

## Mellifluous Music in Early Western Christianity

‘Euphony (*euphonia*) is sweetness of voice. This word and melody (*melos*) take their names from sweetness and honey (*mel*).<sup>1</sup>

‘If sensuous beauty delights you, praise God for the beauty of corporeal things, and channel the love you feel for them onto their maker...they are from him but also in him. You know where He is, because you know when truth tastes sweet’<sup>2</sup>

A description of how the Jews of Minorca were coerced to convert to Christianity might not seem promising material for a paper on music in early Western Christianity, but the account of the fourth century bishop of Minorca, Severus, of how the Jews on the island were led to embrace Christianity, is in fact very revealing.<sup>3</sup> This was largely due to the manner in which they were coerced: what happened in Minorca following the arrival on the island of the relics of St. Stephen, during an eight day period in 418, sometime before the beginning of Lent, was not an inquisition with trials and tortures but what I would like to call a mellifluous assault on the senses: the Jews on Minorca were indeed physically assaulted to convert, but through what Severus believed to be the miraculous workings of divine grace upon their bodily senses: their sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell. In the course of his work Severus carefully, almost systematically, takes each sense in turn, in order to demonstrate how individual Jews were converted to Christianity by their sensory experience of divine presence.

Hearing and seeing are treated first, and occupy the first two-thirds of the treatise, but it is hearing that predominates (or maybe that is because I was listening out for it). Severus’ Jews overhear, mishear (to providential effect), turn a deaf ear, are alternately terrorized or seduced by hearing, and have their minds and hearts converted by outward sounds, inward words and by their response to what they have heard. Music has a key role here,

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<sup>1</sup> Isidore of Seville *Etymologies* 3.19.4 (transl. S.A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 2004) 96

<sup>2</sup> Augustine *Confessions* 4.12.18 (all references are to Maria Boulding’s translation in *Works of Saint Augustine* I,1 (New York NY: New City Press, 1997)

<sup>3</sup> Severus of Minorca *On the Conversion of the Jews* ed. and transl. Scott Bradbury (Oxford: OUP, 1996). I am very grateful to Paula Fredriksen for drawing my attention to this treatise.

and it is one which I hope will allow me to highlight some of the key features of what little we know of the nature and role of music in late antique Christianity for our further discussion.

At two significant points in the treatise the psalms are sung with what Severus describes as an ‘uncanny sweetness’ (*mira suauitate psallentes*) ( 11.4) or a ‘wondrous sweetness’ (*mira incunditate decantabat*) (13.1-2)<sup>4</sup>. The first instance occurs when Theodorus, the head the Synagogue, dreams that he is warned not to enter the Synagogue by a man who tells him there is a Lion inside. When he peers into the building he is met, not by a Lion but simply by the sight, or more importantly, the sound, of monks (one presumes Christian monks) singing the psalms with ‘uncanny sweetness’. Theodorus’ reaction might at first seem odd: he is overcome by a ‘great...and deadly terror’ (11.5) and immediately flees in fear. What is happening here? Severus explains that Theodorus’ encounter with the mellifluous chants of the monks was, for him – presumably as an unbeliever – a terrifying encounter with the Lion. It soon becomes clear that aforesaid Lion is the ‘Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David’ (Rev.5:5), in other words, Christ. So the sweet singing of the Psalms conveys the presence of Christ, who, for an unbeliever, is an object of terror – a sort of Rilkean terror of the beautiful: ‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror which we are barely able to endure, and it amazes us, because it serenely disdains to destroy us’.<sup>5</sup>

In the second instance, it is not the singing of the psalms by Christian monks which is described but rather the singing of the psalms by Jews. This episode is intriguing for a number of reasons: firstly, the psalm is described by Severus as a ‘hymn to Christ’ sung in ‘abundance of joy’ by Christians who are processing to the Jewish Synagogue for a debate (13.1-2); secondly, the ‘wondrous sweetness’ of the Jews’ singing, as they pick up the tune and join in, is a clear echo of the ‘uncanny sweetness’ of the Christian monks’; thirdly, it suggests that Jews in Minorca not only spoke Latin but that Jews and Christians used chants which were either identical or similar enough for one to join in with the other.<sup>6</sup> What is happening here? Bradbury suggests that the Jews joined in, in order to

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<sup>4</sup> *suauitate* and *incunditate* are synonymous; both refer to the pleasing quality, the charm, agreeableness or sweetness of the singing in this context.

<sup>5</sup> R.M. Rilke *Duino Elegies* 1 (transl. David Young (New York NY: Norton, 1978)

<sup>6</sup> As Christopher Page *The Christian West and Its Singers: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010) 42 comments on the relationship between Jewish

turn the meaning of the psalm verse against the Christians: ‘Their memory has perished with a crash and the Lord endures forever’ (Psa. 9:7-8). That may be well be the case, but the ‘wondrous sweetness’ of their singing is a clear indication that there is more than that going on here. As we have seen, and as subsequent miracles associated with tasting and smelling sweetness clearly confirm, ‘sweetness’ is Severus’ shorthand for the presence of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit, which works to bring reluctant Jews to conversion - so perhaps the Jews’ mellifluous contribution to the psalm singing is also an indication of the incipient working of God to bring about their full participation as Christians. From very early on, the act of singing had been used by the early Christians as a metaphor for harmonious relations and as a means to achieve that unity, both within the individual soul as well as among individuals.<sup>7</sup> At the very least then, what we have here is an audible demonstration of the common tradition, texts and typology which Jews and Christians shared and which were the grounds for Jewish conversion.

A later episode might add weight to this interpretation: when the Jews (mistakenly, it turns out) hear the rumour that their leader, Theodorus, has converted to Christianity (a misunderstanding Severus attributes to divine providence), they react, as Theodorus did in his dream, by fleeing: not just that, Severus tells us that they, like Theodorus before them, are fleeing from ‘the terrible lion...who from the site of the synagogue, as had been revealed to Theodorus, had unleashed through the monks the roar by which He put fear in our resisting enemies’ (16.10). So the monks’ singing - the sweetness of the presence of Christ, the Lion of Judah - is heard as a frightening roar by resistant Jews, who promptly flee, pursued by the lion. Equally significant, however, is the fact that, left alone in the very Synagogue where he had had his dream, after all his fellow Jews have fled, Theodorus himself peers around once again, but this time he misses his former anxiety and terror and hears, not the roaring of the Lion, but only its name, and the monks still singing their psalms. (16.11) Theodorus is on the cusp of conversion; his ears are becoming attuned to Christ as he appears in the psalms, and the Lion is no longer heard as a wild beast but as Christ, the Lion of Judah.

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and Christian musical practice: ‘we should be looking...for an enduring relationship in the matter of ritual singing between sibling commitments during some 400 years’.

<sup>7</sup> Eg Athanasius *To Marcellinus* 29; 32-33 (transl. R.C. Gregg (Mahwah NJ: Paulist Press, 1980) 125-26; 127-29) Evagrius *Praktikos* 69-71; 83 (transl. J.E. Bamberger (Collegeville MI: Cistercian, 1972) 35; 37).

It quickly becomes apparent that the flight of the Jews from the roaring lion of monastic psalmody is one that precipitates them into conversion: as the Israelites were exiled from Egyptian unbelief, so Minorca's Jews were exiled in the wilderness from their own former unbelief, (Severus is very keen on the typology of the Exodus (eg. 20.15-16)) and one by one they, like the Israelites, encounter miraculous visions (20.14), showers of hail (20.13), pillars of fire (20.15-16), bitter water turned to sweet honey (by the presence of the wood of the cross(24.5-9)) – until the air itself grows so fragrant with the smell of honey, and the dew on the grass, that they are able to taste it and discover that it is, indeed, sweeter than honey (20.14 Cf. 24.10).

Mellifluous miracles abound, then, but the women of Minorca were made of sterner stuff. It is amusing to note that whilst their male counterparts, one by one, submit to conversion, it is the women who hold out until the bitter end (24.1). The 'deaf ears' of the last to convert, the wife of Theodore's brother, Innocentius, were only converted through a veritable bombardment of prayers and hymns. As Severus puts it, drawing on Exodus imagery again, 'Our army sweated until nearly the third hour in contests of hymns and prayers against Amalec, the enemy of our leader Jesus' (Exodus 17:8-17; 27.5). Alternating prayer and psalmody is, of course, a common feature of monastic psalmody, practiced from very early on (if we follow Christopher Page) by urban house ascetics, followed by the desert fathers and Western communities such as the one in Marseilles, described by Cassian. Whether they used this practice to gradually coerce, wear down and overcome the resistant soul is open to question, but it would not be incompatible with the monastic ideal. There are worse ways of being persuaded than being assaulted by prayers and hymns – and that, I think, is the point of Severus' work. In this treatise music is described as one of the ways in which God acts in order to bend, break and batter the resistant soul, and once subdued, to mend and remake it. It is experienced as wondrously and uncannily sweet, but, for the one who resists the presence of God, as also frightful and terrifying. The presence of the divine can equally occasion delight or terror – or indeed, delight and terror. Its sweetness is indeed wonderful, a matter of miracle, as it is due to the presence of God singing – or, in the case of unbelief – roaring, through it. Its very sweetness, its beauty, inspires in those who will not accept its source a terrified urge to flee. But for Severus, this very flight, like the flight of the Israelites from Egypt, is one towards, rather than away from, conversion.

What, then, can we discover about the nature and presence of music in early Western Christianity from this treatise? Its sweetness is the presence of God, the Trinity and can work miracles in the one who hears it; it is part of God's multi-sensory assault on the senses in order to convert people to Himself; it is at once mellifluous and terrifying. It appears in the singing of psalms or hymns; in Church and in the streets, by monks and by lay people, Christians and Jews; combined with prayer it can overcome the most resistant of wills; it is an expression of the harmony of the soul and can unify those who perform it.

#### *Deus Creator Omnium* : Ambrose, Augustine and Sensuous Music

Severus' mellifluous music resonates closely with the sort of music we discover if we turn from Minorca to Italy and North Africa, to Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo - two of the most influential Christian bishops and theologians of the fourth/fifth century in the West. One of the earliest Christian hymns, Ambrose's *Deus Creator Omnium*, appears in an early work of Augustine's entitled *On Music*<sup>8</sup>, one of a projected series he set out to write, soon after his conversion, on the seven liberal arts, clearly intending to draw on his classical education and former career as a rhetor to exercise the intellectual muscles of devout Christians such as himself, and to lead them through the intellectual disciplines, from what he describes as 'the corporeal to the incorporeal'. However disconcerting it might at first appear as an account of music as we would now think of it, the *De Musica* is a work we cannot ignore: it is the only one devoted specifically to music by a Christian theologian in this period, and in its treatment of music as a classical discipline it lays the groundwork for what was to become a recognisable genre of Christian writing on music in later Western authors such as Boethius, Isidore of Seville and Cassiodorus.<sup>9</sup>

Augustine's treatment of 'music' in the first five books of this work, is indeed precisely what his educated contemporaries, pagan as well as Christian, would expect: a

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<sup>8</sup> *On Music* ( transl. and ed. R.C. Taliaferro in *Fathers of the Church* 4)

<sup>9</sup> Boethius *Fundamentals of Music* ( C.M. Bowers and C. Palisca Music Theory Translation Series (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Cassiodorus *Institutions of Divine and Secular Learning* ( transl. James. W. Halporn and Mark Vessey Translated Texts for Historians (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004); Isidore of Seville *Etymologies* (transl. S.A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: CUP, 2004)

meticulous, painstaking account of the conventions and technicalities of classical poetic metre or rhythm.<sup>10</sup> It therefore reads more like a work of mathematics than music. His ancient readers would have been disconcerted, however, only at the point at which we modern readers begin to feel on more familiar ground: the moment when Augustine turns, at the beginning of the final book, to take as his example, not a line of classical verse, but the first line of a Christian hymn: Ambrose's *Deus Creator Omnium*.

Why, after five books devoted exclusively to classical verse did he suddenly cite a Christian hymn? We could suggest, rather prosaically, that it was because he had just recently discovered the hymn and perhaps even sung it: as the *Confessions* recount, Ambrose had been a key figure in his conversion; he had catechized and baptized Augustine in Milan in 387; he represented the intellectual Christian Augustine aspired to be, able to reconcile classical learning and culture with Christian preaching and exegesis. Moreover, he was a musical innovator; it is to Ambrose that we owe what, in retrospect, we can appreciate is actually a new form of Christian hymn<sup>11</sup>: one with a fixed, octosyllabic form/ iambic dimeter, with eight stanzas consisting of four lines. Ambrose's innovation was to maintain this same, fixed, pattern for all of his hymns (Augustine tells us about four of them and it is thought that we can attribute at least ten others to him);<sup>12</sup> a pattern which is strikingly simple, readily memorized and easily adapted to chanting and antiphonal singing, which became the pattern for hymnody throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The other aspect which would have been covered is melody, but Augustine never got round to this.

<sup>11</sup> The evidence for early Christian hymnody before Ambrose is rather scattered and certainly not a substantial collection of texts. We can assume that from an early stage early Christians sang the Old Testament psalms, biblical canticles or songs and hymns (the earliest of which may be embedded in a number of NT and apostolic texts). A very early Christian hymn is appended to the end of Clement of Alexandria's *The Teacher*; there is a fragment of a hymn with rudimentary notation from Oxyrhynchus (three lines, with indications of pitch but not of rhythm); an evening hymn, to be sung at the lighting of the candles, the *Phos Hilaron*, which is referred to by Basil of Caesarea (*On the Holy Spirit* 73) in the fourth century as having been in traditional use. There is also evidence of hymnody in the *Odes of Solomon*; in Gnostic and Manichean texts; Ephrem the Syrian; and in the West, in a few remaining fragments of Hilary of Poitiers's *Book of Hymns* and the hymns of Prudentius, Sedulius, Ennodius and Venantius Fortunatus. Unfortunately we have no idea of the chants or tunes which psalms and hymns were sung to.

<sup>12</sup> The four Augustine tells us about are: *Aeterna rerum conditor*; *Deus creator omnium*; *Iam surgit hora tertia*; *Intende qui regis Israel*. See J. Fontaine *Ambroise de Milan. Hymnes* (Paris: Cerf, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> As C. White *Early Christian Latin Poets* (London: Routledge, 2000) 22 comments, 'Ambrose still followed the strict quantitative rules for this metre – whereby word accent

*On Music* book 6 – A theology of music

However, whatever his reason was, having cited Ambrose's hymn Augustine proceeds, not, as we would expect from the previous five books of his *De Musica*, to give an account of its metrical form, but rather to set out in careful, stage by stage fashion, a description of how we actually hear and apprehend it. In other words, he theoretically elaborates what we might now describe as a psychology of music. In more theological terms, he gives us an account of how the soul engages in sense perception – for each stage of the process whereby the hymn is sounded, heard, remembered, recollected and judged, is identified a movement of the soul: the action of the soul in creating sound; the soul's attention to sound; the soul's impression of sound on the memory; the soul's inward perception of these impressions; its judgment of them by reason. So we move from hearing music, to the soul, to memory, the spiritual senses, to reasoned judgment. At least in theory...

Augustine goes on to set out the grounds for this ascent; to explain how it is possible for the soul to ascend from a sensuous perception of music to rational judgment of it. He does this by outlining what, this time, we might call an ontology of music, or in more theological terms, an account of creation. God, he insists, brings creation into being from nothing by giving it form, equality, measure, number and order; insofar as anything possesses these qualities it exists.<sup>14</sup> It is, of course, significant that these qualities are precisely the ones he has used to define and analyse poetic metre/ music in the first five books, and that they are also the qualities he uses elsewhere to describe what characterises the true, the good and the beautiful. In short, as Augustine demonstrates in this section, they are both those qualities which belong to God, and those by which He creates, by which we exist, and by which we become aware of God: every aspect of His creation from nothing exists by virtue of its possession of form, equality, measure, number and order - or music; it reveals God's music and leads to Him through music.

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does not on the whole coincide with the metrical beat, and elision between words does occur – but it soon came to be adapted to a rhythmic form of unstressed and stressed syllables which was to make this four line stanza form one of the most popular poetic forms during the Middle Ages'

<sup>14</sup>eg. *On Music*. 6.17.57 where Augustine observes that all things, created from nothing, come from 'that supreme and eternal origin of rhythms and similarity and equality and order... if you take these away from the earth, it will be nothing'.

Even our sinful actions are comprehended by this order through the action of God's providence,<sup>15</sup> so that the 'song of the universe'<sup>16</sup> is not disrupted. This sounds odd: we are not used to encountering music in the context of ontology: as a quality of the Godhead, as constitutive of existence, as part of God providence, or as synonymous with the true, the good, and the beautiful, but that is precisely what Augustine does in this extraordinary treatise.

But he doesn't stop there: the final section of *De Musica* amounts to what we might call a 'theology' of music. In it, we find Augustine returning to the beginning of the ascent, to give more consideration to music as it is sounded and heard, rather than to rational judgment of it. It becomes clear that the reason for this return to 'sensuous music' lies in Augustine's acute awareness of the soul's inability to maintain its proper place in the psychological levels of musical perception he has so carefully delineated, or to observe the ontological hierarchy of music which he has so confidently set forth. His own experience as a fallen human being has evidently undermined these theoretical structures and confident certainties. In reality, he is aware that his soul finds itself weighed down, distracted and fragmented by what it should rightfully subject to itself in sense perception; that it has become inseparably glued and held fast to created things – to corporeal, temporal and mutable manifestations of music – so that it can no longer judge them in relation to their spiritual, eternal and immutable archetypes.<sup>17</sup> Above all, having recently been brought to conversion by the assault of God's grace working upon his will to inspire love and delight for Himself through his own gifts, he has become acutely conscious that only way in which his eyes and ears can be opened is through the love and delight which God Himself inspires in what comes to him through them.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Augustine maintains that God orders human sinfulness through his providential actions, making it part of a beautiful divine order eg. *On Music* 6.9.30; 6.14.46; 6.17.56. This is the subject of another early work of Augustine's, which also has much to say about music, his *On Order*. He often refers to God's providential order in terms of 'sweetness' in his *Expositions of the Psalms*, eg. 99.5-6, or as a verse which is spoken temporally while remaining eternally in the mind of the one who regulates eg. *Expositions of the Psalms*. 9.7.

<sup>16</sup> *On Music* 6.11.29

<sup>17</sup> *On Music* 6.5.12 -15; 6.11.30-33; 6.13.37-14.44

<sup>18</sup> *On Music* 6.14.43 where he observes that the soul can only return to God through love, especially the double commandment.



The ‘sweetness’ of music, which inspires delight and love, is thus identified by Augustine as the key to overcoming the attachment of fallen human beings to its temporal form and their deafness to its transcendent source. In another early work, entitled *On Order*, a work which in many respects anticipates *On Music*, he articulates this by making a distinction between the delight *of* the senses, inspired by the sweetness of song, and delight *through* the senses in the songs’ meaning or rational, rhythmic measure. The distinction is one between what he elsewhere describes as poetic metre and meaning;<sup>19</sup> sound and signification;<sup>20</sup> sweet song and the ‘divine and eternal rules of number’; the corporeal ‘traces’, ‘footprints’, ‘shadows and vestiges’ of music<sup>21</sup> and the ‘secret sanctuary’ from which it emanates.<sup>22</sup> But ‘distinction’ is perhaps the wrong word: Augustine does not separate out the temporal form and eternal source of music, rather he is convinced that the movement from sensuous music to its transcendent Creator is effected precisely in and through the delight occasioned by the sweetness of the song heard by the ears, by which the hearer is led to delight in its source.

Given the sort of distinctions we have seen Augustine make we might well be tempted to ask how much the sweetness and delight occasioned by hearing a hymn such as Ambrose’s *Deus Creator Omnium* owes to the *sound* of the words being sung and how much to the *meaning* of the words themselves. At the end of his *De Musica*, however, Augustine makes clear that the sound and the meaning of Ambrose’s hymn are not just inseparable; they are one and the same. God is the not only the Creator of music; He *is* the eternal, immutable music which is heard through it. This means that when the hymn is rightly heard, it delights us, moves us, and inspires our love for its source, re-orientating our fallen human attention and leading it to the reality or meaning the music so compellingly conveys.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *On Order* 2.11.34

<sup>20</sup> *On Order* 2.14.39; *On Christian Doctrine* 2.3.4 – trumpet, flute and harp make sounds which are not only pleasing but also significant

<sup>21</sup> *On Order* 2.15.42

<sup>22</sup> *On Music* 1.27.28; 5.13.28

<sup>23</sup> Commenting on Psalm 84, ‘Truly the Lord will give sweetness, and then our earth will yield its fruit’ Augustine reflects on the manner in which God’s grace enables the sinner to delight in what is good, rather than what is evil, by making the good ‘sweet’ – or beautiful and enjoyable. He observes that ‘You found gratification in shows, but now in prayer; worthless and bawdy songs used to afford pleasure, but now you enjoy singing a hymn to God; you were wont to run to the theatre, but now you hasten to Church. Where does this sweetness come from? Only from God, who will ‘give sweetness, and

As the *De Musica* makes clear, then, well before the *Confessions*, what led Augustine to conversion was not, in the end, a subjection of sense perception to rational judgment, but rather the grace of God, inspiring love and delight through precisely the sort of sensuous music he heard in Ambrose's hymn. It is in this treatise, working with ideas that are to become the structuring features of his mature theology, that we first encounter a theology of music in relation to creation, the Fall and to the operation of God's grace through the senses and affective cognition, which will be played out throughout his works. For the purposes of this paper, it is the background against which we can appreciate Augustine's emotive descriptions of his encounters with music in Milan, in Book 9 of the *Confessions*.

### Music in Milan

Although written 10 years after the *De Musica*, *Confessions* book 9 describes precisely the period in which it was written: immediately before and after Augustine's baptism in Milan in 386/7, during his first encounter with the liturgical life of Milan, and especially with its music. Clearly music was on Augustine's mind at this time.

It may well be that, with Severus of Minorca's short treatise still echoing in my mind, I was susceptible to hearing echoes of it at every turn. Be that as it may, the resonances between this treatise and *Confessions* 9 are striking and confirm what we have already begun to discover about the nature of early Christian music. The context in which music appears in both texts is one of 'great happenings'<sup>24</sup> - dramatic events which assaulted the senses and affections of those who found themselves caught up in them in order to lead them towards God:<sup>25</sup> in *Confessions* book 9 these include the discovery of the relics of Ss Gervasius and Protasius;<sup>26</sup> miraculous healings;<sup>27</sup> baptism;<sup>28</sup> a mystical

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then our earth will yield its fruit' (*Expositions of the Psalms* 84.15 *Works of Saint Augustine* III/18 (New York: New City Press, 2002) 217-18).

<sup>24</sup> *Confessions* 9.7.16

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* 9.7.16

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* 9.7.16

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 9.6.14

ascent;<sup>29</sup> pain, deaths and grief;<sup>30</sup> tears, sighs and groans.<sup>31</sup> The music in Milan, in particular, had an overwhelming effect on Augustine. It should not surprise us that, like Severus' Christians and Jews, his first encounter with it, even before his baptism, was with the singing of the Psalms, for as a multitude of witnesses in both East and West attest, the Psalter was the most commented upon, cited and recited text of Scripture, sung by everyone, on every possible occasion, in every imaginable place, providing a sort of encyclopedia of the faith, a map of the human soul and a voice for the heart. Augustine resorts to the same affective language as Severus in order to capture the effect the Psalms had on him as a new convert, describing them as the 'honey-sweet Scriptures distilled from heaven's honey' (9.4.11), which precipitated in him 'outbursts of devotion' (9.4.8). Hearing them outwardly, he tells us that he 'experienced their truth inwardly' and simply 'shouted for joy' (9.4.10). In other words, his listening to their 'sweet' music led to an affective cognition which could only be expressed in worship.

The music he heard at his baptism had the same effect: Augustine does not elaborate on this particular 'great happening' but passes over its mysteries in three words – *et baptizati sumus* (and we were baptized) – pausing only to comment on its 'sweetness' ('I could not get enough of the wonderful sweetness that filled me as I meditated on your deep design for the salvation of the human race'), and in the next breath, as if to identify the source of the sweetness, he adds, 'How copiously I wept at your hymns and canticles, how intensely was I moved by the lovely harmonies (*suaue sonantis*) of your singing Church! Those voices flooded my ears, and the truth was distilled in my heart until it overflowed in loving devotion; my tears ran down and I was the better for them' (9.6.14). Here is the same pattern: sweet music, affective cognition, worship (we will come back to the tears below). The language ('flooding', 'distilled', 'overflowed', 'ran down') evokes the movement of oil or water – perhaps the sacramental oil and water of baptism? It is certainly noteworthy that the only mystery Augustine describes as sacramental in this

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<sup>29</sup> The famous 'ascent at Ostia' by Augustine and his mother which is described in 9.10.23-26

<sup>30</sup> Augustine suffers agonizing toothache and chest pains (9.4.12-5.13). During the course of book 9 the deaths of his patron, Verecundus; his friend Nauigius; his son, Adeodatus; his mother, Monnica, are mentioned: a lot of pain and death in a short book otherwise overflowing with elation.

<sup>31</sup> These are everywhere, as they are in Severus' treatise (which is full of references to fear, anxiety, despair, trembling – eg. 11.6; 16.7; 16.12; 18.13) but as we will see below, the tears are particularly noteworthy.

book is not baptism or the liturgy in Milan, but music, which he experienced as the sensuous bearer of spiritual reality.<sup>32</sup>

Immediately after describing the effect of the music he heard at his baptism Augustine evokes an event which, if we are to believe him, marked the beginning of a widespread practice of singing hymns and psalms in what he describes as ‘in the manner customary in regions of the East’.<sup>33</sup> It is another moment of high drama: in order to keep up their spirits, and to comfort and encourage each other, Ambrose’s congregation (which included Augustine’s mother, Monnica) had fervently sung their bishop’s hymns, ‘with voice and heart’, during an embattled sit-in (rather like the monks in the Synagogue in Severus’ treatise), keeping vigil in a Milanese church in order to prevent it being taken over by heretics. This experience had led to communal hymn-singing becoming an integral feature of the liturgy, not only in Milan, but, Augustine enthusiastically adds, in almost all the churches in other parts of the world.<sup>34</sup> What was this ‘singing... in the manner customary in regions of the East’? We have no idea how Ambrose’s hymns were sung or even of what sort of chant was used for singing the psalms, though we do know that the singing of hymns and psalms was common practice. Describing the Christians of Minorca as they set out for their Church ‘to the usual accompaniment of hymns (*hymnis*), chanting (*cantates*) and singing (*psallentes*)’<sup>35</sup> Severus is clearly aware that he is simply referring to a practice which was already established in the New Testament (eg. Colossians 3.16-17 refers to ‘psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord’). Augustine’s now lost reply to a certain Hilarius, who had objected to the new practice of singing during the liturgy, however, suggests that perhaps hymn singing had customarily been something that happened outside it.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, writing to Januarius in *ep.* 55, Augustine is somewhat critical of the standard of singing in North African churches, contrasting the rousing songs which the Donatist schismatics had composed for themselves, and which galvanized their congregations like ‘the blast of a trumpet on the battlefield’, with the comparatively uninspiring, ‘grave chanting of

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<sup>32</sup> 9.4.8 (*illa sacramenta*)

<sup>33</sup> 9.7.15

<sup>34</sup> 9.7.15

<sup>35</sup> 16 Cf 14

<sup>36</sup> *retr.* 2.11

divine songs' of the Catholics.<sup>37</sup> So what was this new fashion of Eastern singing that began in Milan? Was it the use of Eastern chant, such as some recent attempts to recreate Ambrosian chant, by looking to the chants we know of in places like Athens and Antioch, at about the same time, have suggested?<sup>38</sup> Was it a particular practice of antiphonal singing, such as Basil of Caesarea describes?<sup>39</sup> Is it a reference to the sort of singing Augustine alludes to in *Confessions* 10, when he recommends the simple, almost recitative style chant, which he associates with Athanasius. as a means to ensure that the singer does not carried away and the music does not detract from attention to the words?<sup>40</sup> Of course, we cannot know, but it is tantalizing to speculate that what Augustine and Ambrose's congregation heard in Milan was indeed some form of earlier Eastern chant, rather than the Gregorian chant our ears are now rather anachronistically accustomed to associating with earlier Western music.

Music reappears once more in *Confessions* 9, this time as music that is recollected rather than heard – but it is clearly all the more powerful for having been impressed on Augustine's mind or memory, from earlier encounters with it, so that can be represented anew, at a later time. In this case, Augustine awoke from sleep, having been unable to release the tears which were welling up within him following his mother's death, so that he might somehow heal his pain (9.12.29-32), to find Ambrose's *Deus Creator Omnium* resonating in his mind. Like the wife of Innocentius, who began to weep after the combined assault of hymns and prayers had broken down her stubborn resistance to conversion,<sup>41</sup> and like his own earlier experience of cathartic weeping on experiencing the 'lovely harmonies of the singing Church (9.6.14), Augustine's tears of mourning were finally able to flow when he heard Ambrose's familiar hymn echoing in his grief-stricken mind, with its comforting reassurance that 'mourners find release from pain'.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Epistle* 55.18.24 He comments: 'there is great diversity of usage, and in Africa the members of the Church are rather too indifferent in regard to it [song]; on which account the Donatists reproach us with our grave chanting of divine songs of the prophets in our churches, while they inflame their passions in their revels by the singing of psalms of human composition, which rouse them like the stirring notes of the trumpet on the battle-field' (Works of Saint Augustine II/1 235).

<sup>38</sup> Marcel Perez *Chants de l'Eglise Milanaise* CD, Harmonia Mundi, 2003

<sup>39</sup> *Epistle* 207.2 where Basil describes antiphonal and responsorial psalmody practiced by communities in various regions which are all in the East.

<sup>40</sup> *Confessions* 10.33.50

<sup>41</sup> *On the Conversion of the Jews* 27.5

<sup>42</sup> 9.12.32-33

## Music and magic

No one in antiquity, pagan or Christian, would question the inherent sweetness of music, its power to impress the soul, to affect the emotions, and to move the hearer to responsive action. *Confessions* book 9 is simply a notable example of a universally shared understanding of music as possessing almost miraculous powers to calm, heal, persuade, unify and teach – not through reason, but through the delight and love – or, indeed, the terror, courage, piety or devotion – which it inspired in those who heard or sang it. Orpheus’ taming of the wild beasts and David’s calming of Saul’s tormented soul through their playing are frequently cited as illustrations of this. Such powers were partly attributed to the receptiveness of the soul to particular rhythms, modes or harmonies – as Augustine observes, following Plato, ‘I am aware that our minds are more deeply moved to devotion by those holy words when they are sung, and more ardently inflamed to piety, than would be the case without singing. I realize that all the varied emotions of the human spirit respond in ways proper to themselves to a singing voice and a song, which arouse them by appealing to some secret affinity’<sup>43</sup> – but it was fundamentally due to the fact that music was thought to mediate or incarnate its divine source. In this sense that music, as we have already seen in Severus, was often attributed with magical or miraculous powers. Christopher Page has drawn our attention to the many amulets containing Psalm texts,<sup>44</sup> and as Ambrose observes, the word ‘carmen’ can mean both song and ‘charm’. He combines these two senses when he refers to the charm of his hymns as *hymnorum carminibus*, by which his critics had accused him of ‘enchanting’ or bewitching his congregation: ‘They also say that people are led astray by the charms of my hymns. Certainly; I do not deny it. This is a mighty charm (*carmen*), more powerful

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<sup>43</sup> *Confessions* 10.33.49. Cf. Plato *Republic* 397A-400E on the different modes and their effect on morality and behaviour. Cf. Augustine *Letter* 9 on the power of the emotions which music and dance effect in the soul to unconsciously influence the behavior of the body: ‘our earthbound and utterly unresponsive bodies can be so unbelievably affected by the playing of organ music, or by rope dancers and numberless other such spectacles’ (Fathers of the Church I p.22). For a wonderful treatment of the power of poetic metre or rhythm to heal the soul see Stephen J. Blackwood ‘*The Consolation of Boethius: a poetic liturgy*’ (Oxford: OUP, 2015)

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Page *The Christian Singer in the West*, 149f. Cf. Philip Burton *Language in Augustine’s Confessions* (Oxford: OUP, 2007) 150-51 on Augustine’s positive use of *incantare*, in the sense of charming the truth into someone; singing a belief into them; Inos Biffi *Fede, Poesia et Canto del Mistero di Cristo in Ambrogio, Agostino et Paolino di Aquileia* (Milan: Jaca 2003) 60.

than any other'.<sup>45</sup> It is worth noting that he specifically mentions their Trinitarian lyrics as the source of their power: they communicate the presence of God through song, rather than doctrinal discussion, so that 'all have become teachers who were scarcely able to be learners'.<sup>46</sup> He similarly attributes the magical power of music to the presence of Christ, the enchanter, who, through them is able to drive out all evil enchantment: 'There are many men who provoke the Church, but the charms of the magician cannot harm her. Magical chants are of no avail there where the canticles of Christ are chanted daily. Her own chanter (*incantatorem*) is Jesus, our lord, through whom magical charms and serpent's poison were made void'.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, he attributes music's power to unify those who sing it to the presence and inspiration of the Holy Spirit: 'A psalm joins those with differences, unites those at odds and reconciles those who have been offended, for who will not concede to him with whom one sings to God in one voice? It is after all a great bond of unity for the full number of people to join in one chorus. The strings of the cithara differ, but create one harmony. The fingers of a musician often go astray among the strings though they are very few in number, but among the people the Spirit musician knows not how to err'.<sup>48</sup>

So, for Ambrose, the presence of God, the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, was communicated through the communal singing of hymns, enabling them to teach, drive out evil, and harmonise the discords among his congregation, as well as keep them going during an all night sit-in.

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<sup>45</sup> *Sermon against Auxentius* 75 34 . Cf. *Letter* 20.24; 21.34. J. Quasten *Music and Worship in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (transl. B. Ramsay Washington DC: National Association of Pastoral Musicians, 1983) 45 n.18 notes 'Homer (*Odyssey* 12.40ff) labels the effect of music 'bewitching' and uses the same word (*thelgein*) to describe the effect of the magic wand'

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.* Biffi *Fede, Poesia* 13; 56-58 refers to Ambrose's *Commentary on the Psalms* 1, which refers to confessing the faith through song.

<sup>47</sup> *Hexaemeron* 4.8.33 (Fathers of the Church 43 p157. Nicetas of Remesiana *Liturgical Singing* 6, evidently closely following the creed, traces every aspect of what he calls 'the Mysteries of Christ', as they are communicated through song.

<sup>48</sup> Ambrose *Explanation of the Psalms* 1.9 (cited by J. McKinnon *Music in Early Christian* 126-7). Augustine identifies the power of sweet singing to unite people as the grounds for monasticism and the common life in *Expositions of the Psalms*. 132.2 (Works of Saint Augustine III/20, 175) 'These words of the psalm, this lovely sound, this song equally sweet as a melody sung or a message understood, has given birth to monasteries. Brothers and sisters who longed to live as one were awakened by the song'. See Quasten *Music and Worship* 67-69; 77-78 on the fathers' insistence on singing with 'one voice', as signifying unity and concord as against disunity and discord. He also (somewhat questionably) interprets this as a rejection of polyphony.

## Scripture, prayer and song

The combination of singing with readings from Scripture and with prayer - in the liturgy as well as a monastic context - was clearly one that was recognized as particularly beneficial and effective. Singing gave the words of Scripture a power they did not possess when simply read or spoken – a power to enter the mind through the ears, impress itself on the memory, be ‘distilled’ in the soul, sway the emotions and to prompt piety. As Nicetas of Remesiana (in Dacia, modern Serbia) writing in defence of the *Usefulness of Hymns*, comments ‘since human nature rejects and avoids what is difficult, even if beneficial, and accepts virtually nothing unless it seems to offer pleasure, through David the Lord prepares for men this potion which is sweet by reason of its melody (*cantionem*) and effective in the cure of disease by reason of its strength. For a psalm is sweet to the ear when sung, it penetrates the soul when it gives pleasure, it is easily remembered when sung often, and what the harshness of the Law cannot force from the minds of men it excludes by the suavity of song. For whatever the Law, the Prophets and even the Gospels teach is contained as a remedy in the sweetness of these songs’.<sup>49</sup> That Nicetas felt it necessary to argue a case for the beneficial practice of hymn singing supports the impression we get from both Augustine and Ambrose that it was a rather new innovation in the West, which had not found an established place in the liturgy. Psalmody, however, was a different matter, and as we suggested earlier on, had always found a central place in early Christian piety as a Scriptural text which effectively became sung prayer – in the liturgy as well as almost every other context of Christian devotion. Christopher Page has presented compelling evidence for the use of psalmody in the East and West (he mentions Tertullian and Egeria) as a characteristic feature of early forms of ‘household asceticism’, chanted in a domestic setting, by ascetics as well as other lay Christians, in a manner which no doubt foreshadows later monastic, desert psalmody.<sup>50</sup> The wave of psalmody which engulfed the Church in the fourth century, in the wake of the ascetic movement which picked up tsunami-force momentum following Constantine’s conversion in 312, is often commented on by modern scholars. That early Christians were just as conscious of this phenomenon is wonderfully portrayed in Ambrose’s poetic evocation of ‘the echo of the psalms when sung in responsive harmony by men and

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<sup>49</sup> *Liturgical Singing* 5

<sup>50</sup> Page, *Christian Singer* 134-5



women, maidens and children...like the sound of breaking waves'.<sup>51</sup> Cassian, the fourth century bishop and founder of a monastery in Marseilles in Southern Gaul (France) has a great deal to say in his *Conferences* about the practice of alternating reading, prayer and psalmody in the monastic offices. It was no doubt something he had encountered during his extensive travels in the East, and especially among the ascetics of the Egyptian desert, but his work makes it just as significant a feature of Western practice: he acutely observes that the *manner* in which the psalms are sung by a monk is particularly important: 'sometimes the musical phrasing by the brother chanting will arouse dull minds to focussed supplication. We also know that the enunciation and reverence of the one chanting the psalms can very much increase the fervour of those who stand by [listening]'.<sup>52</sup> So good music led to good worship – something we are just as aware of nowadays but are less certain about how to achieve.

What we perhaps fail to remember, and what early Christian's theologians were acutely aware of, is that good music, or sweet music, is experienced as such because it is of God and from God; that through music, God is in fact praising Himself; that it's 'sweetness' is not simply a matter of beautiful form but is the presence of the Creator of all things, the Trinity; that it resonates for us because we are also part of this creation; that hearing it makes the divine mysteries present in a manner which does not just inform the mind, but which inspires a healing, unifying, transformative, awed love and delight which can only be expressed, appropriately, in praise – or song.

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<sup>51</sup> Ambrose *Hexaemeron* 3.5.23 (Fathers of the Church 42, p157)

<sup>52</sup> *Conferences* 9.26.1-2 cited by Dysinger (2005), 61. Nicetas makes a similar observation in his defence of singing: 'There is something alluring about religious sweetness; and those who sing well have a special grace to attract to religion those who listen to them' *Liturgical Singing* 74



