

# Augustine on music as the harmonious language of spirituality: An apophatic theological study



## Author:

Godfrey T. Baleng<sup>1</sup>

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>The Unit for Reformational Theology and the Development of the South African Society, Faculty of Theology, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Godfrey Baleng,  
gtbaleng@gmail.com

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This article arose from the study of apophatic theology also known as the *via-negativa*. Apophatic theology, by definition, refrains from stating what and who God is instead of focusing on what God is not. It renders religious language as a sign-system inadequate in describing God, his nature, and human numinous experiences. Yet, language is the fundamental modelling system that stimulates our everyday phenomenological, spiritual, and religious developments. This article is demonstrating how the apophatic theological view attempted to solve or investigate the inadequacy of religious language or the lack of God's language. The research drew from contemporary scholarship on Augustine's use of apophatic theology in developing its hypothesis of the importance of music as a transcendental language. Moreover, through music and prayer, language becomes an intermediary beyond the physical to the metaphysical. In this instance, Augustine of Hippo, coming to terms with the inadequacy of religious language, considered music a succinct communicative tool in his theology and divine pedagogy. So, due to the challenges of language, the purpose of this article is using Augustine and his view of music within the *Sitz im Leben* of his spiritual development to solve a theological problem. In this article, the following will be discussed: (1) Augustine's *Confessions* as a dialogue where he speaks to God through Scriptures and hymns; (2) Augustine's earlier philosophical theory of music; (3) and Augustine's use of apophatic theology in our spiritual development. The importance of this research will help us understand God's immanence (over his ineffable) through our use and understanding of music as a harmonious language consisting of unchanging mathematical properties. Furthermore, the truthfulness of music as a harmonious language about God's mystery can be better understood.

**Contribution:** Through Augustine's apophatic theology, this study contributes to our understanding and revitalisation of spirituality using music as an alternative form of harmonious language of the spirit. Moreover, it considers music a universal language that transcends all senses and other modes of cognitive activities. By establishing a basic principle of what makes us spiritual, we can transform our cognitive abilities and become better spiritual beings. Furthermore, this study examined the harmonic nature of music in the seven liberal arts as a significant mathematical aspect of the cosmos.

**Keywords:** Augustine; music; language; spirituality; apophatic theology; sensible; intelligible.

## Introduction

This article considers the *Confessions* of Augustine (2016) as a dialogue between himself and God, in which the latter speaks to Augustine through Scriptures and hymns (music). In this dialogue, Augustine not only assimilates his voice so close to Scriptures but also cites Scriptures (especially Book of Psalms<sup>1</sup>) so much that his use of religious language can be studied using textual analysis. According to Niño (2008), the Psalms were a constant source of inspiration for Augustine. He quotes Burns (1993:143) when he says, 'Augustine rephrases and incorporates the Psalms into his *Confessions* in a flexible and personal way'.

Wiskus (2016:328) similarly describes the *Confessions* of Augustine (2016) as a performative text. As a text, the *Confessions* enacts or performs the very content it describes. Further below, Wiskus (2016) posits:

We must keep in mind the dual meaning of confession: not only to lay bare one's sins but [also] to sing the praises of God. Like a piece of music, *Confessions* performs its meaning, born of the resonance of memory. (p. 337)

In summary, the *Confessions* can be textually analysed as a hymn book for studying Augustine's continuation of thought on his theory of music from his earlier treatises, *De Musica* (Augustine 1947).

1. A point which was also mentioned in a previous article (Baleng 2024:1–2) concerning the mimetic nature of his *Confessions*.

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In the *Confessions* and *De Musica*,<sup>2</sup> how then does Augustine speak to God in a cognitive and intramundane language? Moreover, is there a knowledge gap that needs to be bridged in Augustine's philosophical theory of music? These questions set the hypothesis for this research article on the relevance of God's word in Augustine's view of music as a harmonious language of spirituality<sup>3</sup> based on the mathematical properties found in Augustine's musical assertions. Moreover, the apophatic way points to the philosophical paradox as a continuity of thought that predated Plato and can be traced back to Pythagoras.

Pythagoras' theory in *Musica Universalis* is attributed with holding a worldview where everything is essentially made up of numbers and geometry (Carey & Frandlin 2005). Moreover, he had long regarded music as an ordered structure of ratios and mathematical equations. In his theory of music of the spheres, Pythagoras implemented different disciplines such as mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and music. He divides music into sensible and intelligible categories and proposes a unified reality that is governed by the same ratios found in both categories. Heil (2019) affirms that:

Pythagoras ... was also rumoured to have miracle working powers – identified which chords, modulations, and harmonies to use by his close affinity with 'sublime symphonies of the world ... the universal harmony and consonance of the spheres'. (p. 38)

Later, medieval scholars, such as Boethius (1990), built on a similar chain of thought where God, the Creator, sung the universe into existence. In *The consolations of music* (Chadwick 1981), he distinguished between three categories of music:

1. *Musica mundane*, also known as music of the spheres, represents the harmony of the cosmos through the mathematical ratios found in the cosmic blueprint. It is the highest form of music accessible only to the supreme Creator throughout his created universe.
2. *Musica humana*, also known as human music. This form of music prompts the ethical nature of humans through a correspondence between the phenomenon of harmonic sounds and social harmony.
3. *Musica instrumentalis*, also known as instrumental music. This is the lowest aspect of music as it refers not only to instrumental but also to vocal music. As a sensible form of music, it is artistic and practical.

Conversely, in *De Musica*, Augustine offers a secondary reference for music as a language of higher spiritual frequency based on numerology. For Augustine, music is a mathematical discipline that is submissive to the divine

2. *De Musica* is one of the lesser appreciated works of Augustine. It was the first treatise he wrote after his conversion in preparation of his baptism around AD 387. The book was intended as part of a series of works on the seven liberal arts. Unfortunately, such a projected series on the seven liberal arts was never completed and only consists of *De Musica* and the now lost copies of *De Grammatica* (Augustine 1861; cf. Law 1984) as he tells us in his *Retractationes* (Augustine 1999).

3. Spirituality in this article refers to the ascent of the soul through a particular way of living. So, by definition, it simultaneously considers the phenomenological and the metaphysical phenomena.

flow of creation without much emphasis on the artistic and aesthetic aspects that we are used to mimicking in our current music form. Thus, he categorised not only language but also music as a symbolic framework that can be cognitively studied through the liberal arts. He posits that the interaction between cognition and spirituality is best determined through music because ordinary language is full of ambiguities and thus can only speak of God non-cognitively.

On the other hand, music through its rhythmic elements and intervals, speaks directly to the *interior homos* (inner man or world), and naturally, this creates a paradox as far as music can both liberate and enslave. The ancients believed that certain musical frequencies, such as 1111 Hz, had healing properties that can heal mental conditions. Other frequencies, such as 963 Hz, were considered as the frequency of divine harmony. Thus, music as an art and science occupied a place of magical proportions in their imagination.

## Augustine and apophatic theology

The role of music as a harmonious spiritual language must first be understood in the context of apophatic theology as the one true way of doing theology. Therefore, music as a metaphysical expression of spirituality is the *Sitz im Leben* of spiritual development and must contrast with our everyday use of religious language. Considering this paradox, both the East and West church reached a rare consensus on the proper and suitable language to express God. Thus, the East and West mystics refrained from conflicting views when expressing God and his nature of being.

During his early spiritual development, Augustine encountered both Catholic psalmody and the Eastern hymn form that Ambrose had recently introduced to his congregates in Milan (Brennan 1988:268). Moreover, Brennan states that Augustine posits that Ambrose used the communal singing of psalms and hymns to edify his congregation during the struggle with Justina, the Arian empress, for possession of a basilica. One can therefore argue that music demonstrated its proclivity for edification in both the East and West in Augustine's time.

The consensus on the role of music was a result of the inadequacy of religious language in describing God. In the West, Dionysius the Areopagite, a biblical figure, who some scholars associate with St. Paul during his visit to Athens (Ac 17:34), was one of the leading scholars of apophatic theology. In his short treatise, *The Mystical Theology* (3.1), he (Dionysius the Areopagite 2004) summarised his thoughts on the apophatic way, also known as the *via-negativa*, by refraining from stating what and who God is, and instead, focusing on what God is not.

Therefore, the advocates of apophaticism describe it as a divine way that promotes a metaphysical approach to theology through negation of human concepts that are

lacking in God's language. Ancient mystics favour this approach because it preserves the transcendence and mystery of God by avoiding anthropomorphic language. Such an approach was, more than today, central to theology in the ancient world.

Ticciati (2013:2–3) points this out when she writes, 'Most forms of apophaticism from patristic times to the present focus on the simultaneous potential and failure of words to say something about God.' The ancient mystics understood this more than anyone else. But then again, what can we meaningfully say about God, the great I AM, without being rhetorical? In such a paradox, the noumenal human experiences become important in our continuation of theology.

Augustine, in contrast to Dionysius the Areopagite, is not well known or studied for his apophaticism. We can, nevertheless, agree that his theological presupposition is fundamentally intertwined with his understanding of God's ineffability as the ultimate Being without an external form. Carabine (1992:5), in agreement, state that, 'even though we do not normally regard Augustine as an exponent of the negative way, the main principles of *apophasis* are a formative influence upon his thought'.

As aforementioned, for apophatic theologians, any attempt to articulate who and what God is, is purely speculative at best; hence, the term *negative theology*. Whatever is said about God is not worth him because God transcends all human understanding. Thus, the concept of negation is not negative in the literal sense of the word. The apophatic way by design avoids the risk of reducing God to human concepts of evolutionary language and conditioning. As mystics, apophatic theologians posit that God is not a thing, nor a being, nor a form that can be fully fathomed through visible creation and cognitive abilities.

This point was important to Augustine as a teacher. In his divine pedagogy, he understood that language was limited by design to the analysis of its environment; thus, limited in translating the transcendent noumenon experience. Therefore, to speak of God with the same breath as his creation was blasphemy. To explain this paradox of divine nature, Ticciati (2007) posits:

God is nothing in particular; God does not have qualities in the way that creaturely realities do, which might be predicated of him. One cannot say, God is this and not that; for God is not a thing to be distinguished from other things. (p. 161)

Turner (1999:147) similarly cautions against the use of cataphatic theology in *The darkness of God and the light of Christ: Negative theology and Eucharistic presence*. He argues that both the affirmative and negative ways are the languages of our creaturely concepts that do not translate to God and his divinity. In other words, both the negative and positive attributes of religious language cannot affirm God's nature.

Therefore, the use of apophatic theology is adopted for constructive emphasis in describing the indescribable through non-cognitive statements that lack truth-values.

Ticciati's work in this philosophical paradox draws from Turner's conception of the topic. Ticciati (2013:1–6) states her aim as to develop a 21st-century approach to apophatic theology, as she explains in the introduction of her book titled *A new apophaticism: Augustine and the redemption of signs*. She describes her work on the apophatic way as extreme in both its affirmation and denial of what religious language can achieve.

A similar supposition is evident in Augustine's dialogue, *De Magistro* (Augustine 2004),<sup>4</sup> in which he describes the purpose of speech teaching but later neglects language because of its inadequacies in favour of divine intervention. He concluded that the role of language as a sign-system constitutes a hierarchal order that limits language to its secondary role as a medium of knowledge. This renders language inadequate to participate in the truth that resides in God's mind and can, at most, only point us to this truth. However, it knows no truth.

Similarly, Ticciati (2013) notes:

'We can never fully grasp God.'

'God is largely unknowable to us.'

'We can only fathom God to a small extent.'

'Creation gives us an inkling of what God is like, but to no more.'

'God is incomprehensible to us, but revelation nevertheless affords us a glimpse of God.'

'Language cannot capture God's being, but it can nevertheless but it can nevertheless provide us with dim analogies of it.' (p. 1)

The disconnection between the spirit and the material realm is evident in our use of religious language, which can be described as non-cognitive as far as it is irresolvable. At a cognitive level, we cannot prove God as true or false, and this is where the apophatic way becomes a superior theological approach to God by trying to fill an ontological distinction between essence and existence. Thus, through its symbolism, the goal of apophaticism is to unity (or oneness in Neo-Platonist idiom).

Niño (2008:89) notes, 'The ancient philosophers who preceded and moulded Augustine's intellectual and spiritual vision were seriously involved, as he was, with the search for wisdom and union with the transcendent.' One of these ancient philosophers who had a major influence on Augustine was Plotinus. In the *Life of Plotinus* 14 (Plotinus 1912), Porphyry asserts that his teacher was an expert in the *quadriivium* arts which included music as a subject but did not pay attention to its practical aspect.

4. In *De Magistro*, Augustine (2004) describes the inadequacy of language as a sign-system and ends up emphasising Christ as the only true teacher. He applied a divine illumination praxis formulated earlier in his career as a teacher of rhetoric prior to his ordination into presbytery. Thus, his *interior homos* concept was developed in his earlier philosophical dialogues.

Moreover, Plotinus held an idealistic worldview. He believed that, by reversing our way of thinking, we can stretch the mind in opposite directions and thus come to learn the essence and existence of a form in its true state. In this context, theosis becomes a relevant analogy of reverse thinking, as God became man for man to be like God. Theosis was not only idealistic but practical in the form of Jesus Christ.

The simultaneous understanding of theosis conceives the necessity of transcendence and immanence of God as the ultimate oneness through the Trinity. This oneness is essential to music as a universal language of creation that flows forth from a transcended God to the existential arrangements. On such grounds, the ancient mystics adopted the negative way in their teleological arguments about God.

## Augustine and the theory of music

In *De Doctrina Christiana* (2.16.25), Augustine (1865) asserts,

Ignorance of numbers prevents us from understanding things that are set down in Scripture in a figurative and mystical way... An ignorance of certain elements of music also conceals many other things.

In *De Libero Arbitrio* (2.16.42), he (Augustine 1841) further states,

To investigate the beauty of corporeal forms, it is that numbers are contained in space; to investigate the beauty of movement in substance, it is that numbers move around in time.

For Augustine, like the ancient philosophers that preceded him, numerology played a significant role in binding all manner of forms together, and this holds true to music as part of the *quadriivium* arts.

Augustine's theory of music in *De Musica* is a rational approach to music as a science that was defined as a measured relation between different spheres, as aforementioned by Pythagoras. The unchanging nature of mathematics found in both sensible and intelligible music is the aesthetics that thrilled Augustine to love music and not part from it. Although sensible music rates the lowest and is the only form of music that humans can hear, all music forms obey the same mathematical principle of living in harmony with the universe. In *De Musica* (6.10.6–27), Augustine (1947) argued for the significance of equality and provided examples of how equality controls metrical feet.

In other words, music was for Augustine an ordered structure that could be categorised into mimesis and the liberal discipline. According to Harrison (2011:27), instrumental or vocal music was a result of mimicking the temporal and mutable media in contrast to the latter, which aimed to transcend the temporal arrangements to the spiritual and immutable. However, Augustine, like Pythagoras, would classify music as something far more important than the liberal arts. Harrison (2011) further asserts:

In book 6 ... in this new Christian context, music is no longer simply a liberal art that teaches us about the nature of reality through a rational analysis of numerical relations; it is an art that

must practiced in every moment of a creature's existence if it is to remain in right relation to God and not fall back into non-being; it has become a matter of ethics as much as a quest for truth. (p. 31)

As a Platonist, Augustine was solely concerned with the immutability and aesthetics of music that superseded the sensible. In *Confessions* (10.33), Augustine (2016) admits the conflict in his heart to God that he still finds a level of enjoyment in the music of hymns, which are alive with God's praise. This means that he understood such hymns to possess the life-giving spirit he mentions in his treaties *De Spiritu et Littera*. Perl and Kriegsman (1955) argue that Augustine succinctly and neatly developed the distinction in his theory of music as they note that

There are two kinds of music: the first appeals to the senses, and may be either approved or rejected by the spirit, the second is received first by the spirit, to be thence shared with the senses. (p. 509)

An argument could be made that the more Augustine was able to articulate what he was hearing in a song, the more his love and appreciation for music grew. He (Augustine 2016) documents this in *Confessions* (10.33) when he writes:

I am aware that our minds are moved in a more spiritual and passionate way by these actual holy words when they are sung, than if they were not sung, in that manner. Also all the emotions of our spirit, in accordance with their various types, have, their own particular vocal and singing modes that are stimulated by a kind of mysterious kingship. (p. 153)

However, it was his struggle with his own bodily desires that caused him to question his love for music as a newly converted Christian. In *De Musica*, he examines the relationship between the soul and body and wants to know what characterises peace and harmony between the two. He concludes that reason is the best judge<sup>5</sup> in resolving soul-body conflict. In the absence of reason, Augustine fears that music can enslave free citizens, as it overpowers our emotions and consciousness. He (Augustine 2016) writes in *Confessions* (10.33.50):

The sensual pleasure that affects me physically often leads me astray: as when sense perception does not accompany reason in such a way as to be content with second place, but tries to get to the front and take the lead. (p. 153)

Moreover, Harrison (2011), rephrasing *De Musica* (6.10.28) notes:

There is not so much a separation between pleasure and reason as a necessary warning that pleasure is not the end, but the means to the end, which is to know and love God, and that we need to be rationally aware of this and constantly judge all else

5. In *De Musica* (6.9.24), Augustine (1947) writes: motions and states of one and the same nature, that is to say, the soul as it is one thing to be moved towards the reactions of the body, which occurs in perceiving, another to move oneself towards the body, which occurs in an activity, yet another thing to retain what has been produced in the soul as a result of these motions, which is to remember, so it is one thing to approve or disapprove of these motions, when they are first set in motion or when they are revived by remembrance, which occurs in the pleasure of that which is convenient and in the dismay of that which is inappropriate in such motions or reactions, and another thing to evaluate whether it is right or not to enjoy these things, which is done by reasoning.

against this end – even what is ethically right or aesthetically pleasing. This is not least the case because what pleases and delights us is a temporal, mutable manifestation and embodiment of eternal, immutable music. Reason and rational judgement make us aware of this. (p. 33)

In *Confessions* (11.3.4), Augustine (2016) writes:

O my God, where my desire originates. The unrighteous have regaled me with stories of pleasures, but they are nothing like your law, Lord. Look-this is where my desire originates. See, Father! Give heed, and see, and approve: let it be pleasing in view of your mercy that I find grace in your presence, so that the deeper truths of your words may be opened to me when I knock. (p. 197)

In contrast to his fear of music, the mathematical properties of the liberal discipline of music were, for Augustine, the undisputed immutable truth that justified his love for music. The ordered structure of numbers is precisely what makes music the harmonious language of the spirit, as it can say something positive about the divine and human numinous experience. In turn, human numinous experience arguably proves the existence of God, and for Augustine, God's presence is man's ultimate pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Through the immutable nature of numbers, he argues that we can find reasons for God's existence. For Augustine, the unchanging truth of numbers is what makes them susceptible to divine nature. Thus, the relative value of music as a liberal discipline lies in revealing the ability of mathematics in the ascent of the soul.<sup>7</sup> For Augustine, music does more than just convey emotions, as he argued for *creation ex nihilo* through the ordered and rhythmic structure of music. In *De Musica* (6.17.57), Augustine (1947) writes:

From where, I ask, do all these things come, if not from that supreme and eternal origin of rhythms and similarity and equality and order? But if you take this away from the earth, it will be nothing. Therefore, God has created the earth, and it was created from nothing. (p. 377)

According to England (2017:18) 'Music is a foundational grammar of being human. More so than language and more so than art, music sounds being.' Plato in *Phaedo* (1891, 61a) posits that 'philosophy is the greatest music'. In this context, music as a science, leads to a doctrine of God as active in human affairs, in contrast to music as an art deemed inferior imitation that can lead the soul astray. In his *Confessions*, Augustine (2016) considered the art of imitation a crucial step toward his personal development.<sup>8</sup>

For Platonists, music can also be useful in a practical sense. In Plato's *Republic* books 2–3 (1992), he addresses the use of

6. In *Confessions* (1.1.1), Augustinus (2016) writes:

And humanity, which is but a part of your creation, wants to praise you; even though humanity bears everywhere its own mortality, and bears everywhere the evidence of its own sin and the evidence that you resist the proud. And even so humanity, which is but a part of your creation, longs to praise you. You inspire us to take delight in praising you, for you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

7. Albeit interior or within. Perhaps music in this context becomes a product of an inward illumination, as it impacts the soul and restores the image of God within us.

8. For an in-depth reading on this concept, see Baleng (2024).

music in relation to the betterment of the state. He posits that the purpose of music is to fundamentally pursue beauty and goodness in society. He (Plato 1992:226) writes: 'Yet, it [*music*] is useful in the search for the beautiful and the good! Pursued for any other purpose, it is useless'. His disciple, Plotinus, drew inspiration, especially from book 7, and argued for sensible music as a necessary step toward the intelligible, while intelligible music directs the soul toward the intelligible and that which is beyond any sound (Michalewski 2020:178). MacInnis (2014) also posits:

Plato had connected music to his examinations of both the human soul and the cosmos, and his followers in later eras used musical terminology to discuss metaphysics. Plotinus (204/5–270 CE), considered a founder of Neoplatonism, used musical terms especially in his discussion of the soul's ascension to the One in his *Enneads*, e.g., *harmonia* helps the soul perceive the universe and reality, and the soul's union with the Universal-Soul results in *symphonia*. (p. 2)

Likewise, Augustine primarily studied music as the *Sitz im Leben* of spirituality, which can be asserted as the ascent of the soul juxtaposed with its pleasurable emotions on the body. Conversely, Morgan (2015:n.p.) posits, 'For Augustine, worship music is the "setting for the words" accentuating the meaning and appealing to emotion through "appropriate tunes"'. Therefore, the Platonists taught Augustine to treat music as a double-edged sword, as it has the power to corrupt or gratify the soul through the five senses. Wiskus (2016) notes:

Toward the end of book XI, Augustine marvels at his sense when singing 'Deus, creator omnium' that he has the piece as a whole in his mind – for how can his mind contain the previous notes and the anticipated notes together with the present notes all at once? (p. 336)

In *De Musica* (6.2), Augustine (1947) categorises each stage of the ascent of the soul through its reaction to the sound of music to that which produces the sound itself. Thus, music is a science of measuring the soul through rhythmic interactions. Moreover, the soul can evaluate and judge the impact of music according to metaphysical principles. He explains that the goal of *De Musica* is to proceed from the corporeal to the incorporeal. Harrison (2011) notes:

Just as it [*music*] had formed the basis for analyzing and evaluating the nature of reality, for appreciating its essential harmony, unity, equality, and order, for generations of free citizens, Augustine obviously felt that it would be similarly appropriate in a Christian context. (p. 29)

Yob (2010:145) asserts that music is a byproduct of spirituality rather than seeing spirituality as a byproduct of music. Moreover, he warns that such a supposition may require a non-discursive, non-rational, and constructivist pedagogical approach. Of course, this resonates with Augustine's idealistic approach to education, which avers for *interior homo* (Christ) as the true teacher, although he proceeds from the written word. Augustine intentionally adopts a non-rational stance in his pedagogy as an affirmation of the

inferiority of sensible knowledge. According to Hentschel (2011):

Augustine disapproved of sensual qualities in music in two respects: firstly in the direct aesthetical sense that the Beautiful pleases through number, and secondly in the moral sense that one has to stay away from sensuous pleasure. (p. 3)

Phillips (2006:1) posits that both Plato and Augustine's emphasis on rationality led them to reject the edifying power of music out of fear of its influence over the soul. Plato moreover feared that the emotional appeal of music could nullify the dominance of reason. The pleasurable sensations of the flesh were always an obstacle for the Platonist, and music was not different in this sense.

## Augustine's spiritual development

In contrast to his documented struggles with worldly pleasures in his earlier life, what can Augustine teach us about spiritual development? In his later treatises, *De Spiritu et Littera* (19.32), Augustine (1994b) gives an explanation that is useful in understanding the moral dilemma he felt for worldly pleasures (as a Christian) when he writes:

Let no Christian then depart from this faith, for it alone is the Christian faith. ... When the life-giving Spirit is present, he makes us love the very same thing, now written within, which the law made us fear, when it was written exteriorly. (p. 164)

In developing his spirituality, Augustine avidly studied Scriptures to the point of citing them each time he experienced a knowledge gap in his theology. Thus, his spirituality was primarily centred on studying the written word as authoritative in all aspects of a Christian life. Through reading Scriptures, he acquired deeper knowledge, and in the process, he Christianised his Manichaean and Platonist dualistic worldviews by distinguishing between sensible and intelligible forms. As a result, he invented his *interior homos* concept based on the Platonist worldview of the Ideal Good. The importance of this concept offered him a language to express his spirituality as an inward conversation with the *interior homos* (Christ), who alone is the real teacher. Thus, his spirituality should be read as an inward ascension of the soul.<sup>9</sup> In his *Soliloquiorum Libri Duo*, we find Augustine in conversation with Reason. Regarding this concept of inward ascension, Cary (2011) notes:

The inner is higher, better, more intelligible, and closer to God than are external, sensible, and bodily things, including the sounding words of human language. And within the inner life of the soul, the intellect is more inward than the imagination, where we speak to ourselves silently in words that are still images of the sounding words outside us. (p. 193)

Moreover, Storr (1972) notes:

We all possess inner worlds which are, to varying degree, at odds with the external world; and the contents of these inner worlds and the tensions engendered by them have much in

<sup>9</sup>For an in-depth reading on Augustine's spirituality, see Fr. Joseph Farrell's *Augustinian Spirituality (Unitas in Caritas)* (2021–2023).

common. The great creators, because their tensions are of universal rather than personal import, can appeal to all of us when they find, in their work, a new path of reconciliation ... [This] pattern of tension followed by resolution is perhaps best discerned in music ... [and these] patterns of music seem more exclusively related to the inner world of man [sic] than do those of the other arts. (pp. 291–292)

The study of the Scriptures as Augustine's source of inner truth and virtue ethics presented Augustine with a multi-faceted view of spirituality that is centred on the authority of the written word. According to O'Donnell (2009):

The average Christian of [Augustine's] age, including those of his congregation, was less attached to the written form of the word and encountered it more through the formal oral presentation of liturgical readings and preaching. (p. 100)

Ford (2018) notes:

For Augustine, Scripture was the lifeblood of Christian life and practice. It is the authoritative foundation because it has at its center, Christ the author of life. Hence, authority is derived from Christ in his word. (p. 243)

In summary, one may argue that Augustine had the privilege of developing spiritually based on his education and ability to discern more than most people of his time. As a Platonist, he understood the power of examining ones' life. His reverence for the Scriptures was the result of its authority on knowledge. Ford (2018) posits that for Augustine:

First, Scripture is the inerrant authority and therefore the main foundation for the Christian life. Second, Scripture provides the language for prayer and moreover, is able to penetrate the heart of one who is praying. Third, Scripture is humble in character and therefore demands humility from its reader. Last, Scripture is the source of truth and orthodox belief, providing the framework for understanding God and consequently for having a true and pious faith. (p. 257)

The literal and figurative meanings of spirituality were something Augustine understood on the authority of the Scriptures as God's word. This is evident in his *Confessions* where he talks to God through the Scriptures. Likewise, in *Sermon* (339), he (Augustine 1994a) tells his congregation, 'I feed you on what I am fed on myself. I am just a waiter; I am not the master of the house; I set food before you from the pantry which I too live on, from the Lord's storerooms.' Through his reliance on the Scriptures, his aim was to move away from the temporal and sensible to the intelligible as found in the Scriptures.

## Distinguishing sensible from intelligible

Augustine's theory of music can be understood from his conception of the sensible in contrast to the intelligible. This distinction explains the exterior and inner relations of forms to the level in which each form can participate. In other words, sensible music is restricted to a certain level in

which intelligible music can participate. This distinction is determined by the sphere or realm from which it originates. However, the practical and theoretical aspects should be taken as a whole to understand its ethical and aesthetic nature.

Moreover, to refer to the harmony of music, refers to the embedded structure that binds music as an artistic form that is built on mathematical properties that shape the components of a song. Therefore, music is composed through distinct forms that balance the output of the negative and positive vibrations of a song. Thus, the balance is central and unique to music as the ideal language of spirituality. Music, by this definition, becomes more than just symbolic language and sound but the creative mechanism of the cosmos that allows for the ascent of the soul.

The Neo-Platonist theories that influenced Augustine regard the intelligible as transcendental inferior only to The One, as a core aspect of reality. Therefore, language as a form of communication must be thoroughly studied in all its sensible and intelligible structural forms. As a sign-system, natural language can only highlight the object in discussion, but as a symbol, it encapsulates and participates in it. This music ability as a symbol of language that transcends the sensible infers an inner connection to the metaphysical realm that unlocks the deeper meaning of reality. Wiskus (2020:274) describes Augustine's noumenon experience at Ostia as an experience of listening.

Therefore, the ascent of the soul through listening to music can be seen or heard by the soul in its proper form; thus, music is intelligible because of its far reach. The *tolle lege* as a listening experience was unprecedented, as it enabled Augustine's *interior homos* to be active in its intelligible capacity. This level of reach demonstrates the capacity of music as an intellectual subject of metaphysics and the spirit realm. The concept of transcendence speaks directly to music as a form of a mystic phenomenon. The sensible in contrast is naturally limited to the body or spatial proximity according to Platonist metaphysics. Therefore, one would think that music as an uttered word or sound, has no business in participating in the realm of the Ideal Good that reside in God's mind.

Moreover, ancient mystics distinguished between the sensible and intelligible to understand the mystery of music as a harmonious language, that can corrupt and illuminate the soul simultaneously.

## Conclusion

In this article, cogent arguments have been presented in describing Augustine's theory of music as a consistent thought in his memoir, *Confessions*, and his earlier philosophical treatises, *De Musica*. Both the Pythagorean and Platonic influences on Augustine's thoughts on apophatic theology and music theory, as a metaphysical necessity in understanding his theological development, have been considered. It is argued that the copious mathematical harmony found in music was, for Augustine and his mystic predecessors, a key factor in

determining music as a sound and empirically verifiable language in the process of spiritual development. The article did not, however, address broader differences in cosmic evolutionary theories and its assumption on the universality of mathematics and science, that serves as the basis of philosophical systems. Moreover, the subject of this study can be investigated from numerous interdisciplinary fields, making it an ambitious project. Nonetheless, this article differentiated between cognitive and non-cognitive language as a key factor, that determined Augustine's approach to theology. In its final analysis of Augustine's theory of music, this study concluded that, the rejection of sensible knowledge was a consequence of the inadequacy of language to say something meaningful about God. Thus, Augustine elevated music as the only harmonious language towards our spiritual development.

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