THE CORDED SHELL STRIKES BACK

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“All music,” wrote Plato, “is an art of producing likenesses or representations.” ¹ It may merely reproduce animal noises, but this “is in the worst of bad taste.” ² More fittingly, its rhythms may represent the bearing, and its melodies the vocal strains, of men, and ideally of “men who are pure, valiant, and, in a word, good.”³ In such representations, different metric feet will be appropriate to illiberality, insolence, madness and their opposites;⁴ and different musical modes will be suitable for imitating a lamentation or the utterances and accents of conviviality, temperance or bravery.⁵ But all music is mimetic of “the moods [tropōn] of better and worse men.”⁶

The music theorists of the Baroque, from Caccini to Quantz and Rousseau,⁷ loved to copy the ancients; and they found in this classical theory of musical imitation a worthy object of imitation. They

2. Ibid. 670a.
3. Ibid. 660a.
5. Ibid. 398d-399c.
derived from it an account of musical expressiveness according to which music is expressive of some mental state by virtue of standing in a relation to behaviour which expresses that state.\(^8\) This relation may be a natural one, as when music with a dying fall is expressive of melancholy by virtue of bearing a natural resemblance to the sound of the human voice as it expresses that state of mind. Or, as we shall see presently, it may be more or less highly conventionalised. In any case, according to this account, when music is expressive of a certain mental state, it is related to that mental state, not by a simple relation, but by the relative product of two relations,\(^9\) the first of which is a relation of natural or conventionalised imitation, and the second of which is a relation of expression.

This sort of analysis implies that to say that the music is melancholy is to use the term ‘melancholy’ in a transferred or metaphorical sense. It implies that that usage is metaphorical, and simultaneously explains the metaphor.

Peter Kivy has developed a general philosophical account of musical expressiveness which, while based on baroque writings, is not limited in its application to baroque music.\(^10\) Kivy’s account omits certain features of the original, among them the treatment of the crucial relation between music and expressive behaviour as a relation of imitation or representation, and the systematic ascription of affective powers to expressive music. He abandons both these aspects of the original account on philosophical grounds which it is not my purpose here to question.\(^11\)

Another side to baroque accounts of music, which is simply not mentioned by Kivy, is the association they make between the arts of music and rhetoric. Plato had defined both music and oratory in terms of their power over the soul: songs are “spells for souls,”\(^12\) and the function of oratory is “to influence men’s souls.”\(^13\) Thrasy-

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8. op. cit.
9. See Alonzo Church, *Introduction to mathematical logic*, vol. 1, Princeton 1956, n. 518.
11. ibid. p. 83. Instead of representation Kivy speaks of resemblance.
12. *Laws* II 659e.