

The Two Great Tastes That Taste Great Together:

The Similarities and Differences Between Hermes and Apollo in the Homeric Hymns

In Greek mythology, Apollo and Hermes are both gods of music, but the way that they use music in their stories differs. Using these gods and their relation to the creation and performance of music as a lens, art is separated into its two prominent aspects: harmony and discord. To do so, we will see how the two gods are different, how they individually excel, how they act when in conflict with each other, and finally, how they work well together.

The nature of our human, pattern recognizing, brains is that there are no hard rules when it comes to what “sounds good”. There are familiar patterns, such as scales, that create a shared musical language and common phrases that the average listener would recognize as good music. Similarly, there are uncommon patterns or patterns that subvert common patterns which at first will sound odd or incorrect, but with enough repetition they begin to sound normal. In this way, good music is a slowly changing tradition and bad music, to the degree that it is different, is quickly changing pockets of music that challenges the traditional ideals and ultimately changes them bit by bit.

Apollo and Hermes, respectively, are clear analogs to the different extremes of music in their individual qualities and their relationship to each other. The contrast between the two can be seen in the object that they share godly ownership of, the lyre. Hermes’ lyre is grotesque and bizarre. It is created by Hermes immediately after he terrorizes and kills a tortoise, using its shell as a frame, as well as the parts of two other animals (H 39-51). The average viewer would regard it as an off-putting imitation of lyre at best. Apollo’s lyre in contrast is non-descript, though it is likely golden like the plectrum (A 185) and everything else that Apollo owns, it represents the

platonic ideal of a lyre and is, by design, easily recognizable as one. Despite the stark difference, Apollo finds the lyre that Hermes created to be exciting and desirable. It could be that Apollo was unfamiliar with the lyre at all and that the author is crediting Hermes with its invention, but this is not likely as his words, “I fear, son of Maia, crafty-minded guide, lest you steal my lyre and my curved bow” (H 514-5) which mirrors Apollo’s self-description in his own hymn (A 131) and is an entirely strange way to talk about a gift that was just given. Additionally, Apollo describes his amazement by focusing on the sounds being made instead of the instrument itself saying, “full of wonder is this newly-revealed sound I am hearing” (H 443) and “I marvel, son of Zeus, how beautifully you play these things of the lyre”. (H 455) It is what Hermes plays, or in other words his style, that strikes the perfect musician.

Perfect music is, by necessity, methodical. Popular wisdom suggests that it takes ten thousand hours to master a skill and any teacher will understand the value of a curriculum. In order to achieve perfection, tradition must be followed. Tradition acts, in art as well as in other forms, powerfully. It is both the rich history of the art, the timelessness of classical musicians like Bach or Mozart, and it is the influential status quo, with even the most independent music genres being offshoots of what is popular. The collective ideal of music is rich with excellence, history, and influence.

Apollo is the spitting image of perfection and tradition. While he isn’t depicted spending uncountable hours of his life in practice, he does seem to be born as a fully grown, already perfect, adult. His first words are eloquent, “I shall prophesy to men the unerring will of Zeus” and he is described as “long-haired” (A 131-3) quite unlike a newborn. Though his brother also displays many strange qualities for a new-born, Hermes still presents himself as a child while Apollo does not. He is a role model for Greek men and a god amongst gods. Even among the

gods, Apollo, “at whose approach the gods throughout the house of Zeus tremble” (A 2) is fearsome, being the firstborn son of Zeus, he could succeed his father and establish, forcefully, a new order if he wanted. However, Apollo is reverent of his father and similar to him in many ways. Like Zeus, Apollo is a master of prophecy, “he noticed a long-winged bird and knew immediately that the thief was the son of Zeus Kronios” (H 213-4) and he is extremely intelligent shown by his ability to decipher the strange tracks, and the many other tricks that Hermes uses, left by his cattle. (H 219-26) Apollo uses music to perform, bringing joy and togetherness to those who hear him play: to the immortals of Olympus, “[goddesses] dance holding each other’s arms by the wrist. Among them sings...Artemis, twin sister of Apollo. And among them play Ares and Argeiphontes. But Phoibos Apollo plays on the lyre stepping high and beautifully...Leto and Zeus the deviser rejoice in their great hearts as they watch their dear son sporting among the immortal gods” (A 196-206), and to men, “Apollo, led them playing sweetly on the lyre...and beating time the Cretans followed to Pytho and sang the paean like the Cretan paean-singers and those in whose hearts the divine Muse has put honey-sweet song”. (A 514-9) Apollo and his music are symbols of great social achievement and leadership.

In contrast, new music is less about being good than it is about providing interesting ideas to the zeitgeist of music. Every new era in music is pioneered by great talents doing something different and exciting, but it is rarely those talents who refine a genre and fit it within the larger history of music. Even still, those talents are recognized and revered by those who want to play music like they do. Creating something new is to want to be recognized for the talent the artist sees in them self.

In this way, Hermes is a creative. He presents himself as a baby, the newest kind of person, follows the flow of inspiration as opposed to tradition, and feels a desire to prove

himself. Hermes is clearly capable of greatness, within the first week of his life he invented a lyre, a bizarre and grotesque one (H 39-51), fire, creating a comparison between himself and Prometheus and, by extension, humanity (H 111), sandals, an example of clever, quick thinking being used out of necessity (H 80), and, most importantly, his own story. Hermes spends the majority of his hymn convincing not only the gods but also the audience that he is indeed a god. At the first chance he gets, Hermes sings of “his own famous birth” (H 57), possibly the very same hymn that he is living in that moment, and later sacrifices an offering to the gods, including himself among their ranks. (H 126-8) His mother is a nymph, Maia, whose name means mother and his father is the best, and most likely, god to have as a father, Zeus. Zeus would provide legitimacy to Hermes if he didn’t have to be informed, “you declare that you are my father”. (H 378) While it is not worth arguing that Hermes was not, in fact, the son of Zeus and Maia, as he claims, it does fit with Hermes’ character to have an origin that seems made up on the spot. The music that he plays, like his story, is self-serving, improvised, and entertaining in its strangeness. His first performance, following the creation of his lyre, is to himself and improvised, “as when young men reveling amid festivities trade mocking taunts”. (H 55-6) This description, especially when Hermes is alone, implies music that is humorous and sharp, in tone color not pitch, as opposed to the smooth and joyous music of Apollo. His second performance is to Apollo, and is used, as a last resort, to calm and persuade him. (H 416) Hermes and his music are, at their best, surprising.

In music, harmonious and discordant sounds are often determined by the listeners expectations. For example, if a song is in ‘C’ major, which has no sharps or flats, and the listener hears a sharp, it will create tension. If notes that are outside of a key signature are used often, a piece will become more disorganized and strange sounding. When expected tones and

unexpected tones struggle for dominance in a song it will sound conflicted and neither one will benefit.

When Apollo and Hermes are in conflict, they can only ever reach a stalemate. No matter what trick Hermes pulls, Apollo sees through it and despite Apollo's logical evaluation of a situation, Hermes denies everything he says. Apollo accuses Hermes of stealing his cattle and Hermes retorts, "Your story is absurd. I was born yesterday...I myself am not responsible and that I have seen no other thief steal your cows, whatever cows are; I only hear rumor of them". (H 272-7) Of course, Apollo's story is absurd, what newborn could do what he is claiming, but the lies that Hermes tells are carefully crafted, even claiming ignorance of cows, to ensure that Apollo has no way to question him further. In front of the gods, their argument appears before a court with Apollo as a fierce prosecuting attorney and Hermes as an evasive witness, unable to give a straight answer. Apollo's opens, "soon you will hear no empty tale" (H 334), a textbook line for any lawyer, and proceeds to give a detailed description of the case, leaving Hermes no ground to claim innocence. Hermes opens, "I will tell you the truth, for I am truthful and do not know how to lie" (H 68-9) and proceeds to ignore Apollo's accusations and instead talks about Apollo's actions towards him. Apollo is unable to get Hermes to admit guilt, and Hermes is unable to persuade Apollo that he is innocent.

When tension is released, the discordant notes are retroactively given a harmonious feeling and a song feels cohesive again. After two gods "quarrel outrageously" (H 255), Hermes plays for Apollo on the lyre that he created, and his anger is sated. Apollo is given the lyre, a symbol of Hermes' music, and Hermes is given the renown and wealth that he sought. Even more, both gods gain, "every kind of friendship" (H 575) with each other. Apollo and Hermes, and their musical domains, are a cycle of conflict and resolution, of tension and release.

Works Cited:

Hymn to Hermes (shortened to H)

Hymn to Apollo (shortened to A)