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Plato Banned Rock & Roll

Most people in the world have been touched by music in some way. Whether through the lonely twangs of a guitarist improvising on the street, the slow melodies of Debussy on a grandparent's turntable, or pop music blaring on car speakers - everyone knows music can be a transformative experience. Historians, philosophers, and poets have all attributed to the incredible array of literature on its significance throughout history. One of the most important discourses took place in Ancient Greece, in a culture where music was scrutinized and researched alongside contemporary science, mathematics, and astronomy. The philosopher Aristotle first introduced his thoughts on the topic in his treatise *Rhetoric*. He called it the Doctrine of Ethos, which is a philosophical concept that states how certain musical modes have the ability to affect character, emotion, morals, and ethics. The Doctrine of Ethos "attributed ethical powers to music and claimed that music can help to build character because of music's magical power to speak directly to human emotion" (Durakoglu). Aristotle thought this was obvious, and wrote that "it [is] clear music possesses the power of producing an effect on the character of the soul. If it can produce this effect, it must clearly be made a subject of study and taught to the young" (Politics 1340b). Plato, Aristotle's student, became very interested in the idea of music education and developed the Doctrine of Ethos to become a prominent role in *paideia*, an Ancient Greek ideal, which can be described as "the complete pedagogical course of

study necessary to produce a well-rounded, fully educated citizen” (Tarnas 29-30). Plato believed so strongly in the possibility of music to shape the perfect man that he even wished to restrict, ban, and modify certain elements of music. While Plato’s goals were to cultivate a culture and youth formed to the ideal of *kalos kagathos* ("beautiful and good"), he and his contemporaries were wrong to attempt to mold music education for their own purposes - this attempt was authoritative, offensive, and antithetical to the beauty of free expression found in music.

The basic idea behind the Doctrine of Ethos is that music is an imitative art, and can affect people in this manner. In *Politics*, Aristotle says that “Musical compositions. . . are, in their very nature, representations of states of character. This is an evident fact” (1340b). According to this view, music has the ability to convey different emotions and feelings that humans naturally exhibit. When music is performed, it causes a natural transference of emotions that not only can, but will influence the listener. Plato followed this idea and believed that music could be used to set a good example. In *Republic*, Plato writes that such “imitations, if continued from youth far into life, settle down into habits and second nature of the body, the speech, and the thought” (395d). The idea of music being used as a good or bad habit shows why Plato worked to initiate music into the curriculum of the youth. Because music has the ability to shape a man’s thoughts, actions, and perceptions, 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).

So, Plato began work on molding music education to his vision. He began by “promot[ing] a series of guidelines that would ensure that music would be a force that would promote ethical behavior” (Gurgel 2003). This included many restrictions and rules, such as “restrict[ion] of certain subject matter in the text of songs, as well as some instruments including

the Aulos, a popular wind instrument of the time” (Lippman, 1964). With the restriction of lyrical matter and certain sounds, one thinks of the concerns of authority in the late 1950s, as rock and roll music became a subject of controversy. The moral panics brought about by rock and roll were clear, as new ideas and messages began infiltrating the minds of the youth. In Santa Cruz, California, 1956, “city authorities announced a total ban on rock and roll at public gatherings, calling the music ‘detrimental to both the health and morals of our youth and community’” (History). This announcement sounds similar to Plato’s concerns with the lydian scale, for example, which, he said, “must be banished... Certainly, in the next place, drunkenness and softness and indolence are utterly unbecoming the character of our guardians. (398E). As with attempts to restrict rock music, Plato’s softcore authoritarianism can be interpreted as a subvert attempt at controlling the population according to values he deems important.

Another reason that Plato was wrong to mold music towards *kalos kagathos* is that Plato’s restriction of music set a precedent of pretentiousness for music education that carries on to this day. According to Wayne Bowman, author of *Philosophical Perspectives on Music*, Plato “believed that music was too potent to be entrusted to the whims of mere musicians or common people” (42). Bowman went on to say that “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” (42). Plato’s implication that the average person should not concern themselves with music is clearly disrespectful and pretentious. Any musician knows that incredible art can be made through spontaneous intuitive action, and any listener can be deeply moved by a piece despite not having a trained intellectual understanding of Pythagorean frequency ratios, for example. To be specific, I think of the music of American folk singers in outsider or alternative music scenes.

Musicians like Daniel Johnston, Phil Elverum, and Kurt Cobain come to mind - musicians who have mostly no formal training in music yet have had profound emotional impacts on their followings. It is clear that music has the ability to capture our hearts and moods - we don't need an Ancient philosopher's opinion to confirm this. While Plato's intentions were to cultivate a "beautiful and good" civilization, his attempt to mold music education for his own purpose is clearly antithetical to music's free expression.

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