

*Term Essay for the Course HUM-201B
Major Works of Literature - Myths and Archetypes*

by

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What is the role played by Music and Musical Instruments in Ancient Greece?

Without question, Ancient Greek culture is the fundamental basis of Modern Western Culture. At the time they were so advanced that even at the 17th century's innovative environment, physics and natural sciences were still referring to the works of Pythagoras, who had lived almost 2000 years ago. Also much similar to science, they were even able to cultivate the roots of modern philosophical thought. It is widely accepted that the entire western philosophical structure was built upon the arguments of Aristotle and Plato. Of course, this advancement was reflected upon music and their spiritual life. My claim in this essay is that for Ancient Greeks, music was not a mere enjoyment tool, nor a scientific instrument but a sacred and profound practice which had a tremendous capacity to express spirituality and communicate with what is unknown and what is in its essence primordial.

Plato was extremely fond of music. He understood the power of music, and most probably he inherited the idea from Pythagoras that music could be a unique and potent

instrument to adjust and tune the inner workings of the human soul. Plato studied the works of Pythagoras extensively and later on in his life; Plato was able to obtain one of Pythagoras's original books. According to Plato, Pythagoras was too searching answers through music, and he found out that Pythagoras's philosophical ideas were often interwoven with music and physics. Plato was very much influenced by Pythagoras's ideas, and we know that Pythagoras used music, as an instrument to understand rules of the universe and prove his theories. However, Plato implemented the ideas of Pythagoras more to the social sphere and moral values. Plato turned against Pythagoras in certain senses, for example, he believes that Pythagoreans are in error because they investigate music like astronomers study the stars or how an instrument works in a mathematical sense. He adds on to his argument by implying that Pythagoreans are missing the whole picture by not giving the proper attention to the question of why harmonious relations of different musical styles trigger our emotions to different directions. Of course, this problem might have been answered to a certain extent with the basic knowledge of physics and musical knowledge. For example, tonic and a dominant relation of notes can be described as ratios 1 to 1.5, and these numbers are symmetric, so naturally, it is pleasing to our ear rather than the inharmonic 1:3424 to 0.5913 ratio. Plato sees everything with a much broader perception. For example, he was able to examine the make a metaphorical distinction between philosophical thought and spiritual principles about the tightness and relaxedness of the strings of an instrument. In his book Republic, he asserts that: "Of the harmonies I know nothing, but I want to have one warlike, to sound the note or accent which his cause is failing, and he is going to wounds or death or

is overtaken by some other evil, and at every such crisis meets the blows of fortune with firm step and a determination to endure; and another to be used by him in times of peace and freedom of action, when there is no pressure of necessity, and he is seeking to persuade God by prayer, or man by instruction and admonition, or on the other hand, when he is expressing his willingness to yield to persuasion or entreaty or admonition, and which represents him when by prudent conduct he has attained his end, not carried away by his success, but acting moderately and wisely under the circumstances and acquiescing in the event.”. Along these lines it is possible to see his point. He considers music and harmony as highly functional tools, but he firmly suggests to use them in service of higher purposes such as spiritual and virtuous development of children and I sincerely believe that this kind of understanding of music should maintain for individuals to progress and explore new dimensions for new cultural values.

Music had a big part in Ancient Greek philosophical thought and as well as in their social life and religion. According to William McNeil (2008), in his book *Dance and Drill* he says: “Dionysian and Orphic worship spread around the shores of the Aegean. Their ceremonies also provoked ecstasy, thanks to the combined effect of music, dance, and wine.”. It is also possible to use Homer’s *Odyssey* to see the overall picture of the ideal Ancient Greek society. In his book, we always see the use of music in a social context such as feasts and competitions. In one instance, in *Odyssey*, poet, and musician Demodocus sings with his harp at the feast, and Odysseus requests a song about the Trojan war. At the end of his song, Odysseus cries, and they urge him to stop the song

since it isn't a pleasurable song and it also made him sad. We can see from these lines that singing and music had a positive effect on Ancient Greeks and they used it as a complement to social gatherings. We also know that *Odyssey* is a poem and it is most often performed by a reader and complementary by musicians.

The religious aspect of music was also essential for Ancient Greeks. In Hesiod's *Theogony*, we get an insight with the connection between music and the Greek gods with these lines: "From the Muses, and far-shooting Apollo are singers and guitar-players across the earth, but kings are from Zeus. Blessed is he whom the Muses love. From his mouth, the streams flow sweeter than honey. If anyone holds sorrow in his spirit from fresh grief and is dried out in his heart from grieving, the singer, servant of the Muses, hymns the deeds of men of the past and the blessed gods who hold Olympus and right away he forgets his troubles and does not remember a single care. Quickly do the gifts of the goddess divert him." It is easy to see that music has a healing effect on the troubled heart and for this purpose gods themselves come down and sing those tunes with care.

Ancient Greek music was often called by Plato, *mousike* (music) in which it is derived from the phrase "art of Muses". Even this derivation points us that music ascends to the higher spheres of spirituality. In my opinion musical ethos of Ancient Greek can be found indirectly in the ideas of the earliest philosophers of Ancient Greeks. For example, Pythagoras used the word "kosmos" in his philosophy extensively, and it meant "all," without the void of chaos and nothingness. Modern word "universe" also comes from the

word “Kosmos”. The word “harmony” comes from “Harmos” which it essentially means joint and concord. Maybe it is possible to imagine and explore further, by binding these two concepts, harmos and kosmos in order to understand the vast and ever-changing universe.

Carl Jung’s concept of collective unconscious can be implemented in this context for further exploration of this topic. According to his theory, Jung argues that collective human psyche is modulated by the instincts and also by the archetypes. We know that in Ancient Greek, music was most often played with lyrical poetry. The central subject of these stories are gods and mythological figures. In my opinion, for the case of spiritual matters and otherworldly feelings to be transmitted via an artwork, lyrics can push-forward semiotic and linguistic reality to only a certain extent. So for this almighty message to be transmitted and also to enhance the message, music played a role of catalyst for lyrics to point to the realm of abstract archetypes.

Bibliography:

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