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Abstract

The Ancient Greek doctrine of ethos attributed ethical powers to music and claimed that music could affect character. These ideas seem far-fetched or mystical if Greek music and culture are not understood. However, a short study of the nature and use of music in Greek culture reveals the roots of the doctrine of ethos. Music in Ancient Greece was an integrated art form that permeated society and embodied cultural values. Greek philosophers recognized the power and influence of music in their society and developed the doctrine of ethos. Although most of the major philosophers believed that this ethical influence was a reality, they disagreed over the process by which it worked and the extent to which it affected people. Each philosopher developed his own specific theories about the effects of music and its proper forms and uses. Although Western music and culture have changed, the doctrine of ethos still holds significance as a piece of Western musical heritage and a model for the examination of music in society.

William Shakespeare said that music has the power to soothe the savage beast. David played the harp to calm King Saul's evil spirit. Mermaids lulled sailors to their deaths with songs of enchantment. Throughout history, the effects of music have fascinated people of all cultures. Even in the present day, there is a widespread interest in music therapy and a large market for "therapeutic" music recordings. The Greek culture had its own musical ideas. In fact, the Greek philosophers expanded their theories beyond the soothing powers of music to the ethical powers of music in their doctrines of ethos. Their musical ideas were perhaps more expansive than any that have been presented to western civilization since then, and might seem almost far-fetched or unbelievable. They must be understood, however, in the context of their culture. The nature and uses of music in Greek society led philosophers to develop doctrines of ethos that, though different in explanation and emphasis, attributed ethical power to music.

Several factors gave music its importance in the ethical doctrines of Greek philosophers. The most basic but perhaps most important factor was the nature of music itself. Although purely instrumental music was performed occasionally, the majority of music incorporated words and motions, as well. In fact, "the complete combination of poetry, melody, and dance . . . was the ideal type of music as well as the predominant type. . . wordless music was regarded as inferior" (Lippman 52-54). This combination of words, music, and dance created a much fuller expression than any of those art forms alone. In addition, they were united by rhythm; rather than each form having its own rhythm, the rhythm of the words, music, and dance were identical. This created music with a "single rhythmic expression" and a "remarkably definite physical nature"

(Lippman 54). Music was not just rhythm, melody, and harmony alone, but an integrated, unified art form that included words and motion.

This musical form was one factor that brought philosophical attention to music. Since music also involved words and motion, it could make very deliberate, powerful statements. Philosophers wanted that power to be used productively and ethically.

Another factor that gave music its place in ethical philosophies was its widespread presence throughout Greek society; music possessed great influence because it was used extensively. The Greeks incorporated music into every aspect of society and daily life, from religious rituals to private ceremonies to public events. A form of musical poetry, and perhaps dance, as well, existed for almost every activity or tradition.

Greek religion used this integrated type of music in a large number of rituals. One of the earliest uses was in the *dithyramb*; this form of worship of the god Dionysus combined instrumental music, choral singing, and dance. In the early years of Greek history, the dancing and singing was frenzied and the ritual orgiastic. By the 6th century B.C., the dithyramb had tamed and developed into an organized form of worship, with trained choruses, composed music, choreography, and a place in the annual theatre festivals (West 16-18 and Butler 3). Many other religious rituals involved poetry, music, and a sort of choreography. The Greeks often worshipped their gods with processional hymns or *prosodia*; these were sung at festivals by groups of men and woman carrying flowers, sacred emblems, and sacrifices to the gods. Often, the processions were formal and showy and might have been accompanied by other dancers and chorus singers (West 14). The *prosodia* was a recognized form of religious poetry for which many poets composed and even received rewards at festivals (Symonds 292 and West 15). The

religious integration of words and music also occurred in the Greek *paeon*, a sung prayer. These prayers varied in length and were sung both on private occasions, such as dinners or weddings, and on public ones, such as festivals or battles (West 15).

In addition to religious rites, lyrical and musical poetry were important for private events. Marriage festivals, for example, used a special kind of lyric poetry called the *hymeneal*, which was sung during the wedding ceremony (Symonds 292). After the wedding, the groom took the bride to his house, accompanied by dancers, instrumentalists, and the singing of another *hymnaeum* (West 21). Another common private event, the banquet, involved the participation of guests in a drinking song called the *skolia*; along with the accompaniment of a hired lyre player or piper, the guests took turns singing something—a hymn, a commentary, a piece of advice, anything they wished—or continuing what had been sung by the previous singer (West 25-26).

Lyrical music was integral to public events, as well. In theatres, music was often used throughout an entire play, combining dramatic action with poetic dialogue, dancing, and singing. Some parts of the drama might be chanted in recitative or sung to accompaniment. Music was especially important in the function of the chorus, whose purpose was to help the audience understand and relate to the action and plot of the play. “The singing, recitative, and dancing of the chorus as they delivered choral odes helped to establish the proper mood. . .” (Butler 59).

Music and poetry were also highlighted and important to the public in the form of odes, called *epinikia*, sung in honor of the victors at public games. These were sung as the victor was crowned, when he returned home, or at the celebration reception in his home. A poet, along with his trained band of singers and musicians, would stand by the

altar to the victor's god and offer "prayer, praise, and admonition mingling with the fumes of intoxicating poetry" (Symonds 299). Competitors aspired to win so that they could enjoy the prestige of this musical-poetical award. In addition, sometimes the music itself was rewarded; there were valuable prizes for singers and instrumentalists at games. Some composers even wrote odes for the victorious singers. The high value the Greeks placed upon this reward showed how greatly they valued their form of music. It also illustrated the great extent to which music was incorporated into Greek life. This was one of the compelling causes for the development of doctrines of ethos; the Greek philosophers realized the influence that resulted from this widespread incorporation and believed that it was an ethical influence, as well.

In addition to the form of Greek music and its place in society, the educative intent behind all music in Greek culture was another reason that philosophers attributed ethical powers to music. "The motif of moral instruction, intimately allied to music, [ran] through the entire history of Greek poetry" (Lippman 63). Every type of lyrical poetry aimed to teach, although "the precise function varie[d] with the genre" (63). The religious paeans, for example, revealed the gods and taught devotion. The epic poems praised heroism and action. An entire, separate genre catalogued maxims. No matter the type of lyrical-musical poetry, it taught a moral lesson (Lippman 57-58). The philosophers recognized the educative intent behind music as another reason that music had the power to convey ethics.

With this ideal of music as a tool for moral education and the incorporation of music into so much of daily life, Greek music—in its integration with lyrical poetry—portrayed and established cultural values. These cultural values, in turn, were "embodied

in words, dance, and melody, becoming the basis of specific musical genres . . . with particular ethical natures” (Lippman 51-52). This, ultimately, explains the ethical power that philosophers attributed to music. The form of Greek music, its use in society, and the moralistic ideal behind it combined to lead philosophers to a belief in the ethical force of music.

Although most of the major Greek philosophers believed that this ethical influence existed, they disagreed over the process by which it worked and the extent to which it affected people. Some only developed theories involving the effects of different modes, rhythms, or instrument types. Others, such as Plato, constructed complex theories that considered these factors but expounded further into critiques of society, education, or musical practice.

Many ethical theories of early philosophers consisted of assigning ethical qualities to various musical components. Pindar, a fifth century musician and poet, associated “an ethos of particular solemnity to the Dorian mode” (Anderson 35). Other lyric poets made “programmatically assertions that a certain mode [was] best for a particular purpose” (West 246).

The doctrine of ethos became more complex, however, with the number theory of the Pythagoreans, in the 5th century. Their number theory, which was explained in a treatise by Philolaus of Tarentum, significantly influenced later philosophers. He asserted that number and truth were in “close natural union” and that the “cosmic force of *harmonia* interrelated the disparate elements of the cosmos and enabled men to grasp reality” (Ethos 1). From this theory, he drew the belief that the soul was a kind of harmony, made up of a “blending and combining of opposites” (Anderson 38). The

character or ethos of a mode, according to Philolaus, originated from the proper ordering of the intervals (38). Other followers of Pythagorean doctrine, presumably using number ratios, supposedly classified and used music according to the different effects, such as rousing or calming, that it produced (West 246).

The effect of the Pythagorean ideas can be seen in the theories of Damon, an Athenian philosopher of the late 5th century, who developed the first extensive theory of musical ethos. He named and catalogued a set of modal scales, describing their notes, rhythms and qualities. He also commended and condemned different rhythms and tempi.

Damon's most influential theory of ethos, however, came from his belief that dance and song arose from motions of the soul (Damon 1). In his treatise, he stated the primary tenet of all Greek musical ethics, that "liberal and beautiful songs and dances create a similar soul, and the reverse kind create a reverse kind of soul" (Anderson 39). According to this theory, music creates motions and patterns in the soul that mirror the quality of the music. Thus, the notes "mold through similarity a nonexistent ethos in children and in those already advanced in age and bring out a latent ethos" (Damon 1). For this reason, Damon maintained that music should portray courage, moderation, and justice (Anderson 39). Through this imitation, similar motions would arise in the soul and produce the same qualities in those playing, singing, or listening to the music. Since music, according to Damon, possessed this power, it possessed a large potential for either good or harm to Greek culture. Damon expressed this in another famous and influential statement: "Musical styles are nowhere altered without (changes in) the most important laws of the state" (Anderson 41). He believed this so firmly that he published an essay

addressed to the Areopagus Council, the Athenian assembly responsible for judicial functions and public morality, arguing that it was the duty of the state to regulate music and music education (West 246). Damon's views about the nature of the soul, the power of imitation, and the responsibility of the state influenced later Greek philosophers, who rejected some of his theories and adopted and integrated others.

Aristophanes, the 5th century Greek playwright, agreed with Damon's concern about changes in musical forms but disagreed with his call for the state to control music. Both Aristophanes and Damon attacked the 5th century increase in use of a *dithyramb* form that constantly changed modes rather than adhering to one. This incessant modulation, they believed, prevented the establishment of any definite ethos.

Aristophanes also disapproved of the change in choral music for theatre, where composers had begun to use more than one note per syllable; he claimed that it resulted in an indistinct text and mixed idioms that should have been kept separate. In addition, he condemned the disassociation of text from music that occurred with the rise of purely instrumental music, which was designed to display instrumental virtuosity. Aristophanes believed that all of these 5th century movements led to meaningless, wasteful, and confused music (Anderson 58). He shared these concerns with Damon, who first developed them, and Plato, who agreed with Damon to a great extent, as will be shown later.

However, Aristophanes strongly disagreed with Damon's assertion that the state should regulate music to prevent the distortion that was occurring. He believed that free, creative genius, if guided by morals, was sufficient for establishing ethos; state restrictions, on the contrary, would only cause a "substitution of synthetic dogma for the

genuine expression of moral experience” (Anderson 62). In addition, Aristophanes saw no value in the theoretical classification of modes and rhythms; they were tools of enjoyment rather than ethos (62). These beliefs were crucial differences between his philosophies and Damon’s.

Aristophanes’ theories were also drastically different from those of Plato, who both expanded and opposed Damon’s ideas. Of all the Greek philosophers, Plato created the most extensive, abstract, and involved doctrine of ethos. His doctrine was based primarily on the theory that music conveyed ethos through *mimesis*, or imitation. Like Damon, Plato believed that “rhythm and attunement [melody] are what most penetrate the inner soul and grasp it most powerfully” (West 248). This penetration of the inner soul occurred through imitation. Music imitated the ethical qualities of the person or subject it portrayed. As a result, because the motions of music and the motions of the soul were so similar, the imitation in music created an imitation in the soul, as well. In other words, the soul developed the qualities of the music to which it was exposed.

Since music possessed this power for good or evil, Plato believed that it must be carefully controlled. He proposed restrictions that aimed to ensure that music would be an ethical force, rather than an immoral or destructive one. One of these restrictions dictated which subjects were appropriate for poetry. “The content of epic poetry must not lead to fear of death and so prevent the development of courage; it must not tell of the weeping of famous men; nor must the gods be represented as lamenting” (Lippman 70). He also put restrictions on the choice of modes, accepting only the Dorian and the Phrygian. These two, he believed, imitated temperance and courage; the other modes were too sorrowful and relaxed (71). The aulos, a popular wind instrument, was also

excluded; its capacity for modulation made it too unsettling. Plato did not want modulation or innovation. “In all musical matters he commended singleness, simplicity, and universality” (Plato 1). Plato believed that virtue was simple; to portray virtue, therefore, music must also be simple. This focus on simplicity meant that musical theory and ability were not important to him. He spent very little time studying the theoretical aspects of music. This made his approach significantly different from that of Damon, who was a theorist and worked with modes and rhythms extensively. Plato was solely concerned with the ethical aspects of music.

This concern led him to exclude elements of music that the general population thought important. He did not believe, for example, that pleasure was a significant consideration. Pleasure was the result of habit—a person enjoyed the music to which he or she had become accustomed. Thus, a person might enjoy music that was actually harmful to them (Anderson 69). Pleasure could only be used as a criterion by those who took pleasure in virtue. The rest of the population must be trained by habit to appreciate the ethical music (Lippman 80). In addition to pleasure, Plato dismissed and even condemned the instrumental virtuosity that had become popular in society. The ethical power of music came from its integration with words and motion. Music that was purely instrumental lost this power. He spoke against complex music, as well, because it involved “opposed tendencies which either mix different characters or obscure the imitation of virtue” (Lippman 81). Plato wanted nothing to interfere with the sole educational goal of conveying ethics.

Aristotle, Plato’s pupil and the next philosopher with extensive musical theories, differed greatly from Plato in this respect. Although Aristotle shared some of Plato’s

ideas, he disagreed with him in many respects and expanded far beyond Plato's restrictions. Aristotle agreed that the power of music to portray ethos came from imitation; he stated that "like attitudes arise from like activities," (Anderson 113). He even proceeded further to say that the elements of music—rhythm, melody, and dance—were "in themselves natural imitations of character, emotion, and action" (Lippman 140). As a result, playing or listening to music with a certain ethical nature produced that nature in the performer or listener. In addition, since it was the music itself that held the ethical qualities, he declared that purely instrumental music could portray an ethical character "even in the absence of a text, owing to the rhythms and melodies themselves" (Anderson 125). This was a noteworthy contradiction to Platonian doctrine.

Aristotle differed from Plato most significantly, however, in the purposes that he established for music. In addition to educating, which was the only purpose Plato allowed, Aristotle declared that music was also useful for entertainment and the purgation of emotions. He accepted the public performances that Plato rejected. In addition, he declared all of the modes acceptable for discriminating use. The "active" and "passionate" modes, he said, should be used for professional performances. He claimed that "those who compete before an audience . . . must be allowed to use the sort of music which suits their listeners, seeing that everyone enjoys what is naturally suited to him"(Anderson 139). The "ethical" modes should be used for education and the cultivation of ethos; even for these purposes, though, he advocated the use of a mode suited to the present nature of those being trained, rather than one chosen with an ideal in mind (141). Accepting all of the modes was also useful for Aristotle's theory that music could be used to purge the emotions—a function he called *katharsis*. He believed that an

emotional state could be relieved by rousing the same sort of feeling through music (Aristotle 1); the passionate, enthusiastic modes, for example, could be used to calm active audiences (Lippman 130). Thus, Aristotle expanded the uses of music, while still upholding the doctrine of ethos.

Although exact theories and reasoning differed, the Greek philosophers championed the power of music to portray ethical characteristics and create ethical natures. They developed extensive, complicated theories about the process of conveying ethics and the proper use of those ethical powers. A short study such as this leaves those in-depth ideas unexplored, providing only a basic explanation of Greek musical culture and the general ideas of the major philosophers. However, even a brief investigation is enough to demonstrate that the ethical theories of music were founded upon and grew from Greek music and culture; without this basic understanding, the doctrine of ethos might seem fanciful or idealistic. On the contrary, the ethical study of music holds value yet today. A study of the doctrine of ethos turns the inquiry back upon present day music and its forms in society. Perhaps the uses and effects of modern music have been overlooked and need to be put through rigorous examinations like those conducted by the Greek philosophers. Even without direct musical application, the intensity of ethical and societal scrutiny in the doctrine of ethos is valuable for any time period and civilization.

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