Three things a wise judge of music must know

In Book II of Plato's *Laws* the Athenian classifies choral music as an art that is "representational" (εἰκαστική, 667c10, 668a6-7) – a characterization he uses interchangeably with "mimetic" (μιμητική)(667e10-668a7). It is on the basis of this characterization that he rejects the view that music is to be judged by the criterion of pleasure. As he develops this point (667-670), he identified three things that a wise judge of music must know:

So, for each representation (περὶ ἐκάστην εἰκόνα), whether in painting or in music as a whole, doesn’t a wise judge need to have the following three things? [b] One must know first of all, what it is (ὅ τε ἐστι πρῶτον γιγνώσκειν), next how correct it is (ἔπειτα ὡς ὀρθῶς), and then third, how well rendered the particular representation is in phrases, tunes, and rhythms. (ἔπειθ᾽ ὡς εὖ, τὸ τρίτον, εἴργασται τῶν εἰκόνων ἡτίσοιν ῥήμασί τε καὶ μέλεσι καὶ τοῖς ρυθμοῖς) (669a7-b3)

The figure of the wise judge evokes a prevalent concern throughout *Laws* II, which is the task of identifying the choral compositions that are suitable to be performed by citizens in the musical training that is the primary vehicle of their *paideia*.¹ This task is assigned to the elders, members of the Chorus of Dionysus, and the present passage is part of the longer exposition of the nature of their expertise (called "music" 666d-667b) at 667b-671a1. [handout reproduces that passage frm 668d]

The “three things” that such a judge must “have” are presumably the basis on which these musical critics are to arrive at their verdicts. These are ...

¹ As defined at the opening of Book II, *paideia* is the correct nurture of a person’s “pleasures and pains” so that one “hates what one should hate and love what one should love from beginning to end” (653b6-c2; 654a6-7).
My main concern today is with how to understand the “third thing”, but we need to start (as the Athenian does) with the first and the second.

The Athenian’s first step on the way to identifying the “musical expertise” of the Dionysian chorus is to articulate a positive alternative to the view that he has already rejected (657c-659c), namely, that music is fine (kalon) insofar as it gives pleasure. Many things that bring us enjoyment (charis), he points out, also have standards of correctness: in the case of food this is health or nutrition, in the case of learning truth (667b5-c9). Only when there is no such standard of benefit or correctness to a pleasant object or activity is pleasure the criterion of its evaluation (667d9-e9). Since music is one of the representational arts (technai eikastikai), which produces “likenesses” (homoion, 667c10), it is not to be evaluated by the pleasure it gives, but by the accuracy of its representations:

ATH: Now what about the representational arts, which produce likenesses? [667d] When they achieve their goal and pleasure comes along with it, wouldn’t it be most proper to call it enjoyment?
CL: Yes.
ATH: But presumably the correctness in such cases would be achieved, roughly speaking, by equality in quantity and quality, not by pleasure.
CL: You are right.
ATH: So the only thing that would be correctly judged by pleasure is what provides neither benefit nor truth nor likeness when it is [667e] achieved (667c10-e1)

Here the accuracy of the representation is described as “equality” (isotes) – presumably this involves capturing the dimensions of the object imitated in a visual medium (as at 668d-e: “I mean, for example, the dimensions of the body and, if it has parts, their position, number, and proper arrangement, as well as their colours and shapes...”). He restates the point a few lines later in more general terms about
representational art: “For, as we said, correctness of imitation consists in rendering the actual dimensions and qualities of the object imitated” (668b6-7).

Thus we have the “second thing” in our original passage: “how correct it is”. [= beginning of #5 on handout]

Turning now to epistemological considerations, the Athenian draws a conclusion about what a critic must know in order to determine the correctness of a composition.

ATH: Now anyone would agree on this point about music, that all of its compositions are imitations and [c] representations. Surely all poets, audiences, and actors would agree on this?
CL: Certainly.
ATH: So, in order not to misjudge a particular composition, it seems, one must recognize just what it is. Without recognizing its nature—just what it intends, what it actually represents—one will hardly discern whether the intention is carried out correctly or misses the mark.
CL: Hardly indeed. (668b9-c9)

The ensuing illustration (668d-e) makes it clear that “what it is” is the intended object of representation. If one does not know whether a turtle or a tarantula is being represented, one cannot judge how successfully the representation/imitation has been carried out. Thus in order to judge the correctness of a representation, one needs to know the answer to a prior question, what it is.

So we have “the first” thing (which is a necessary condition to knowing the “second thing”. The Athenian now turns [handout #5 continued] to note (by implication- ara) that knowing this “second thing” (whether the representation is accurate) is necessary to answering a further question:

ATH: And if one fails to recognize whether it is correct, will one ever be able to discern whether it is good or bad? (Ὁ δὲ τὸ ὀρθῶς μὴ γιγνώσκων ἄρ’ ἂν ποτε τὸ γε εὖ καὶ τὸ κακῶς δυνατὸς εἶν διαγνώναι). 668d1-3
I'm not expressing myself very clearly here. Perhaps this way of stating the point is clearer. (668d1-3)

Now, how are we to classify that further question (whether it is good or bad)? It is tempting to identify it with the “third thing” in our passage Let us call it the “fourth thing” (provisionally, leaving open whether it is the same as the third), but we will see shortly that this cannot be the case.

One might also wonder whether there is any distance between this additional question (fourth thing) and the second thing. Indeed, the general evaluative question raised about works of arts (#4 handout), was originally articulated as a question about what kind of music is kalon (657c-659c), and has since been articulated as a question about the correctness (orthotes) of music ((655d1, 657b3, c4, 660a8, e8). (And kalos echein and eu echein have been used interchangeably throughout Laws I-II). Thus one might expect, at this point in the discussion (esp since 667b), that the Athenian takes the evaluation of works of arts to be entirely a matter of determining their correctness.

However, the question in the present passage merely presents knowing about a work’s correctness as a necessary condition for answering the question about its goodness or badness. As an indication that the Athenian does not take this point to be immediately accessible to his audience, he notes immediately (missing from handout, continuation of #5 end): “I'm not expressing myself very clearly here. Perhaps the following way of stating the point is clearer” (668d2-3)

The clearer explanation that the Athenian now gives proceeds in two stages. First he illustrates, in the case of visual representations the point already
established above, that if one does not know what is being represented, one cannot judge whether the art work represents it accurately: \textit{[start of long handout]}

ATH: Suppose, in these kinds of imitation, a person did not know what particular body it is. Would he recognize what is correct in the rendering? I mean, for example, the dimensions of the body and, if it has parts, their position \([e]\) number, and proper arrangement, as well as their colours and shapes. Are these things rendered all mixed up? Do you think that a person completely ignorant of what the imitated creature is could make these discriminations?

CL: How could he? \((668d\_e\_)

That is, if one does not know the answer to

(1) what it is

one does not know the answer to:

(2) how correct it is.

The second stage of the explanation changes tacks and asks whether having the answer to (2) is \textit{sufficient} for answering the general evaluative question:

ATH: Now suppose we recognized that the drawn or sculpted figure is a human being, and that all its parts, \([669a]\) colours, and shapes have been captured by the art. Is it necessarily the case that someone who recognizes these things is thereby in a position to recognize whether the work of art is fine, or whether it falls short of beauty in some way?

CL: But then, just about all of us would recognize what is fine in the case of pictures!

ATH: You are quite correct.... \((668e7-669a7)

Clinias’ response is explicitly counterfactual \((πάντες μεν τὰν ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν, ὡς ξένε, τὰ καλὰ τῶν ζῴων ἐγιγνώσκομεν - 669a5-6). Thus he is saying ‘No’ to the Athenian’s question, and the Athenian is endorsing that negative answer. To know whether an artwork accurately represents its object is NOT thereby to know whether the art work is fine. \((E.g.\) to know whether a Rembrandt self-portrait is a
fine work of art is not simply a matter of knowing how accurately it renders the visage of the painter)

The clear implication is that in addition to knowing the answers to (1) and (2), there is a third thing that one must know in order to know the fourth thing: i.e. to answer the general evaluative question. And that is precisely the inference that the Athenian proceeds to draw explicitly (which brings us back to our original passage):

So, for each representation (περὶ ἐκάστην εἰκώνα), whether in painting or in music as a whole, doesn’t a wise judge need to have the following three things? [b] One must know first of all, what it is (ὁ τέ ἔστι πρῶτον γιγνώσκειν), next how correct it is (ἐπείτα ὡς ὀρθῶς), and then third, how well rendered the particular representation is in phrases, tunes, and rhythms. (ἐπείθ᾽ ὡς εὖ, τὸ τρίτον, εἰργασται τῶν εἰκόνων ἡτίσοιν ῥήμασί τε καὶ μέλεσι καὶ τοῖς ρυθμοῖς) (669a7-b3)

So what is the third thing a wise judge of images needs to know in addition to knowing [1] what is being represented and [2] how accurately it is being represented? On the most natural way of reading the text, the “third thing” concerns how well the composer has employed the various musical elements in the composition (“how well worked” it is “in phrases, tunes, and rhythms” (669b1-3; cf. 656c4-5). What counts as being “well worked” in this respect is explained in the following passage (669b5-670b7), which purports to describe the sorts of blunders made by human composers (vs. Muses) and makes specific and repeated mention of tunes, rhythms, and words:

quote 669c3-670a3
This diatribe against musical innovation catalogues a series of increasingly severe deviations from the principle of correct composition that is stated more succinctly (with slight terminological variation) \(^2\) at the end of the paragraph:

They must have keen perception and knowledge of rhythms and harmonies. How else could one recognize the correctness of tunes—which of them should be in the Dorian harmony, and whether the rhythm the poet has attached to a tune is correct or not? (670b2-6)

The Dorian is one of the four harmoniai (“harmonies” or “modes”) discussed at Rep. III 398c-399c (cf. Laches 188d,193d-e), but which are not named or enumerated elsewhere in Laws, even in the discussion of harmony and rhythm in VII, 802c-e. Even if England is right to bracket these phrases as a later gloss not written by Plato, the explanation they provide is surely correct

More to our present purposes, whether a tune (melos) has “correctness” (orthotês, 670b4) is a here construed as a matter of its being “well rhythmmed” (eurhuthmos) and “harmonious” (euharmoston – 670b9), and this requires that it employ the harmony or mode (harmonia) or rhythm that is appropriate to its words or phrases (rhêmasin), and gestures (schêmata).\(^3\) In effect, the requirement is that

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2 The requirement of appropriate harmonies and rhythms is articulated somewhat differently here at 670b2-6 than at 669c3-8: the difference is that here ‘melos’ (tune) is substituted for ‘harmonia’: it is not a composition’s “harmony and rhythm”, but its “tune (melos) and rhythm” that must be appropriate to its words and gestures, as well as to each other. This slight variation reflects the conception of melos as constituted by harmonia, rhythm and logoi (Rep. 398d); any given melos involves a specific harmonia. The mention, in addition, of gestures (schêmata) ensures that the requirement applies not just to song, but to dance as well. On gestures and tunes (or gestures and words) as the material of dance and song respectively, see 654e4-5 and 655a1-2.

3 On rhythms and tunes appropriate to women, men, slaves, etc., see 802c-e. On their relation to different character types, see Rep. 398c-400a and Hatzistavrou 2011: 382-3.
the distinctively musical aspects of the work—harmony and rhythm—be in keeping with its more narrowly representational features—the words and gestures.

Thus it is natural to conclude that the “third thing” is a matter of such internal consistency, which we might call the “integrity” of a work of art. When stated at a level of generality that would apply to any work of representational art (as promised at 669a7-8), the requirement is that the media of representation be consistent with each other and with the object of representation. Nonetheless, this is not how the “third thing” is generally construed by commentators. (Indeed I have yet to find a precedent for the reading I have just given; no doubt I am overlooking something?) Most commentators, by contrast (e.g., England, Saunders, Schöpsdau, and most recently Pelosi and Hatzistavrou: 380-381) construe the discussion of “fitting” harmonies and rhythms at 669b5-670b7 as pertaining to criterion (2)—the representational accuracy of the composition—and they interpret (3) as a moral or ethical assessment of the art work, variously understood to concern its suitability for inculcating virtue (Schöpsdau, England, Mouze 2005: 198-205) or the moral quality of the behaviour it represents (Morrow 314, Stalley 126-7, 129; Pelosi 56-7). However, while I agree that that the Athenian takes the question of whether a work of art is fine to involve a moral or ethical assessment (to be discussed further

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4 On the generality of (3): England would bracket as an interpolation the phrase “with phrases, tunes, and rhythms” (669b2-3; rejected by Schöpsdau), since it articulates the “third thing” in terms specific to music in the narrow sense, while the three things have been introduced as applying to all representational art “whether in painting or in music as a whole” (669a7-8). However, an abrupt shift from generic to specific would not be out of character for the Athenian’s exposition. In any case, if the interpretation of the third thing defended in this paper is correct, it is easy to reformulate at the requisite level of generality.
below), it is a mistake to suppose that criterion (3) expresses that moral requirement. Call the latter the “moral interpretation” of the “third thing”.

An obvious embarrassment faced by the moral interpretation of the third thing is that the long catalogue of mistakes made in musical compositions (669b5-670b7), which follows immediately upon the introduction of that third thing in our original passage (669a-b), does not concern the moral defects of those compositions. Rather, it concerns their failure to use harmony and rhythm as fitting accompaniments to song and dance (cf. 670a1). We are to suppose that having stated the inadequacy of judging a work of art on on the basis of its representational features alone—that is, on the basis of the “first” and “second” things)—the Athenian announces that “the third thing”, its moral adequacy, must also be taken into account, but then proceeds to ignore the question of moral adequacy and to give a lengthy discussion of additional considerations that go into the assessment of (2). Moreover, the Dionysian chorus’ signature expertise in harmonies and rhythms (670b-d) would be irrelevant to the criterion (3) here introduced—even though expertise in the “third thing” is explicitly attributed to them at 670e5-7.

The skill they practice is more exact (παιδευθέντες ἀκριβεστέραν ἂν παιδείαν)..... even than that of the composers themselves. For there is no need for a composer to recognize the third thing, whether the imitation is fine or not (τὸ γὰρ τρίτον οὐδείμα ἀνάγκη ποιητή γινεῖσθαι, εἴτε καλὸν εἴτε μὴ καλὸν τὸ μίμημα). All he needs to know, basically, are harmony and rhythm. These people, by contrast, must know all three, in order to select what is finest as well as what is second. Otherwise, their incantations will never succeed in drawing [671a] the youth toward virtue. (670e2-671a1)
It is reasonable to suppose that that the Athenian intends to be discussing the same “three things” here as in our original passage, 669a-b. In the present restatement of the list, mimêma (which I have translated ‘imitation’) is substituted for “representation” (eikôn) in the original locution – as licensed by 668a6-7— and “fine” (kalon) is substituted for “well” (eu). Now it might appear that in characterizing the “third thing” as “whether the mimêma is fine or not (εἴτε καλὸν εἴτε μὴ καλὸν τὸ μίμημα), the Athenian is in fact endorsing the moral interpretation of the “third thing.” This would involve taking mimêma to be the thing imitated (not, as I have rendered it, the imitation, as at 669e). But this is hardly the obvious meaning of the Greek term. Of course, the Athenian has indicated much earlier in book II that fine song and dance must represent the behaviour of virtuous people (655b2-6, a point to which we will return), there has been no indication so far in our present context that this is what the Athenian has in mind as the third thing. Rather, he has indicated that it has to do with appropriate harmonies and rhythms. [I think rather that the Athenian here is conflating the third thing with the fourth thing; but this supplies no support to the moral interpretation of the third.]

This “moral” interpretation of (3) is nonetheless preferred by commentators as the price of avoiding a variety of problems. For example, it is sometimes supposed that the alternative to the “moral” interpretation of (3) is a narrowly technical reading—as on the translations of Jowett and Taylor—according to which (3) is a matter of how well the words, songs, and gestures in a choral work succeed

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5 LSJ’s entry translates it “anything imitated, counterfeit, copy”, but all the examples are of counterfeits, and classifies the occurrence of the term at (Leg. 669e) as representation.
in representing their intended object (thus Morrow 314n55). On such a narrowly technical reading, (3) would collapse into (2)—which is at odds with the Athenian’s clear message that (3) is an additional consideration not captured by (2).

Schöpsdau, by contrast, supposes that the alternative to the “moral” interpretation is to suppose that (3) concerns the quality of workmanship of the composition (so construed, (3) would be distinct from (2), the work’s strictly representational adequacy). But this alternative, he claims (p. 324), has the unacceptable consequence, given the Athenian’s claim at 670e5 that the poets need NOT know “the third thing”, that the expertise of the poet does not extend to assessing the technical workmanship of poetic compositions. Thus, Schöpsdau concludes, (3) must concern a higher expertise than the poet’s technical expertise.

To assess this set of worries, let us attend to the continuation of our passage (670b8-671a1), where the expertise of the Dionysian musical critics is distinguished both from the competence the trained musical performer and from the expertise of the composers. In contrast with those who have been “drilled at singing to the flute and marching in rhythm” ⁶ the wise judges must be “able to recognize what is and isn’t harmonious and well rhythmed” (γιγνώσκειν τό τε εὐάρμοστον καὶ εὐρυθμόν καὶ μή - 670b9).⁷ They must be “able to follow closely the feet of the rhythms and the notes of the melodies” (συνακολουθεῖν ἐκαστὸν ταῖς τε βάσεσιν τῶν ῥυθμῶν καὶ ταῖς χορδαῖς ταῖς τῶν μελῶν) so that “with a synoptic grasp of harmonies and rhythms (καθορῶντες τάς τε ἀρμονίας καὶ τοὺς ῥυθμούς), they will be able select

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⁶ A phrase that evokes the choral training of the Athenian’s interlocutors (cf. 666d8-10).
⁷ That knowledge of what is euarmoston and eurhythmon is specialized expertise rather than common knowledge is affirmed at Tht. 178d, Rep. 398-400, esp 400d (but compare Protagoras 326b).
what is appropriate” (670d2-5). The passage concludes by contrasting this expertise with that of the composers:

The skill they practice is more exact (παιδευθέντες ἀκριβεστέραν ἢν παιδείαν)..... even than that of the composers themselves. For there is no need for a composer to recognize the third thing, whether the imitation is fine or not (τὸ γὰρ τρίτον οὐδεμία ἀνάγκη ποιητῇ γιγνώσκειν, εἴτε καλὸν εἴτε μὴ καλὸν τὸ μίμημα). All he needs to know, basically, are harmony and rhythm. These people, by contrast, must know all three, in order to select what is finest as well as what is second. Otherwise, their incantations will never succeed in drawing [671a] the youth toward virtue. (670e2-671a1)

The challenge we face is to understand how the composers’ knowledge “about harmony and rhythm” (to de harmonias kai rhuthmou, e6—marked as an imprecise phrase by schedon) differs the expertise that allows the wise judges to discern which songs have appropriate harmonies and rhythms (670b8-c3, 670d1-5). My proposal is that we may understand the difference as follows: the composer’s expertise is in setting words and gestures into harmonies and rhythms, but does not extend to discerning which harmonies and rhythms are appropriate to which words and gestures (witness the mixing and matching decried at 669c3-8; see note ad loc). Thus the composers are unable to perform the task assigned to the wise judges of music: identify which pieces of music are “harmonious (euarmoston) and well rhythmmed (eurhythmon)” (670b8-9). The higher expertise of the these judges will involve not simply discriminating one harmony from another (the Dorian from the Lydian, for example, which a composer might be competent to do), but also discerning the sort of character to which each harmony is appropriate (e.g. that the Dorian is appropriate to courage). The latter discrimination involves knowing that the Dorian harmony replicates the psychic structure of courage (see
note on 669c3-8), an expertise quite distinct from the composer’s knowledge of how to produce a tune in the Dorian harmony (pace Hatzistavrou 2011: 383). To deny such discriminatory expertise to composers is thus not to deny them competence in their craft—pace Schöpsdau p. 324; see note on 669a9-b3.\(^8\)\(^9\)

Thus, contra Schöpsdau, it is perfectly intelligible for the Athenian to distinguish between the composer’s knowledge of harmonies and rhythms (which is how to produce them, that is to set words and gestures into harmonies and rhythms) from expertise as to whether the harmonies and rhythms so employed are appropriate to the words and gestures. On the “integrity” interpretation, it is the latter expertise that pertains to the “third thing” and is the special province of the Dionysian chorus.

The defenders of the moral interpretation of the “third thing” are clearly right in supposing that the Athenian thinks works of art must be evaluated according to moral or ethical criteria. In his earlier discussion of what makes choral music fine, he has concluded:

Now, to avoid going on at great length about all these matters, let us posit the general principle that all the gestures and tunes connected with virtue of soul or of body are fine—whether this is the virtue itself or its representation—while all those connected with vice are the opposite.\(^10\) (655b2-6)

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\(^8\) A different cognitive deficit is assigned to the composers in Book VII, 801b9-c7.

\(^9\) Hatzistavrou’s proposal that the composers know the same things about harmony and rhythm as the wise judges know (2011: 382-3), only less expertly, conflicts with the Athenian’s explicit statement at 670e5 that what the composers need not know, is one of the three things that the elderly judges must know.

Closer to the present context, he has said that the music of concern to him is the sort that is engaged in the serious business of “imitating what is fine” (668a9-b2; see note on 668b2).

So yes, fine choral music must represent the behaviour of virtuous agents, and thus the Athenian does endorse a moral/ethical requirement on fine works of art. But we may still ask which of the “three things” identified in our main passage (669b1-3) expresses that moral or ethical requirement. It seems clear to me that the first criterion as the locus of the moral restriction, for it asks what object is being represented (or imitated) by the work. This has the result that the “first thing” is independently significant, not just a necessary condition for grasping the “second”. The reason why a “wise judge” of music must know “the first thing” (“what it is” that the work represents) is not simply in order to know the second thing (how accurate the representation is), but more importantly, because the answer to that first question will disqualify those works that imitate behaviour and character that is not fine. Thus I submit that it is criterion (1) that expresses the moral requirement on fine music: that the object of representation in fine music must be virtuous behaviour. Criterion (2), by contrast, requires that such behaviour be represented accurately. Criterion (3) introduces a consideration in addition to (1) and (2).

Now it might be objected that the requirement of appropriate harmonies and rhythms is itself a requirement of representational accuracy, on the grounds that different harmonies and rhythms are representations or imitations of different
states of character.\textsuperscript{11} After all, in \textit{Republic}, Plato goes so far as to have Socrates state that the different harmonies and rhythms are \textit{imitations} of particular character types or kinds of life (399a, c, 400a; cf. \textit{Laches} 188d, 193d-e). While the Athenian stops short of making the same claim in Book II, in Book VII he does say that the rhythms and harmonies will be “likenesses” of the soul (\textit{homoiotêta} – a term used for representations at 667d10; cf. c10 ). Thus we might understand what makes a given rhythm or harmony appropriate to a given set of words or gestures as follows.

The \textit{melê} and \textit{schêmata} in a choral performance represent the outward behaviour of a person with a given state of character, while the harmony and rhythm represent or imitate the corresponding state of soul. Thus the particular harmony, rhythm, words, and gestures of a given choral song and dance are appropriate to each other if they represent the same type of character.

If harmonies and rhythms, no less than \textit{mele} and \textit{schêmata}, are representations of character, then one could make the case that both the third and the second criteria for fine music concern its representational adequacy. But I don’t think this is a problem. We can acknowledge the representational aspects of harmony and rhythm and still appreciate why the Athenian distinguishes between the second criterion and the third. We may say that (2) concerns the representational aspects of the work (words and gestures) whose “correctness” is more generally accessible to the ordinary person (parallel to the ordinary person’s ability to judge whether a painting is an accurate picture of an animal – cf. 669a). By contrast, (3) concerns aspects of the work (harmony and rhythm) whose

\textsuperscript{11} The conception of harmonies and rhythms as representations of character is endorsed by Hatzistavrou 2011: 382-3.
representational properties are grasped only by specialized musical expertise. On such a construal the Athenian distinguishes between the second and third items of the competent judge’s knowledge NOT because only the former concerns the representational accuracy of the musical composition, BUT rather because assessing the representational adequacy of harmonies and rhythms (and hence their fit with words and gestures) is a matter of specialized knowledge.

It is an expertise that belongs to the wise critic of music, not to the composer.