

Music: A Melodic Linkage to the Human Psyche

Imagine you are driving down the highway listening to your favorite smooth jazz playlist, and out of nowhere, *Numb* by Linkin Park starts playing. Would your mood shift to match that of the more hardcore tunes provided by the late Chester Bennington? Most would agree that the overall mood of the drive would at least somewhat shift to reflect the edgier tone of the music; this is because there is something special about music that separates its melodic tones from the other noises that we are exposed to in our daily lives, where instead of simply hearing a sound, our brains sync with its canorous pattern and exhibit a unique emotional response to it. This response was further explored through a study conducted by Terrence Hays and Victor Minichiello of the University of New England, who qualitatively identified six psychological dimensions in older individuals that are fulfilled when listening to music: linking, life events, sharing and connecting, wellbeing, therapeutic benefits, escapism, and spirituality.^[1] In this essay, I will explore how music can impact the development of our character in innumerable aspects, and attempt to pinpoint what trait of music best influences this phenomenon. As we have just seen, even from a small pool of elders, Hays and Minichiello pinpointed six significant emotional areas that are struck when listening to music. However, this analysis is far from new. In fact, dating back as far as Ancient Greece, this unique psychological impact that music generates has been given attention. The Ancient Greeks established their ideas on how music impacted behavior through what is now referred to as *The Doctrine of Ethos*. From this set of principles, they believed music greatly contributed to the formation of one's character, and saw it as a means of conveying ethical and moral attitudes. In fact, it was believed even the type of instrument being played had an impact on the shaping of one's identity. People who played the aulos were viewed harshly, as degenerates, whereas those playing the kithara were believed to have improved their moral character as a result.^{[3][4]} In Aristotle's *Politics*, he further argues of the impact music has on one's character, asserting that "rhythms, too, have a character, some of rest, others of motion; and of the latter some have a more vulgar, others a nobler, movement."^[2] The influence that these properties have on us stems from how we relate our emotions to these different characteristics, and the strength of these

connections demonstrates the power music has over the mind as a result. For this reason, Aristotle proceeded to stress that “we cannot afford to neglect its use in education,” as its ability to impact the development of one’s character must be used responsibly to avoid negative influence. Like Aristotle, the Roman philosopher Boethius was concerned with the functions that music served, but observed our relationship with music from a different, more mathematical, approach. He envisioned a way of understanding music beginning with the simplest man made instruments rising towards a conception of order and divine harmony throughout the universe, from which he developed three separate classifications: Musica Mundana (Music of the Spheres/Celestial Harmony), Musica Humana (Music of the Body, Soul and Spiritual Harmony), and Musica Instrumentalis (Music of the Instruments). “Music is related not only to speculation but to morality as well, for nothing is more consistent with human nature than to be soothed by sweet modes or disturbed by their opposites... the whole Universe is united by musical concord,”^[5] claimed Boethius, who essentially viewed one's identity through music on a spectrum proportional to the harmonic properties of a specific melody, as the universe revolves around harmonic/spherical properties, and thus, converging towards these properties is “right” by nature. While the two had different approaches to how music impacted one’s character, with Aristotle believing the type of rhythm had the greatest effect, whereas Boethius deduced that harmony was more influential, they both agreed that it undoubtedly impacted character development depending on how it was incorporated into one’s lifestyle.

From my own experience with music, I can attest to the concept that character is heavily impacted by music. Growing up, my parents enjoyed listening to eccentric subgenres of Metal music, typically what I would call a mixture of Space Metal and Symphonic Metal. Thus, songs by artists like Dream Theater, Symphony X, and most important (to myself), Ayreon, had been frequently exposed to me, and had a huge influence on my upbringing. I recall having an increased interest in mathematics and science following any exposure to Space Metal, which impacted my decision to become an engineer later in life. I would argue more in favor of Aristotle’s idea that rhythm plays a role in my musical connection, with the faster pace and complexity accompanied by Metal providing an enjoyable sensation in my head; however, in the case of Space Metal, I believe the lyrics play an important role as well. For instance, when I feel a lack of motivation in the pursuit of my path as an engineer, I intentionally use the album *Universal Migrator Part*

I: The Dream Sequencer by Ayreon, as both encouragement, plus a reminder of who I am. Its lyrics examine the last human alive after everyone else was wiped out from humanity's mistakes. While grim in nature, the human, who lives on Mars after escaping the condemned planet Earth, uses a machine called *The Universal Migrator* to revisit both his youth, and past lives to relive an array of events – from the first moon landing to the last world war that ended it all. The album gives me a feeling of inspiration with regards to the concept of innovation due its tech-centric complexion, similar to how smooth jazz may provide a feeling of comfort and relaxation to others. Moreover, as someone with a brain plagued by angst stemming from OCD, I have found binaural beats to reduce anxiety in times of mild distress. This odd effect brought by binaural beats is often called “The 110 Hz Phenomena,”^[6] as this resonance causes enhanced right brain activity (The right brain is responsible for our artistic, poetic, sensual, spiritual, imaginative and innovative abilities). In contrast, when I listen to more “hardcore” metal and rap music with a violent/chaotic rhythm, I tend to feel more reckless; it is often argued that this music doesn't directly produce these emotions, but rather amplifies these feelings. However, when I go to the gym to lift weights, I am typically in a relaxed or exhausted mood beforehand, and use these music genres (Artists like Linkin Park and YG) to shift my mood to a more angered state, which effectively encourages me to pump out a few reps in response.

As you can see, music is incredible in the influence it can have on the mind. While not everyone responds the same way to specific genres and songs, music, since its earliest traces of exploration dating as far back as Ancient Greece, its impact on psychology has been apparent. As far as how it influences one's character, it becomes more unclear. The likes of Aristotle suggest rhythm type plays a more significant role, while Boethius favors harmonic stability as the key factor. When comparing my own experience, Aristotle's view makes more sense, but alas, there is no exact answer; our brains are as different from one another as the songs that best resonate with them. Nonetheless, I have felt the power of musical rhythm on my character firsthand, to a point where even my career has been shaped around it. In the end, it all depends on the individual. Be it rhythm, harmony, or a mixture of both, it is important to understand that we are all influenced by music in a way that exceeds the simple sounds that are being uttered.

References

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