

# The Influence of Music and Lyricism

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We live in a world where music and lyricism reign over humankind. In an era where we eat, breathe, and sleep music, its influence pervades every aspect of our lives, from personal entertainment to political campaigns. The power of these art forms to persuade and shape human thought, emotion, and behavior has never been more pertinent. Though most live at ease with the increasing dominance of music on humankind, as a singer-songwriter, I wonder: If music is one of the only sources of power that can successfully alter and reach every individual's emotions – be it through variety and personalization, being a multisensory experience, its accessibility or even through its direct emotional connection – are music and lyrics' persuasive powers always for good? Alternatively, could they be harmful?

Music and lyrics are like pharmaceuticals. Whilst harmony and melody provokes strong emotions without the need for cognitive processing, lyrics evoke specific memories and experiences nostalgic to an individual. Hence, they can serve as a complementary therapy for the artist or the listener. A mode of expressing "our true feelings." As an artist, I have always agreed with this statement and never questioned the power of expression through music. How could music threaten our kind if it is said to be here to serve us? However, with his cautionary stance on the arts as a potentially deceptive force, Plato warns of the dangers inherent in their ability to manipulate emotions and distort reality. In the modern context, Plato sheds light on how this power of persuasion could touch our hearts and sway our minds, influencing everything from our mood to our decision-making. Music could indeed be a force not to be reckoned with, as it makes us question to what extent this art form encourages imitation instead of authenticity of emotion. The central thesis of my essay is that music and lyricism have incredible persuasive power. I scrutinize whether this influence manifests as a boon or a bane for humanity through empirical evidence from neuroscience and psychology as well as personal experience, a careful analysis of Plato's perspective on the persuasive aspects of music and poetry, and Aristotle's counter-arguments highlighting the positive influences of these arts and the importance of humans' free will. I will nuance an understanding of the true power of music and poetry, ultimately answering my questions on whether their influence catalyzes human progression or are a perilous threat to our rationality and moral compass.

On a regular day, a mother takes her child to a music group; in the meantime, her elder son, a student, relishes the opportunity to put on his headphones as he leaves the school gates. His father breathes a sigh of relief as he finally gets home from a long day of work and puts on his favorite playlist. Music is having a profound positive effect on each member of this family. How could we argue that the influence music has on humankind could be harmful? Life without music is simply unfathomable, as the essential function that music plays varies greatly from person to person and is greatly impacted by emotional requirements, cultural backgrounds, and personal experiences. It serves as a crucial emotional channel for individuals, providing comfort, happiness, or a strong sense of identification and kinship with their ancestry. Others use music more as a background to their everyday lives, bringing forth its wide range of effects and uses in human experience while also improving their times of relaxation, concentration, or social engagement. Indeed, it is proven that listening to music gets good genes flowing, specifically those that help with mood, memory, and primary brain function. Regardless of taste in music, the feel-good neurochemical called dopamine is released while we listen to it. Indeed, according to the *NorthShore University Health System*, "this increased dopamine production helps relieve feelings of depression. Music is processed directly by the amygdala, which is the part of the brain involved in mood and emotions, and therefore relieves symptoms of depression. Music can help pick people up when feeling down in the dumps—much like exercise." This citation perfectly explains why we tend to listen to music when we feel down, to cheer us up, or, in a more contemporary context, why many go clubbing with friends right after a breakup—it all adds up. Not only does music help cure melancholy by boosting the mood, but it is also used as a form of therapy to tackle anxiety, a common everyday obstacle faced by many. Indeed, "There is conflicting evidence about whether listening to music affects your body's physiological stress response; however, according to the *National Library of Medicine*, it is indicated that the body releases less cortisol, a stress hormone when people listen to music.<sup>1</sup> It also measured several stress indicators (not just cortisol) and concluded that while listening to music *before* a stressful event does not reduce anxiety, listening to relaxing music *after* a stressful event can help your nervous system recover faster. How often have people found themselves in situations where they must blast

music to feel better after a stressful event or try to fall asleep with music in their ears due to the anxious, overthinking ritual they find themselves in late at night? Music helps us go about our daily routines without letting the negative aspects of our lives creep in on us—at least, that is how many feel about music. Music and lyricism can scientifically improve our mental health, allowing us to heal and feel better. As we can see, music has an immense influence on the human mind and mood, and thanks to scientific facts, we can see why the family I depicted above finds pleasure, relief, and necessity in music and lyricism.

This family may be listening to different music in different scenarios. Nevertheless, when they gather in their car for an hour's drive to visit the children's grandparents, they collectively sing their hearts out. Meanwhile, in another family, a father and his daughter connect through their love for Billy Joel, making their bond unique. Right across the street, two soon-to-be lovers are sharing their similar traumas, highlighted when they listen to that one song from Cigarettes After Sex. Be it through similar political beliefs, shared experiences, or shared love between individuals themselves or individuals and the artist, music, art, and lyricism have the power to bring together people from all walks of the earth. With years of war, hatred, and fear, we have all searched the ends of the world for a concept that could try and unite our kind amidst cruelty. From back in the day when people would use music and art as a form of storytelling and to today's use of the craft as a means of pleasure, music has been a uniting factor for us humans. Indeed, Lyricism and music have a close relationship; lyrics provide precise verbal representation to the emotions and narratives that the music expresses, forming a partnership that enables a deeper level of engagement with the audience. When combined, music and lyrics have the power to convey complex concepts, tell tales, and elicit a wide spectrum of emotions that neither one could achieve on its own.

Without music, the world would not turn, the sun would not rise, and the stars would not shine—as cheesy as it sounds. Therefore, after having had experience as an artist and having detailed knowledge about the positive effect of music on one's health and mind, when reading Plato's *Republic*, I had trouble agreeing with his statements. However, as I sit here writing my essay in a coffee shop on a Sunday night, questions arise, and my opinions have started to turn. Suppose music, art, and lyricism can affect our mood, beliefs, bonds with people, and, most importantly, our emotions through relatability. That could also mean that music can lead to misrepresentations, lies, and false feelings. And so I wonder, is the influence of art in our favor?

Through Book X in Plato's *Republic*, it can be inferred that music, lyricism, and, most importantly, poetry can be of danger to our society for three main reasons: the artist's imitation of a false reality without having any prior knowledge, the moral influence of the craft on our society, and most importantly the misleading emotional impacts of art on an individual and the inauthenticity of emotion.<sup>2</sup>

One of the first things Plato rapidly highlights in his speech about the dangers of art and poetry is the notion that poets and painters are only mimics who produce unintelligent images of reality. The physical world is only a shadow of a more substantial, abstract realm of "Forms" or "Ideas," according to his Theory of Forms. This theory explains that ultimate reality, which consists of timeless, unchangeable forms or concepts that best capture truth, exists outside of our physical reality and is not to be confused with the physical world. Poets are twice distant from the truth because they base their writing on this shadow world. Indeed, Socrates argues that "it is necessary for the good poet, if he is going to make fair poems about the things his poetry concerns, to have his knowledge when he makes his poems." As human beings, it is our nature to be influenced by others. Most of the time, especially when it comes to artists who use lyricism in their craft, we tend to take the art form as some glorified piece of information due to the level of "relatability" we feel with the emotion conveyed by the artist. Nevertheless, Plato infers that it is nearly impossible for artists to depict or portray reality accurately, so we should not take their craft literally. I, as a songwriter, can easily relate to what Plato is trying to explain. Indeed, I am no wiser than the listener listening to my song. When writing about a feeling I am experiencing, the odds of perfecting the depiction of this emotion in lyrics could be better. This example proves that music is not a source that should be reliable for others as even the singer-songwriter can provide a false representation of the emotion they are singing about. In a more modern context, this issue is evident in lyricism and music, especially in the popular music genre. Think about a popular song that talks about a love partnership. The song's melody and lyrics may create strong feelings and a vivid image of passion and love. However, from Plato's point of view, this representation is two steps from reality. The actual feelings and sensations that the music mimics are only reflections of the genuine, abstract form of love. Like the poets in Plato's perspective, the songwriters build their art on these imitations rather than a more profound comprehension of the real meaning of love. As a result, despite the song's emotional resonance and appeal, it lacks a genuine understanding of the essential qualities of love as understood through Plato's theory of forms.

Now that Plato strips away all credibility when it comes to the artist's diffusion of information, what is interesting to consider is the power and importance the glorification we give to artists, whether in poetry, music, or any other form of art for being "genuine" and "tragic." Indeed, the problem with music and lyrics is that the artist, in the lyricism of his craft, encourages people to believe that public expression is brave and authentic—especially when it comes to melancholy. Indeed, This is something about music and lyricism that

is wrong on many levels. First and foremost, the encouragement of tragedy, depression, and sadness has become a trend from the Romantic art period in poetry and literature through to today's music and breakup songs we hear on the radio day to day. Through the glorification we give to artists and their craft as listeners, we end up in a vicious circle where we believe that being melancholic—public or private—is aesthetic. In no world is it aesthetic to be depressed or to listen to sad songs and convince oneself that one's life is crumbling to pieces. Not only does it invalidate emotion, but it also falsely leads people into believing that their emotions are, in fact, real. In contrast, they are simply a derivative of a trending emotion. Back in high school, there was a time when kids would gloat and say, "If you listen to The Neighborhood, Cigarettes After Sex, and Tame Impala, you know you have been truly depressed," as if it were pathetic not to have gone through this "phase." I was one of these kids.

Looking back, I now realize how music and lyricism are used as a mediatized weapon regarding collective emotion. I started to relate to lyrics and emotions that I have luckily never experienced. The feelings a piece of music evokes might be referred to as "aesthetic emotions" as they are emotional reactions to the music's characteristics, rather than to issues or situations in real life. These feelings are "false" in that they do not accurately represent the listener's actual circumstances or emotional state, but they are genuine in that they are felt.

Secondly, the other danger found in music and the public display of tragic emotion is that it questions to what extent the artist's emotions are authentic. Indeed, we are quick to praise an artist for being "genuine" about their emotions in front of a mass audience, yet when feeling such strong emotions of fear, sadness, or grief, most people reflect on them on their own. When put up for the whole world to see, we are expected to wonder as humans to what extent the artist is playing the victim to appeal to his audience and to what extent their feelings are "true." As Plato mentions in his *Republic*, "the prudent and quiet character, which is always nearly equal to itself, is neither easily imitated nor, when imitated, easily understood, especially by a festive assembly where all sorts of human beings are gathered in a theater. For imitation is of a condition that is surely alien to them." Music and lyricism can lead people to believe that emotions such as grief and heartbreak should be experienced, looked at, and felt in a specific way. However, feeling and dealing with an emotion is meant to be conditioned to a specific individual; There is no universal way to cope with an emotion. We tend to lose sight of that and blur the line between what is real and what is fake when we feel it. Consequently, not only does music have the force to lead people to misinformation, but it also has the potential to promote a world where it is within the social norm to be depressed, to glorify negativity, and to trick people into thinking that the emotion they are feeling is genuine. It becomes more and more understandable that one of Plato's goals was the censorship of art in society as if art has the power to negatively influence and persuade people into believing false narratives and being out of sync with their emotions: maybe we have been blinded by our love for music all this time.

Music and lyricism have the power to influence the way our brain works and the way our heart feels. Therefore, music can tamper with our emotions. It is common for music to lead people to feel false emotions, whether through emotional contagion or the manipulation of expectations and responses. Either way, in his *Republic*, one of the most crucial and exciting arguments Plato makes is that because epic and tragic poetry appeal to the darker sides of the psyche and promote irrationality and moral weakness, music is a danger to society. It allows for solid emotions like sympathy, terror, and grief to be evoked by art, leading viewers away from morality and reason. Music can send signals to our brain through different frequencies that stem from chord progressions, telling us that we should either be experiencing happiness or sadness. We live in a day and age where a large number of successful art pieces are those that strive to "move" the audience emotionally; the easiest way to do so as an artist is when artists seek to be "genuine" through the expression of negative, deep emotion. I believe people try their best to be content with their lives.

Nevertheless, with the diffusion of such art, it is practically impossible for people not to feel negative emotions in the space of a day. Unfortunately, this is the least of our problems, as we need to choose to listen to sad music selectively. The real danger we face when it comes to music, art, and lyricism is the threat imposed by emotional contagion, which Plato deems to be the source of humankind's misery. In his *Republic*, Plato argues that music "awakens this part of the soul and nourishes it," the part in question being the ability to feel negative emotions. Plato explains that the primary threat when it comes to art and music is how humans are influenced by music because it evokes feelings unrelated to the listener's past or present circumstances. For instance, even if someone is not depressed about anything in their lives, they may experience sadness while listening to melancholy music. Feelings are "caught" via music in the same way that yawning is contagious. Emotional contagion is the most common yet unspoken phenomenon experienced in our time. One could be having the best day of their lives, yet upon listening to a sad song they will immediately, through the lyricism in the song, be led to believe that they are experiencing the same situation as the artist. This phenomenon highlights the danger of music in our society and questions to what extent our feelings are valid, as many of us find ourselves trapped in the cycle of emotional contagion and the pleasure it provides us relating to an experience. Personally, I can not recall the amount of times I would sit in my room and put on sad music just because I enjoyed the feeling of feeling sad, the nostalgia that I felt when

crying on a shared experience with the artist, as if the music understood all the emotions I was experiencing. In reality, I was doing perfectly fine. That is the danger of emotional contagion; it leads people to believe that they are feeling sad, happy, angry, or nostalgic when, in reality, they are feeling and experiencing something entirely different. It is frightening that music and poetry can play with our perception of life for the worse. We believe that lyricism is a form of self-expression, not mass persuasion. Plato may be right. How can one possibly argue that art is not a threat when it can quickly induce the world into melancholy?

After long hours of reflection on Plato's arguments about the influence of music and lyricism on humanity, it seems impossible not to consider censorship of art. However, when imagining a world where music, poetry, and art ceased to exist—what else would universally bring us joy and serotonin? It may be true that music and lyricism both manage to touch individuals profoundly and lead us to feel strong emotions that may not correlate with our lives. There is a reason why music and lyrics move us, and though we may falsely believe we are experiencing narratives concerning the art provided in front of us, it may not be the case.

Nevertheless, most of the time, we draw a conclusion or learn something after having taken part in waves of emotion. We wonder why we feel when exposed to art, and the simple act of wondering, followed by the feeling, perfectly proves why music, art, and lyricism must be at our disposal—to learn and to grow. Education, knowledge, and wanting to evolve are choices that are not forced upon us. Though societal norms force us to attend school and incorporate ways to grow as individuals, we have all the free will in the world. We can make the choice to educate ourselves and take a step further in our lives through careful inquiry. Similarly, we are not fated to dwell on melancholic music, art, and poetry. Art is at our disposal: no matter the message, our experience with it is what we make of it.

The beauty of art is that it is up to interpretation. If I listen to James Blunt's "You're Beautiful" and look back at memories spent with a loved one and dwell on the nostalgia, that is a personal choice. If my professors listened to the song, Professor Franks could relate to the song's message and reflect on a current experience with a friend or significant other. At the same time, Professor Duncombe may enjoy listening to the song with no particular attachment to it, as it is nothing more than beautiful. We, as humans, have the free will to decide how we are going to merge our souls with art and the extent to which we allow art to go deep in our hearts and minds. Indeed, Aristotle explains this concept perfectly in his *Poetics*. Aristotle gave reason's place and reasonable interaction with art more weight. He thought the public could discern between reality and art through reason and intellectual participation.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Plato's fear of unbridled emotional contagion, this thoughtful and mature connection with art is made possible by reason. As humans, we have learned to master the art of detachment. Therefore, it is not because art is placed before us that we must immediately try to find some relation between the piece and the self or the artist. A perfect example of this would be when listening to a song for the first time. Most of the time, when we listen to a song for the first time—whether upbeat and joyful or slow and bitter—we find ourselves appreciating the beauty of the craft and felicitating the artist rather than immediately trying to relate the lyricism with our lives. Only once have we listened to the song carefully, and again, we find ourselves alone in our rooms, reflecting on our emotions. Hence, this proves that we can co-exist with art and that we can determine whether a work of art can hold the power to lift us or bring us down. Plato may argue that the cause of emotional force is art's imitation of life, yet imitation helps humans pull away from the intense emotions of the artist's craft. If we know art is imaginary or a story experienced by another, then we could not possibly trick ourselves into believing that it is accurate to us. The foundation of this conversation is Aristotle's idea of mimesis. According to Aristotle, poetry depicts things and events such that readers might imagine them to be authentic while yet understanding that they are works of fiction. Reflective learning from art is made possible by a type of detachment that this technique offers. Indeed, this can, in turn, mean that one can become more sensitive and introspective by reflecting on human behavior.

Though we can appreciate the artist's craftsmanship from afar without getting our emotions involved, the questions that arise when we feel are here to help us better understand ourselves and the society around us. Music and lyrics, art and literature, are the primary means of education in our day and age for a reason. Learning from fiction through feeling and allowing our minds, hearts, and souls to question our existence and those around us allows humankind to progress. In his foundational treatise *Poetics*, Aristotle proposed that music and poetry might arouse feelings and facilitate catharsis. The term "catharsis" describes using art to purge or purify emotions, especially dread and sympathy. According to Aristotle, viewers have the free will to decide how they want to react to an artwork on an emotional level. People can develop moral awareness and emotional equilibrium by living through these feelings via art. One's feelings and experiences may become more fully understood due to this interaction. In this situation, using art becomes a way to reflect on oneself and explore emotions.

Suppose we reflect on Aristotle's notion of catharsis. In that case, we will find that though we may be prone to feeling strong emotions that may not correlate with our current life situation when listening to music, rationality, and authenticity can still be found. When we pleasure-purify ourselves from the feelings we bottle and hide deep within, we release valid emotions to continue living a content life. Truthfully, Aristotle relieved

me. I thought that I was a masochist for wanting to experience pain and sadness through art, whereas I am doing fine in life. However, there may have been a part of me that needed to let these emotions run free in order to feel fundamentally satisfied. All this time, the sadic ritual of emotionally engaging with music is playing to my benefit! Hence, art may incorporate the theme of broodiness and melancholy, yet contrary to Plato's belief, it does not induce society to live in misery. Quite the opposite, if it were not for art and music, we would not be able to live happily. As Aristotle would say in *Politics*, "Rhythm and melody supply imitations of anger and gentleness, and also of courage and temperance, and all the qualities contrary to these, and of the other qualities of character, which hardly fall short of the actual affections, as we know from our own experience, for in listening to such strains our souls undergo change."<sup>4</sup> Poetry and music are potent forms of expression that go beyond simple amusement. They can evoke powerful emotional reactions because of their profound psychological resonance. More significantly, poetry and music may impart moral and ethical teachings through these emotional experiences. They can provoke thought about morality, justice, and the state of humanity and reflect society's ideals and standards. A world without art, music, and lyricism would be nothing but doom and gloom; art is a catalyst for growth and progress.

In conclusion, I have written a Bible-long work to answer my thesis. However, as an aspiring singer-songwriter, it was nearly impossible to argue that music and lyricism, or art, would not be essential to an individual's life. Arguing against the vitality of music in our modern day and age would additionally mean throwing my credibility in the trash, as it is my life's purpose to become one with music. As much as I thought it would be hard to understand what Plato was saying, I was surprisingly shaken by his argument and his valid points. As a society, we eat up any information we receive without considering the consequences. It is human nature to be naive, and Plato has demonstrated this perfectly through emotional contagion. It takes contemplation to re-evaluate what we know and find many different truths to be found. As Plato has shown us, what is true is subjective to the individual, as is the concept of music, art, and poetry. Music, art, and poetry are as helpful to humankind as they can also be destructive. As informative as they can be misinformative. They are relatable even as they can be fiction, and as genuine as illusory. Though persuasive, we can choose where art transports us and what we feel in response. As powerful as music and lyricism can be, we should be the ones manipulating art to our advantage rather than evaluating whether music and lyrics are the bane or boon of our existence. Music makes the world go round, yet behind the music, there is always a human being.

1. NorthShore, "[9 health benefits of music](#)." ↵
2. Plato, *The Republic*. ↵
3. Aristotle, *Poetics*. ↵
4. Aristotle, *Politics*. ↵

Alani Hajithomas (BA '25) originally wrote "The Influence of Music and Lyricism" in Hallie Franks and Stephen Duncombe's Fall 2023 Interdisciplinary Seminar "[Persuasion!](#)"

Thumbnail image: statue of Aristotle at Spada Palace.

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