A Genealogy of Music

1. *Introduction*
2. *Music as an Embodied Experience*

how do we use bodies as instruments of musical experience/expression of intellect and psyche?

* 1. The Grain
  2. Timbre
  3. Collective Musical Experience

1. *The Psychic and Moral Contents of Music*

Given these observations, what can we say about the contents of music?

* 1. Musical Ethos
  2. Music as *Logos*
  3. Bodies that Matter

## *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[[1]](#footnote-1)) 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[[2]](#footnote-2) 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 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[[3]](#footnote-3)), equate to other specie’s means of survival), facilitating social cohesion in early human society – in other words, as Thaut & Grahn (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*[[4]](#footnote-4)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 goodness). From this superficial mapping of the territory, it is clear that the most significant element in the resulting topography is the mysterious and unmarked path through which music is able to freely travel from the realm of human psyche to that of sensible reality. If we are to take our goal as the crafting a life-like portrait of this road, then we would certainly be required to closely inspect the only two known points of this line: point A, or the psychic and moral contents that man is able to transmit and acquire through music, and point B, or the physical results of the full realisation of the musical phenomenon, and their significance in human experience. It is sensible, then, to address the concept most familiar to us, that of physical phenomena, and trying to work our way up this path, leading to the very contents (if any) of music themselves.

*(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.)*

1. *Music as embodied intellect*

# Bibliography

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Aristoxenus, *Harmonics.*

Mithen, Steven. *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body*. Harvard University Press, 2005.

Thaut, Michael H., and Grahn, Arthur H., eds. *Music and the Brain: The Neuroscience of Music and Musical Behavior*. Routledge, 2016.

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.

1. Which is not to say that musical products of other animal species are *a priori* excluded from the realm of art. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The specific nature of which will be discussed further throughout the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Protagoras (320c–322d)*, [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)