

Augustine on rhythm (or how to do theology in conversation with the arts)

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Dates:

Received: 17 Aug. 2022

Accepted: 18 Nov. 2022

Published: 15 Mar. 2023

How to cite this article:

Havenga, M.J., 2023, 'Augustine on rhythm (or how to do theology in conversation with the arts)', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2693. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2693>

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This essay reflects theologically on rhythm by turning to the North African church father Augustine, specifically his work *De musica*. It begins by briefly referring to recent theological work on rhythm, before introducing Augustine and discussing the role music played during and after his conversion to Christianity. This is followed by an exposition of *De musica*: a work which comprises six books. It is shown how the first five books offer a comprehensive rhythmic theory, which is then followed – in Book 6 – by a theological discussion of the topic. Finally, the essay briefly explores what we can learn from Augustine's text, not only in terms of rhythm but also about theological engagements with the arts more generally.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: As part of the larger interdisciplinary conversation between theology and the arts, this essay focuses on the theological dimensions and implications of rhythm by turning to what could probably be viewed as one of Christian theology's first interdisciplinary texts, namely Augustine's *De musica*. Interdisciplinarity thus stands at the very heart of the contribution.

Keywords: rhythm; Augustine; *De musica*; theology and the arts; theological aesthetics.

Faith and life in rhythm

In his plenary address on the theme of decolonisation at the theological day of Stellenbosch University's Faculty of Theology in 2019, Tinyiko Maluleke called for a more deliberate theological engagement with the arts in South Africa and beyond.¹ In response to this call, the organising committee of the following year's theological day chose as theme for the event, 'Faith and life in rhythm: on hip-hop, the arts and theology'. They also invited the celebrated South African hip-hop and rap artist Hemelbesem as plenary speaker.² Hemelbesem's presentation would ultimately include his perspectives on the intersection of faith and the arts, coupled with performances of various rhymes from his rap oeuvre – much to the enjoyment of student participants, especially. The theological day would also include various contributions from *within* the field of theology – contributions that would explicitly speak to and engage with the artform represented by Hemelbesem. As a revised version of one of these contributions, this essay will reflect theologically on one of the fundamental elements of hip-hop and rap music, namely rhythm,³ by turning to the North African church father Augustine, specifically his work *De musica*. This task will be performed in order to see what Augustine can teach us about the theological dimensions of rhythm, which can be viewed as the lifeblood of hip-hop and rap music, but also about theological engagements with the arts more generally.

Rhythm and Augustine

In recent years, there has arguably been a growing interest in the philosophical and theological dimensions of rhythm. One pertinent example on the theological front is Eikelboom's (2018) study *Rhythm: A theological category*, in which she sets out to explore theologically the intricacies and possibilities of rhythmic patterns and movement, also in conversation with modern

1.The overall theme of the theological day, which annually serves as the opening of the academic year of the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, was 'Doing theology from and for Africa: Our lamentations, struggles and hopes'. In his presentation, Maluleke asked, for example, why there are no theological studies being carried out on the music (and life) of Hugh Masekela.

2.For more on Hemelbesem, also known as Simon Witbooi, see his collection of autobiographical reflections, opinion pieces and poetry, *Hemelbesem* (2017).

3.It is interesting to observe that – unlike various other genres of music – what is foundational in hip-hop and rap music is often not some melodic hook, chord progression or harmonic sequence, but the rhythmic flow of the track. In this regard, see Snell and Söderman (2014:63), Adams (2015) and Rose (1994:65). The last-mentioned author writes: 'Rap's rhythms are its most powerful effect ... Rap music centres on the quality and the nature of rhythm ...'.

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philosophical considerations of the topic.⁴ The motivation behind Eikelboom's inquiry, as she notes, is simple: rhythm is all-pervasive; it permeates every part of our existence. It is not only a foundational element of poetry and music – as clearly seen in hip-hop and rap music such as Hemelbesem's (2017) – but also of almost every other aspect of life. 'As with categories like space, time, language, and consciousness', she writes, 'rhythm is one of those phenomena in which human experience is steeped ... It is part of the scaffolds to which life clings' (p. 2). There is, for example, a certain rhythm to our breathing, to our speaking, to our heartbeat, to the neuron pulses in our brains and to the steps we take as we walk from one place to another. Rhythmic movement also marks larger ecological and cosmic processes such as the changing of seasons, the oscillation of sound and light waves, the pulsations of atoms, and the circling of planets, including our own (Eikelboom 2018:2). This reality, of which countless more examples could be given, warrants a theological reflection, Eikelboom (2018) argues. She writes: 'If theology is talk about God by creatures, and about the difference that God makes to creatures, then understanding the creature's rhythmic context is indispensable for understanding that God-creature relationship' (p. 3).

Eikelboom's study is ultimately an in-depth exploration of how the phenomenon of rhythm can help us understand something of the nature of our existence and the way we think about, relate to, speak about, and worship God. In this endeavour, her main interlocutor – together with philosophers such as Heidegger, Deleuze, Derrida and Agamben – is the 20th-century Jesuit theologian Erich Przywara, who also looked to and employed rhythm as a philosophical and theological category in his retrieval of the classic Thomistic principle of the analogy of being.⁵ The fact that Eikelboom predominantly engages with a recent thinker such as Przywara should, however, not give the impression that the theological and philosophical discourse on rhythm is merely a new development – on the contrary. As she frequently mentions, the tradition in this regard – while often being inconspicuous – is long and rich, and in many ways has its foundations in the work of the 5th century North African church father Augustine, one of Przywara's important influences (see Przywara 2014b). In fact, something that is not widely known is that one of the very first texts that Augustine composed after his conversion to Christianity was a collection of six books on music, called *De musica*, which took the form of an extended reflection on the 'nature and operations of rhythm' in light of the Christian faith (Ward 2019:1).

While Eikelboom only briefly discusses this oft-overlooked work by Augustine (see Eikelboom 2018:125, 127–131), I

4. Eikelboom, in fact, takes as a starting point for her reflection Derrida's remark: '[R]hythm has always haunted our tradition, without ever reaching the centre of its concerns' (Eikelboom 2018:1, cf. Derrida 1989:33). Other recent philosophical-theological engagements with rhythm that can be mentioned include contributions by Panikkar (2010) and Eikelboom's doctoral advisor at Oxford, Ward (2022, especially 1–56).

5. The importance of rhythm for Przywara's (ed. 2014a) understanding of the analogy of being is evident in the subtitle of the English translation of his magnum opus: *Analogia entis: Metaphysics: Original structure and universal rhythm*. For more on Przywara and the analogy of being, which posits an ontological continuity-amidst-discontinuity between God and creation, see recent publications such as McAleer (2019), Gonzales (2019), and White (ed. 2010).

would like to explore it more thoroughly in what follows, not only because it is an early theological reflection on rhythm which stems from our own African context but also because I believe it could provide some hints on how one can go about engaging theologically with the arts today, including artforms such as hip-hop and rap music. But before turning to *De musica* in the next section, it would be helpful to first make a few brief comments about Augustine himself.

As is well known from his *Confessions*, Augustine undertook somewhat of a stormy journey on his way to embracing the Christian faith he was reared in as a child. Following a rather intemperate youth in Thagaste and Carthage – in regions today known as Algeria and Tunisia – he initially became an ardent adherent of Manichaeism, a religious movement which, in gnostic fashion, propagated an elaborate, dualistic cosmology, where the so-called spiritual world stood in opposition to our material existence. With time, however, Augustine became disillusioned with the teachings of Mani, and after moving to Milan to teach rhetoric and becoming acquainted with the theologian-bishop Ambrose, he found his way back to Christianity (see Versfeld 1990:14–24).⁶ In these events, music – with its rhythmic movements – played a central role (McInnis 2015:212).

Remembering, for example, his first experiences of worship services in Milan, Augustine (1998) writes in words addressed in prayer to God:

How I wept during your hymns and songs! I was deeply moved by the music of the sweet chants of your Church. The sounds flowed into my ears and the truth was distilled into my heart. (p. 160)

It is important to note that when, in this passage, Augustine speaks of 'hymns and songs', he is referring to what was most probably a rhythmic, one-line chant, which the congregation sang-spoke in unison, in different octaves, without the mixing of different pitches.⁷ In light of the theme of the theological day, one can almost say that what moved Augustine was an early 'rap' performed in and by the Milanese church.

Another decisive event in Augustine's conversion story was when – around the time he was first exposed to the worship services mentioned here – he heard a child sing-speak the words, 'Pick up and read, pick up and read', in Latin: '*tolle lege, tolle lege*'. This prompted him – similar to St Anthony of old⁸ – to open a Bible and read Romans 13, where Paul asks

6. For Augustine's description of these events, see the first nine books of his *Confessions* (Augustine 1998:3–178). See also important biographies such as Brown (2000) and Fox (2016). Hans Urs von Balthasar describes Augustine's *Confessions* as follows: '[T]he *Confessions* describes the Christian path of the individual – namely of Augustine himself – from self-alienation from God into self-discovery (a discovery that is ultimately fulfilled eschatologically) in God (*conversio, epistrophe*)'. See Von Balthasar (2021).

7. For a technical description of corporate singing in the 4th-century church see Harrison (2011:27) and Quasten (1983:67).

8. Augustine makes a direct link between him hearing these words and the calling of St Anthony. For more on the role St Anthony's story played in Augustine's Christian awakening, see Augustine (1998:153) and also De Gruchy (2021:64).

of the reader to 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ'. Augustine would relate the events as follows in his *Confessions*:

[S]uddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again 'Pick up and read, pick up and read.' At once my countenance changed, and I began to think intently whether there might be some sort of children's game in which such a chant is used. But I could not remember having heard of one. I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find ... So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit. (Augustine 1998:45)

Again, it was some sort of rhythmic chant – or perhaps, then, rap – that caught Augustine's ear and had a profound impact on his life.

Following these events, Augustine soon enrolled as a catechumen with his mentor Ambrose. This would involve an intense preparation programme for baptism, which he finally received – together with his son Adeodatus – at the Easter Vigil in the year 387 (Augustine 1998:123). And it was while immersed in this rhythm of daily catechism lessons and exercises, accompanied by Scripture reading, prayer, fasting and, indeed, ample communal singing or chanting, that Augustine began – as part of a planned series on the various liberal arts – to work on a six-book study on music, a work which would finally be completed after his baptism when he returned to Africa.⁹ What is thus interesting to note is that – exactly as Augustine was confronted anew with the Christian understanding of the world as a young catechumenate – he also became convinced that music can and should be seen, understood and engaged with theologically, which is exactly what he sets out to do in *De musica*.

De musica

De musica is a unique work – especially in the context of antiquity. By the time it was composed there was, of course, already a long tradition of reflection on music, starting with thinkers such as Pythagoras (see Godwin 1992), as well as Plato and Aristotle (see Stamou 2002). Music also formed part of the core curriculum of the seven liberal arts in which Augustine was trained and which – as mentioned here – he intended to explore in a series of writings (see Clair 2017:25ff; Panti 2020:450). Yet what makes Augustine's six-volume work different to other books on this topic – also by his peers at the time – is that it is solely focused on rhythm. Usual topics like the tuning of string, modes and scales and the spacing of harmonic intervals are not considered at all.

9. In his *Retractions*, written at the end of his life, Augustine described these events as follows: 'At the very time that I was about to receive baptism in Milan, I also attempted to write books on the liberal arts, questioning those who were with me and who were not adverse to studies of this nature, and desiring by definite steps, so to speak, to reach things incorporeal through things corporeal and to lead others to them. But I was able to complete only the book on grammar – which I lost later from our library – and six books, *On music*, pertaining to that part which is called rhythm. I wrote these six books, however, only after I was baptised and returned to Africa from Italy, for I only began this art in Milan. Of the other five arts likewise begun there – dialectic, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, and philosophy – the beginnings alone remained, and I lost even these' (Augustine 1999:21–22).

Indeed, from the first book right up to the sixth, *De musica* is a study dedicated *in toto* to what Augustine calls the 'art of rhythm' (Augustine 2002:159). The reason for this, one soon learns, is that, for Augustine – unlike other thinkers of the time – rhythm is the foundational element of music. His definition of music is, in fact, that it is the *scientia bene modulandi*, [the science of mensurating or measuring well].¹⁰ Augustine sees music as something which – at a fundamental level – has to do with right proportion, that is, with the proper relation of one pulse or beat to another. For him, everything else, including the harmonic qualities of music, is grounded in and stand in service of music's rhythm, which should continually be listened for, or as he writes, 'observed' in and through the sounds reverberating forth (Augustine 2002:172).¹¹

The form that *De musica* takes is that of a teacher – or master (*magister* in the original Latin) – entering into dialogue with a student or disciple (*discipulus* in the original Latin). For the first five books, this interchange primarily focuses on the basics of how rhythm works – that is, on the way rhythm becomes manifest in measured relations, in numerical patterns and proportions. Through the interaction between the teacher and the student, Augustine offers what could be seen as a general theory of rhythmic, a course in Rhythm 101. He initiates the conversation in the first book (the *liber primus*) by offering an exposition of his definition of music mentioned above, focusing on each part thereof: 'science', 'mensurating' and 'well'. The conversation then gradually moves on to how various rhythmic patterns are formed and performed, a topic that is also discussed further in Book 2 (the *liber secundus*). Beginning with the smallest component of rhythm, namely a single beat, the master shows how two of these beats can relate to one another to form a pattern of measured beats, which we call 'feet', which in turn make up the 'meter' of a verse. Some of the feet that are explored include, for example, a 'pyrrhic foot', where there are two unaccentuated or slack beats; a 'trochee foot' where a first accented or stressed beat is followed by an unaccentuated or slacked one; and an 'iambic foot', where a first unaccentuated or slacked beat is followed by an accented or stressed one.¹²

10. The dialogue between the master and the disciple reads as follows: 'Master: Now define music. Disciple: I shouldn't dare to. Master: Well, you can at least test my definition? Disciple: I'll try if you will give it. Master: Music is the science of mensurating well [*modulandi*]. The Master in Augustine's dialogue then goes on to define 'mensuration' as follows: '[M]ensuration is [...] certain skill in moving, or at any rate that by which something is made to move well. For we can't say that anything moves well unless it keeps its measure' (Augustine 2002:172–173).

11. It should be observed that Augustine did, initially, plan to write another six books on melody to follow up this foundational work on rhythm but abandoned the idea because of time restraints. See Augustine (2008:146) where he writes in a letter to his friend Memorius, bishop of Capua (whose son, incidentally, became one of the strongest promoters of the Pelagian heresy): 'I wrote six books on rhythm alone, with the intention – I admit – of perhaps doing another on music [or then, melody], when I should have some hoped for time. But, once the burden of ecclesiastical authority was laid on me, all those sweet delights slipped from my hands ...'

12. Regarding the somewhat strange names that are used for the different feet, the master notes to his student: '[B]ecause the old names are not to be despised and custom should not be lightly violated unless it is opposed to reason, we should use the names of feet the Greeks instituted, now in use among the Latins. And we take them over without inquiring into the origins of the names, for this matter has much talk about it and little usefulness. For in speaking you don't name bread, wood, and stones the less usefully because you don't know why they are called so' (Augustine 2002:172).

As this dialogue continues – also in Books 3–5 (the *liber tertius*, *quartus* and *quintus*) – more complex rhythms are mentioned and explored together with various forms of meter and verse (e.g. ‘those beginning with full feet of their own with no rests interposed in the cyclic return, or with feet not full, followed by a rest’; Augustine 2002:278). Throughout this process, the student is not only introduced to but also invited to reflect on the nature and working of these rhythmic patterns that are – at a fundamental level – all created through the measured combination of stressed and unstressed beats. At first, this appears to be an overly intellectualist enterprise, one that is excessively concerned with mathematical ratios and proportions to be apprehended by the mind. What should, however, not be overlooked during this inquiry into what can be described as the ‘number-traces belonging to time intervals’ (Augustine 2022:324) is the important role that sensory experience, the actual hearing and making of sound, play in the discussion. Repeatedly, when the master wants to illustrate a point about some rhythmic pattern, he recites actual poetry and songs. What is then asked of the disciple is to listen attentively to the rhythmic beats sounding forth so as to pass judgement on what is heard – thus, to follow ‘the ear’s judgement’ (Augustine 2002:254; see also Ward 2022:35).¹³ The rather technical conversation in *De musica* is, accordingly, never divorced from the practice of music, from the sounds ‘we sense’ and which ‘delight us in singing and dancing’ (Augustine 2002:204). For Augustine, the task at hand is to discover by reason, and put into words, what the ‘senses announce’, something which happens at a noticeably physical level (Harrison 2011:126).¹⁴

The first five books of *De musica* are ultimately, then, a deeply experiential induction into the world and working of rhythm with insights which, as contemporary musicologists have shown, remain interesting and relevant until the present day.¹⁵ This is, however, not all that the work has to offer. Following Book 5’s exploration of how verses are formed out of various metrical structures and the feet that comprise them, Augustine suddenly changes gears and embarks on a *theological* consideration of the topic at hand. In Book 6 (the *liber sextus*), the discussions in the preceding books indeed abruptly open up to a doctrinal reflection on rhythm, one that ultimately amounts to a small *summa* of the Christian faith with rhythm at its very core – an astonishing development, as very few, if any, hints were given of such a transition in the previous books.

13. When the master wants to teach his student which feet can be combined with one another, he immediately begins reciting verses out loud to show how the different feet sound together. He says: ‘But you know the ancients judged such feet to be properly combined and they constructed verses composed this way. But, not to oppress you with authority, take a verse of that sort and see if it offends your ear. For if it should not, but rather delight you, there will be no reason for rejecting this combination. And here are the verses I wish you to listen to ...’. The master then continues to deliver – or perhaps we can say sing-speak – verses from Terentianus Maurus’ *De litteris*. The master even, at times, goes on to compose and recite his own verses to illustrate a point. At one stage, after reciting a few lines of poetry, he says: ‘[T]hese verses I was forced to compose on the spur of the moment ... I want to know the judgement your senses passes in the case of these four [lines], too (Augustine 2002:230–231).

14. Augustine’s wording in this regard reads: ‘The senses announce and reason judges [sensu nuntio, indice ratione in the original Latin].’

15. See, for example, the recent study by Wuidar (2021), a leading musicologist in the world today.

In reading this sixth and final book of *De musica* it is seen that one of its central ideas is that the rhythms we experience and identify in poetry and music – such as in the first line of the hymn *Deus creator omnium*, which was written by Augustine’s mentor, Ambrose, and is continually quoted in this section¹⁶ – do not only reside in, for example, material realities, sensory experience, the soul or our memory but reverberate through all levels of creaturely existence. Indeed, by means of the dialogue between the master and his disciple, Augustine shows that every part of creation, from the highest to the lowest,¹⁷ ‘hums and vibrates’ in a rhythmic manner and, in doing so, forms part of – and gives expression to – what he calls the *carmini uniuersitatis*, the ‘hymn of the universe’ (Augustine 2002:355; Ward 2019:5).¹⁸ The insights from the first five books – which were initially only related to actual poetry and song – are thus now expanded to include everything that is (Augustine 2002:333–334).

What is subsequently asked is where this universal hymn, in which all things participate and to which they give expression, comes from. What is the source of the ‘fittingness and agreement’ underlying and giving form to the rhythmic movements of the world (Augustine 2002:345)? The answer the newly converted Augustine – by mouth of the master – gives is, of course, the triune God, which is why the ongoing reference to Ambrose’s hymn, with its declaration that God is the creator of all, is so apt and rhetorically clever (Harrison 2019:42–43). Indeed, for Augustine, all of the seen and unseen rhythms pulsating throughout creation stem from, depend on and point towards the uncreated rhythm of God’s trinitarian life of self-giving love. It is from love and for love that the world was created, and it is this reality which is reflected in and expressed through the rhythms found in and marking the very fibre of our created existence.¹⁹ Yet, as the master continues to show, just because this is the case does not mean that the world is always seen and recognised in this manner. Because of the reality of sin, that is, of misdirected desire and the prideful aspiration to be equal to God (Augustine 2002:345), human beings more often than not mishear, and thereby misconstrue, the proportions of the God-given rhythms resounding throughout creation – something Augustine knew all too well from his own life.

The master explains that instead of viewing – and taking pleasure in – the *carmini uniuersitatis* as something which

16. Augustine often refers to this hymn – which thanks God, the creator of all that exists, for the day that has passed and ends with a striking trinitarian doxology – in his *Confessions*, notably in Book 9 where he recalls how its words helped console him after his mother Monica had died. For an extensive study on Ambrose as hymn writer, and the role these compositions played not only in Milan but also in the church throughout the ages, see Dunkle (2016).

17. In line with the theological–philosophical worldview of the time, Augustine holds to – and further develops – a strong hierarchical view of creation, moving from the material to the immaterial. This framework should, however, be differentiated from the dualistic cosmology of, for example, the Manichaeism he turned his back on. For Augustine, it is exactly because the physical world was created *ex nihilo* by God (and can thus be seen as primordially good), that it can lead – even then by hierarchical steps – to immaterial things, including, ultimately, the uncreated God. See Augustine (1991), Ge (2021), as well as Versfeld (1990:9).

18. This idea of the *carmini uniuersitatis*, the hymn or poem of the universe, would also later become important in the thought of the medieval thinker Bonaventure. See Curtius (1953:545).

19. On account of the importance love plays in Augustine’s theology, he is often called the *Doctor Caritatis*, that is, ‘die leermeester van die liefde [the teacher of love]’, as Versfeld (1982:43) notes.

comes from, participates in and points towards God as its source and end, its different rhythms are often treated as ends unto themselves, in accordance with humanity's selfish desires (Harrison 2006:175, 2019:45). This leads to a distorted sense of rhythm which is not marked – as proper rhythmic patterns should be – by equal, well-ordered relations, as found in the various forms of feet, meter and verse discussed in Books 1 to 5, but by inequality and disproportion, which, in terms of actual music, would 'cause offence to the ear [*offensione aurium*]' (Augustine 2002:263). The 'self' can, for example, be elevated to a lone-sounding – and hence violent – rhythm that is not only oblivious to the reality of God (Augustine 2002:374) but actively seeks to dominate and drown out other rhythmic expressions around it. For Augustine, 'the power to influence the other' after all 'manifests itself as a nightmarish ambition to enslave and imprison' (Guthrie 2000:288). In this regard, the master remarks to his disciple:

[T]he appetite of the soul is to have under it other souls; not of beasts as conceded by divine law, but rational ones, that is your neighbours, fellows, and companions under the same law ... [*The soul*] thrusts out, wishing to attach some to itself or to enslave. (Augustine 2002:289)

In *De musica*, sin is thus directly connected to the all-too-human desire to dominate others – what Augustine later, in *De civitate Dei*, would call the *libido dominandi* (see Harrison 2000:198; Ruokanen 1993:96–100). This causes a demise of the universal ratio so that human beings, unlike the rhythmic patterns discussed in Books 1–5, no longer stand in right relationships with one other nor with God and themselves (cf. Tillich 2012:155).

For Augustine, who would soon begin his journey as a preacher, priest and bishop in Hippo, this reality of discord – marked by wrongful hearing and doing – is, of course, not the end of the story. It is in and amidst the situation of being out of rhythm, of mishearing and stepping outside of the God-given beat of creaturely existence, and of forcing one's own distorted sense of rhythm on others in an attempt to imprison and enslave, that God's providential grace calls and enables us not only to rediscover but also to reembrace the *carmini uniuersitatis* (Augustine 2002:375), the hymn of the universe which – as he would continue to work out in later writings – is reiterated, conclusively, in and through the rhythm of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the Word through whom everything was made (see e.g. Ayres 2001:67–93). In one of the most profound insights in Book 6 of *De musica*, the master tells his disciple that salvation – *salus* (which can also be translated with healing, restoration, flourishing) – should be understood as finding again one's 'proper order in place or time', which is something that needs to happen in relation to 'all things' which were 'made from one beginning' and 'are joined together in charity [that is, love] as one' (Augustine 2002:375). According to *De musica*, salvation – already in this life – thus has to do with getting back in rhythm and becoming who we are called to be within – and in relation to – the larger rhythmic symphony of God's creation. For Augustine, music – as the 'art of mensuring well' – therefore does not merely

help us to better understand the nature of reality; it is something that shows us how salvation looks and feels and how it can be embodied and performed in every moment of our creaturely existence, as we are continually reoriented towards God and neighbour.

On rhythm and doing theology in conversation with the arts

Following the exploration of *De musica* here, we will now – in conclusion – very briefly return to the theological day of the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, with its focus on rap and hip-hop music and plenary contribution by Hemelbesem. It can, of course, be asked what the relevance and implications of Augustine's classic text are in and for this discussion. How does *De musica* help us to think about theology's engagement not only with rap and hip-hop music but also with the arts more generally?

In the first place, I think *De musica* shows us – in a striking manner – that the phenomenon of rhythm that plays a particularly important role in rap and hip-hop music can indeed provide a helpful lens through which to view and thereby reflect on and make judgements about the world around us – also theologically. While, therefore, exploring and analysing the lyrics someone like Hemelbesem utters (which, to be sure, provide rich material to work with as they eloquently verbalise challenging ideas, often relating to complex societal realities), Augustine's ancient text prompts us to listen *even deeper* to the very beats underlying and giving structure to these rap verses, verses which in themselves – while being articulated – display a distinctly rhythmic quality. The reason for this is the following: rhythm – as *De musica* demonstrates – has to do with ratio or proportion, with the way one beat relates to and sounds together with another. As the bedrock of music, rhythm veritably shows us – to use Augustine's definition – *how* to measure and to do so well. By thus heeding and even experiencing with our bodies music's rhythmic make-up – as the master and his disciple do in *De musica* – we are invited and guided to also discern, name and begin to critically consider other relations marking life on Earth, whether between people, nature, things, ideas or a boundless combination of these. And by doing so – by considering anew the various 'rhythmic' relations marking life on Earth, relations forming part of what Augustine would call the *carmini uniuersitatis*, the hymn of the universe – *De musica* furthermore encourages us to ponder how these relations could possibly connect to, illuminate or even give expression to doctrinal ideas such as – for example – creation, incarnation, sin, salvation and so forth.

Even if one does not agree with the theological conclusions Augustine draws in *De musica*, it remains stimulating to see how he deliberately sets out to think about rhythm and an artform such as music in light of Christian revelation and the doctrinal ideas he was receiving instruction in during and after his baptism. For Augustine, with his developing sacramental understanding of the world (see Ayres & Humphries 2015:156–

158), it is clear that Christian theology could not possibly *only* be concerned with the supernatural or transcendent realm but needed to investigate *all that is*, including music. This – I would like to argue – challenges us to also rethink and enlarge theology’s scope and focus in our time, to not merely confine theology to some transcendent and perhaps abstract reality above and beyond the world but to continually explore how it can engage with everyday things, including rap and hip-hop music, from the very depths of the Christian tradition and confessions about God – exactly as Augustine aimed to do (see e.g. Begbie 2018). The way in which this engagement takes place is, however, important. And I think this is the second thing we can learn from *De musica*.

What remains fascinating about Augustine’s text is that he takes five full books trying to understand and make sense of music and rhythm, before – in the sixth book – embarking on his theological investigation. *De musica* is thus not a flimsy and superficial engagement with the topic at hand. It is not as if Augustine is seeking to propound certain theological ideas and then – almost as an afterthought – drapes them beneath a thin curtain of musical terminology. This is not a work of theology with a few shallow musical illustrations thrown in for good measure. No, Augustine takes music seriously – so seriously that he spends five out of *De musica*’s six books in attempting to discern how rhythm works before, ultimately, carefully and even with a sense of hesitancy embarking on his theological analysis.

When we say that theology can – and perhaps should – engage with things such as music, also rap and hip-hop music, the temptation naturally is that it can do exactly what *De musica* warns its readers against, namely becoming a force which seeks to dominate the other. An engagement *between* theology and the world of music can thus easily become an instance of theology speaking *about* the world of music or even theology speaking *over against* the world of music. *De musica*, however, provides a different vision. It demonstrates how – for our engagements with music and the arts more generally to be fruitful and authentic – we first have to hold back on the theology and listen deeply to what others – from outside – are saying. We therefore need to not only continue inviting artists such as Hemelbesem to our faculties of theology but also go to where they are practising their art in the world, so that we can listen and learn and, in doing so, eventually come to offer a theological contribution to the discussion.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

Author’s contributions

M.J.H. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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