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## Platonic and Confucian Theories on Music-Parallels and Differences

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# **Platonic and Confucian Theories on Music-Parallels and Differences**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
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by

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Dr. Dillon

Axial Age

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### Platonic and Confucian Theories on Music-Parallels and Differences

Throughout the course of human existence, music has been a constant that has evolved alongside man. There is not a single recorded culture that did not have music in some form or another, and to this day music continues to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers.<sup>1</sup> This fact can be seen in modern times in the commercial success of foreign songs in the United States, like the Korean song “Gangnam Style” reaching number two on the Billboard Hot 100 chart in October 2012, or the Mexican “Macarena” reaching number one on that same chart in August 1996.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, there is archaeological evidence that in ancient times music was a constant presence that was able to transcend cultural and linguistic limits and boundaries.

Long before the Axial Age, music made by varying instruments had already had a profound influence on human cultures. In fact, music goes back further than even our species. Archaeology has uncovered flutes made from animal bones by Neanderthals in Slovenia that are approximately 53,000 years old, predating Homo

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1. Garfias, Robert. "Music: The Cultural Context." *Senri Ethnological Reports* 47 (2004): 1. Web. 29 Sept. 2016. Pg 1.
  2. "Billboard - Music Charts, News, Photos & Video." *Billboard*. Prometheus Global Media, n.d. Web. 30 Sept. 2016.

Sapiens' arrival in Europe by over 10,000 years.<sup>3</sup> Archaeology has also uncovered rows of animal teeth buried with Bronze Age humans that have been dated to approximately 2900 to 2300 B.C. Based on analysis of the teeth, which were uncovered in Ajvide, Gotland, Sweden, archaeologists now believe that they were braided together and designed to jangle together in order to produce sounds.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most bizarre Neolithic instrument is an item that most people are already familiar with, albeit not in a musical sense. Archaeologists have uncovered 15,000-year-old cave paintings in modern-day Trois Freres, located in Southern France. These paintings depict a man dressed in bison skin holding a bow to his mouth and using it as an instrument.<sup>5</sup> Music clearly had an important role in the everyday lives of these ancient people, as they were able to turn common items into musical instruments and loved them so much that they included them in their artwork. Interestingly, use of the bow as an instrument can be seen in many other ancient cultures all around the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, eastern Africa, South America, and California.<sup>6</sup>

As mankind developed, its musical instruments became increasingly complex and improved in quality. Archaeological evidence for this trend can be seen in the excavations that have taken place in Jiahu, China. Here, archaeologists have found more than 30 bone flutes, not unlike the Neanderthal flutes found in Slovenia. These

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3. Grafias 5.

4. Rainio, Riitta, and Kristiina Mannermaa. "Tracing The Rattle Of Animal Tooth Pendants From The Middle Neolithic Graves Of Ajvide, Gotland, Sweden." *World Archaeology* 46.3 (2014): 332. *MasterFILE Premier*. Web. 29 Sept. 2016. Pg 7.

5. Kurtz, Glenn. *Practicing: A Musician's Return to Music*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Print. Pg 106.

6. *Ibid* 107.

bone flutes from Jiahu were produced from a period of approximately 7000 to 5800 B.C. The fact that both of these Neolithic groups who would not have had contact with one another both made such similar instruments from the same exact materials helps to further illustrate the importance of music throughout all of history. Due to the range of dates of the bone flutes, the archaeologists were able to trace their development and see how these musical instruments evolved over an entire millennium. As time went on, the ancient people who occupied Jiahu began adding more and more holes to flutes and changing the positioning of the holes around. This allowed them to play a wider variety of notes, and over the course of the 1200-year long occupation of Jiahu the bone flutes evolved from a four-tone scale to a seven-tone scale.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the bone flutes found in Jiahu from the later periods of occupation become more and more standardized in appearance and performance capability. The archaeological team at Jiahu concluded that this was likely done in order to allow multiple flutes to be played at once in harmony, something that could not have been done with the older, more varied bone flutes found at the same site.<sup>8</sup> Thousands of years before Confucius or Plato were even born, music had already been ingrained in communal human culture, as evidenced by the fact that these flutes were designed to be played in harmony with many others in a communal setting.

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7. Zhang, Juzhong, Xinghua Xiao, and Yun Kuen Lee. "The Early Development Of Music: Analysis Of The Jiahu Bone Flutes." *Antiquity* 78.302 (2004): 769-778. *Bibliography of Asian Studies*. Web. 30 Sept. 2016. Pg 775.

8. Ibid.

As aforementioned, music has the ability to cross cultural and linguistic barriers in modern times, and the same is true about music in ancient times. Many cultures adapted the musical instruments of other cultures that they had contact with. For example, the ancient Aegean culture, who were something of a precursor culture to classical Hellenistic culture and lived primarily on islands in the Aegean Sea, adapted an instrument called the sistrum from their Egyptian neighbors, whom they had had trade contact with.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, before the beginnings of the Axial Age music had already been deeply ingrained in human cultures for tens of thousands of years. With the advent of the Axial Age, however, great thinkers like Plato and Confucius began applying their theories and thoughts to music's significance and its place in society, religion, and spirituality.

Confucius himself was both enamored by music and an accomplished musician himself. Author Mark Muesse writes that, "Music was a particular love of Confucius; he enjoyed singing and playing the lute."<sup>10</sup> Confucius viewed music as much more than just notes coming together, as is written in Analect 17.11, "When we say, 'music, music,' are we speaking merely of bells and drums?"<sup>11</sup> Music played an important role within the teachings of Confucius, but one must first understand the basics of Confucian thought to understand music's role in it.

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9. Younger, John G. *Music in the Aegean Bronze Age*. Jonsered: P. Åströms Förlag, 1998. Print. Pg 1.

10. Muesse, Mark W. *The Age of the Sages: The Axial Age in Asia and the Near East*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013. Print. Pg. 187. See Analect 17.20 for an account of Confucius playing the lute.

11. Ivanhoe, Philip J., and Bryan W. Van Norden. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. Vol. 2. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2005. Print. Pg 49, 17.11.

Great thinkers are often born of circumstance, and such was the case with Confucius when he was born in 551 B.C. Muesse describes that, “Confucius lived during a particularly brutal time in Chinese history. Hostilities between kingdoms and corruption in government were on the rise. Almost by necessity, he thought about social and political matters.”<sup>12</sup> With this background in mind, then, it is easy to see how Confucian ideas originated in contrast to the moral issues that surrounded it.

The idea of *dao*, or “the way” in Confucius’ teachings refers to the way in which one lives his or her life and conducts him or herself.<sup>13</sup> The aspects of living a good life in Confucian thought are the concepts of *li*, *de*, and *ren*.<sup>14</sup> These three concepts are also important to gaining a better understanding of Confucianism as a whole. University of Hawaii professor Dr. Roger T. Ames offers concise definitions for each of these three aspects of Confucianism. *Ren*, or authoritative conduct, “is the recognition that personal character is a consequence of cultivating one’s relationships with others. For Confucius, nothing defines humanity more than the practical consideration of one human being for another.”<sup>15</sup>

In a time when warfare between kingdoms was common, consideration for the people in neighboring kingdoms must have been at an all-time low. Thus, it is easy to see why Confucius would emphasize kindness for all people, regardless of

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12. Muesse 176.

13. Ames, Roger T. "Confucianism: Confucius (Kongzi, K'ung Tzu)." *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2003. 58-64. Print. Pg 61.

14. Ibid 62.

15. Ibid.



any other factors, because a human being is a human being no matter what. In *The Analects*, a collection of Confucian teachings and stories, he writes, “With regard to the world, the gentleman has no predispositions for or against any person.”<sup>16</sup>

*Li*, or propriety, “is a code of formal behaviors for stabilizing and disciplining our every changing circumstances...it is a social syntax that brings the particular members of a community into meaningful relationships.”<sup>17</sup> *Li* is probably one of the more foreign aspects of Confucianism to many modern Westerners. It involves following rituals and obedience towards others, like people in power and parents. Confucian emphasis on ritual can be seen all throughout *The Analects*, for example in 3.3, “The Master said, ‘A man who is not Good-what has he to do with ritual?’<sup>18</sup> An odd story appears later in the same book, in 3.17, “Zigong wanted to do away with the practice of sacrificing a lamb to announce the beginning of the new month. The master said, ‘Zigong! You regret the loss of the lamb, whereas I regret the loss of the rite.’<sup>19</sup> While this story and the importance of rituals as a whole may seem strange, it is important to realize that rituals continue to perpetuate throughout even Western secular society. What are wedding vows and the rules of conduct within court if not rituals?

The idea of *de*, or virtue, ties together *ren* and *li*. Confucius believed that when provided with an inspiring role model, people would naturally follow in their footsteps. Ames offers the example that, “if I act properly, performing my roles and

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16. Ivanhoe 11, 4.10.

17. Ames 62.

18. Ivanhoe 7, 3.3.

19. Ivanhoe 9, 3.17.

cultivating my relationships with so that they are rich and fruitful, other people in community will see me as a model of appropriate conduct and defer to me.”<sup>20</sup> Only by practicing *li* (performing my roles) and *ren* (cultivating my relationships) can one be an inspiring role model.

For Confucius, music played a role in both *li* and *ren* and thus was an important part in attaining *de*. It is also important to note that for Confucius, music was not limited to songs that only included musical instruments by themselves or as backing to vocals. Rather, music included poetry that was read out loud, similar to the genre of spoken word in modern times.

*Shijing*, or *The Book of Songs*, is one of the Five Classics traditionally attributed to Confucius, and this book is referenced several times throughout *The Analects*.<sup>21</sup> *Shijing* is a collection of 305 poems, which are traditionally said to have been compiled or written by Confucius himself.<sup>22</sup> These poems are a form of music in themselves.

Music factors into *ren* in two distinct ways. Firstly, Confucius emphasized self-cultivation, or the refinement of one’s own moral sensibilities as a means to making the world a better place.<sup>23</sup> “In his program of self-cultivation, Confucius also included an educated appreciation of the refined arts of music, dance, and poetry...he believed that particular kinds of music had the power to evoke and

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20. Ames 62.

21. Cua, Antonio S., ed. *Encyclopedia of Chinese Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print. Pg 932. See *Analects* 3.2,3.8, and 16.15 for allusions to this book.

22. Ibid 953.

23. Muesse 185-187.

refine moral sensibilities.”<sup>24</sup> By gaining an understanding and appreciation of music itself, one could make him or herself a better person and act with the appropriate authoritative conduct. Confucius thus believed that music could have a very real and tangible effect on the human mind. One striking story comes from *Analect* 7.14. It describes that, “When the master was in the state of Qi he heard the Shao music, and for three months after did not even notice the taste of meat. He said, ‘I never imagined that music could be so sublime.”<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, music is important to *ren* because it reflects the harmony of many different facets coming together to make one piece, just different humans should strive to come together harmoniously. Ames writes:

...music conduces to harmony, bringing different voices into productive relationships. Music is tolerant in allowing each voice and instrument to have its own place, its own integrity, while at the same time requiring that each ingredient find a complementary role in which it can add the most to the ensemble.<sup>26</sup>

As aforementioned, China during the life of Confucius was anything but harmonious, with many different states engaged in a period of constant warfare. For Confucius, music reflected the ideal scenario where these people from differing backgrounds could come together in order to live in peace and harmony. After all, two people from differing states have a lot more in common than a lute and a reed

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24. Ibid 187.

25. Ivanhoe 7, 7.14.

26. Ames 62.

pipe. The idea of harmony from chaos is important for Confucian thought, and Confucius himself describes how this phenomenon is seen in music in *Analect* 3.23:

What can be known about music is this: when it first begins, it resounds with a confusing variety of notes, but as it unfolds, these notes are reconciled by means of harmony, brought into tension by means of counterpoint, and finally woven together into a seamless whole. It is in this way that music reaches its perfection.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the beauty of music is the coming together of opposites, just like life lived with *ren* is.

As previously stated, Confucius' ideas of goodness and self-cultivation were intrinsically tied to the ritual aspects of *li*. In *Analect* 12.1, it is described that:

Yan Hui asked about Goodness. The master said, "Restraining yourself and returning to the rites constitutes Goodness...Do not look unless it is in accord with ritual; do not speak unless it is in accord with ritual; do not move unless it is in accord with ritual."<sup>28</sup>

Throughout *The Analects* are many examples of Confucius tying ritual directly to music. In *Analect* 3.3, Confucius describes, "A man who is not Good-what has he to do with ritual? A man who is not Good-what has he to do with music?"<sup>29</sup> In 8.8, he says, "...take your place through ritual, and achieve perfection with music."<sup>30</sup> Including these two examples, the words "ritual" and "music" appear in the same

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27. Ivanhoe 9-10, 3.23.

28. Ivanhoe 34, 12.1.

29. Ibid 7, 3.3.

30. Ibid 24, 8.8.

sentence or sentences adjacent to one another in at least nine *Analects*.<sup>31</sup> Just as goodness is tied to ritual, music is tied to ritual, and thus music is tied to goodness.

As a whole, Confucius does not offer up many specific examples of what constitutes appropriate music for self-cultivation. He seems to have no preferences for instrument, as he does not specifically mention any as being above the others. One can infer, however, that he seems to have had an appreciation for any music that was well performed and harmonious, as cited in *Analect* 3.23.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, he does offer up examples of specific musical genres that are superior to others. In *Analect* 15.11, it is stated that, “Yan Hui asked about running a state. The Master said, ‘...As for music, listen only to the Shao and Wu. Prohibit the tunes of Zheng...for the tunes of Zheng are licentious...’”<sup>33</sup> Here, Shao and Wu refers to the music of King Shun and King Wu, respectively.<sup>34</sup> Although the music of these men has been lost to time, Confucius’ condemnation of Zheng’s music as “licentious” leads one to believe that the Shao and Wu music promoted virtue, while the Zheng music did not.<sup>35</sup> While he may have condemned certain types of music, Confucius nevertheless appreciated the positive effect that listening to and studying music would have on a mind, just as another one of his Axial peers would.

Halfway across the world and about a century after the birth of Confucius, another great Axial thinker entered into world. Plato was born in 428 B.C. in the Greek city-state of Athens. For the Greeks, music was already heavily ingrained into

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31. See *Analects* 11.1, 11.25, 13.3, 14.12, 16.2, 16.5, and 17.10.

32. See pg 9.

33. Ivanhoe 45, 15.11.

34. Ibid, footnote 134.

35. "In Pursuit of Lost Ancient Imperial Chinese Music." *En.peopl.cn*. People's Daily Online China, 3 Jan. 2003. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

their culture before Plato began applying his Axial Age thinking to it, and this musical culture no doubt influenced him to include music throughout his writings. This can be seen in both the vital role that song had in popular plays at the time, as well as the enduring myths and legends from the ancient Greeks.

Theater took an important role in ancient Athens. The Theater of Dionysius at the Acropolis, for example, could hold every single male citizen in Athens at a single time. In these plays, choruses of 12-15 people would play a supporting role. The members of each chorus were usually trained by a poet, who also wrote the music that they would sing. This was all organized by the state, illustrating that those in power recognized the importance of the plays and their music.

The chorus would sing songs and dance while a reed instrument called an aulos was played throughout the play, and these interjections served to either help pull or the audience more into a story or to push them away and force them to view the play as an outside observer.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the ancient playwrights like Aeschylus recognized the power that music had over the audience and knew that the chorus could move them in ways the actors could not.

Moreover, music also figured prominently in performances outside of the theater. By the Archaic Period of Greece in the seventh century B.C., a mode of performance known as lyrical poetry had swept across Greece. This musical form involved the recitation of a poem while a lyre played, which was a new addition to

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36. Dover, Kenneth. "Comedy, Greek, Origins of." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University, Dec. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

performance art. Utah State University Classics professor Dr. Mark Damen believes that the music of the lyre was the catalyst for the creation and spread in popularity of lyrical poetry in Ancient Greece, similar to the function of the electric guitar in rock music.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the lyre added an extra layer to poetry that moved the audience in ways lyrics alone could not. Hundreds of years after the spread of lyrical poetry, it was still viewed as an important genre by the Alexandrian School, who compiled a list of nine lyrical poets whom they deemed important for study around the third century BC.<sup>38</sup>

Music also plays prominently in ancient Greek myth, and these popular stories illustrate both the power that ancient Greeks believed music held as well as offering social commentary on how music works into class divisions. In particular, the myths of Orpheus, Pan, and Apollo have a heavy emphasis on music. It is important to note that while many of the cited works below were written after Plato's death, these myths were part of a longer oral tradition that no doubt stretched back before the time of Plato. This is evidenced by Plato's *Republic*, in which Plato alludes to the myths of old.<sup>39</sup> In this passage, Plato condemns many myths that he deems "immoral," as they depict the gods as lacking morals and thus bad role models. Nevertheless, these myths reflect the attitude that music was a very powerful force, and Plato would have agreed with this.

The power of music in ancient Greek myth can be seen in the stories of the mortal Orpheus, who appears in several stories, including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

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37. Damen, Mark, Dr. "Chapter 5: Greek Lyrical Poetry." *Ancient Literature and Language*. Utah State University, 2004. Web. 21 Nov. 2016.

38. Miller, Andrew M. *Greek Lyric: An Anthology in Translation*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1996. Print.

39. Bloom, Allan, trans. *The Republic of Plato*. 2nd ed. New York: Basic, 1968. Print. Pg 63, 386a.

and Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*. In Orpheus' myths, his beautiful music is transcendent in that it is able to influence just about everything, including man, nature, and mythical beasts like the guardian of Hades, the imposing Cerberus.<sup>40</sup>

Of particular note because of its realistic nature and connection to Plato's Axial ideas is one passage in Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, in which a great argument amongst the Argonauts almost derails their voyage:

...the strife would have gone further had not... Orpheus lifted his lyre in his left hand and made essay to sing. He sang how the earth, the heaven and the sea, once mingled together in one form, after deadly strife were separated each from other...He ended, and stayed his lyre and divine voice. But though he had ceased they still bent forward with eagerness all hushed to quiet, with ears intent on the enchanting strain; such a charm of song had he left behind in their hearts.<sup>41</sup>

Music had soothed and united the very souls of the Argonauts in a way that mere talk could never have, and this is a concept that would be reflected in the writings of Plato.

As music permeated Greek culture so thoroughly, Plato naturally included it in his writings. For Plato, music could mean any number of genres, including the songs of the chorus as well as musical instruments. As described in his book *Laws*, he thought of music as tunes that had the ability to "reach the soul," whether for

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40.Graf, F. "Orpheus." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University, 02 Mar. 2016. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

41. Rhodius I, Apollonius. "The Argonautica." *Classics.mit.edu*. Trans. R. C. Seaton. MIT, n.d. Web. 8 Dec. 2016.



good or ill.<sup>42</sup>

In Plato's ideas about music, the actual tunes themselves were not what was important, but rather what it could do in order to affect the person listening. He describes that, "Now, in the case of anything, that brings us enjoyment, mustn't we first of all say the following? Either this very feature on its own is the most important thing about it, or else what is most important is a certain correctness or, third, a benefit?"<sup>43</sup> In music, it is this benefit that is most important, rather than the actual enjoyment itself.

Although Plato recognized the importance of the good in music rather than music that was good, he nevertheless condemned and seemed to hate one instrument in particular, the aulos, a popular instrument at the time that was often used in the theater. Plato's writings are filled with negative references to this flute-like instrument, like in *Republic* Book III, 561c, when he describes an immoral person as one who acts in the manner of, "day by day indulging the appetite of the day, now wine-bibbing and abandoning himself to the lascivious pleasing of the flute."<sup>44</sup> In the *Symposium*, Plato does not have the characters begin a serious philosophical discussion until the musicians playing the aulos are kicked out of the room,<sup>45</sup> and the discussion comes to an abrupt end when the drunk and immoderate Aristophanes bursts into the room with several of the same girls playing the flute.<sup>46</sup>

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42. Plato. *Laws 1 and 2*. Trans. Susan Sauve Meyer. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015. Print. Pg. 72, 673a.

43. Ibid, 65, 677b.

44. Plato. *Plato: In Twelve Volumes*. Comp. Harold North Fowler, W. R. M. Lamb, Paul Shorey, and Robert Gregg Bury. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005. Web. 19 Nov. 2016. *Republic* 561c.

45. Plato. *Plato: In Twelve Volumes*. *Symposium*, 176e.

46. Ibid, 212c.

Plato singling out one instrument as inferior seems odd when compared with his previous ideas about the good in music as opposed to good music. Even if one does not enjoy the music it produces, a philosopher should be able to recognize the good in it. Plato's derision towards the flute seems to stem from two separate ideas, namely the composition of the instrument itself as well as the underlying social implications of the instrument.

Despite its role in theater, the flute seems to have been viewed as an instrument for the lower class by ancient Greek society. This can be seen chiefly in the myths of the time, as well as its use by prostitutes.

Greek myth was populated by Satyrs, who were man-goat hybrids who resided in the rustic countryside. They were most commonly depicted as simple creatures who enjoyed drinking and dancing in the countryside, and their instrument of choice was the flute.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, the great and aloof God Apollo preferred to play the lyre from his home on Mount Olympus.<sup>48</sup> Thus, a sort of dichotomy was created by these instruments in myth, with the upper class elites preferring the stringed lyre and the lower class common men preferring the flute.

This class split is directly addressed in the myth of Marsyas and Apollo. Marsyas, a satyr, challenged Apollo to a musical contest, with the prize being that the victor could do what he pleased with the loser. Although Marsyas played his flute with equal skill to Apollo's lyre, he would lose the contest when Apollo played

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47. Seaford, Richard. "Satyrs and Silens." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University, Mar. 2016. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

48. Graf, F. "Apollo." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University, Dec. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

his lyre upside-down, a feat ill-suited for the flute. For his prize, Apollo cruelly tied the satyr to a tree and flayed him alive.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the superiority of the upper class is established through the representations of their instruments. But even if the upper class instrument was superior, the common people could always keep in mind that the lyre was actually invented by Apollo's half-brother Hermes, who was something of a common man as far as Greek gods go.<sup>50</sup> Plato's ideas being in line with these myths does represent a sort of inconsistency, however, based upon his prior condemnation of these myths in the *Republic*.

In addition to these myths, the underlying societal implications of the flute are reflected in its use by prostitutes, a fact directly addressed in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>51</sup> Women would often be hired to play the flute for drinking parties, and these women would commonly have sex with their clients following the conclusion of the music.<sup>52</sup> As these women represented a societal lower class and the flute was associated with them, Plato thus sees the flute as an inferior instrument.

Besides the social implications of flute use, Plato also seems to disdain the instrument based on the work of one of his Greek predecessors, Pythagoras, who was born nearly 150 years before Plato. In his music theory, Pythagoras examined harmonic ratios, or the mathematical ratio between tensions in the differing placement of strings of an instrument-for example, if the tension of the first string of

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49. Dowden, Ken. "Marsyas (1), Satyr." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University, Mar. 2016. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

50. Jost, Madeleine. "Hermes." *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford University, Dec. 2015. Web. 09 Nov. 2016.

51. See pg. 14.

52. Goldman, M. L. "Associating the *Aulêtris*: Flute Girls and Prostitutes in the Classical Greek Symposium." *Helios*, vol. 42 no. 1, 2015. Pg. 29.

an instrument was double that of the fourth, then their ratio was 2:1.<sup>53</sup>

Part of Plato's hate for the flute, then, seems to be from the fact that he subscribes to this idea of Pythagoras. In *Philebus* 56a, he directly addresses how the flute does not apply to this mathematical theory when he writes, "flute music throughout tries to find the pitch of each note as it is produced by guess, so that the amount of uncertainty mixed up in it is great, and the amount of certainty small."<sup>54</sup> Because the flute does not have the ratio certainty that a stringed instrument like the lyre would have, it is an inferior instrument in Plato's eyes and thus unsuitable for use in music education.

Flute aside, for Plato the greatest benefit of music was its role in educating the person. In his *Republic*, Plato enters into a lengthy discourse about the role that music and musical education will play in the upbringing of the hypothetical city's ruling class, the guardians. These guardians would be raised from a young age to be as close as possible to perfect human beings, so that they may rule the city justly and allow it to prosper.

Based on the Republic Book 3, Plato understands the power that music has on the person and the effect that a proper musical education would have on the guardians. He writes, "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, if one is rightly

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53. Hall, Manly P. *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*. Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2007. Print. Pg. 81.

54. Plato. *Plato: In Twelve Volumes*. Philebus, 56a.

trained.”<sup>55</sup>

For the music used in education and his city in general, Plato was chiefly interested in the composition and content of the songs, as well as what instruments were to be used.

For the actual composition of songs themselves, Plato had specific ideas as to what types would be ideal for his city. Plato defined music as being composed of three elements, namely the words, tune, and rhythm.<sup>56</sup> He prescribes that in good music, the rhythm and tune of a given song should conform to the words being spoken, rather than the other way around.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, in both modern and ancient Greek music theory scales, or modes as they were called in ancient Greece, play an important role. The late M.L. West, a prominent classicist, writes of these modes by explaining that they “provided a framework of discipline by limiting the infinity of possible notes and intervals to an ordered set.”<sup>58</sup>

Although in his writing Plato claims ignorance of the exact details of musical modes,<sup>59</sup> he does rule out certain modes based on the effect that they would have on the soul the person listening to them. He rules out the modes that are overly “soft and convivial,”<sup>60</sup> as they would be conducive to the vices of “softness and sloth.”<sup>61</sup> Instead, Plato prescribes that only two musical modes should be allowed in an ideal society. Of one he describes, “leave us that mode that would fittingly imitate the

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55. Ibid. *Republic* 401d.

56. Ibid. 398e.

57. Ibid.

58. West, M. L. *Ancient Greek Music*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1992. Print. Pg. 160.

59. Plato. *Plato: In Twelve Volumes. Republic* 399a.

60. Ibid. 398e.

61. Ibid.

utterances and the accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare or in any enforced business, and who, when he has failed... confronts fortune with steadfast endurance and repels her strokes.”<sup>62</sup> For the second mode Plato writes that it should be fit “for such a man engaged in works of peace... not bearing himself arrogantly, but in all this acting modestly and moderately and acquiescing in the outcome.”<sup>63</sup> He refers to the former mode as “forced,” and the latter as “voluntary.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, the only music allowed for Plato would be music that would positively influence the soul and reflect virtue.

In addition to specific modes, Plato also prescribed what he considered appropriate instruments. As discussed previously, Plato disliked the reed flute for various reasons, and so this instrument would not have any place in his musical policy. In a moment of self-awareness, he does acknowledge, however, that preferring Apollo’s instrument over that of Marsyas’ is not innovative thinking.<sup>65</sup> Besides this, Plato also rules out a wide variety of instruments “whose compass includes all the harmonies,” such as the harp.<sup>66</sup> This relates directly back to the exclusion of certain musical modes, as these instruments would be able to produce modes that would be harmful to the soul. Instead, instruments would be restricted to instruments with a limited musical range so as to restrict them to appropriate modes, namely the lyre and the cithar.<sup>67</sup>

Despite their cultural differences, the writings of both Plato and Confucius

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62. Ibid. 399a-b.

63. Ibid. 399 b-c.

64. Ibid. 399c.

65. Ibid. 399e.

66. Ibid. 399c.

67. Ibid. 399d.

on music actually have a number of parallels. For one, they both recognized that music transcended simple notes and harmonies and had profound effects on the human soul.<sup>68</sup> Both men believed that listening to and learning about music could lead to direct moral refinement, an important part of being a leader and a good person. Parallels between their thinking in regards to this can be found in the Confucian concept of *de* and Plato's ideas about the education of his utopian city's guardians.<sup>69</sup> Confucius believed that becoming a better person through music and other means would directly lead to others becoming the same way by following the example of that person, and likewise Plato believed that through music his guardians would become better leaders and thus inspire others to act morally.

Furthermore, a striking similarity between these two men can be found in how they disregarded certain musical forms because of their negative effects. In *Analect* 15.11, Confucius specifically advises against Zheng music because it is licentious and thus apt to inspire those same negative thoughts in a person.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, in his *Republic* Plato condemns certain musical modes in his education system because they will make the students lazy and soft.<sup>71</sup> In both *Analect* 15.11 and the *Republic* Plato and Confucius were referring to how to make the best future leaders, as Plato's education system is designed for the guardians of his city and Confucius' quote about Zheng music came in response to someone asking him how to best run a state.

A key difference between these men, however, lies in their opinion of musical

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68. For Confucius, see citations 11 and 25; for Plato see citations 42 and 55.

69. For *de* see pgs. 6-7; for Plato see pgs. 18-19.

70. See pg. 10.

71. See pg. 18.

composition outside of lyrical content. Confucius was fond of all types of tunes, regardless of its mode or the instrument used. This stemmed from the fact that all good music involved harmony and the coming together of opposites and thus reflected key Confucian ideas. Plato on the other hand was critical of many different types of music and musical instruments, going so far as to recommend that only two modes and two instruments be used in order to make a person better. In this regard, it seems that Plato is more critical of music, while Confucius chooses to emphasize the harmony exhibited in all good music.

In a broader sense, Plato and Confucius' differing views on music provide an excellent window to a better understanding of their writings. In the *Republic*, despite the fact that he is writing about a community as a whole, Plato continually emphasizes individual virtue and education. On the other hand, Confucian values such as *li* and *de* tend to emphasize aspects of community. In this sense, the fact that Confucius loves music because of its harmony while Plato emphasizes the negative effects of some musical forms on the person is indicative of their larger beliefs.

Despite their differences, two of humanity's greatest thinkers were able to independently come to the same conclusion that music transcends simple notes and melodies. As both men realized, music holds a special power. The same is true today, as many people know that a bad day can be turned around by something as simple as a three-minute song. Philosophy and science may never be able to understand why this is, but by looking to the classics we can come closer to some sort of understanding. This is the true beauty of the classics and why they still matter more than two thousand years later.



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