

# A Genealogy of Music

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blah blah blah but how do we use bodies as instruments of musical experience/expression of intellect and psyche?
  - 2.1 Timbre
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3. *The Ethics of Music*  
Given these observations, what can we say about the relationship of individuals and music?
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## 1. Introduction

If we were to be so ambitious as to attempt the tracing of a genealogy of human musical experience (i.e. human interaction with the musical phenomenon), we would, sooner or later, be faced with one terrifying question: “*why?*”. Even if we were to take, through a sort of infinite musical regress, entire millennia of inscrutable musical practices for granted, thus being able to single out, theoretically, the first ever occurrence of a musical phenomenon, we would be hard pressed to answer the most essential of questions about it. This work concerns itself with investigating the essence of music, meaning its *conditio sine qua non*, through a series of sympathetic, physical (meaning, deriving from both the physical nature of sound and its interactions with our nervous system and psyche in general) and historical observations.

A seemingly naïve approach to answering the question about essence might be to start probing the hypothetical first occurrence of a musical phenomenon that we have postulated only a few moments ago. Looking at the functioning of other animal species, it is reasonable to assume that the primordial origin of music as we have come to know and conceptualise it must have developed out of a certain necessity. Meaning that, in the history of evolution, species which have developed something even remotely close to the art of music making (as humans today conceptualise it<sup>1</sup>) have done so to fulfil specific needs – be it for the attracting of a mate, the relaying of information and instructions, or the fostering of social bonding. We must therefore postulate that this first musical phenomenon was a response to a certain need, perhaps one sharing some similarity<sup>2</sup> with those fulfilled by animal “musicality”. An ulterior conclusion that we can derive from this fact is that if that the birth of human musical practice is to be necessarily tied to a need requiring tending to, it would only be reasonable for one to

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<sup>1</sup> Which is not to say that musical products of other animal species are *a priori* excluded from the realm of art.

<sup>2</sup> The specific nature of which will be discussed further throughout the article.

assume that the first instance of such a practice relied solely on the human body as instrument, as the construction of specific instruments, or the repurposing of existing objects, can only be seen as a product of technique, already an abstraction from the relationship between need and response. In other words, it must be taken as a fact that the need for the development of musical practice must be prior to the technical development of such practice, and therefore the least possible amount of technique must have been involved: the lower limit of such a metric is, very obviously, identifiable with the human body itself, as either the object of percussion or a set of strings contained in a sound-box.

This is, I believe, as far as we can get with this line of reasoning, unless we also, bravely, include the unnamed need, that has until now been a completely artificial postulate, into the scope of our investigation. The academic landscape is densely populated with opinions on the matter, a statistically relevant amount of which share the belief that the need fulfilled by music is of essentially social nature (as is the case for many more animal species). As Mithen (2005) suggests, music would seem to constitute some kind of evolutionary advantage (as maintained by Plato's Protagoras and his telling of the myth of Prometheus<sup>3</sup>), equate to other species's means of survival), facilitating social cohesion in early human society – in other words, as Thaut & Grahm (2016) maintain, a means of communication predating complex language.

We could, therefore, say of such a first musical experience, that it is one of the first responses of humanity to its Aristotelian need to fulfil the *political* part of its nature. This view of the development of some sort of musical language, or rather, musical *Logos*, a bridge between the sensible and the intellectual or psychic, I posit, is the one best fitting our empirical knowledge, as it entails dialectic processes similar to those we believe to be involved in the development of both language and the fine arts, namely both a social and a *ritualistic*<sup>4</sup> meaning – in the sense that the importance of the experience of a musical, linguistic or artistic phenomenon itself is comparable to that of the fulfilling of the need that caused the phenomenon in the first place. From this ritualistic nature, all three kinds of experiences (linguistic, visual, and musical) have, as we can now easily see retrospectively, evolved into artistic experiences that are causes of themselves, as the good we get from their practice goes far beyond the good we get from their use as mere means for political functions. Therefore, it can be said that another fact we know is that this first musical experience produced something that would come to be treated as something good in itself (or, at least, extremely useful in reaching Good). At this point, there seem to be two looming questions that none should look forward to answering: “*what does this say about music, both ethically and aesthetically?*” and “*why did music come to be precisely as it did – namely as a phonic event based on the subdivision of time and/or pitch?*”. Those are the questions that will be object of investigation in the following chapters.

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<sup>3</sup> Protagoras (320c–322d),

<sup>4</sup> In the Confucian sense of the word “*li*” (礼). Confucius himself held similar views on music as Greek thinkers, which will be explored later in the text.

## 2. Music as embodied intellect

In the realm of neuroscience, the bare building blocks of musical perception are generally understood to be sympathetic nervous responses to auditory stimuli, and particularly to the physical measures of them, namely their frequency (pitch), repetitiveness over time (rhythm) and the ratios present between multiple frequencies (intervals). Interestingly, if one were to construct a definition of “*musical experience*” from these atomic concepts, one would have to recognise the fact that the first instance of a musical experience fitting this definition must have undoubtedly been related to a simple phonic event repeating itself regularly over time (such as the falling of a drop of water, or the shaking of branches in the wind), triggering a sympathetic response in the nervous system of one very lucky human being. Regardless of any of the further implications of this kind, which at this point are outside the scope of this work, the valuable insight, subjectively verifiable, offered by this type of definition is that musicality is an essentially *embodied* process. Like language and art, it deals in stimuli and responses. It is founded on sympathetic bodily responses to the objects of our senses, and on our subsequent employment of such responses as signifiers<sup>5</sup>, making them into a physical phenomenon (the act of speaking, drawing, or making music – in other words, the artistic *act*), that in turn appeals to the senses of humans, and possesses a certain content, in that it serves as a vehicle for emotion, intellect and psyche. What is interesting, then, is that through the perception of the products of such a process, what we are left with is *Logos* reflecting on itself. This fact is clear to use from two simple premises, namely the contents of the artistic act itself and the reception of said act by an observer.

The mere existence of the former, which should itself be justified (as what is obvious for language and figurative arts might not be as readily apparent in the case of music), can be justified through a thoroughly historic approach. The earliest written testimonies on musical practice come to us from the Greek civilisation, and they paint a rich and vast picture of the contents of music, as well as their value to man<sup>6</sup>. A lot of these sources concern tragedies specifically, or are themselves fragments of tragedies containing musical notation. Most notably, in the first category, we find the works of Aristotle, who, in his *Poetics*, discussed the importance of music in intensifying the catharsis of the audience, and his student Aristoxenus, who in his *Harmonics* discusses how different *modes*<sup>7</sup> were used to evoke certain emotions in the audience during plays. Before proceeding with our investigation, a basic understanding of the concept of modes (*harmoniai*) should be established, as they seem to be the core of the entire Greek theoretical system. Modes are collections of pitches, and their atomic unit is that of the *tetrachord*. A tetrachord is a collection of four pitches, all of which are at a tone’s distance from the last, except for one, which only moves by semitone – so that the sum total of intervals is that of a perfect fourth. The placement of this minor second interval, then, determines the name of such a tetrachord (for example, the tetrachord containing a semitone

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<sup>5</sup> Not in the sense that they all convey meaning in the way language does, but that they are a conventional set of physical acts that stem from our sensory experience of reality. It is somewhat similar to the creation of a dictionary, where to each physical act (as in, either intentional act or sympathetic response) a certain phenomenon is associated.

<sup>6</sup> The latter will be treated in Chapter 3.1 – Musical Ethos.

between the first two pitches receives the name of Dorian). These tetrachords are then used to form larger and larger molecules and are translated in pitch and joined together in different ways in the process. Regardless of any technical detail, then, we can observe that the earliest musical system we have direct knowledge of was founded on melodic material produced by a set of pitched sounds organised through a rational governing principle regulating their distance in pitch. But that is not all we know, for Plato, in his *Republic*<sup>8</sup>, discusses the importance of these difference modes for the individual's ethical life. Indeed, he affirms that certain modes promoted or impeded in the listener certain virtues (Dorian and Phrygian, for example, encouraged courage and temperance respectively, while Lydian and Ionian were considered too indulgent), going as far as designing the use of certain modes as the object of legislation in his *Laws*<sup>9</sup>, expressing concern for their technical use as tools to stir immoral emotions in the listener. These sources are the earliest in existence, countless centuries old, and yet they already describe music as an incredibly complex phenomenon, both because of the existence of a vast body of musical theory as well as the implication of music as a tool for stirring emotion and living the good life. Based on the landscape these writings describe, we understand music to have possessed, to the Greek, certain greatly important qualities, in that it was both something instrumental to education and knowledge of the Good and stirring of emotions in others through certain techniques, which themselves relied on a complex theoretical musical system. In other words, through the theorisation of a musical *language* (or, more properly, "system"), man was, already at that time, able to create a response in the listener, through either a shared ethical belief or an established and conventional musical lexicon. The conclusion that can be drawn from this line of investigation, then, is that already in its early manifestation, music worked through the use of an established and conventional framework, mutually understood, if not by all, by most of its practitioners, either intellectually or instinctively<sup>10</sup>, to transmit a certain content, either moral or emotional, and was often used to aid narration. Let us ascertain now what can be found out about the functioning of this transmission.

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<sup>8</sup> Book III, 398d-400a.

<sup>9</sup> 812d-816d.

<sup>10</sup> That is to say, in the same way today's musically illiterate public is able to understand the meaning of a piece of music.

## Bibliography

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Plato, *Laws*

Plato, *Protagoras*

Kongzi, *Analects*

## notes

### 3.1 Ethos

- “in the morning hear the Dao, in the evening die content”
- sacred Om, Ubuntu
- Christianity and Judaism decided to go with language (“In the beginning was the Word”, tree of life)
- Aristotle’s reflection of music in tragedy are a reaction to the further abstraction of music from its ritualistic and ethical nature, meaning the inevitable tragedy of the birth of art.