

## Fourth seminar: *Laws* 669b5-670a6 and 700a7-701c4

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### Part 1: 669b5-670a6

We're now going to look at two short passages. One is the bit we missed out from the passage of Book 2 we were studying yesterday, 669b5-670a6; the other is in Book 3, at 700a7-701c4. It seems appropriate to look at them together, even though they come in different contexts, since in some fairly obvious respects they're quite similar. But there are important differences too, both in the messages they're designed to convey and in their musicological content, and it will be interesting to compare them directly. We'll consider the passage of Book 2 first; then we'll look at the one in Book 3 and try to make some comparisons.

You'll remember that before the Athenian begins the long speech which starts at 669a5, he's been working his way through an argument about the basis on which musical judgements should be made, which he picks up again at 670a6. He has just recapitulated his list of three things which he says the musical judges must know if their assessments are to be authoritative. First they must know 'what the composition is'. This involves accurate perception of all its musical elements and understanding of its harmonic and rhythmic structures; and it also involves knowledge of a different sort, knowledge of the nature of the original of which it is a *mimēsis*. Secondly, they must know 'whether it has been made correctly', that is, whether the *mimēsis* represents the original accurately; and in order for this to be possible they must understand what the elements and structures which they find in the composition are capable of representing. Finally they must know whether it is 'made well', which turns out to mean that they must be able to judge reliably whether or not it is aesthetically and/or ethically excellent or admirable, *kalon*.

The long speech that follows this summary is a digression, as the Athenian himself says towards the end; it raises the question why it is so difficult to make these judgements about music in particular. He seems to imply that the task of judging the merits of a musical composition is much harder than it is in the case of the other arts – painting and

sculpture, for instance – though he does not make that point explicit. Further, it's much more important than are parallel tasks to do with other kinds of *mimēsis*, for what seem to be two quite different reasons, though the Athenian runs them together. In the first place, ὑμνεῖται περὶ αὐτῆν διαφερόντως ἢ τὰς ἄλλας εἰκόνας, 'people praise it much more highly than the other images' (669b6-7). That is, I suppose, the arts of *mousikē* have a much higher profile and attract much more applause and greater approval than for instance the visual arts; and that does seem a fair assessment of cultural attitudes to the arts in the classical period. For all the splendours of Greek architecture and the brilliance of fifth- and fourth-century painting and sculpture, the musical arts enjoyed much higher status and occupied a much more significant socio-political and religious niche in contemporary culture. Hence, the Athenian says, it is about music, of all the arts, that one should exercise most care and caution, *eulabeia*. For, he goes on, anyone who makes mistakes about music will be most seriously damaged, since he will be embracing bad characters (or 'taking a friendly attitude towards bad characters'), ἡδὴ κακὰ φιλοφρονούμενος (669b8-c1). As I said, the Athenian seems to connect this point closely with the one about music being most highly praised, and no doubt one could find a way of linking them. But at the same time they are obviously very different; and though the *Republic* has of course made us familiar with the idea that listening to and enjoying bad music leads on to faulty estimates of good and bad human character, and perverts the character of the listener himself, nothing in this part of the *Laws* has prepared us for that theory or done anything to justify it. Plato seems, once again, to be slipping in an important thesis whose basis he does not want to re-examine here.

So much for the subject's importance; but why is the task of musical judgement so difficult? It is because, the Athenian says, human composers are worse composers than the Muses, whom we should obviously take to stand for composers of the ideal sort; and he goes on to give a long list of things which human composers do and the Muses wouldn't. This list is perhaps the most interesting part of the speech, since it puts on record a whole series of strategies which, according to Plato, were adopted by composers in his period. He clearly finds them objectionable, or at least counts them as defects, since they are things that the Muses, the ideal musicians, would never do; but we should

also bear in mind that this isn't his main point here. He isn't simply denouncing certain kinds of music, as he sometimes does elsewhere; the central theme of the passage is a different one, that the use of these techniques is what makes it so hard to form reliable judgements about the music's merits. This need not imply that compositions which use them are necessarily ones that would corrupt the characters of their listeners, only that even the best judges may have no way of being sure whether they will do so or not.

The list falls into two parts. In the first part we have examples of compositions which mix ingredients that do not belong together and indeed contradict one another, and whose combination, we might say, therefore fails to make sense. The Athenian mentions four of these ridiculous kinds of mixture; we'll begin by looking at the first three (669c3-8). In the first, words suitable for men are mixed with a women's *χρῶμα καὶ μέλος*; the second combines *μέλος καὶ σχήματα* suitable for free men with rhythms proper to slaves and *ἀνελεύθεροι*, which I take to mean people who aren't technically slaves but have a slavish character; and in the third we have the 'free' (*ἐλευθέριον*) type of rhythm and *σχῆμα* mixed with the opposite kind of melody or words.<sup>1</sup>

The general picture is straightforward; all of these mixtures graft ingredients proper to one kind of human character or status onto others that belong to people of the opposite sort. Hence they pose a problem for the judge, who may be baffled when he tries to decide what they are trying to imitate or represent; and if he can't do that, he can hardly be in a position to decide whether they have done so 'correctly'. At least, I think that's where the difficulty is supposed to lie. When Plato writes 'words of men', *ῥήματα ἀνδρῶν*, we might take him to mean any of three different things: 'words suitable for men to utter', 'words suitable for men to listen to', or 'words that represent or imitate men' – or more fully, 'words that represent the characters proper to men'. It seems to me that he must mean the last of these, for two reasons: first, because that is the sense needed in the context, where the main issue is about determining what the composition represents, and

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<sup>1</sup> οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἐκεῖναί γε ἔξαμάρτοιέν ποτε τοσοῦτον ὥστε ῥήματα ἀνδρῶν ποιήσασαι τὸ χρῶμα γυναικῶν καὶ μέλος ἀποδοῦναι, καὶ μέλος ἐλευθέρων αἴ καὶ σχήματα συνθεῖσαι ῥυθμοὺς δούλων καὶ ἀνελευθέρων προσαρμόττειν, οὐδ' αἴ ῥυθμοὺς καὶ σχῆμα ἐλευθέριον ὑποθεῖσαι μέλος ἢ λόγον ἐναντίον ἀποδοῦναι τοῖς ῥυθμοῖς.

secondly because at 669c7 Plato shifts from using these genitives, ἀνδρῶν, ἐλευθέρων and so on to an adjectival expression, σχῆμα ἐλευθέρου, where the adjective must pick out a feature of the *schēma* itself. It is a ‘free’ or ‘liberal’ *schēma*, which for Plato must imply one that represents the character or attitude of a free person. Of course he may also hold that items which represent a character proper to free men, for instance, are also particularly suitable for such men to sing and to hear; but that is not the immediate point.

In that case we must conclude that in Plato’s opinion, not only particular forms of words, but also particular kinds of melody, rhythm, *schēma* and so on can rightly be interpreted as *mimēseis* of the characters of free men or women or slaves. This isn’t surprising, of course, in view of the things he’s already said about musical *mimēsis*, and from what we are told in Book 3 of the *Republic*; and it fits quite well with the way in which the comic poets mock modern composers for the ‘effeminacy’ of their music, as Aristophanes mocks Agathon in the *Thesmophoriazousae* (notably at 130-145). But it’s important to notice that this passage of the *Laws* in particular indicates that a melody, for instance, simply as such and in its own right, is a *mimēsis* of something specifiable, and does not need to be combined with anything else in order to be such a *mimēsis*. We’ll come back to this point later.

One or two minor details in this part of the passage are worth noting. The trickiest is the word *chrōma* at 669c5. I should point out in passing that the Aldine edition has *schēma* here instead of *chrōma*, but this isn’t in any of the MSS; it was evidently adopted to bring the phrase into line with the references to *schēmata* in the rest of the passage, where *chrōma* does not reappear. For this and other reasons *chrōma* is the *lectio difficilior*, and we should accept it, unless it turns out to be impossible to give it a sensible interpretation. So what does Plato mean by ‘the *chrōma* and melody of women’? If this were a passage of Aristoxenus or a later theorist, we might suppose that it’s a reference to the chromatic genus, which is quite often called simply *chrōma*, but that can’t be correct here. For one thing, there’s no hint anywhere else in the dialogues that Plato knew of a classification of musical scales which distinguishes chromatic from enharmonic and diatonic; these terms and this form of classification are not in his repertoire. Even if they had been, it would be

hard to justify this interpretation in the present passage. It would require us to suppose that there is some particular form of chromatic system that is specially suited to the representation of women; and though that is something that a philosopher might imagine to be true, it would be ridiculous just to drop such a substantial and unusual theory into the text like this in a casual phrase, with no explanation at all. I'm virtually certain, then, that the expression has nothing to do with the chromatic genus.

Or perhaps it's not absolutely nothing. Ancient and modern scholars alike have argued that the group of systems that Aristoxenus calls 'chromatic' were not originally thought of as systems of a well-defined type, independent of the others. Rather, they were 'colourings' or subtle variants of the enharmonic or the diatonic, slightly adjusting the tunings of their intervals to create different nuances of aesthetic impression.<sup>2</sup> When Aristoxenus or Archytas, or whoever it was, established a fixed classification of scales into three types, he borrowed the name 'chromatic' for this group from an earlier usage in which these subtle nuances of tuning were already called *chrōmata*, 'colourings'; and this pattern of usage survived, of course, in Aristoxenus' adoption of the word *chrōa*, a 'shade' of a colour, to refer to variant form within a single genus. Then if we go back to Plato's expression *χρῶμα καὶ μέλος*, 'the colour and melody', we could take it almost as if it were *χρῶμα μελοῦς*, 'the colouring of melody', and as referring to the slight modifications of the intervals of a standard scale that were designed, in this case, to capture the special quality associated with femininity. To put some flesh on these bones, Plato might be thinking here, for instance, of a melody whose nuances of tuning were reminiscent of those associated with the self-representation of young women in a *partheneion*, while the words were better suited to the *ēthos* of brave men marching to battle. At any rate, this is the best I can do with the allusion to *chrōma*; and if it's roughly correct, perhaps it has some musicological interest. It helps to confirm the impression we get from certain other texts<sup>3</sup> that composers of this period sometimes deliberately altered, very slightly, the intervals of the standard repertoire in order to create particular kinds of impression.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music*, Oxford 1992, 164-5, E. Rocconi, *Le parole delle Muse*, Rome 2003, 69-70.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. [Plutarch] *De musica* 39 (1145C-D), a passage almost certainly derived from Aristoxenus.

The fourth example in the first part of Plato's list, at 669c8-d2, mentions ingredients of a different sort, 'the voices of wild animals and humans and instruments, and all sorts of noises', all of which are mixed together 'as though they were a *mimēsis* of some one thing'.<sup>4</sup> It's not altogether clear what kind of performance he has in mind, and maybe, as some scholars have suggested, he's alluding to some form of rather vulgar popular entertainment. But he may be thinking of something more substantial. Some comic plays certainly included sounds of all these sorts – Aristophanes' *Frogs* and *Birds*, for instance – and it could have been something even more serious than that, something like a rendition of the *Pythikos nomos*, with its musical images of the serpent's hissings and the gnashing of its teeth, Apollo's challenge and its imitation trumpet calls, and so on. So there's plenty of scope for descriptions of the sort the Athenian gives. What seems odd about it is the qualification 'as though they were a *mimēsis* of some one thing'. In the context the qualification is evidently needed, since there need be nothing mixed or muddled about a composition that used ingredients evoking several different things, so long as they are presented as *mimēseis* of several different things. But it seems very unlikely that anyone would have performed all these animal noises and so on as if they were all parts of a representation of a single object such as a person; and if Plato means only that they all appeared in the course of a *mimēsis* of a single scene or narrative, it's hard to see what would be objectionable or problematic about that. The qualifying phrase is probably intended to apply to the first three examples too, but there the difficulty doesn't arise; it's only in the fourth that it seems out of place.

Let's move on now to the second part of the list, beginning at 669d5.<sup>5</sup> Here what the Athenian complains about is not the incoherent mixing of conflicting elements, but the omission of musical features of one category or another. He mentions performances which involve rhythm and *schēmata* but no melody; words fitted to metre in the absence

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<sup>4</sup> ἔτι δὲ θηρίων φωνὰς (d) καὶ ἀνθρώπων καὶ ὀργάνων καὶ πάντα ψόφους εἰς ταῦτόν οὐκ ἄν ποτε συνθεῖεν, ὡς ἔν τι μιμούμεναι.

<sup>5</sup> ταῦτά γε γὰρ ὀρῶσι πάντα κυκώμενα, καὶ ἔτι διασπῶσιν οἱ ποιηταὶ ῥυθμὸν μὲν καὶ σχήματα μέλους χωρὶς, λόγους ψιλοῦς εἰς μέτρα (e) τιθέντες, μέλος δ' αὔ καὶ ῥυθμὸν ἄνευ ῥημάτων, ψιλῆ καθαρίσει τε καὶ αὐλήσει προσχρώμενοι, ἐν οἷς δὴ παγγάλεπον ἄνευ λόγου γιγνόμενον ῥυθμὸν τε καὶ ἁρμονίαν γινώσκειν ὅτι τε βούλεται καὶ ὄτῳ ἔοικε τῶν ἀξιολόγων μιμημάτων.

of any other musical feature; and melody and rhythm with no words. In these cases there's no problem in identifying the kinds of performance he's talking about. When we have only rhythm and *schēmata* without melody – where *schēmata* is a choreographic term referring to the postures or figures of dance – it is dance unaccompanied by any singing or any melodic instrument, though percussion might still be involved. Metrically organised words by themselves will appear in any sort of poetic recitation, most notably in the performances of epic verse by the *rhapsōidoi*, and of course in the spoken passages of drama. Finally, there will be melody and rhythm but no words, as the speaker himself makes clear, in purely instrumental music of any kind; almost all of it will have fallen into one of the two types he mentions, *ψιλή κιθάρισις* (solo playing on the lyre or the *kithara*) and *αὐλησις* (solo playing on *auloi*). All that is quite familiar and straightforward, and we can be satisfied that these types of performance are not figments of Plato's imagination.

The real problem is why he objects to them. None of them are new-fangled modern inventions, so we can't put it down to mere conservatism. What we'd expect him to mean, in the context, is that in cases like these there is some special difficulty about identifying the object of the *mimēsis*; and that's precisely what he says about the example of purely instrumental music. But I find this very puzzling. He explains that the trouble with instrumental music is that there aren't any words to tell us *ὅτι τι βούλεται καὶ ὅτω ἔοικε τῶν ἀξιολόγων μιμημάτων*, that is, I think, what it is *trying* to represent and what it actually *does* represent, though Plato puts the last bit in a slightly peculiar way. If this were a good explanation it would work equally well, I suppose, in the case of dance with no song; but it obviously doesn't apply to the second category, where what we have are precisely the words. So where is the difficulty in that case? There is nothing to tell us.

Even if we could solve that problem, what he says about instrumental music strikes me as seriously suspect. You'll remember that earlier on he was talking about melodies and rhythms, for instance those of women and of free men, as though they had a clearly identifiable significance even without the help of words, since his point is that the picture painted by the words doesn't fit them. Similarly, the familiar comments about *harmoniai*

and rhythms in Book 3 of the *Republic* plainly mean that these elements are *mimēseis* of identifiable human *ēthē* in their own right; they ought to ‘follow the words’, as he puts it, but it’s by no means inevitable that they will. Again, in a stretch of argument at the end of this speech, which we’ve already looked at (670b2-6), the Athenian insists that the judges must know what the Dorian *harmonia*, for instance, is suitable for; but how can they know that, if it is impossible to identify the mimetic significance of a melody or a melodic structure, simply as such? So far as the earlier part of the present speech is concerned, we might ask how on earth he could know that a piece was using a melody representing free men and rhythms representing slavishness, if the objects imitated by these elements could not be independently recognised. Clearly, too, it’s important for the musical judges to be able to pick these things out, if they are to decide whether a composition is or is not a coherent representation of ‘some one thing’; even if there are words to help them, they still have to decide whether the melodies and rhythms fit with what the words represent. They must therefore be able to specify the objects imitated by the melodies and rhythms without any reference to the words. Then why should purely instrumental music be especially difficult to understand? I really do not see how Plato can answer that question.

The next part of the passage, 669e5-670a3, continues the polemic against instrumental music, and it unmistakably conveys the impression that it is something which Plato despises and detests; he doesn’t attack any of the other kinds of performance he’s mentioned with anything like such hostility and contempt.<sup>6</sup> It is the last word in vulgarity, and wholly devoted to such meaningless nonsense as speed, noises like those made by wild beasts and rhythmic and/or melodic precision (I think that’s what *aptaisia* means here); it’s nothing but unmusical showmanship, or perhaps a collection of unmusical conjuring tricks (*thaumatourgia*). All this could of course be plausibly connected with the thesis that it has no detectable meaning and that you can’t tell what the object of the *mimēsis* is; in that case, Plato seems to imply, it can be nothing but pointless noise-making. But this doesn’t in fact quite follow from what he has said; it

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<sup>6</sup> ἀλλὰ ὑπολαβεῖν ἀναγκαῖον ὅτι τὸ τοιοῦτόν γε πολλῆς ἀγροικίας μεστὸν πᾶν, ὅπόσον τάχους τε καὶ ἀπταισίας καὶ φωνῆς θηριώδους σφόδρα φίλον ὥστ’ αὐλήσει γε χρῆσθαι καὶ (670a) καθαρίσει πλὴν ὅσον ὑπὸ ὄρχησίν τε καὶ ᾠδῆν, ψιλῶ δ’ ἑκατέρῳ πᾶσά τις ἀμουσία καὶ θαυματουργία γίγνοιτ’ ἂν τῆς χρήσεως.



would follow if he had said that this kind of music *is not* a *mimēsis* of anything, but he doesn't. All he says is that it's extremely difficult to identify what it imitates or is trying to imitate. This leaves open the possibility that instrumental music is sometimes or even always a *mimēsis* of something, and though the musical judges will allegedly find it hard to assess, Plato's premise is clearly not enough to justify the insults that he goes on to level at it. There may indeed be something that it represents, perhaps some admirable or despicable human *ēthos*, and in that case its claim to be music of genuine significance in Plato's own terms is apparently unassailable.

I think it's reasonable to guess that his hostility to it has some other origin, and the passage gives a small clue to what it might be. It says that such compositions are so devoted to speed, *aptaisia* and so on that they don't restrict *aulos*-playing and *kithara*-playing to what is needed for the accompaniment of dancing and song, but use them on their own. It's significant, I think, that 'dancing and song' are linked closely by the *τε - και* construction, *ὄρχησίν τε και ᾠδὴν*, suggesting that the proper place of instrumental music is in pieces which involve both of these elements, not just one or the other.

Perhaps we can also make something of Plato's use of the preposition *ὑπό* in the phrase *ὑπὸ ὄρχησίν τε και ᾠδὴν*. Admittedly it's the preposition regularly used to convey the relation between song and accompaniment, but it also implies that the accompaniment is subordinate to the song, or here to the song-and-dance; and if Plato had meant to treat the music of instruments and the associated song-and-dance as equal partners he could easily have chosen a different form of words, *μετὰ ὄρχησεώς τε και ᾠδῆς*, for example.

It looks as if Plato will only allow a composition to count as worthwhile music if it includes every one of the major forms of musical expression, words, melody, rhythm and dancing, which of course will incorporate its *schēmata*. That would explain why he objects to rhythmic dancing in the absence of melody, and poetic recitation when no other musical features are associated with it, for whose treatment the text offers no explicit justification. Though dance is much less prominent in the *Republic* than in the *Laws*, we can find hints of the same attitude there; after talking about words, *harmoniai* and rhythms, Socrates goes on to link good rhythms, several times, with *euschēmosynē*,

that is, graceful bodily posture; and this must surely imply that the rhythms are those of the dance (see especially 400c-401a). Hence the music he is thinking about in that passage too includes all four of the major musical elements.

So why does Plato adopt this position? One reason might be that he can locate the combination of all these elements in the music of the ‘good old days’, before the modern decadence set in, or again in the performances attributed to the ideal musicians, the Muses, by poets of the early period. This won’t really hold water, of course, since many of the performances in the Homeric epics do not include them all, and neither do all the compositions of archaic times; and the Muses are quite often represented as dancing without singing or singing without dancing. There’s no compelling reason to suppose that educated Greeks in general would have agreed with Plato’s view at any period, or that it reflects any pervasive cultural reality, though some modern scholars have incautiously asserted that it does. But Plato may not be concerned with historical fact. What he’s projecting is an ideal of completeness, the notion of a music that is a complete whole, in which all ingredients that can be classified as ‘musical’ are integrated and brought into a unity. They must all be present, and they must all cooperate in representing ‘some one thing’, as he puts it; that is what binds them into a unity, the many into one. In short, I read what he says here more as a reflection of the philosophical tradition than of the tradition of practical music-making; it is motivated by the search for unity in diversity which runs through Presocratic thought and is central to Plato’s own work, and which had been explored in relation to the special case of music by 5<sup>th</sup>-century Pythagoreans. It reappears later, for instance in Aristides Quintilianus, in the guise of the concept of *τέλειον μέλος*, which translates literally as ‘complete melody’ but in fact incorporates the ‘movements’ of both sound and body in melody, words and rhythms; Aristides also describes it as *τὸ τέλειον τῆς ᾠδῆς*, ‘the completeness of song’. It’s perhaps worth noticing too, that in a later passage he comments that though melody by itself can contribute a little to the production of psychic well-being, only *τέλειον μέλος* can provide a *paideia* or a ‘therapy for the emotions’ without any gaps or omissions.<sup>7</sup> This seems to be a development of Platonic themes, rather than something we can find

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<sup>7</sup> For these passages see Aristides Quintilianus *De musica*, Book 1 chapters 4 and 12.

explicitly set out in the dialogues; but it certainly catches the spirit of Plato's pronouncements.

### **Part 2: *Laws* 700a-701c**

Before we set out on this passage I had better say something about its context. The Athenian has been talking about the successes and failures of certain types of constitution, and is now concerned with the reasons why great cities and states have come to grief in the past. If we discover those reasons, he says, by examining historical examples, we shall be better able to avoid their mistakes. At 697c he sets out an account of the reasons why the Persian empire deteriorated. He says it was because the rulers became too despotic, and took too much liberty away from the people, with the consequence that they destroyed the people's willingness to identify themselves with the community; they no longer felt any affection or loyalty towards it. The rulers, for their part, were interested only in preserving and increasing their own power, and had no qualms about destroying cities or slaughtering the population to serve their purposes, so inflaming the people's hatred. As a result, when it came to warfare, they had a vast army at their command, but it was completely useless.

Next, at 698a, he starts to talk about a very different kind of case, that of Athens itself, and he begins by explaining how it came to achieve its remarkable successes in the early fifth century. In the course of a splendidly biased and Athens-centred account of the Persian wars, he argues that what gave the Athenians their steadfast resolve in the face of their monstrous enemy was the respect which they gave to the laws of their own free will, and the feeling of community that this shared devotion to the laws fostered in them. They thought it far more important to stand together and die, if necessary, in defence of the common good than to save themselves individually by surrendering, and thereby accepting the destruction of their community; and they did so, as I said, as people who freely and willingly submitted themselves to the laws. This can scarcely be called objective history, but it conveys the message that Plato needs. The conclusion he reaches in due course will be that the best kind of constitution is one in which a due proportion is

maintained between the authority of the laws and the rulers, and the citizens' exercise of their own free choice.

I'd like to say a little more about this matter before we go on with the passage. In what follows and in many other places the Athenian is so insistent that the rules governing music and the laws of the *polis* must be fixed and unchangeable, and that they must be rigorously enforced, that it's easy to get the impression that he's intent on introducing another kind of despotism, just as unbending as the one he attributes to the Persians. The impression that individuals are to be left with no freedom at all might seem to be confirmed by a famous passage in Book 1, at 644d ff, with its image of human beings as puppets of the gods, harnessed to strings which pull them and control their actions, and of a similar relation between the city's authorities and its citizens. But this is an illusion. For one thing, the strings are not pulled by a god or some other external puppet-master; they are internal to ourselves, our own emotions and our own faculty of reason. Secondly, the one string that is made of gold and whose tugging we should follow is soft and easily resisted, unlike the others; it tries to persuade, rather than compelling. Its counterpart in the *polis* is the law, which serves in place of their own independent reason for the citizen-body as a whole, especially all those in whom the reasoning faculty is not well developed. But because these 'golden strings' cannot force us to obey, they need help from some other source. This source is *paideia* that inculcates in the citizens the disposition to identify with the laws and to obey them willingly which is embedded in the institution of the choruses, led by the divine helpers, Apollo and Dionysus. In these choruses the singing dancers act in perfect unison, like the idealised choruses of archaic poetry, just as if they were puppets on strings, all moving together as one under the direction of their master. But they are not really puppets; they act as they do, in a paradigm of unanimity, out of their own choice, since through this *paideia* they have completely internalised the norms of the city's institutions and have come to love them. Thus, through their continual repetitions of their choral activities in the presence and in the service of the gods, the citizens choose freely to submerge their individual identities in that of the city, and so recreate the situation which existed, in Plato's imagination, in Athens at the time of the Persian wars.

So much for that. But despite the splendid attitudes that Athens had bred in its citizens in that golden age, its success didn't last. Let's get back to our bit of the text. 'In a sense,' says the Athenian at 699e1-4, 'the same thing happened to us as to the Persians; but whereas they drove the people into absolute slavery, we, by contrast, impelled the masses into absolute liberty;' and he now turns to the question of how this came about. This is where our passage begins, after a reminder that under the ancient system, the Athenian *dēmos* was indeed the master, *kyrios*, in certain respects, but at the same time the people were willing slaves to the laws.

'Which laws do you mean?' asks Megillus; and the Athenian replies (700a7-8) that the laws involved in the first instance were those concerned with *mousikē*. This answer might well startle anyone who wasn't already well acquainted with Greek discussions of this kind of topic; but it won't come as a surprise to us, given our familiarity – for instance – with the theories about musical and political change attributed to Damon, the contentions of *Dikaios Logos* and Aeschylus' attacks on Euripides in Aristophanes' *Clouds* and *Frogs*, and of course Plato's discussions in Books 2 and 3 of the *Republic*. The notion that breaches in musical laws spill over into social and political upheaval is already well entrenched.

But the present passage adds a fair amount of detail and has peculiarities of its own. It starts with the statement that in those days music was divided into various determinate *eidē* and *schēmata* (700a9-b1).<sup>8</sup> *Eidos* is a familiar term in the sense 'form', or less technically 'type', but the word *schēma* is clearly being used in a different sense from the one we were dealing with in Book 2, where it referred to figures or postures in dancing. Here the phrase *εἶδη καὶ σχήματα* might have a sense something like 'species and subspecies', but I don't think it does; subdivisions of the forms or species play no part in the passage that follows. More probably the *schēmata* are the patterns of elements which define the construction of each of the *eidē*, since the point that Plato will make, as I understand it, is that the ancient regulations did not permit the characteristic *schēmata* of

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<sup>8</sup> διηρημένη γὰρ δὴ τότε ἦν ἡμῖν ἡ μουσικὴ κατὰ εἶδη τε (b) ἐαυτῆς ἄττα καὶ σχήματα.

any musical genre, that is, the features that defined it, to be transferred into any of the others. So music was divided into various kinds, and each had a definite set of characteristics that distinguished it sharply from the others.

What we get next is another of the Athenian's lists, this time a list of examples of the distinct kinds of composition he has mentioned (700b1-6).<sup>9</sup> There were prayers to the gods, which were called *hymnoi*, and compositions of a type which he says is the opposite of the *hymnos*; these are *thrēnoi*, laments. Then there are *paian*s, and another group called dithyrambs, whose theme, he thinks, was the birth of Dionysus; and finally there are *nomoi*, which he says were specifically named *kitharōidikoi nomoi*. Once these types and various others had been fixed and distinguished, he continues, it was forbidden to use a melody belonging to one type of composition in any of the others.<sup>10</sup> The phrase *καὶ ἄλλων τινῶν*, 'and various others', in 700b7 indicates that the list is not necessarily complete, but we may perhaps infer that the ones he has listed are in his view the most important.

Even granted that the list isn't meant to be complete, however, there are some interesting omissions. In the first place there is no mention of any genre of songs of the kinds performed at symposia and other private or informal gatherings, none of the short lyrics characteristic of Sappho or Anacreon, for instance, no *skolia* and of course no folk songs. It seems clear that he is thinking only of music of a relatively large-scale public kind. But there are well-known types of composition for public performance that are not mentioned either, *partheneia*, for example, and epinicians; these, however, are perhaps less central to archaic culture than the ones the Athenian specifies, and he could reasonably have consigned them to the group of 'various others'. It seems strange, too, that he seems to imply that the only *nomoi*, or the only significant ones, were the kitharodic *nomoi*, pieces for a soloist singing to his own accompaniment on the *kithara*; it's true that these carried the greatest prestige and the most valuable prizes in Plato's

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<sup>9</sup> καὶ τι ἦν εἶδος ᾠδῆς εὐχαὶ πρὸς θεοῦς, ὄνομα δὲ ὕμνοι ἐπεκαλοῦντο· καὶ τούτῳ δὴ τὸ ἐναντίον ἦν ᾠδῆς ἕτερον εἶδος—θρήνου δὲ τις ἂν αὐτοῦς μάλιστα ἐκάλεσεν—καὶ παίωνες ἕτερον, καὶ ἄλλο, Διονύσου γένεσις οἶμαι, διθύραμβος λεγόμενος. νόμους τε αὐτὸ τοῦτο τοῦνομα (5) ἐκάλουσιν, ᾠδὴν ὡς τινα ἑτέραν· ἐπέλεγον δὲ κιθαρωδικούς.

<sup>10</sup> τούτων δὴ διατεταγμένων καὶ ἄλλων τινῶν, οὐκ ἐξῆν ἄλλο (c) εἰς ἄλλο καταχρῆσθαι μέλους εἶδος.

own time, but the others, especially the auletic *nomoi*, had quite prominent positions too.<sup>11</sup> Much more obtrusively, however, there is no place on the list for drama, either tragedy or comedy, which in Plato's Athens were surely the most high-profile of all the musical genres, and we may wonder why.

One hypothesis might be that Plato supposed these two forms of drama to have originated too late to have been included under the scope of the ancient laws, and that it would therefore be inappropriate to include them. But this suggestion is very implausible. It was common knowledge that tragedy went back before the time of Aeschylus, to Phrynichus and beyond him to Thespis, or so it was believed. Aeschylus was famous as one of the 'men of Marathon'; and it's clear that Plato locates the beginning of Athenian degeneration at a date after the time of the Persian wars. He must therefore have accepted that tragedy was already up and running well within the period in which Athens was supposedly governed by its ancient laws. The real problem, I think, is connected with the thesis the Athenian states at the end of the list, that no one was allowed to use a melody belonging to one kind of composition in any of the others. We may guess that when he says 'melody', *melos*, we are to treat this as shorthand for 'melody or rhythm or *schēma* and so on', and as implying that compositions could not include *any* of the defining characteristics of a genre to which they did not belong; but it doesn't much matter whether that interpretation is right or not. The point is that the drama cannot intelligibly be treated as another distinct genre alongside those specified on the list, that is, as one that has its own defining features and incorporates none of the special characteristics of the others, or even as one that does not borrow melodies characteristic of the others. There may be nothing in early drama that corresponds exactly to the dithyramb or the kitharodic *nomos*. But the tragedians created some of their most significant effects by representing their characters as singing *hymnoi*, *thrēnoi*, paians and other pieces of easily recognisable kinds; and even if their dramatised forms differed to some extent from those performed in real life, their melodies, rhythms and so on must have been appropriate to the relevant genres and recognised as such by their audiences. I

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<sup>11</sup> These were purely instrumental pieces for a soloist playing the *auloi*, thus falling into the category of *psilē aulēsis* mentioned at 669e1-2. They had an especially prominent place in the great Pythian festivals at Delphi.

suspect, then, that Plato avoided mentioning tragedy and comedy because they were an embarrassing exception to the thesis he is propounding; they make it clear that the supposedly impermeable boundaries he envisages were in fact very far from watertight.<sup>12</sup>

There is indeed almost nothing in Greek literature before the fourth century to suggest that these sharp demarcations existed at all. Of course the various genres were identified and given their specific names, and there were differences between *hymnoi* and *thrēnoi* and between paian and dithyrambs; but they are not always as clear-cut as Plato wants us to believe, and there are a good many cases where the distinction between a *hymnos* and a paian is virtually undetectable. Thus Plato has defined a *hymnos* as a prayer to the gods; but the prayer offered by the Achaeans to Apollo in Book 1 of the *Iliad*, for instance, in their attempts to persuade him to end the plague that is destroying them, is explicitly described as a paian (*Il.* 1.472-3). More significantly, perhaps, Glaukos of Rhegium, writing in the late fifth century, seems to find nothing strange about describing the music of two eminent archaic composers, Stesichorus and Thaletas, as combining features from two quite different strands of musical activity, one from the repertoire of music for the *aulos*, and another from that of song accompanied by the lyre or the *kithara*.<sup>13</sup> Quite often, in sources from Plato onwards, the inference that the music of archaic times was governed by strict rules is drawn from the double meaning of the word *nomos*, both ‘piece of music’ and ‘law’. But the word is used much more flexibly in earlier literature than in the philosophical, technical and semi-technical writings of later times. Writers of the archaic period and the fifth-century use it to refer to songs of any sort, including ones sung in informal settings where no official rules can possibly apply; and no one before Plato, so far as I know, proposed the argument based on its double meaning. It does seem to be true that even in the earlier period, the pieces called *nomoi* in the technical sense, when performed at the great competitive festivals, were required to conform to certain constraints; in some cases at least, most famously the *Pythikos nomos*, they were expected to represent a specific narrative, and to be divided into a set number

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<sup>12</sup> For Plato’s treatment of comedy and tragedy in the context of the city envisaged in the *Laws*, see Book 7, 816d3-817d8, and cf. Book 11, 935d3-936a5.

<sup>13</sup> See [Plutarch] *De musica* 1133F, 1134D-E.



of sections dealing with particular parts of the story.<sup>14</sup> Something similar can be inferred about the *nomos polykephalos* described by Pindar in his twelfth Pythian. But regulations like these, which are only to be expected in a competitive context, leave plenty of room for diverse musical interpretations, and clearly say nothing of the sort that Plato asserts. Like many other passages in the *Laws* which purport to be genuine history – its treatment of the Persian wars, for example – this part of the Athenian’s speech seems really to be presenting ideology in a fictitious historical disguise.

There are some other minor oddities in the first part of the Athenian’s speech, but I’ll pass over them and move on. He tells us next that those responsible for passing judgement on the pieces performed did so in a very different way from the one that is normal nowadays. In the old days, the judges were not swayed by the shouting and whistling of the mob; children and their attendants (*paidagōgoi*) and the crowd in general were kept in order with a stick, and it was the rule for people described as *τοῖς γεγυόσι περὶ παιδείῃσιν* to listen in silence right through to the end.<sup>15</sup> I’m not sure what the phrase I’ve quoted in Greek means; in his Penguin translation Saunders renders it as ‘people of taste and education’, and though this makes good sense I find it hard to extract it from the Greek. My own view is that it means ‘those concerned with education’, which I take to imply ‘those in charge of educational matters’. I’m inclined to think that it refers to the judges themselves, and that Plato is envisaging a system in which the cultural education of the citizens and the institution of public musical performances were so closely intertwined as to be one and the same thing, and therefore assigned the task of judging the musical contests to the educational authorities. If he did not mean that, the passage would say nothing at all about the behaviour of the judges, who are introduced at the beginning of the sentence as though it were all about them; and this would be rather odd.

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<sup>14</sup> Pollux *Onomastikon* 4.84, Strabo *Geography* 9.3.10.

<sup>15</sup> τὸ δὲ κῦρος τούτων γνῶναι τε καὶ ἅμα γνόντα δικάσαι, ζημιῶν τε αὖ τὸν μὴ πειθόμενον, οὐ σύριγξ ἦν οὐδέ τινες ἄμουσοι βοαὶ πλήθους, καθάπερ τὰ νῦν, οὐδ’ αὖ κρότοι ἐπαίνους ἀποδιδόντες, ἀλλὰ τοῖς μὲν γεγυόσι περὶ παιδείῃσιν δεδογμένον ἀκούειν ἦν (5) αὐτοῖς μετὰ σιγῆς διὰ τέλους, παισὶ δὲ καὶ παιδαγωγοῖς καὶ τῷ πλείστῳ ὄχλῳ ῥάβδου κοσμοῦσης ἢ νουθέτησις ἐγίγνετο.

We certainly know that audiences in the fourth century were noisy and unruly;<sup>16</sup> and sources like Demosthenes' speech against Meidias give graphic accounts of the ways in which people tried to intimidate the judges and to sabotage the performances of their competitors. What is not so clear is whether audiences in earlier times were much more respectful and subdued, and whether no one in those days tried to influence the judges or obstruct the other performers. As many commentators have remarked, critics in every generation imagine that life was much more rigorously disciplined when they were young, and even more so in their parents' and grandparents' time, and that in these decadent modern times people have abandoned all the rules that once kept civilisation in general and the arts in particular under proper control. We may well suspect that Plato, along with the spokesmen for musical conservatism in Aristophanes, Pherecrates and many others, was indulging in nostalgic fantasies of this sort without anything very solid to base them on. We certainly shouldn't accept what he says at face value without a very careful inspection of the evidence; and I can't undertake that here.

At this point, at 700d2-8, Plato's focus shifts for a while, away from the behaviour of the audience and the judges to that of the composers themselves. It is they, he says, who were the *ἄρχοντες τῆς ἀμούσου παρανομίας*, the initiators of unmusical law-breaking. These composers were indeed talented exponents of their art, but they were completely ignorant of what is right and lawful in music. They were carried away in a Bacchic ecstasy, *βακχεύοντες*, by the seductions of mere pleasure; and what was the result? Horror of horrors, it was the terrible catastrophe of musical mixtures, of which we heard a good deal in the passage of Book 2 we have been discussing. But this time they are mixtures of a different sort, or at least they are depicted in a different way; the Athenian is no longer talking about melodies representing the characters of free men linked with rhythms evocative of slavery, or anything like that, but about mixtures of genres such as those that were listed at the outset.<sup>17</sup> These composers mixed *thrēnoi* with *hymnoi* and

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<sup>16</sup> See R.W. Wallace, 'Poet, public and "theatocracy": audience performance in classical Athens', in *Poets, Public and Performance in ancient Greece* eds. L. Edmunds and R.W. Wallace, Baltimore 1997, 97-111.

<sup>17</sup> μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα, προϊόντος τοῦ χρόνου, ἄρχοντες μὲν τῆς ἀμούσου παρανομίας ποιηταὶ ἐγίνοντο φύσει μὲν ποιητικοί, ἀγνώμονες δὲ περὶ τὸ δίκαιον τῆς Μούσης καὶ τὸ νόμιμον, βακχεύοντες καὶ (5) μᾶλλον τοῦ

paians with dithyrambs, imitated *aulōidia* with their *kitharōidia* and so on; and on this occasion Plato seems to have got his facts pretty well right. There is plenty of evidence for the interpenetration of genres in the so-called ‘new music’ of the later fifth century, and the influence of *aulos*-music on other musical forms is particularly well attested. We should notice, however, that Plato has given us no good reason for thinking that mixtures of this particular sort are especially objectionable; and it is not clear why he has set the scenario up in this particular way, that is, by beginning from an initial ideal condition in which musical genres were kept sharply distinct. The problem that this poses is in fact rather bigger and more general than that, and I’ll come back to it at the end. For the present, let’s press on.

By breaking down these barriers, the Athenian continues, these composers gave a completely false impression of music, not deliberately but by mistake, *akontes*, because of their *anoia*, ignorance or folly.<sup>18</sup> The impression they gave was that there is no standard of correctness whatever in music – a sentiment echoed in a different context by Aristoxenus, in one of his bitter remarks about his predecessors<sup>19</sup> – but that it can ‘correctly’ be judged by anyone, better people and worse people alike, just by the criterion of the pleasure it gives them. This is of course a crucial point for Plato; as we saw earlier, the notion that good music is simply the music that gives a person the most pleasure is one that he vigorously rejects.

His next comment (700e4-6) brings out one of his reasons for rejecting this view. The example and the pronouncements of the composers induced ordinary people, *hoi polloi*, to suppose that they themselves were competent to pass judgement on music, and this led to musical *paranomia*, which is perhaps not just ‘law-breaking’ but ‘anarchy’.<sup>20</sup> The point is, of course, is that if pleasure is the only criterion of musical excellence, each

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δέοντος κατεχόμενοι ὑφ’ ἡδονῆς, κεραννύντες δὲ θρήνους τε ὕμνοις καὶ παίωνας διθυράμβοις, καὶ αὐλωδίας δὴ ταῖς κιθαρωδίαις μιμούμενοι.

<sup>18</sup> καὶ πάντα εἰς πάντα συνάγοντες, (ε) μουσικῆς ἄκοντες ὑπ’ ἀνοίας καταγευδόμενοι ὡς ὀρθότητα μὲν οὐκ ἔχοι οὐδ’ ἠτινοῦν μουσική, ἡδονῇ δὲ τῇ τοῦ χαίροντος, εἴτε βελτίων εἴτε χείρων ἂν εἴη τις, κρίνεται ὀρθότατα.

<sup>19</sup> *Elementa harmonica* 5.23-29 Meibom = 10.4-8 Da Rios.

<sup>20</sup> τοιαῦτα δὴ ποιοῦντες ποιήματα, λόγους τε ἐπιλέγοντες τοιοῦτους, τοῖς πολλοῖς ἐνέθεσαν παρανομίαν εἰς τὴν (5) μουσικὴν καὶ τόλμαν ὡς ἱκανοῖς οὖσιν κρίνειν.

person individually will be, in effect, an ideal judge of what is best, since he is the only person who knows which pieces please him most. Pleasure is always the pleasure of some individual, and if you are a devotee of heavy metal and I am a Bach junkie, neither of us is in a position to tell the other that what he enjoys isn't *really* pleasing; and nor is anyone else, no matter how sophisticated their musical expertise may be. We thus reach a position similar to that of Protagoras. There are no objective standards, and no music is simply good or bad; there is only music which seems good or bad to you or to me, and so on, and the music that seems good to me *is* good so far as I am concerned. What you or anyone else may think is irrelevant, and no regulations imposed by supposedly authoritative judges can possibly be justified. In Plato's view, it is essential that conclusions along these lines should be rejected; his intricate arguments against Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* show how much philosophical energy he devoted to the task of refuting them.

But of course the Athenians of his historical sketch didn't have Plato to show them the error of their ways. As a result, the crowds in the theatres abandoned their respectful silence; since each of them took himself to be the proper judge of what was good and bad, they started to fill the air with shouts of approval and disapproval and to make their opinions felt, and the ancient *aristokratia*, 'government by the best', degenerated into a despicable *theatrokratia*, 'government by the spectators', that is, the general mob (700e6-701a3).<sup>21</sup> It's no accident that Plato uses political language at this point. If this state of affairs had remained as a *dēmokratia* in musical matters alone, he says, it wouldn't have mattered very greatly. But it didn't stay confined to that context; from its origin in musical matters there was born the idea that everyone was in full possession of wisdom about absolutely everything, and the result was unrestricted liberty amounting to anarchy in every corner of Athenian life (701a-b3).<sup>22</sup> A glance at the passage at the beginning of the Athenian's next speech (700b5ff), which I'm not going to look at in detail, will show

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<sup>21</sup> ὅθεν δὴ τὰ (701a) θέατρα ἐξ ἀφώνων φωνήεντ' ἐγένοντο, ὡς ἐπαίοντα ἐν μουσικαῖς τό τε καλὸν καὶ μὴ, καὶ ἀντὶ ἀριστοκρατίας ἐν αὐτῇ θεατροκρατία τις πονηρὰ γέγονεν.

<sup>22</sup> εἰ γὰρ δὴ καὶ δημοκρατία ἐν αὐτῇ τις μόνον ἐγένετο ἐλευθέρων ἀνδρῶν, οὐδὲν ἂν πάνυ γε δεινὸν ἦν τὸ γεγονός· νῦν δὲ ἤρξε μὲν ἡμῖν ἐκ μουσικῆς (5) ἡ πάντων εἰς πάντα σοφίας δόξα καὶ παρανομία, συνεφέσπετο δὲ ἐλευθερία. ἄφοβοι γὰρ ἐγίγοντο ὡς εἰδότες, ἡ δὲ ἄδεια ἀναισχυντίαν ἐνέτεκεν· τὸ γὰρ τὴν τοῦ βελτίονος (b) δόξαν μὴ φοβεῖσθαι διὰ θράσος, τοῦτ' αὐτό ἐστιν σχεδὸν ἡ πονηρὰ ἀναισχυντία, διὰ δὴ τινος ἐλευθερίας λίαν ἀποτετολημμένης.

you the extent of the outrages that followed, so he says, once the composers had made their original and entirely unintentional mistake. People abandoned their traditional obedience to their parents and elders, made every effort to evade the injunctions of the laws, and eventually descended into oath-breaking and atheism. It's pretty heavy stuff.<sup>23</sup>

Now readers of the *Republic* won't be surprised by the suggestion that musical *paranomia* can have disastrous social and political consequences. But there is something rather unexpected about the line of argument pursued in this passage of the *Laws*. Both the *Republic* and other parts of the *Laws* itself would lead us to expect Plato to make his argument depend on connections between specific types of music and specific ethical attitudes; listening to Dorian melodies inspires courage, Lydian melodies make you supine and soft, and so on. But there is no trace of any such reasoning here. The cause of the upheaval, it tells us, was not any particular failing in the music as such; it was simply the encouragement given to the view that anyone's opinion is just as valuable as anyone else's. It's true that Plato traces this opinion to the composers' decision to create mixtures of the musical genres, a practice he dislikes, but the nature of the musical error is really irrelevant. He could have told essentially the same story even if he had thought that the ancient music was an indissoluble mixture of musical styles, and that although the rules in force in those days insisted on keeping them all together as an integrated whole – which could indeed be portrayed as an ideal in line with some aspects of Platonism – at some point in time the composers decided to break it up into distinct types, on the grounds that this produced more pleasure. Exactly the same sort of narrative could still have been constructed from that starting point. It could indeed be transplanted, essentially unaltered, to a completely different cultural context, in which the arena where the populace was most often gathered in the greatest numbers was not that of the musical contests, but for instance the football stadium. It could be any place where big crowds assembled to watch events that were controlled by strict rules and official judges or referees, and where the behaviour of the participants might encourage the spectators to

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<sup>23</sup> Ἐφεξῆς δὴ ταύτῃ τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ ἢ τοῦ μὴ ἐθέλειν τοῖς (5) ἄρχουσι δουλεύειν γίγνοιτ' ἄν, καὶ ἐπομένη ταύτῃ φεύγειν πατρὸς καὶ μητρὸς καὶ πρεσβυτέρων δουλείαν καὶ νοθεύτησιν, καὶ ἐγγὺς τοῦ τέλους οὖσιν νόμων ζητεῖν μὴ ὑπηκόοις εἶναι, (c) πρὸς αὐτῷ δὲ ἤδη τῷ τέλει ὄρκων καὶ πίστεων καὶ τὸ παράπαν θεῶν μὴ φροντίζειν, τὴν λεγομένην παλαιὰν Τιτανικὴν φύσιν ἐπιδεικνῦσι καὶ μιμουμένους, ἐπὶ τὰ αὐτὰ πάλιν ἐκεῖνα ἀφικομένους, χαλεπὸν αἰῶνα διάγοντας μὴ λήξαι ποτε κακῶν.

voice their own opinions and override the judgements of the appointed officials. Plato may have thought that his reading of the course of events in Athens was accurate, and that it was in fact in the environment of musical performances that the excesses he deplores originated; it's even conceivable that he was right, though I think it rather unlikely. But nothing follows from that about the nature of the rules that ought to apply in music. The only moral we could properly draw is that if the culture is such that the largest popular gatherings are those of the musical contests, then it's important that there should be clearly-defined rules to govern the behaviour of both the performers and the audience, and that these should be strictly enforced. No doubt someone should then try to work out what the best rules would be, but that is a separate task on which the present argument has no bearing at all. Plato's rhetoric tries to persuade us that it is the separation of musical genres that is crucial, but there is nothing in the passage that should make us believe it, even if the story it tells is true.

I've beaten poor old Plato around the head quite enough for now, and I'll end by repeating what I said yesterday, that despite all my disrespectful comments I'm still full of admiration for his vigorous and ingenious championship of his views, for the subtlety of his linguistic and rhetorical strategies, and for the stimulus they give to both critical and appreciative thought. He deploys his skills here in a very different way from some of those he uses in the earlier dialogues, but these are not just the ramblings of a dotterly old idiot. It's powerful and effective writing; and though it plainly fails if we judge it by the standards of strict logical demonstration, we should recognise that it is not designed on that pattern, and try to appreciate it for what it is.