

2010

Music: Its Expressive Power and Moral Significance

Sarah Whitfield

Cedarville University, smccoy@cedarville.edu

[DigitalCommons@Cedarville](#) provides a publication platform for fully open access journals, which means that all articles are available on the Internet to all users immediately upon publication. However, the opinions and sentiments expressed by the authors of articles published in our journals do not necessarily indicate the endorsement or reflect the views of DigitalCommons@Cedarville, the Centennial Library, or Cedarville University and its employees. The authors are solely responsible for the content of their work. Please address questions to dc@cedarville.edu.

Recommended Citation

Whitfield, Sarah (2010) "Music: Its Expressive Power and Moral Significance," *Musical Offerings*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.15385/jmo.2010.1.1.2

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings/vol1/iss1/2>

Music: Its Expressive Power and Moral Significance

Browse the contents of [this issue](#) of *Musical Offerings*.

Abstract

The creation and practice of music is tightly wound with human emotion, character, and experience. Music arouses sentiment and cannot be underestimated as a powerful shaper of human virtue, character, and emotion. As vehicles of musical expression, musicians possess the ability to profoundly influence an audience for good or for evil. Thus, the nature of music and the manner in which musicians utilize it creates innumerable ramifications that cannot be ignored. The pervasiveness of this notion is largely attributed to the Greek theorists, who ascribed various emotions and moral implications to particular modes. The prominent Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle affirmed that music contained an intrinsic element that was conducive to the promotion of moral or spiritual harmony and order in the soul. Plato and his contemporaries attributed specific character-forming qualities to each of the individual harmonia, or musical modes, believing that each could shape human character in a distinct way. These ideas inevitably persisted and continue to endure. Theorists throughout history have agreed that music profoundly influences human character and shapes morality.

Keywords

Musical expression, emotion

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/musicalofferings>

 Part of the [Musicology Commons](#)

Music: Its Expressive Power and Moral Significance

Sarah Whitfield
Cedarville University

The notion that music might have moral significance—without reference to anything beyond itself—seems to be a persistent and enduring one (Carr “The Significance of Music,” 113). As a vehicle of expression, music inevitably weaves itself into the fabric of human thought and action. The belief that music can profoundly desensitize, influence, condition, and inspire audiences is not indebted to recent discoveries. Theorists throughout history agreed that music could profoundly influence human character and shape morality.

The pervasiveness of this notion is largely attributed to the Greek theorists, who ascribed various emotions and moral implications to particular modes. The prominent Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle affirmed that music contained an intrinsic element that was conducive to the promotion of moral or spiritual harmony and order in the soul. Plato (and his contemporaries) attributed specific character-forming qualities to each of the individual *harmonia*, or musical modes, believing that each could shape human character in a distinct way.

The various Greek *harmoniai* (musical modes) were scale patterns composed of a specific arrangement of tones and semitones. The names for the various modes derived from particular ethnic tribes and regions, some within Greece, including the Dorians, from which the Dorian mode derives; and the region Locris, from which the Locrian mode derives; and others from neighboring non-Greek regions in Asia Minor, including Lydia and Phrygia, from which the Lydian and Phrygian modes derive. The Greeks associated the unique sound of each mode with a specific temperament and the set of emotions they were said to evoke.

It is important to note that this correlation of *ethos* and music did not manifest itself in a purely theoretical context. In contrast to the church modes of the eighth and ninth century, the Greek modes were less a matter of a theoretical pattern of tones and semi-tones than they were adverbs to delineate a particular sound. When Plato spoke of *harmoniai*, he referred to something that was audible—not “an abstraction diagrammed in a treatise” (Anderson, 25). In a Hellenistic context, the words *Dorian* and *Lydian* described a certain “manner” or “style.” Thus, certain sounds could be described as being in the “Dorian” style. This suggests that when the Greeks thought of modality, they did not have particular scale patterns in mind, but rather distinct musical idioms.

In *The Republic*, Plato assumed that music’s expressive character resembled certain aspects of the inner life and pointed to higher, spiritual realities. Plato

acknowledged the innate psychological and spiritual nature of music, and concluded that because music could arouse and habituate particular emotions, it could also shape the character of its listener. According to Plato, music's highly personal nature gave it the capacity to render propositional truths more persuasive (Bowman, 39). Because music was primarily imitative—it mirrored man's sensual and intellectual life—music could shape thought, action, and perception in powerful ways to which most people were oblivious. Thus, Plato concluded that “education in music is most sovereign, because more than anything else rhythm and harmony find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace...” (Plato, 14).

This capacity made certain that music's ethical effects had to be carefully controlled. The emotional excitement that music afforded could aid in developing the wrong kind of character, making people susceptible to beliefs and actions that are morally bad (Bowman, 42). Plato explored the effects each of the various musical modes had on character formation, and argued for the moral superiority of those that foster self-discipline over those that promote self-abandon. He shunned both the Lydian and the Mixolydian modes, which he claimed promoted sloth and drunkenness. Those “soft and convivial *harmoniai*” (Plato 10), namely, the Ionian and Lydian modes, promoted relaxation and were thus approved by Plato. Purity and simplicity were desired in music, and that which was pleasurable, sensuous, or virtuosic was eschewed (Bowman, 39). Plato believed that the indulgence of pleasure compromised the listener's rational faculties. In a culture dictated by the pursuit of rationality and wholeness, any impediment—be it musical or not—was strictly rejected.

Plato's theories on music shaped the structure of Greek education. The significance (and dangers) attributed to the character forming qualities of each individual *harmoniai* ensured that music played a paramount role in *paideia*. *Paideia* was the process of educating humans into their true form. In a sense, *paideia* was “the complete pedagogical course of study necessary to produce a well-rounded, fully educated citizen” (Tarnas, 29-30). This educational program was devoted to the education of the inner being—of the shaping of virtue and character—and music was considered a primary vehicle of character formation because of its ethical power and ability to form the rational mind.

The persuasive nature of music led Plato to believe that music was too potent to be entrusted to the whims of mere musicians or common people (Bowman, 42). These “mere musicians”—those who occupied themselves with the performance of music and not the theoretical study of its ratios—were not even esteemed as citizens worthy to engage in music. Not every listener's preference counted: only those who were the most educated, the most rational—those who were fully competent, responsible listeners and looked past superficial entertainment to the greater interests of society as a whole. Artistic inspiration likewise had to be informed, disciplined, and rational, for unbridled emotional gratification and mindless pleasure were virtually antithetical to the value of music. Such

stipulations fostered the idea that only cautious philosophers and theorists could concern themselves with music.

Despite the fact that Plato wrote many works concerning the ethical nature of music, his claims may not be a true reflection of mainstream Greek thought (Bowman, 36). It is clear that Plato took the moral implications of the theory a bit more seriously than his contemporaries. Although the philosopher's restrictions and musings on music seem to be offensive, naïve, or antiquated, it would be foolish to dismiss some of the truth in his claims. Plato's beliefs were linked to a far-reaching philosophical system, thus, these beliefs can only be understood in light of the attitudes, assumptions and values that underlie this system (Bowman, 20). Greek education centered on the development of good character and a rational mind. Therefore, the desire for the rational and the simple greatly influenced and informed Plato's philosophy of music.

The importance of the development of character in Greek society also influenced Plato's student, Aristotle. While Aristotle's philosophies somewhat diverge from Platonic thought, his theories also affirmed that music contained representations of emotional feelings. Like Plato, Aristotle thought music to be fundamentally imitative and agreed that music had the propensity to affect the human soul. "There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms," he says, which ensures that "we are affected in a certain manner" (Aristotle, 5). As a tangible expression of intangible realities, music also had the ability to sustain and cultivate moral rectitude. Aristotle states, "rhythms and melody contain representations of anger and mildness and also of courage and temperance and all their opposites and other ethical qualities..." (Aristotle, 5). Music either habituated specific pleasurable notions, which encouraged good character, or unpleasant notions, which facilitated the maturation of immoral character.

Although Aristotle ascribed to the conviction that music was a critical agent of virtue and character formation, for him, pleasure itself need not be so irrational and suspect. Unlike his predecessor, Plato, Aristotle was more trusting of music's seductiveness and sensuality, believing that pleasure could even be beneficial. Music did have ethical implications, but Aristotle believed music could also be celebrated as an agent of pleasure and relaxation.

Nonetheless, Aristotle placed weighty responsibility upon education in music, insisting that only ethical modes be employed in *paideia* and that every student be schooled to delight in music of good ethos. In reference to the role of music in education, Aristotle concluded that music may not have one sole use, but rather a threefold application—one that encompassed instruction, amusement, and the passing of time.

Theorists of the medieval period, drawing from Greek philosophy, also acknowledged that music directly corresponds to human nature. In his treatise, *De institutione musica* (1491-92), the philosopher Boethius dealt amply with music

as a character-forming device. Boethius concerned himself largely with preserving the integrity of ancient Greek ideas, and the influence of Platonic thought is evident throughout his work. This historical stream of thought manifests itself in the first book of *De institutione musica*, which opens with a discussion on moral implications of music.

Boethius acknowledged that each mode had the ability to charm the human spirit and inspire particular emotions. In the eyes of the theorist, the essence of this influence lay in the ability of music to confer unity and harmony to the human soul. Boethius described three kinds of music: *musica mundana*, *musica humana*, and *musica instrumentalis*. *Musica mundana* was as “an all-pervading force in the universe” determining the courses of stars and planets, the seasons of the year and the combinations of elements (Grove, 845). *Musica humana*, on the other hand, was the unifying principle for the human being (Grove, 845). It was that which brought body and soul into harmony, integrating the rational and irrational members of the body into harmonious wholes. Music, then, profoundly permeated every aspect of the cosmos, holding together the very universe and bringing wholeness to human beings.

From these observations, Boethius concluded, “music is so naturally united with us that we cannot be free from it even if we so desired” (Book I, 3). Because music was so closely united with human nature, Boethius believed it to be an important shaper and guardian of virtue. The theorist asserted that music was not only wedded to speculation (theoretical observation), but to morality as well, and that “from this cause, radical transformations in character also arise” (Book I, 2). The explicit leverage Boethius granted to music in regards to the shaping of the human mind cannot be underscored. He concludes, “no path to the mind is as open for instruction than the sense of hearing. Thus, when rhythms and modes reach an intellect through the ears, they doubtless affect and reshape that mind according to their particular character” (Book I, 3)

In his commentary on Boethius’s treatise, translator Calvin Bower insists:

Through music one does come to know truth, but music—and music alone of the four disciplines--- gives pleasure and pain as well as truth. One’s actions can be greatly influenced by music: the calm can be enraged, the enraged can be made calm. Therefore music is not concerned with the investigation of truth, it is related to morality as well. Music is such an integral part of human nature that men and women of all ages and races are affected by it. (Bower, 375)

As the authoritative document on music theory for nearly a millennium, Boethius’s treatise influenced and reflected the medieval musical mind. Boethius

wrote the treatise to expound upon the virtues of the quadrivium—the mathematical disciplines within the liberal arts curriculum. In true Platonic tradition, Boethius thought the aim of education to be directly related to the development of understanding and wisdom as opposed to the technical or practical skill (Bowman, 63). Bower comments on the philosophical context, stating that, “music and other mathematical disciplines [were] thus not part of a philosophy proper as they would be in the Aristotelian tradition, but they [were] rather pedagogical preparations for the ascent to pure philosophy in the Platonic sense of the word” (Bower, 16). The discipline and speculation of music allowed the student to pursue truth in the purest sense.

This theoretical approach fostered the conviction that the actual “doing” of music—the creating and performing of music—was second to speculation as a vehicle that formed the rational mind. Music was not an art, but a science; not meant to be practiced, but speculated. Because music may lead people to either virtue or vice, Boethius exhorted students to study music that is “temperate, simple, and masculine, rather than effeminate, violent, or fickle” (Boethius, i).

Although Boethius’s accounts are not entirely original, forming a direct line from Plato’s theories, their historical influence is undeniable. For centuries the power attributed to music (and the distrust it inspired) would subvert the practice of music and evoke the ideal realm of the abstract. The same sentiments advocated by Plato and Boethius even echo throughout the Renaissance.

The foremost theorists of the fifteenth century, including Gioseffo Zarlino and Paolo Cortesi, all acknowledged the speculative divisions of music, not questioning the cosmic subdivisions constructed by Boethius. The “metaphysical” preconceptions associated with *musica mundana*, *musica humana*, and *musica instrumentalis* thus color the writings of many Renaissance theorists. By this time, however, the role of the music theorist extended beyond the solely speculative stance of the Boethian model. In addition to addressing the nature and power of music and the modal theory, it became imperative for Renaissance theorists to address the principles and implications bound to polyphonic music. The Greek theorists championed the expressive nature of single melodies. Renaissance theorists now had the task of evaluating this expressive power in light of the advancement of polyphony.

Paolo Cortesi, a predecessor of Zarlino, echoes Platonic thought. In addition to publishing Latin treatises on a wide gamut of subjects, Cortesi wrote a handbook of comportment for cardinals entitled *Three Books on the Cardinalate* (Cortesi, 316). Published in the months following his death in 1510, the handbook offers a discussion on the use and effect of music.

Like Plato, Cortesi agreed that because musical modes appeared to “imitate all the habits of morals and all the motions of passions,” (Cortesi, 317), they had the ability to arouse certain emotions and inspire particular sentiments in the listener.

Although he did not condemn music as an instrument of merriment, Cortesi emphasized that music must be sought after to increase knowledge and morality. The author defends his viewpoint by arguing:

It is evident that all the habits and motions of the soul are found in the nature of the modes, in which nature the similarity to fortitude, or temperance, or anger, or mildness is exhibited, and it can easily be observed and judged that the minds of men are usually brought to those motions just as they are excited by the action of the modes. (318)

Cortesi implies an interconnection of harmony and the human soul by highlighting the psychological sway of music. This relationship reverberates with Plato's notion of the "music of the spheres," and once again, testifies to the persistence of Greek thought.

Gioseffo Zarlino's first treatise on polyphonic writing, *Istitutioni harmoniche*, published in 1558, bears witness to the range and depth of his historical reading and the prevalence of the belief that music could indeed hinder or enhance moral character. Zarlino offers a thorough discussion of the nature of harmony and its intricate relationship to the soul. Of harmony, he says, "It is this that joins together the rational parts of the soul, and keeps the rational part united with the irrational" (Zarlino, 297). Zarlino's statement echoes the idea of Boethius's *musica humana*: human music, created by the concord of the spiritual and corporeal natures and the reconciliation of the rational and irrational natures. The unification of these opposing natures created harmony in the soul, and when this harmony was undone, the soul fled to darkness and immorality.

Although Zarlino's musings on *musica humana* are more related to the philosophical realm than that of the audible and practical, they are irrevocably wedded to the Greek and Boethian theories that understood music to be an ideal shaper of harmony, character, and morality. Reiterating Plato's theories concerning music and the spiritual realm, Zarlino acknowledges that "music, beyond merely raising our spirits, leads man back to the contemplation of celestial things and has such power that it perfects everything it is joined to. Those people who are gifted in music are truly happy and blessed" (Zarlino, 297). Music then, not only had the ability to raise morale, but also acted as a guiding force that informed the thoughts of man, drawing him to closer to the spiritual realm and to physical wholeness. Furthermore, because music roused the contemplation of spiritual dominion, it was inevitably believed to shape morality.

Composers and theorists of the Baroque period sought a return to the expressive power of music championed. Drawing from the Greek theorists, Baroque composers were united by an underlying faith in the expressive power of music and its ability to move "the affections." Following the ideas of ancient Latin and

Greek orators who believed that the use of certain modes of rhetorical influence could sway the emotions, or “affections” of their listeners, late Baroque composers believed that music too was capable of arousing particular sentiments, and that by utilizing a particular musical device, certain involuntary emotional responses could be evoked in the listener.

This philosophy, known as the Doctrine of the Affections, became a guiding aesthetic for Baroque composers. “Affections,” however, were not equated with emotions. Lorenzo Giacomini, a poetry critic from the sixteenth century defined an “affection” as “a spiritual movement or operation of the mind in which it is attracted or repelled by an object it has come to know” (Palisca, 4). Affections were the result of an imbalance in the spirits and vapors that continually flow throughout the body. Those spirits that were thin and agile disposed a person to a joyous affection; those vapors that were impure inspired sorrow and fear. Both external and internal sensations could stimulate the body to alter the state of the spirits. This activity was known as the “movement of the affections,” and the resulting state of ‘imbalance,’ as it were, was known as the affection (Palisca, 4). The affects, then, could be adequately described as rationalized states of passion. These theories—the desire to impose a system of order upon human emotional responses—were byproducts of an age of rationalization.

The mechanics behind the view of the affections perpetuated the belief that music not only could, but was obligated to move the affections. Thus the arousal of a particular affection became the primary objective of music in the late sixteenth century. Specifically composers and theorists of the late eighteenth century advocated a unity of affections—that a single piece or movement should only encompass one affection, and argued that the affection of the text must be reflected in its musical setting through an appropriate choice of key and a carefully crafted melody. The motivic nucleus of such compositions, known as the *intentio*, was seen not merely as a representation, but as a tangible expression of a particular affect. For example, the *lamento bass* (a bass line descending by half steps) was seen as a perceptible expression of sadness, while a sequence of rising thirds implied euphoria. The doctrine is spelled out explicitly in numerous theoretical writings—the most familiar of these promulgated by Johann Heinichen and Johann Mattheson—and is substantially manifested in the pieces of the time.

Even more contemporary scholars remain impacted by the persistence of Greek thought. Anny von Lange, author of *Man, Music, and the Cosmos* (1992), affirms that “even today, music—given a good performance—has the power to awaken the soul of earthly man to his higher nature” (15). Music, once again, points man to higher spiritual realities, uniting him with the cosmos, and awakening his soul to commune with the harmonic nature of the universe. Other scholars move beyond the spiritual realm, approaching music from a more aesthetic and practical standpoint. Frederic Louis Ritter, composer and music historian of the nineteenth century, professes that “even one of them (the arts) possesses more or less, its moral, refining, and ennobling qualities; every one of them can also be made the

vehicle of demoralization, or to serve frivolous purposes...its influence upon man's mind is thus ennobling, strengthening, elevating" (Ritter, 9-10). Ritter, recognizing the philosophies endorsed by the Greek theorists, agrees that the arts cannot exist outside the bounds of moral implications.

The creation and practice of music is tightly wound with human emotion, character, and the overall tapestry of human experience. Music arouses sentiment, whether it evokes the intended sentiment or not. Thus, music cannot be underestimated as a powerful shaper of human virtue, character, and emotion. Musicians possess the ability to profoundly influence an audience. The nature of music and the manner in which musicians utilize it ensures innumerable ramifications that cannot be ignored.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Warren D. *Ethos and Education in Greek Music: The Evidence of Poetry and Philosophy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966.
- Aristotle. "Politics." *Source Readings in Music History*. Ed. Oliver Strunk and Leo Treitler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959. 23-34.
- Boethius, Anicius M. S. *Fundamentals of Music*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Bower, Calvin M. "Boethius's 'The Principles of Music:' An Introduction, Translation, and Commentary." Ph.D. diss. George Peabody College for Teachers, 1966.
- . "Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus." *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. London: Macmillan Publisher Limited, 1980, 844-845.
- Bowman, Wayne D. *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*. New York: Oxford, 1998.
- Carr, David. "The Significance of Music for the Promotion of Moral and Spiritual Value." *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 14.2 (2006): 103-117.
- . "Music, Meaning, and Emotion." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62.3 (2004): 225-234.
- Cortesi, Paolo. *Three Books on the Cardinalate*. *Source Readings in Music History*. Ed. Oliver Strunk and Leo Treitler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966. 316-321.

- Haweis, Rev H. R. *Music and Morals*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Isidore of Seville. "Isidore Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum Sive Originum Libri XX, Book Three." *Source Readings in Music History*. Ed. Oliver Strunk and Leo Treitler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, 149-155.
- James, Jamie. *The Music of the Spheres: Music, Science, and the Natural Order of the Universe*. New York: Grove Press, 1993.
- Palisca, Claude V. *Baroque Music*. Ed. H. Wiley Hitchcock. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991.
- Plato. "The Republic." *Source Readings in Music History*. Ed. Oliver Strunk and Leo Treitler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966, 9-19.
- Ritter, Frederic L. *History of Music, in the Form of Lectures*. New York: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1876.
- Tarnas, Richard. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that Have Shaped our World View*. New York: Ballantine, 1991.
- Von Lange, Anny. *Man, Music, and the Cosmos*. Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1992.
- Yob, Iris M. 2006. "Response to David Carr, 'The Significance of Music for the Promotion of Moral and Spiritual Virtue.'" *Philosophy of Music Education Review*. 14.2 (2006): 209-213.
- Zarlino, Gioseffo. "Insitutioni harmoniche." *Source Readings in Music History*. Ed. Oliver Strunk and Leo Treitler. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966. 293-299.