How doth the city lie solitary,
that was full of people
How is she become a widow
She that was great amongst the nations
and princess among the provinces
How is she become a tributary!

So begins the Lamentations of Prophet Jeremiah. Further on in the book of Jeremiah itself:

Oh that my head were waters
and my eyes a fountain of tears
That I might weep day and night
for the slain of the daughter of my people.

Songs of loss, they are, certainly, recognizably so, and there are many of them, not only in these two books of the Old Testament, but elsewhere; open in the clarity and immediacy of their vision, the simplicity and universality of the message they convey, leading then to a corresponding clarity of genre. What was enjoyed is gone; the satisfaction and bounty of former years no longer there, only the memory remains from that which had brought so much comfort. How much better it would have been if one had not been so happy, if one had not past joys with which to reproach oneself. Better always sightless, ever poor, than to have lost what one had enjoyed, had even taken for granted. For the way it is today, may not always be so.

The proud city lies in ruins, the people have been conquered, forcibly taken away—exiled—and only this sad, eloquent, prophet finds expression in the midst of grief to tell of it. Characteristic as a genre in the Old Testament, recognizable in the Middle Ages as the Lamentationes of the Prophet Jeremiah, sung not only during Holy Week, but taken up as a compositional project, for example, by Orlando di Lasso in the sixteenth century, or by Igor Stravinsky in the twentieth; the medieval Latin or vernacular planctus—in the provençal vernacu-
lar, planh—the lament can be traced throughout western music history. There are, as well, analogies in other world music civilizations that can be related to a cross-cultural identification and study of the Lament through centuries of its importance.

Laments are, after all, universal, and certainly transcend time and place. Who has not, in fact, felt the acute pain, poignancy, and perplexity—the sheer desolation, in fact—of loss. But there is more to it than this. This contribution to a volume on the topic of “Dreams and Visions,” will explore the emotional content of music and why laments as the vision of an emotional state nearly always either bring up the subject of music or include it in a powerful partnership of tone and text in a dynamic coalition of music and words, specifically as sound substance, and the implications of this coalition for the expression of loss itself. If sound is a substance, than loss and a sense of loss is also an emotional substance, is it not? Medieval writers thought so.

We follow this train of thought regarding sound as substance further. Although certainly not alone in this, throughout his long life, from his conversion in the 380s, CE, to his death in 430, Augustine continued to be amazed that music was so powerful, and expressed in his writing, particularly on the subject of music, De musica, ca. 387, what was the source of music’s own particular potency. He perceived, as well, that music was addictive. Although Augustine thought about what, in music, produced effect—and, to a certain extent was both in awe of, and mystified by, music’s obvious dynamism—it appears that the great theologian never completely settled the question to his own satisfaction. It was not for lack of effort. Augustine’s treatise on music was one of the first of his youthful, post-conversion writings, written together, or interspersed, with his works concerning the mind and soul. His work, however, on music, rather than indicating, as some have suggested, a residual link to his old pagan life, or a post-adolescent expedition into a subject he quickly found tiresome—as others have proposed—provided a basis from which the major preoccupations of a long and productive writing career emerged.1

From the very onset of Augustine’s treatise on music—and the beginning of the long journey his thought-life would follow—Augustine seems convinced that accent, pulsus, not tone, was the primary component, and a key to significant answers in a quest for