuse the pleasure taken by hearers of the melody was compounded by

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the purpose of the wordless music, which was designed to animate bodies through dancing – a social, physical and sensual practice that offered sinful opportunities for participants and spectators alike.

Elsewhere in his writings, however, Augustine talks more positively about the musical element of singing when he talks of the 'jubilus' – by which he seems to mean the melisma on the final syllable of the chant setting the words 'alleluia'. This melisma typically consisted of many notes that simply prolong the sounding of the final syllable in time rather than setting any new text. The 'Alleluia' as a whole is not entirely without text, but the long melisma at the end is so much an extension of a single syllable of text that rather than conveying the sense of the word itself it instead gives expression to a pure emotion. As Augustine says:

One who jubilates does not speak words, but it is rather a sort of sound of joy without words; for the voice of the soul is poured out in joy, showing as much as it is able the feeling without comprehending the sense. A man joying in his exultation, from certain unspeakable and in comprehensible words, bursts forth in a certain voice of exultations without words, so that it seems he does indeed rejoice with his own voice, but as if, because filled with too much joy, he cannot put into words what it is in which he delights.¹⁰

The sound of the heart rejoicing without words is acceptable to Augustine not only because it rejoices in the praise of God, but also because Augustine speaks of the performer's perspective. Augustine accepts the musical expression of joy as a performer because one can regulate the sound and know its pure intention when one is actually generating it. Conversely, when one is merely a passive listener, the effect is altogether different: the listener must be able to assess the rational content of the sound, its sacred words and the good intention of the performer in producing it without being carried away by rapturous – irrational and dangerous – enjoyment of the sound itself. Rarely, however, is there a singer without a listener, and even when everyone present is singing, they are also all listening. The danger of being charmed by one's own voice, hinted at in Augustine's writing, remains as a troublingly autoerotic possibility.

¹⁰ Holsinger, Music, Body, and Desire, 76.
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Positive containment 1: the pedagogical rationalization of chant

For those like Augustine who saw the value and beauty in music but worried about its potential to distract from the contemplation of moral good, it was necessary to emphasize the rational and ethical aspects of music. In his music treatise Boethius, summarizing Plato’s strictures in the Republic, defines music of the highest character as ‘temperate, simple, and masculine [modesta, simplex, mascula]’, rather than ‘effeminate, violent, or fickle [effeminata, fera, varia]’. These binaries are repeated verbatim by a vast array of subsequent theorists. In terms of medieval rhetorical tropes which insisted that gender categories were biologically determined and immutable, producing good music meant de-emphasizing passive appreciation of music’s beauty as something feminine, seductive, de-rationalizing, effeminizing, in favour of an active engagement with music’s rationality as something masculine, numerical, quantifiable, and part of the active mental engagement of a performer. This was especially the case in the Christian Middle Ages when the sung liturgy of the Church was central to the everyday praise of God — banning music in church was just not an option. To ensure that it was the right kind of music, the teaching and study of music — the discipline of musica — developed a specific pedagogy in which the very definition of what was and what was not music was based on music’s expression of a rationality that belongs only to humans and not to other animals. Most typically in theoretical and pedagogical contexts, this rationality expressed itself in the ability to understand the mathematical ratios that underlie the correct tuning of musical intervals with the range of notes used in chant.

However, for most writers of this period even tuned sounds — whose intervals exhibit such ratios — merit the status of music only when they are both produced and received by an intellectually engaged rational

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animal. Again, this thinking is carried over from earlier antique understandings of music. Even before he converted to Christianity, Augustine started writing a music treatise cast in the form of a dialogue between a master and a pupil. In stressing to the pupil that *musica* is a science – that is, something involving knowledge – the master uses the example of the song of the nightingale.

**MASTER:** Tell me, then, whether the nightingale seems to make proper intervals with its voice well in the spring of the year. For its song is both harmonious, and sweet and, unless I'm mistaken, it fits the season.

**PUPIL:** It seems quite so.

**M.** But it isn't trained in the liberal discipline, is it?

**P.** No.

**M.** You see, then, the noun 'science' is indispensable to the definition.

**P.** I see it clearly.

**M.** Now tell me, then, don't they all seem to be a kind with the nightingale, all those which sing under the guidance of a certain sense, that is, do it harmoniously and sweetly, although if they were questioned about these number or intervals of high and low notes they could not reply?

**P.** I think they are very much alike.

**M.** And what's more, aren't those who like to listen to them without this science to be compared to beasts? For we see elephants, bears, and many other kinds of beasts are moved by singing, and birds themselves are charmed by their own voices. For, with no further proper purpose, they would not do this with such effort without some pleasure.  

So the pupil agrees that the voice of the nightingale *sounds* like music, but when it is pointed out to him that the bird is not trained in *musica* – the liberal discipline of music, which makes music the rational property of humans – he admits that birdsong should not really be considered as

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music in that strict sense. The master then extrapolates to liken the nightingale's lovely but irrational non-music to the playing of human performers guided only by a certain sense but lacking the understanding of their own practice. And he goes further: people who like to listen to such non-music without themselves understanding the rationality – the science – that makes music *music* can be compared to the elephants, bears and many other kinds of beasts that are moved by singing. The mere enjoyment of beautiful sound doesn't make the listener human; nor does it make that sound music, which is seen as being by definition something human.

Augustine again outlines many of the issues that extend throughout the Middle Ages. He demands that even if the song sounds sweet and well measured, the musicians must know what they are doing or they are no better than animals; and listeners who take pleasure in music by musicians who do not know what they are doing are also no better than beasts. That which makes music a science or an art is that which separates it from nature and from the natural voices of birds and other animals that *seem* to sing. The performer of music is under an obligation, not just to make musical sounds, but to understand them as *musica*, that is, as proportions that are rational. The listener is also under an obligation to understand sounds in this way, whether or not their performing agent does so. Whether that performer is a bird or an unthinking human, by listening actively the medieval hearer, who can tell whether or not the beautiful sound is music or not, can avoid being reduced to a similarly bestial status.

The problem for music pedagogy, however, was that it was reliant on models taken from the teaching of language. It was relatively easy for medieval grammarians to differentiate language from non-linguistic utterance, because language conveys semantic content with its sound (or, as medieval grammarians said, its *vox* has *verbum*). The rational content of language is thus semantic, binding it tightly to human agents wanting to communicate sensible information. But the rational
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component of music is its ratios – the tuning of its sounds – which is something that species other than humans use to communicate in a distinctly non-linguistic manner. So music’s ontology could not readily be pinned down using grammatical models: music-like intervals could be imitated by birds or untrained singers with a good ear so that a listener could never be sure that the seemingly rational sound being heard was not something dangerously irrational. Given that medieval authorities viewed women as less rational than men, we might now begin to appreciate why in their earliest instantiations, the sirens are hybrids of women and birds.16

Many later clerical writers took their cue from Augustine’s ambivalence about listening to music and sought to impose strictures on what they viewed as feminine and feminizing excesses in performance. The twelfth-century writer John of Salisbury, for example, criticizes those singing in church services for what he identifies as the ‘lightness and dissolution of dainty voices designed to achieve vainglory in the feminine manner’.17 ‘Thou wouldst think’, John continues, ‘that these were the most delicious songs of very pleasing sirens – not of men – and thou wouldst marvel at the lightness of voice, which cannot be compared in all their measures and pleasing melodies to those of the nightingale or parrot, or any other more clear-sounding bird that might be found.’18 These male singers’ effeminacy and effeminizing powers are stronger and all the more worrisome on account of their virtuosity. John describes the singers as more eloquent than two natural avian practitioners but says that their sound would make a listener mistake them for sirens – women–bird hybrids – rather than men.19 Rationality is the defining feature, not only of the human soul, but specifically of both masculinity and musica,

18 See Keats-Rohan (ed.), Ioannis Saribusiensis Polycraticus I–IV, 1.6; Leach, ”The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird’, 188–5; Leach, Sung Birds, 155.
19 See Leach, “The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird’.
differentiating men both from beasts (including birds) and from women. According to John of Salisbury, the beautiful sound of accomplished singers take the singers — and potentially their passive listeners — away from their humanity and their masculinity, making them effeminate, monstrous, unnatural.

Sirens appear in medieval bestiaries, where — like all bestiary animals — they are explained as encoding a moral message. Medieval moralizations of the sirens mention their singing and the danger it poses, explaining it in terms of various worldly blandishments: money, rich food, illegitimate sex, and other sensory excesses. Manuscript illuminations for this particular beast typically depict three sirens as a visual embodiment of Boethius’s three species of musica instrumentalis: one plucks a stringed instrument, one plays a wind instrument and the third sings (see Figure 4.1). As in Figure 4.1, where a man is being physically torn in two as he hears the sirens’ music, sirens served as a convenient reminder that sonic beauty could be dangerous. Sometimes sirens turn up visually in churches, sculpted on corbels or decorating the exterior masonry, or inked into books designed for use in church services. Reading these images required a certain amount of decoding from the viewer, and thus poses complex questions of interpretation for us. Figure 4.2 shows a page from a late thirteenth-century chant book, possibly from England but now in France, on which a bird-footed, winged siren stands holding up the cadential formula that will connect the ‘in secula seculorum’ at the end of the chant back to the repeat of an earlier bit of the chant.

What does this mean? Is it a warning? Or a joke? It is perhaps significant that the siren occurs in the chants for the Office for St Cecilia — a woman whose link to music was very clear but whose moral propriety — and especially her sexual continence — was even clearer: her legend tells that at her wedding she sat away from the other guests, singing psalms, and thereafter managed to keep her husband from her bed and convert him to Christianity, thereby remaining a virgin. The siren who supports

20 See ibid.
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Figure 4.2. Helpful siren in the Office for St Cecilia. Vendôme, Bibliothèque Municipale 0017E, f. 527v. Image © Institut de recherche et d'histoire des textes – CNRS.
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part of St Cecilia's office acts as a counterpoise to Cecilia's musical virginity as a reminder of the ever-lurking presence of musical - and moral - impropriety. Both of music's ethical possibilities are brought plainly into view in the hope, perhaps, that only one is translated into sound.

Positive containment 2: vicarious courtly pleasures

Outside the cloister, practitioners pursued slightly different methods of shoring up music's ethical goodness to enable the appreciation of beautiful sounds in despite of their detractors. Even dance music – melody with or without words for people to move their bodies to – had its apologists. Because it was not associated with the literate musicians of the cloister or court chapels, instrumental music was rarely written down in the Middle Ages. One of the earliest discussions from Western Europe was written around 1300 by a Norman music theorist called Johannes de Grocheio. His discussion of the musical practices of late thirteenth-century Paris describes a number of instrumental genres and dance forms. Grocheio, who was influenced by the new Aristotelian philosophy of the late medieval universities – which had far more time for music than its more Platonic forerunner – tries to validate much-criticized secular musical forms. Specifically he claims that music diverts young minds away from vice, and away from sexual vice in particular. A genre he calls the cantus coronatus has inherent bonitas – goodness – in it; the cantus versualis, while not on the same level, should nevertheless be 'performed for the young

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22 Edition and translation Christopher Page, 'Johannes Grocheio on Secular Music: A Corrected Text and a New Translation', *Plainsong and Medieval Music*, 2 (1998), 17–41, 81–2. Earlier edition of the Latin text of Grocheio's treatise is available in open source at www.chmtl.indiana.edu/tmil/14th/GRODEM_TEXT.html. See also Lawrence Gushee, 'Questions of Genre in Medieval Treatises on Music', in Wulf Arlt, Ernst Lichtenhahn and Hans Oesch (eds.), *Gattungen der Musik in Einzeldarstellungen: Gedenkschrift Leo Schrade* (Bern: Francke, 1973), 365–433, 386. The *dactyl* is also 'cum decenti percussionse mensuratus,' which Page translates as 'with an appropriate beat' and Gushee as 'measured by seemingly percussion'. Grocheio has, however, just cited Aristotle as authority to the fact that although instrumental sounds are commonly subdivided by the means of production into those produced by blowing or by striking, all sound is ultimately the result of percussion. Grocheio's 'cum decenti percussionse mensuratus' (with properly measured striking) may thus mean that it is discretely pitched (since measure more often pertains to pitch than the 'beat' of Page's interpretation) or merely 'correctly produced'.

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lest they be found ever in idleness'. This is the same reason that the sung
dance form called the *stantipes* is praised – because it represents, in the
diversity of its rhymes and music, a level of difficulty that 'makes the
minds of young men and of girls dwell upon this, and leads them away
from depraved thoughts'. The nature of these depraved thoughts is
elicited more explicitly in the genre Grocheio calls the *ductia*, whose
name he derives from the explanation that it leads the hearts (*ducit corda*)
of young people away from vain thoughts 'and is said to have power
against that passion which is called "erotic love"'.

The *ductia* forms the instrumental accompaniment to the *carole*, a kind
of dance, in which men and women typically held hands in a circle or a
line and which unsurprisingly was frequently condemned by preachers in
the later Middle Ages. One sermon story, designed to put people off such
dances, concerns a flute player who urges youths and maidens to dance to
songs that inspire obscene and vulgar thoughts and behaviour. As the
flautist tarries in the street at vespers, he is struck dead by lightning. And
when his corpse is buried in holy ground, its grave is robbed by a number
of devils who turn up in the middle of the night to carry his body off to
where it truly belongs.

Grocheio's writings counter this widespread
religious opposition specifically to claim that such dance songs distract
the young from precisely the same emotions that the preachers maintain
they inspire.

The most famous French poet and composer of the fourteenth century,
Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300–77), similarly stresses music's power to
inspire joy of a very moral kind. In the *Prologue* to his collected works,
the poet notes that spending time composing songs causes happiness,
gaiety and joy because no one intent on such things quarrels or argues or
thinks of immorality, hate, foolishness or scandal. Composition requires
concentration on its own process and thus precludes other thoughts.

Car quant je sui en ce penser,
   Je ne porroie a riens penser
   Fors que seulement au propos

\[\text{\textsuperscript{26}}\] R. F. Bennett, *The Early Dominicans: Studies in Thirteenth-Century Dominican History*
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Dont faire dit ou chant propos;
Et s'a autre chose pensioie,
Toute mon ouevre deferoie.

(For when I am so minded [as to write poetry or song], I wouldn't be able to think about anything except this sole purpose of making the proposed poem or song; and if I were to think of something else, I would completely undo all my work.)

Here we have the idea that composition not only keeps despair at bay, but also – like dancing the ductia – avoids creating idle hands for which the devil might find work.

As seen in Augustine's comments above, a positive moral aspect is available for those making music, whether through performance or composition, but Machaut's larger output – a mixture of narrative poems, lyrics and music – propounds a similarly moral role for music for its listeners in the very distinctly non-pedagogical ambience of the court. His audience are not necessarily trained musicians; they do not necessarily know about musica, but they do know about moral good, about beauty, and about different kinds of love – and their good and bad effects. Machaut's poetry and music taught his lay audience about the importance of hope, often personified for the didactic purpose as the noble Lady Hope.

As courtiers living in a mixed-sex community, their spiritual, existential, and practical needs were rather different from those of regular monks who could see music as reflecting divine neo-Platonic harmonies. Instead, lay persons – essentially later versions of those 'weaker spirits' that Augustine mentioned – could use beautiful sound as a pleasurable form of ethical education. Practically, a beautiful song inscribes itself in memory with its text, making Machaut's short lyric items very memorable. As Machaut's lyrics often summarize and epitomize ethical issues discussed at greater length in his narrative poems, his songs effectively served as a short-cut aide-memoire for his ethical programme. Most importantly, the pleasure of listening to a beautiful song acts as a

66 See Elizabeth Eva Leach, Guillaume de Machaut: Secretary, Poet, Musician (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), chapter 3.
67 See ibid., chapter 4.

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stand-in for the pleasures that the song might describe. In some cases the song depicts the pleasure of hunting, replicating the sounds of the chase and giving a vicarious pleasure that takes up far less time than a real hunt would. But courtly song more typically celebrates — and replaces — a more amorous chase: the pursuit of ladies. Machaut’s balade with the apt incipit ‘Beauty’ (Biaute (B4); see Figure 4.3) describes a peerless lady, of refined sweetness, with a body worthy of all praise, a soft face, beautiful glance, and a joyful appearance. Unfortunately for the lover, this beauty, too, is deadly — the lack of encouragement that he gets from her has brought him to the point of death. But the music of the song has its own beauties, both auditory and — in this case — visual.

The notation is beautified by the use of red colouration (it is no coincidence that the words for red and beauty are related in many languages); and the sound of the melisma where the red colouration is, which terminates the three main sections of each stanza of the song, is a lovely musical sequence, replete with plangent dissonances and a wonderfully undulating contour. Like the melisma of the jubilus of the Alleluia mentioned by Augustine, this melisma enables the singer to ‘just sing’, and conveys to the listener wordless emotion. The listener to this song gains aural and visual representations of the lady’s beauty and of the lover’s pain, and the time spent listening to the song at once distracts and consoles.

The promotion of musical items, especially songs, as objects of visual as well as auditory beauty was taken to a high level in the court cultures of the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Individual songs exist in

28 See the analysis of the depiction of a hunt in Denis le Grant’s Se je chant in Leach, Sung Birds, chapter 4.
30 I recommend in particular the recording by the Ferrara Ensemble, which is performed in the original two-part arrangement. On music and consolation in Machaut see Leach, Guillaume de Machaut, chapters 4–6; Elizabeth Eva Leach, ‘Poet as Musician’, in Deborah McGrady and Jennifer Bain (eds.), A Companion to Guillaume de Machaut (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 49–66; and Sarah Kay, ‘Touching Singularity: Consolation, Philosophy, and Poetry in the French dit’, in Catherine E. Leglu and Stephen J. Milner (eds.), The Erotics of Consolation: Desire and Distance in the Late Middle Ages, The New Middle Ages (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 21–38.
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FIGURE 4.5. Guillaume de Machaut's balade *Biauté* (B4). The Ferrell-Vogüé MS, f.298r. On loan to the Parker Library, Corpus Christi, Cambridge. Reproduced by kind permission of Elizabeth J. and James E. Ferrell. Colour image available on the DIAMM website.
manuscript copies with the musical staves shaped variously into a heart, a circle, a seven-course maze, and a harp. These ‘picture pieces’ were given as gifts on single sheets of parchment, particularly at New Year, when noblemen and women typically exchanged very costly items. One of these, Jacob Senleches’s *La harpe de melodie* (see Figure 4.4), sets a text that invites the recipient to see and hear the notes of the melodious harp.

The music to which this text is sung is presented on an image of a harp, with notes placed on the harp strings giving the pitches of the melody. A red-inked rondeau wrapped around the harp’s frame tells the performers how to decode the notation, which represents two separate parts as a single written part to be performed in canon (a kind of round). This deliberate prettifying of song, turning it into a beautiful object, an artwork, even an artefact, serves to make beautiful song into a surrogate for the pleasure it describes, a safe and ethical surrogate that must be experienced socially, in company, and gives a pleasure that is not the much more dangerous pleasure that is sought by the desire for the lady.

**Desire for music and the music of desire: back to the sirens**

In order to fulfil such kinds of function more effectively, the musical language of what we now call the later Middle Ages developed its own aural depiction of desire and fulfilment – or expectation and achievement. The present description attempts discussion in fairly unspecialized language; musically literate readers seeking a more technical explanation will find this in the musicological literature. The musical device in question is made up of a succession of two sonic moments that I will here call chords: the first chord has an element of instability that makes it seem to lead to the second more stable chord, giving a sense of progression or movement from the first to the second chord. The fourteenth century seems to be the first time that the specifically harmonic element

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31 Reproductions of all four ‘picture pieces’ can be found in Leach, *Sung Birds*, chapter 3.

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of music was able to figure expectation aurally. This presentation of two chords is more than a mere succession of sonorities, since it is able to suggest a necessary connection that leads irresistibly from one moment to another. Like later music, medieval music creates that sense of expectation by sharpening one of the notes in the first chord so that it seems to lead a note very close in pitch to it in the second chord. This sharpened note, which there is evidence that singers might have 'over-sharpened', destabilized the overall sonority, making the first chord teeter into a near dissonance, and led very strongly towards the note of resolution. In the regulated system of medieval musica, the note causing the instability in the first chord and prompting the sense of movement was strictly speaking outside the normal collection of pitches that medieval music theory described: it loosened the pedagogical rope binding music to the mast of the rational ship; and it did so while making the listener long for the next note of a song.

This adjustment of the notes was 'for reasons of beauty' according to medieval music theorists, who distinguished it from pitch adjustments made 'for reasons of necessity', which was just a rule about properly tuning certain 'perfect intervals' (octaves, fifths, and unisons) to prevent really harsh dissonances. So, it was completely necessary to tune the perfectly consonant and highly stable intervals of octaves, fifths, and unisons; but inflecting the tuning of the imperfectly consonant thirds and sixths was beautiful — and was something that destabilized them further, creating the aural image of a temporal progression of sonorities, one resulting from the other. The action of sharpening the leading note of the first chord, especially if it was 'over-sharpened', resulted in the division of the pitch spectrum into unusually small interval steps, which were placed where small intervals within the octave did not ordinarily go in the system known as musica recta (correct music). This represented a double transgression of the rational system developed for chant so that it could reflect the music of the spheres; music with this directed

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progression was very worldly music indeed. In the mid-fourteenth century the music theorist Johannes Boen notes that young men, sick of the regular diatonic gamut, 'admit more notes than the ancients because they pursue, mouths agape, the wantonness of the song itself \([lasciviam ipsius cantus]\).\(^8\) The use of the word 'lascivia' – from which we get the English 'lasciviousness' – to describe this open-mouthed longing for new notes already starts to admit an interpretation of this kind of listening as a potentially dangerous kind of aural erotics. Another theorist from the period, Arnulf, also uses this word as he notes among the most able kind of singers

a second group – that is to say of the favoured female sex – which is so much the more precious the more it is rare; when she freely divides tones into semitones with a sweet-sounding throat, and divides semitones into indivisible microtones \([athomos]\), she enjoys herself \([lascivil]\) with an indescribable melody that you would rather deem angelic than human.\(^9\)

Unsurprisingly the theorist then goes on to liken these women to 'earthly Sirens' who

enchant the bewitched ears of their listeners and they steal away their hearts, which are for the most part lulled by this kind of intoxication, in secret theft, and having snatched them and made them subject to their will, they then enslave them and lead them, shipwrecked by the beauty, alas!, of their prison, into an earthly Charybdis in which no kind of redemption or ransom is available.\(^10\)

This writer seems specifically to link the singing of small intervals – the atoms of pitch – with the beauty of these singers' song. But then he goes on to note the dangers of the song, causing the soporific intoxication of

\(^8\) Translation by Leofranc Holford-Strevens. See Leach, 'Gendering the Semitone', 12–13. Open source edition of the Latin text can be found at www.chm.indiana.edu/tml/14th/BOENMUS_TEXT.html.

\(^9\) Translation adapted from that in Christopher Page, 'A Treatise on Musicians from c.1400: The \textit{Tractatus de differentiis et gradibus cantorum}', \textit{Journal of the Royal Musical Association}, 117 (1992), 1–21, 20, which gives the Latin on 17. Open source for the Latin can be found at www.chm.indiana.edu/tml/14th/ARNTRA_TEXT.html.

\(^10\) For further comments, see Leach, "The Little Pipe Sings Sweetly While the Fowler Deceives the Bird", and \textit{Sung Birds}, chapter 5. This translation from Page, 'A Treatise on Musicians from c.1400', 20, Latin on 17.
its listeners who love their subjection to the beauty of the prison as an earthly Charybdis from which there is no escape.

Arnulf's text testifies to the already-mentioned underlying problem of the beauty of sound – the problem of the feminine. Music's link to femininity – or, at the very least, its ability to undermine typical Western constructions of self-willed, active masculinity by making listeners passive, soporific and subject to the musical sound – seems to be at the root of the problem with the sound of beauty. These problems continue to beset music throughout its history, from the Greeks to the present day, never winning the day, but always providing ammunition for those who found their own or others' subjection to beautiful sound distasteful – who resented having their own emotions manipulated by a mere singer or player, or – more latterly – by the disembodied sounds of electronic reproduction. And authorities continued to worry about the sirens: later tonal music in the West famously extended the two-chord sequence that controlled time aurally, figuring desire and resolution, to enormous temporal proportions in the music of the nineteenth century. It is possible to understand the entire four hours of Wagner's opera Tristan and Isolde, for example, as being animated tonally by repeated non-resolving presentations of the first chord of this tension-resolution sequence, ornamentally extended (music analysts would say 'prolonged') throughout the entire opera, resolving only at the end. Such an analysis might explain – at least in part – why a 1992 report into church music, commissioned by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, specifically condemned the music of Wagner. The sound of beauty is dangerous.

Narratives responding to the sound of beauty have throughout history see-sawed between condemning it as the song of the sirens of the sea and lauding it as the music of more heavenly sirens. If the voices of warning predominate at particular periods it is largely because the educated elites who voice such warnings are more likely to leave written records of their criticisms, while those who have no such moral qualms are more likely to

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be enjoying themselves playing, singing, and dancing. In all periods it is possible to find those who extolled the joyful beauty of music, those who warned that a moral kind of sonic beauty was only assured within the correct regulatory framework, and those for whom most or nearly all music was simply immoral. In the nineteenth century the apologists for music tried to downplay the problematic category of beauty—effectively accepting from its detractors that anything beautiful was feminine and ornamental—and adopted as their own category for positive beauty the idea of the sublime. The sublime enabled its listeners to evade charges of feminine seduction for a much more reassuringly masculine, awesome, even terrifying kind of aural pleasure. The elevation of difficult music—and ultimately, in the so-called postmodern sublime of the twentieth century, of music that seemed to espouse a deliberate ugliness—seemed responsibly and ethically to reflect the terrifying horrors of modernity and at once confirmed the negative judgements of beautiful sounds’ detractors while opening up a space in which deep aesthetic responses—even passive subjection—to music could still be justified.

Conclusion

The sound of beauty can serve as a sonic manifestation of a moral good, of the divine, of the music of the spheres, a glimpse into the mind of God. Like most forms of beauty, however, it can also serve a negative purpose, distracting and seducing, especially when corrupted by the venal mouths of human singers or divorced from a guiding text in wordless melismas or instrumental music. Like Odysseus bound to the mast, wise men in the past sought to constrain their own musical practices by emphasizing music’s rational content, tying it tightly to good words, and insisting that its practice was strictly regulated. But music was too subtle, too beautiful, too irrational and irregular. The masculine sublime of modern

99 See, for example, the discussion of the symphony in Mark Evan Bonds, Music as Thought: Listening to the Symphony in the Age of Beethoven (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

10 For a discussion, which ultimately rejects a strong distinction between romantic and postmodern sublime but places music centrally, see Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).
music (by which I mean music after around 1800) and the masculine rationality of earlier musical pedagogy are both attempts to remain in control while ceding control. After all, Odysseus managed this: he set up the control of himself by having himself tied to the masts and cautioning the sailors to ignore any countermand while the sirens were singing. He was thus able to subject himself safely to beautiful sound, without becoming enslaved to it.

The debates about the sound of beauty indicate clearly the cultural importance of music, and why it has been and remains something over which people argue, legislate and worry. Fundamentally they bring us up against the compound nature of the human, the intersection of what Aristotle would call the animal soul and the rational soul, promising us something that only a rational human can attain but ultimately showing us that we are also just animals. Whatever the music in question, its ability to merge the immiscible elements of being human makes it resemble nothing so much as human Being itself.\footnote{The idea of musical structure as mimetic of human Being, an account fusing Heideggerian and Schenkerian ideas, can be found in J. P. E. Harper-Scott, \textit{Edward Elgar, Modernist} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).}