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Aristotle on Music as Representation

In his *Politics* and *Poetics* Aristotle claims that music is a form of imitation (*mimesis*) and that pieces of music are images of character.¹ It is a view Aristotle obviously shares with Plato,² and this outlook seems to have been accepted by many authors throughout antiquity, even if it is not the only view held during this period of the nature of music. In our times it is, on the contrary, not natural to regard pieces of music as images of something or to say that we listen to images. In this paper I will try to reconstruct parts of the conceptual framework within which the idea that music is a kind of image has been thought and formulated in antiquity, as a background for a better understanding of the ancient outlook on music as image. First some crucial quotations from Aristotle's *Politics* in which the nature of music in terms of images and imitations is discussed:

Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and of all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affections, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo a change. ... The objects of no other sense, such as taste or touch, have any resemblance to moral qualities; in visible objects there is only a little, for there are figures which are of a moral character, but only to a slight extent, and all do not participate in the feeling about them. Again, figures and colours are not imitations, but signs, of character, indications which the body gives of states of feeling. ... On the other hand, even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each. ... The same principles apply to rhythms; some have a character of rest,

others of motion, and of these latter again, some have a more vulgar, others a nobler movement.³

I. LISTENING TO MUSIC IS A FORM OF AESTHESIS

In an attempt to understand the ancient Greek way of thinking and describing what music is, it is useful to start with the theory of *aesthesis*, i.e., the Greek conception of what it is to look at and to listen to things and generally to perceive things. An initial difficulty here is that the terms "*aesthesis*" and "perception" are not synonymous. We cannot presuppose that what we understand by "perception" is what the Greeks understood by "*aesthesis*."

Basic here is the distinction between *aesthesis* and *noesis*, which is the distinction between what we can see (and vision is often used as the most important form of *aesthesis* and thus the representative of the other senses) and what we think. In Plato's strongly dualistic view, what we can see we cannot think and what we think we cannot see.⁴ *Noesis* grasps the world of universals, whereas *aesthesis* consists of the imprints on the mind of the particulars of the world in a variety of ways.

The fundamental metaphor used by both Plato and Aristotle in describing the process of *aesthesis* is that of pressure; the particulars, i.e., the things seen, heard, touched, etc., press their individual shapes and qualities into the minds of the living organisms via the sense organs (and sometimes through a medium like air). They do so without imposing the matter of the particular on the perceiver; only their shapes and qualities appear in the mind of the perceiver. There is, of course, a large variety of opinions in antiquity regarding the nature of

noesis and *aesthesis* and their interrelations; for instance, the atomists described *aesthesis* in terms of atoms, and the neoplatonists described the appearance of particulars in the mind as an interplay between impressions from the outside and universals residing in the mind. Alternatively, some philosophers believed that the mind sends out something like rays through the sense organs in order to “feel” the shape of the particulars.⁵ But either way, it is the metaphor of pressure which is fundamental.

The process in which this pressure results in an awareness in the mind of the particulars seen and heard is often described with the terms “like” and “unlike”; there is a shift in the sense organ from unlike to like, and this shift generates the mental image of the particular thing heard and looked at. For example, when a signet ring is pressed into wax, it changes the wax from a shape which is unlike the ring to a shape which is like the ring.⁶

Now, there are five senses but just one consciousness. This fact made Aristotle postulate that there is an *aesthesis koine* (common sense) which synthesizes the “reports” from the different senses into one complex but unified image of the world of particulars.

Further, the philosophers of antiquity distinguished a number of kinds of *aesthesis*. These distinctions are drawn with regard to the relation between the mental image and the things arousing it, particularly the correctness, consistency and vividness of the mental images and the awareness of this relation in the receiver. As a rule, a mental image is taken to be correct when the shape of it is the same as the actual shape of the particular thing seen or heard. Obviously this is not always the case. The classical example is introduced by Plato: if we, when rowing, look at the oars while they are partly under water, the mental image shows broken oars. But we know they are not. The “higher part of our mind” which calculates, measures, etc., tells us the truth, Plato wrote.⁷

This latter kind of *aesthesis* is often called illusion; there is a thing outside the mind arousing a mental image, but this mental image is not adequate to the thing looked at. The perceiver believes it is, however. Vividness and consistency may be the same in both cases; the oar looks broken even if we know it is not. An hallucination, on the other hand, is a mental

image generated, for instance, by drugs and fever. When we are hallucinating there is no outward object that can be correctly or incorrectly related to the mental image occurring, but the spectator believes there is; maybe the hallucination also lacks in consistency compared to correct *aesthesis*, whereas strength and vividness can be both stronger or weaker than average *aesthesis*.

Thus, correct *aesthesis*, illusion and hallucination all are forms of *aesthesis*. But there are yet other forms of awareness of particulars related to *aesthesis*. Aristotle claims that correct *aesthesis*, illusion and hallucination are passive forms of *aesthesis* in the sense that mental images are created or received in the mind without the active interference of the mind. But the mind can also on its own call forth mental images of particulars without there being anything outside the mind arousing them, as in correct *aesthesis* and illusion and, in a way, also in hallucination. When we remember something a mental image is called forth, a mental image that often lacks in consistency and vividness compared to correct *aesthesis*. It is a recalling which is partly steered by our will of things once experienced in *aesthesis*, and we know that this is the fact; otherwise the mental image would be a delusion. Memories are always of particulars. We cannot remember thoughts; we can only think them. Or in Plato’s vivid metaphor of *anamnesis*, thoughts are memories of the acquaintance with Platonic ideas in an earlier existence in an eternal world. Dreams belong to another form of active *aesthesis* which certainly can be as vivid as but seldom as consistent as correct *aesthesis*. At least when we are awake we know that dreams are generated by the mind itself. But we don’t know this in the state of dreaming. Plato remarks: “Is not the dream state, whether the man is asleep or awake, just this: the mistaking of resemblance for identity?”⁸ Finally, daydreams and fantasies are forms of *aesthesis*. When we are imagining something we know that there is no outward thing answering to the mental image created by our imagination. When we are daydreaming we are, perhaps, balancing on the edge between knowing and not knowing that there is no outward object answering to the mental image, and this act of balance gives strength and vividness to the daydream.

II. IMAGES AND (REAL) THINGS

To look at images and imitations is, of course, a kind of *aesthesis*. But this kind of *aesthesis* has a mysterious double character which troubled Plato; it is both an illusion and a correct *aesthesis* at the same time, or something in between—neither full illusion nor correct *aesthesis*.

In *The Sophist* Plato divides the world of things, that is the world of particulars, into (real)⁹ things and images. Further, these two classes can, each of them, be split into (real) things and images made by human beings and such made by God or Nature. The result was the following “map” of the world of particulars with examples of each class:

	God or Nature	Human Beings
(real) things	trees, stones, animals	artifacts
images	shadows, reflections, constellations of stars	paintings and pieces of poetry and music

In an attempt to define what distinguishes images from (real) things, Plato claims that an image is something which is similar to something else but only in some respects, and that the function or nature of images is to be nothing but similar in these respects.¹⁰ A thing, which is similar to something else in all respects, is not an image of that something but another example of its kind.¹¹ The respects in which the image resembles something else are tied to the medium in which the image is made, as Aristotle remarks in his classificatory discussion of different kinds of imitation in the first chapter of the *Poetics*.¹² But things can be similar to other things in some respects without being images of the things they resemble. The crucial characteristic is that this partial similarity is the only function or form of existence the image has. Suppose we look at Myron’s famous sculpture of a cow. This piece of bronze is in some respects (three-dimensional form materialized in bronze) similar to cows, and the basic function of it is to be nothing but similar to cows, i.e., when we look at it, mental images of a cow are meant to occur in the minds of the spectators.

In *The Cratylus* Plato contrasts words and images with each other with respect to what they represent or what they signify. Words signify, he maintains in one part of the dialogue, universals, whereas images signify things in their particularity. Here images are regarded as signs; it is thus natural to understand the “being nothing but similar in some given respects” as an attempt to characterize the sign function of images.¹³

Fundamental to *semiosis*, or our uses of signs, is that we know that the thing we apprehend is a sign. When we read or hear the word “beauty,” we must know that it is a word referring to beauty and not beauty itself or just a series of noises. And similarly, when we look at a sculpture, it is important for us to know that it is an *image* of a beautiful person and not a living beautiful person in front of us. Even if Greek painters and sculptors tried to make their paintings and sculptures as full of life as possible, they seldom intended to trick the spectators into the belief that they had a (real) thing in front of them and not an image.¹⁴ This borderline between knowing and not knowing whether something is an image or a real thing is also Plato’s concern in *The Sophist*. He wants to show that the sophists are such tricksters. They have no wisdom but put up the appearance of having it and trick innocent people into the belief that they, the sophists, are wise. In *The Republic* Plato claims something similar: the painters can trick simple people with their paintings and that is a danger.¹⁵ But even if this can be the case sometimes, this does not mean that all images are used in such a way or that tricking people into false beliefs is the goal of image-making. On the contrary, if we look back into history for all the different kinds of usage of images, the spectators know in most cases that it is an image and not a (real) thing they are looking at and that this awareness is intended. There are no real persons standing along the funeral road in Kerameikos in Athens, or in the Agora or on the Acropolis. And it is not the real Oedipus who investigates why Thebes is plague-stricken in the performances of Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex* in the theater of Dionysus.

To look at or to “listen to” an image implies that the spectators and listeners, to some extent at least, expect different things from images than from (real) things and that they accord-

ingly act differently in front of an image than they would do in front of real things of the kind represented in the image. Aristotle is aware of this fact: "Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies."¹⁶ When we know that we are "listening to" or looking at an image we act in a way which is different from the ways in which we usually act in front of the things represented in the image. "Again, when we form an opinion that something is threatening or frightening, we are immediately affected by it, and the same is true of our opinion of something that inspires courage; but in imagination we are like spectators looking at something dreadful or encouraging in a picture."¹⁷

In a sense, images have a double nature, and this doubleness might be mystifying: it is both a real thing in its own right and a sort of illusion. Myron's cow is a lump of bronze which we can look at and touch. The sculpture has its own set of qualities, like yellow-brown colors, a smooth touch and formal and structural features. These the sculpture has irrespective of its being a representation of a cow or not. But secondly, it has its representational function, i.e., to create an inner image of a cow in the mind of the spectator. The spectator sees a cow but knows that it is not a real cow, just as the person who imagines things knows that the things imagined are not outside of him or her, or as the person remembering something knows that the mental image is related to something that occurred back in time.

In *The Laws* Plato comments on the double character of images and imitations. The gods gave human beings, in pity for the beastly life of the human race, the ability to appreciate harmony and rhythm in song and dance. But since songs and dances also are representative, it might happen that people take delight in the rhythms and harmonies of representations of immoral content and are thus tricked into the belief that the thing represented also is good (since most people believe that the things that give pleasure are good).¹⁸

Aristotle seems to have a similar outlook in the fourth chapter of *The Poetics*. The reasons why human beings use images and imitations are two (Aristotle writes about poetry in general, but what he says is clearly valid also for

other kinds of images and imitations): "First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. ... Next, there is the instinct for 'harmony' and rhythm, meters being manifestly sections of rhythm."¹⁹ The capacity to appreciate rhythm and harmony in things heard as well as the capacity to appreciate symmetry and good proportions in things seen is unique for human beings and these qualities, namely rhythm, harmony, symmetry and good proportions, belong to images and imitations as objects in themselves irrespective of what they represent. Thus Aristotle clearly saw the twofold character of images and imitations as the following quotation also shows: "For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the colouring, or some such other cause."²⁰

Described within the conceptual frame of *aesthesis*, looking at or "listening to" images and imitations gives the spectator and listener a double imprint—both the shape of the image itself with its rhythms, harmonies, symmetries, and good proportions, and the shape of the thing represented. Crucial here is that the spectator and listener know that the representational imprint is without counterpart in the (real) world. Or, as Plato formulates it, an image is "a sort of man-made dream produced for those who are awake."²¹

Thus an image is, according to the ancient outlook, a humanly made thing with a set of qualities of its own which might be organized into a harmonious, rhythmical, and well-proportioned whole and with an ability to create an inner image of some particular thing which it is not in itself. Primarily images and imitations are meant to call forth mental images in the minds of the spectators and listeners. Then this function can be put into a large variety of situations in which this human ability is used.²² In most cases it is important that the spectator or listener is aware of the fact that it is an image or imitation he or she is looking at or listening to. Sometimes, however, the image can be used to trick the receiver into the false belief that he or she is looking at a real thing.

III. MUSIC, IMITATION, AND THE PLEASURES OF MUSIC

If you claim that pieces of music are images or imitations, this means, within the conceptual framework sketched above, that a piece of music is a humanly made thing the sole function of which is to create a mental image of a double character in the mind of the listener: a mental image of the piece of music as a thing with particular qualities, foremost rhythms and harmonies, and a mental image of something which the piece of music is not, that is, what it represents. Further, it is implied that the listener knows that the representational impression does not originate from a real thing of the kind shown in the mental image.

Very few persons deny that listening to music can give the listener pleasure, although there is a great disagreement about the value of such pleasure and about the role it should play in human life. There is also disagreement about the origin of musical pleasure. Musical hedonism can be described as the view that pleasure from music is direct and immediate in the same way as the pleasure of good tastes and odors.

Another way of describing pleasure in connection with music, not necessarily denying the hedonistic view, is to claim that good proportions in the thing heard arouse pleasure. This type of pleasure, tied to the structural properties of the sensuous thing, is called beauty following a very long tradition from the Pythagorean school.²³ Since taste and smell have no structural features in their sensuous objects, they cannot share this kind of beauty, and touch can only do it to a certain extent. Only sight and hearing provide us with full-fledged sensuous beauty.

Since music is a form of imitation, the pleasure experienced in listening to music can also be the pleasure of learning something. "Again, since learning and wondering are pleasant, it follows that such things as acts of imitation must be pleasant—for instance, painting, sculpture, poetry—and every product of skillful imitation; this latter, even if the object imitated is not pleasant in itself."²⁴

The Pseudo-Aristotelian text, *Problemata*, makes this distinction clear by posing the question, "Why does everyone enjoy rhythm and tune, and in general all consonances?" and then

answering: "We enjoy different types of songs for their moral character, but we enjoy rhythm because it has a recognized and orderly numerical arrangement and carries us along in an orderly fashion; for orderly movement is naturally more akin to us than one without order, so that such rhythm is more in accordance with nature."²⁵

Thus music can give us hedonic pleasure, structural pleasure (beauty), and pleasure from learning. But what can we learn from listening to music, and what can music represent?

IV. MUSIC AND ETHOS

Music also has an influence on the character or disposition (*ethos*) of persons. Such characters or dispositions of persons are in antiquity denoted by means of words like "frenzy," "sobriety," "temperance," "strength," "lasciviousness." The idea that music can influence the character and dispositions of persons seems to be the very center of Plato's and Aristotle's argument on the nature of music. Aristotle refers to it several times as something we know from our own experience.²⁶ When we listen to a piece of music it happens that our minds shift, and what changes is our *ethos*, i.e., our disposition or character. Sextus Empiricus tells the following anecdote: "Thus Pythagoras, having noticed on one occasion that the youths who were in a state of Bacchic frenzy from drunkenness differed not at all from madmen, advised the flute-player who was with them in their revels to play them the 'spondean' tune; and when he had done as instructed, they suddenly changed and became sober just as if they had been sober from the beginning."²⁷

The fact Aristotle uses as foundation for his argument is, then, that music has the power to change the mind of its listeners so their characters or dispositions change. Since listening to pieces of music is a kind of *aesthesis*, it often is described as a change from "unlike to like." Now, the change is described as a change of *ethos*, of character and disposition. The natural conclusion would be, then, that the piece of music has a character which it "imprints" on the listener or, at least, that it is similar to such a character.

The basic assumption is, of course, that music has character and means to communicate this character to the listener. In *Problemata* the

following question is put: "Why is hearing the only perception which affects the moral character? For every tune, even if it has no words, has nevertheless character; but neither colour, smell nor flavour have it."²⁸

In this passage Pseudo-Aristotle claims that music has character. But in another passage close to it in the same text Pseudo-Aristotle asks about music's relation to character: "Why are rhythm and tune, which are only an emission of the voice, associated with moral character, while flavours, colours and scents are not?" In both cases Pseudo-Aristotle's answer is that they have movement. "Is it because, like actions, they are movements? Now, action is a moral fact and implies a moral character, but flavours and colours do not act in the same way."

What does it mean to say that rhythms and harmonies have character or are similar to character? Aristotle claims that it is a plain fact, something everybody knows from his or her own experience and that the explanation is found in movement. For Plato, Aristotle, and many other, but not all, ancient thinkers it was natural to use the conceptual framework of *aesthesis* and *mimesis* in order to describe these processes. A piece of music is not, for instance, anger itself in abstraction nor is it an example of anger, i.e., angry behavior, but it is an image of anger, namely something that is similar to but not an instance of anger, and this "nothing but similarity in certain respects" is the basic nature of music apart from its rhythms, harmonies, and shapes as well as it is basic for all other kinds of image and imitation. A piece of music is a humanly made thing which is expressively made in order to give us inner images of anger which are individual and particular in shape and necessarily individual and particular, since to listen to music is a form of *aesthesis*. At the same time, the receiver knows that it is neither anger itself nor an example of anger but an image of anger which she or he is looking at or "listening to"; recognizing something to be an image implies that it is not understood as a "real" thing. This knowledge and the praxis tied up to it is to a large extent culturally established and acquired by the members of the culture in a process of acculturation, in which they learn which things are images and imitations and how to react in front of them and how to use them.

Knowing this, the listener reacts differently than in "ordinary" situations: if we see a sad person it is, in many situations, natural to try to comfort him or her. But we do not comfort the performing musician or the composer. On the contrary, we enjoy the shape of sadness because we learn something by listening to it, Aristotle would say; we learn about sadness. In the same way as we enjoy looking at paintings of things which we would dislike and detest in real situations, we enjoy learning about characters and dispositions which we, if we met with them in real life, would abhor. And we would try to turn away from them as quickly as possible, which is contrary to looking at them with enjoyment.

V. THE IMITATION OF UNIVERSALS

Since Plato's challenge that images and imitations cannot represent anything but individual things in the visual and audible world, i.e., that they cannot represent Platonic ideas,²⁹ a central question has been: what can images and imitations represent? Can they in some way transcend the limits of the visual and audible world and represent something that is invisible and inaudible, that has no body?

In the *Poetics* Aristotle claims that poetry is more important than history because poetry represents something more universal, whereas history is the representation of individual and particular occurrences, and universality (*to kathólou*) is, to Aristotle and to many with him, of greater value than particularity. Aristotle writes in *De interpretatione*: "I call universal that which is by its nature predicated of a number of things, and particular that which is not; man, for instance, is a universal, Callias a particular."³⁰ Thus, can images and imitations show and teach us something about human beings in general and not only about particular human beings as, for instance, the individual fate of Callias?

At least poetic imitation can, according to Aristotle, teach us universal truths, and this feature of poems is the distinctive differentia of poetic imitation. But it is likely that also other forms of imitation in addition to poetic imitation can teach us about universals. Let us first take Aristotle's own example of poetic imitation: *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. The universal truth about human existence, which we can

learn from this tragedy, is what the chorus pronounces in its last lines: human happiness is fickle. At any time the greatest happiness can be reversed into the greatest unhappiness. In order to communicate this universal truth to his audience, Sophocles chose to tell the story of Oedipus and the plague in Thebes. The fate of Oedipus demonstrates this universal with graphic clarity. What we see in the performance of the tragedy is not, however, the universal truth in abstraction, something a philosopher could demonstrate and clarify with arguments. And it is neither a real thing, i.e., Oedipus himself in his search of the cause of the plague, nor an image of what Oedipus actually did (that is the history of Oedipus), if he ever lived and tried to find out why Thebes was plague-stricken. It is an image which offers a particular exemplification of a universal truth about human existence, and the fate of Oedipus is chosen because it is such a striking example.

Thus, the poetic image and imitation do not present chance examples or actual examples of some general truth but paradigm examples of it. "It is, moreover," Aristotle writes, "evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen—what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity."³¹ Not all images and imitations, however, are meant to be, or in fact are, presentations of paradigm examples of universal truths; many images and imitations tell about particulars.³² But the poetic images and imitations are, Aristotle maintains, not historical in that sense. They present something more general to their audiences. Furthermore, the universal truth exemplified should be of importance to the life of human beings and the presentation of it in images and imitations should, thus, be paradigmatic. According to Aristotle, the audience does not learn this universal truth through arguments, but, through the emotions pity and fear, it reaches the insight that human happiness is fickle.

Aristotle mentions only poetic images and imitations in connection with the presentation and exemplification of universals. But it is easy to see that other forms of images and imitations can also be "poetic" in the sense that they exemplify, in paradigmatic form, some universals important to human life. Thus it is natural to

ask: What sort of universals about human life can painting, sculpture, dance, and music present in paradigmatic form to their audiences?

To know about human character (*ethos*) is important to human life. Such characters or dispositions as temperance, sorrow, and greed are universals that can be shown in paintings, sculptures, and dramatic performances. But, as both Xenophon and Aristotle maintain, they cannot be exemplified directly. The only way to show sorrow or temperance, for instance, in paintings, sculptures, and dramatic performances is through the outward signs of these characters.

Music, however, can represent character itself, Aristotle writes. Music shows us directly, through its images and imitations, paradigmatic examples of character. These examples are received immediately and directly through a change of mind of the receiver to the character imitated in the sense that the character or disposition is not attached to the behavior of an individual person as it is in what we may call physiognomic imitation of character; it is a direct imitation of characters and dispositions.

Aristotle maintains that hearing and music are unique in this respect.³³ The other senses cannot provide us with such images. Smell, touch, and taste cannot represent anything at all. Sight, Aristotle writes, can give us images of character, but only to some extent, and he also points at an important restriction: painting and sculpture can only represent the indications of character. Painting and sculpture can, according to Aristotle, only represent character physiognomically.

A similar view is found in Xenophon's *Memorabilia*. Painting can only represent "the works of the soul," Xenophon maintains in a report about Socrates's discussions with the painter, Parrhasius, on the limits of painting.³⁴ Character is something immaterial and cannot be represented. But it is possible to see and thus represent the difference between an angry person and, for instance, a happy person.

Thus painting and sculpture can represent persons with a certain character or in a certain mood but unable to represent the character and mood itself. This is so because not only painting and sculpture but also poetry and theater represent individuals in action. Music alone presents examples of these dispositions and characters themselves, which the listener

knows are not real things but images and imitations. Pieces of music are *images* of character because the listeners know that they are neither real and genuine signs of a character nor the character itself; they are only similar to it. The impression the listeners get results in a mental image of, for instance, anger, i.e., an experience and conception of anger, and he or she knows that it is neither anger in itself nor real genuine signs of it. It is a thing made to give just angry "impressions" without instilling the belief that the piece itself or its maker is angry.

VI. MUSIC AND EXPRESSION

Modern languages find it easier to talk about emotions than images with regard to the function of music. A piece of music calls forth an emotion of anger or expresses anger; it does not give us an image of character. But to ancient thought it was natural to call pieces of music images and imitations since they were not real things, as discussed above.

So far we have discussed music as imitation of character from the supposition that pieces of music have character or are similar to character and that they stamp this character into the minds of their listeners resulting in a change of character. But how can we explain that pieces of music have or are similar to character? According to some authors there is a relation between the character of pieces of poetry and their creators. "Sublimity is the echo of a great mind," Pseudo-Longinus writes.³⁵ And much earlier Aristophanes ridiculed this idea in *The Thesmophoriazousae*. In the beginning of the play Euripides and Mnesikles visit the poet, Agathon, in order to recruit him to participate in a religious festival of women where Euripides is threatened to be sentenced to death for slandering women. Euripides is anxious to make Agathon speak in favor of him. When they knock at his door Agathon comes out dressed in women's clothes, and Mnesikles expresses his amazement. Agathon answers:

Old man, old man, my ears receive the words
Of your tongue's utterance, yet I heed them
not.

I choose my dress to suit my poesy.
A poet, sir, must need adapt his ways

To the high thoughts which animate his soul.
And when he sings of women, he assumes
A woman's garb, and dons a woman's habits.

MN. (*aside to Euripides*) When you wrote Phaedra,
did you take her habits?

AG. But when he sings of men, his whole appearance
Conforms to man. What nature gives us not,
The human soul aspires to imitate.

MN. (*as before*) Zounds, if I'd seen you when you
wrote the Satyrs!

AG. Besides, a poet never should be rough,
Or harsh, or rugged. Witness to my words
Anacreon, Alcaeus, Ibycus,
Who when they filtered and diluted song,
Wore soft Ionian manners and attire.
And Phrynicus, perhaps you have seen him,
sir,
How fair he was, and beautifully dressed;
Therefore his plays were beautifully fair.
For as the Worker, so the Work will be.

MN. Then that is why harsh Philocles writes
harshly,
And that is why vile Xenocles writes vilely,
And cold Theognis writes such frigid plays.

AG. Yes, that is why.³⁶

Here it is stated that the character of the maker is carried over to his products. This resembles the theory of poetic communication given in Plato's *Ion*. The Muse seizes the poet who in his turn communicates what he has received from the Muse to the rhapsodist or actor. And they continue the chain to the listeners. Plato describes the process metaphorically: it is like the power of a magnet which can attract rings of iron.³⁷ Basic, here, is that it is the same content that is communicated from the Muse to the listeners. Thus the pieces of poetry and music are not signs of the character in question but the character itself or resemblances of it.

It is possible to describe the making of images and imitations as a reverse process of *aesthesis*. In the process of *aesthesis* the (real) world imprints its shapes and qualities without its matter into the mind of the receiver, whereas in

making an image, the shape and character created in the imagination of the sculptor, poet or musician are forced upon some matter.³⁸ Bronze, for instance. Myron created in his imagination a mental image of a cow, and with the help of his skill (*technē*) he transformed this shape into matter. Similarly, the character or disposition of the mind of the musician is stamped upon the piece of music, which in its turn acts upon the listener in such a way that he or she changes to the character of the piece of music.

So, possibly, theories of imitation and theories of expression meet in Aristotle's account of the nature of music. Maybe we have to regard Aristotle's description of musical representation as an attempt to formulate a theory of expression within the conceptual framework of *aesthesis* and *mimesis*.

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1. *Politics*, 1340a 18–22 and *Poetics*, ch. 1.

2. *Republic*, 401 B–403 C; *Laws* 655 D and 668 A: “We assert, do we not, that all music is representative (*eikastiken*) and imitative (*mimetiken*)?” *The Laws*, trans. R. G. Bury (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1952).

3. 1340a 18–1340b 10. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. B. Jowett (Princeton University Press, 1984).

4. *The Republic*, 507B–C.

5. Cf. Boethius, *De institutione musica*, 179: “Whether sight occurs by images coming to the eye or by rays sent out to sensible objects is a point of disagreement among the learned, although this dispute escapes the notice of the ordinary person.” Quoted in *Fundamentals of Music: Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius*, trans. Calvin M. Bower (Yale University Press, 1989).

6. Cf. Aristotle, *De anima*, 424a 17–28.

7. *The Republic*, 602C–603A.

8. *The Republic*, 476C in *Plato: The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1946).

9. *The Sophist*, 265C–266D. An image is, of course, also a thing. But it is a thing of a particular sort, and it is the distinguishing characteristics of images that Plato is looking for; the nature of images in contradistinction to (real) things.

10. *The Sophist*, 239D–240B.

11. Cf. *Cratylus*, 432B: “[T]he image must not by any means reproduce all the qualities of that which it imitates, if it is to be an image.” Quoted in *Plato with an English*

Translation, Vol. VI., trans. H. N. Fowler (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1953).

12. Cf. also Plato's *Cratylus*, 434A.

13. *Cratylus*, 423C–D.

14. Norman Bryson's idea in *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983) that the basic goal of pictorial art up until recently was to produce the Essential Copy, a sort of thing that made the spectators believe that they looked at a (real) thing and not an image, is to my mind a very superficial interpretation of thoughts about and practices in the pictorial arts in antiquity.

15. 598 C.

16. *Poetics*, 1448b 10–12, in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art with a Critical Text and Translation of the Poetics*. First published 1894. Fourth ed., trans. S. H. Butcher (New York: Dover Publications, 1951).

17. Aristotle, *De anima*, 427b 22–25, trans. W. S. Hett (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1964).

18. *The Laws*, 653C–654A, 655D–656C.

19. 1448b 5–9, 20–22. Trans. cf. note 16.

20. *Poetics*, 1448b 18–19. Trans. cf. note 16.

21. *The Sophist*, 266C, in *Plato with an English Translation: Theaetetus, Sophist*, trans. H. N. Fowler (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1921).

22. In discussing the different causes why a sculpture exists and looks as it actually does, Seneca writes: “The ‘fourth cause’ is the purpose of the work. For if this purpose had not existed, the statue would not have been made. Now what is this purpose? It is that which attracted the artist, which he followed when he made the statue. It may have been money, if he has made it for sale; or renown, if he has worked for reputation; or religion if he has wrought it as a gift for a temple.” Epistle 65 in *Seneca: Ad Lucilium Epistolae Morales*, trans. R. M. Gummere (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1967).

23. Cf. Wladislaw Tatarkiewicz's paper “The Great Theory of Beauty and Its Decline,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 31 (1972): 165–180.

24. *Rhetoric*, I.11. 1371b4–7 in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (Princeton: Bollingen Series 71:2, 1984).

25. XIX.38. *Aristotle: Problems*, trans. W. S. Hett (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1957).

26. In the long passage from *The Politics* quoted above (1340a 18–1340b 19).

27. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Professors*, VI.8, in *Sextus Empiricus with an English Translation*, trans. R. G. Bury (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1961). This anecdote was apparently standard knowledge in antiquity. It is told by several authors. Cf., for instance, Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* 1.10.32 and Boethius *De institutione musica* 1.185.

28. XIX.27. Trans. cf. note 27. Plato also believes that music without words represents character but he is troubled about how to know which character is represented in the individual cases (*Laws* 669E): “[T]he poets rudely sunder rhythm and gesture from tune, putting tuneless words into metre, or leaving tune and rhythm without words, and using the bare sound of harp or flute, wherein it is almost impossible to understand what is intended by this wordless rhythm and harmony, or what noteworthy original it represents.” Trans. cf. note 2.

29. *The Republic*, 597E ff.

30. *De interpretatione*, 17a 38–40, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. J.L. Ackrill (Princeton: Bollingen Series 71:2, 1984).

31. *Poetics*, ch. IX, 1451a 37–39. Trans. cf. note 16.

32. *Ibid.* 1451b 10–11. “The particular is—for example—what Alcibiades did or suffered.”

33. Possibly dance, too, is capable of this since rhythm is a constituent part of dance.

34. *Memorabilia*, III.10. 1–8.

35. *On the Sublime*, IX.2.

36. *Aristophanes with an English Translation*, trans. Ben-

jamin Bickley Rogers (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1963).

37. *Ion*, 533D–E.

38. Cf. my paper “What is in the Mind of the Image-Maker? Some Views on Pictorial Representation in Antiquity,” *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics* 1–2 (1987): 1–41.

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