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# Greek Music Theory vs. the Bible

Kearsten M. Kostelnik

Cedarville University, [kearstenmkostelnik@cedarville.edu](mailto:kearstenmkostelnik@cedarville.edu)

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GREEK MUSIC THEORY VS. THE BIBLE

Kearsten M. Kostelnik

Music History I

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Many people today study and know of the great philosophers of Ancient Greece. Their writings and works still show influences in Western society today, even in music. Famous Greek philosophers and writers, such as Plato and Pythagoras, formulated theories on musical philosophy — it's purpose, use, dangers, power, and importance in society — and not just entertainment. These philosophies shaped not only secular music development but also influenced the church music history. Although Greek philosophy of music heavily influenced early European society's view and development of music, it only partially supports Biblical views and principles of music and worship. Julius Portnoy explains, "Music and religion were thought by the Greeks to be divinely intertwined."<sup>1</sup> Even so, there are some discrepancies between the extent of these theories and Biblical interpretation.

In the history of Greek philosophy of music, there exists many different views of music in proportion to life, deity, nature, and society. These can be separated into two major categories, a *naturalist* view of music, and an *idealistic* view of music. The naturalist view proposes that man designed music to imitate nature and reflect the beauty of it's sounds. This could be interpreted to sounds of birds, rivers, or more complex ideas such as natural ways of life such as the Circle of Life. The idealistic view presents the creation of music from a more perfect or divine force, such as the stars— stars were more than materialistic creation during Ancient Greece times. This analysis will reflect and focus on the ideas centered around idealistic views of Greek philosophy and less of the naturalistic views. These include the views of Pythagoras, Plato, and Augustine.

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<sup>1</sup> Julius Portnoy, *Music in the Life of Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), 2.

Pythagoras, known for his discovery of interval pitch ratios, created one of the first theories of music, Music of the Spheres. This notion suggests that stars and planets of different sizes produce different pitches and create an inaudible harmony amongst the universe, or cosmic music. We see this not only in Greek belief but in others as well. Babylonian religion was formed around astronomy, forming seven heavens reflecting the seven planets.<sup>2</sup> Each of these planets moved on a unifying sphere, where the sphere was ruled by one God. This suggests that music connects all of creation and human beings. In addition, Greeks believed that demigods were transferred to or into stars, implying that stars and planets were alive with celestial bodies.<sup>3</sup> This contributed to this popularity of the theory of Music of the Spheres as it united the stars, or celestial beings, with man on earth through harmony. Therefore, chaos and negativity came from dissonance and bad harmony between the universe, or rather, between the gods, celestial beings, and man.

Greek gods became the role models and creators of music for the people of Greece, and therefore set the standards and uses for music. Apollo was the main god of music, arts, body, medicine, and knowledge. Therefore, a lot of music was dedicated to him and formed around him and his legends. These Greek mythological stories served as a means of life for the Greek and purpose in music. It is no wonder that Ancient Greek philosophers and writers of this time thought that music, mind, and body were all connected in some way. If this were true, then music serves a great importance and could be deemed as equal as the importance of medicine, the body, and knowledge.

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<sup>2</sup> Kathi Meyer- Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death; Studies in Musical Iconology* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Kathi Mayer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death; Studies in Musical Iconology* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970), 11.

The Bible does not lead the reader to believe that there are any other Gods other than the one God of Judea and that all of creation, including music and body, are from this one God. Nehemiah states clearly, "You alone are the Lord. You have made the heavens, the heaven of heavens with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them You give life to all of them and the heavenly host bows down before You."<sup>4</sup> This states that there is one God and one single creator of the world and heavens. It also states in Colossians 1:16 that anything created by Him, should therefore be given back to him in some form.<sup>5</sup> People who believed in the God of the bible were faced with the decision to choose this God, or the Greek gods as Exodus states "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."<sup>6</sup>

In addition, the Bible does not state anything that leads the reader to believe that stars are more than just material creation. Genesis 1:16 implies that God created stars and moon, or "lesser light," on the fourth day as mere material creation. Before technological advances, the sky, stars, planets, and space were a mystery to people and something people often saw as celestial. However, now we know the material make-up of stars and planets, how they function, and their course of direction. Although they remain mysteries, technological advances have allowed clarity in our understanding of space. Because of this, as well as other developments, many people do not believe in the theories of Greek mythology seriously, and therefore Pythagoras' music of the spheres becomes less logical and popular. Even so, many people took

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<sup>4</sup> Nehemiah 9:6 (*New International Standard*).

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 1:16 (*New International Standard*).

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 20:2-3 (*New International Standard*).

this notion into serious consideration at his time and expanded on these thoughts of music as something that connects with the soul, such as Plato.

Plato expands on Pythagoras' notion, and creates a more detailed theory of music and the harmony of the soul in his major work: *The Republic*. Plato states three main parts to one's soul: the rational, the spirited, and the bodily desires. By this, everything is in accordance the harmony and balance of one's soul. Plato then acknowledges the aesthetic power that music has on one's emotions and tells of the close relationship of music and one's morality.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Plato, as well as other Greeks, believed that certain modes of music negatively influenced one's character and therefore morality. This led to the development of the doctrine of ethos and affections in music. In the end, he suggests that if society only listens, creates, and performs the "good" music, people will build good morality and unite society in harmony. Thus, music is seen to have ethical abilities and characteristics as it reflects the ideal order of society, or harmony of the universe. Aristotle, taking after Plato's theories, went as far as categorizing music into four main categories: the moderate, the enthusiastic, the sad, and the relaxed. He further describes these in detail with scale examples. "Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian; others enfeeble the mind."<sup>8</sup>

Although Plato took after Pythagoras' Music of the Spheres, Pythagoras was more centered around the acoustics of the sound, while Plato expanded on the esthetic powers of not just listening to music but also creating music. This is expected as Pythagoras discovered the interval ratios, which provided a great foundation for music theory and the development of instrumentation. Plato describes musicians as to having ecstatic influences when creating music

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<sup>7</sup> Plato, and Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), Book III 398 e.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, and Benjamin Jowett, *Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1885) 8.5.1340a-1340b.

and being “*God-intoxicated*” as Portnoy describes it.<sup>9</sup> When a musician or artists truly creates, he is not following rules or laws of society, but is embodied in a sort, by celestial powers and therefore creates something divine. Aristotle, Seneca, and others took after this notion of divine inspiration in a means to understand music. Eventually, this notion died down in the Renaissance era as the humanistic viewed this musical frenzy to be figurative, and not in a literal sense.

Even so, the church did not remain uninfluenced by these theories and notions. The church soon took after these teachings by incorporating only “holy” or “good” music in the church. Choral music was accepted, and by strict guidelines of composition, but instrumental was opposed vigorously. There are examples of this in the early twelfth and thirteenth century churches with the strict construction of the Catholic Mass, purely triple meter music—representing the Holy Trinity—, and seldom to no dissonances. Although the organ was introduced into the church in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, it was still incorporated with the purpose of supporting voices as accompaniment. Begbie explains, “Instrumental music, however, seems to have little or no place in worship; indeed, by and large it was vigorously opposed.”<sup>10</sup> However, the Bible references musical instrumentation being used in worship by key Bible figures. David played his harp as to make Saul feel better and even used as a weapon of preventing evil spirits from coming upon Saul.<sup>11</sup> This Biblical evidence supports Plato’s theory that music influences emotion and has power. Although it supports the theory that music influences emotions and character, it does not extensively explain to what extent the power of music has. Therefore, we see church music develop, as well as secular music, by including more musical harmonies, dissonances, and other musical characteristics that were at one point viewed as “bad” music. The

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<sup>9</sup> Julius Portnoy, *Music in the Life of Man* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1963), 7, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Begbie, *Resounding Truth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 85.

<sup>11</sup> 1 Samuel 16:23 (*New International Standard*).

Bible supports Plato's notion of musical aesthetics, but only to a general extent. Key figures of the church eventually noticed this and made interpretations of their own.

Although these Greek philosophers agreed that the comprehension of music requires a cognitive process, they didn't always agree on the mental reactions that arise from it. As Rowell explains there are three main categories that this aesthetic activity can be categorized in: "art can purify the mind by inducing an ecstatic experience; second it can create a fiction, an illusion in the mind (especially in the visual arts); and finally, art can communicate by triggering an act of recognition, of discovery, when the perceiver becomes aware of similarities between the art work and its models in nature."<sup>12</sup> Aristotle fondly took after the last notion of imitation, or *mimesis* (Greek equivalent). His belief was that all art and all music is an imitation of something else, regardless of whether the creator is aware of it. This supports that there is a higher external force, that is the subject of imitation. This could be something such as nature, or even a higher being, such as Apollo or the God of the Bible. This served as a large foundation for many philosophies that emerge later in Greece and even in the church. After all, the Bible states "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." If this is true, then it is possible that man's ability to create music is a reflection or imitation of God creating music. This notion became a struggle for many church leaders, such as Augustine.

Augustine provided another important view and philosophy of music especially regarding the church. Although not Greek, his beliefs reflect many similarities and characteristics of

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<sup>12</sup> Lewis Rowell *Thinking about Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 49.



Plato's theory of music and morality. In his major work, *De Musica*, Augustine stresses the importance of meter and numbers in proportions according to a hierarchy. This hierarchy derives from God himself as an order and rhythmic "eternal number." People may move up and down this hierarchy in their own proportions and numbers. These numbers and proportions could be interpreted as physical material, such as height proportions of a person, or numbers as in harmony within order or character. This suggests that the highest of the numbers portray perfection and a closeness to God. Augustine states that the complexity and purity of these numbers prove God's existence; His supremacy, relation, harmony, unity, music creation, are displayed in music as temporal expression of the eternal music belonging to God. For example, the complexity that is within the numbers of nature; the natural design of animals, the placement stars, natural harmonies in sounds, and all of creation. The more complex and of higher number, the more beautiful, or good, the creation was to Augustine. Therefore, the balance and wellness of one's soul regarding music depended on our love for beautiful things, or numbers; even sinners are moved by numbers and set the numbers of this world in motion and cannot be entirely without some form of beauty in numbers. Every part of creation has numbers, even if simple and not complex. Augustine may have struggled with the love of the material world but provided the church with support in musical beauty and importance in the church. Carol Harrison explains, "As with all temporal manifestations of music (as harmony, unity, order...) in the created realm, therefore, whilst appreciating the beauty of music as it is sung in Church, Augustine never ceases to emphasize the need to move beyond and through it: beyond and through the temporal mutable and bodily towards the eternal, immutable and spiritual."<sup>13</sup>

Augustine not only stresses the importance of beautiful music in the creation aspect, but also in

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<sup>13</sup> Jeremy Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie, *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2011), 32.

the spiritual aspect. Music, to Augustine, reflected something much greater than creation and beauty in numbers. It was meant to represent perfection and beauty as to God. Therefore, music no longer serves for pure enjoyment or a mechanism of teaching us naturalistic realities, but something that each person should often practice in order to be closer and in harmony with God.

Augustine's suggestion can be understood in one of two ways; the first is that music makes us more like God as we reach perfect numerical beauty; or the second where music brings us closer to God. Just as in any relationship, praising or thanking someone brings their relationship closer, but does not necessarily make them like that person. Whether or not the means of their praise come by the form of music, art, creation, dance, or works, it is still praise. Therefore, being closer to God, and being like God provide different outcomes. Being like God means becoming more perfect and holy where being closer to God means having a better understanding of God and deeper appreciation for Him.

It is evident in the Old Testament that music served an important role in the Hebrew's worship of Yahweh. Lockyer Jr. states, "References to music, praise, and singing in the Bible outnumber references to prayer and praying almost two to one."<sup>14</sup> The Bible supports that creation helps us worship God and give praise through song and appreciation but does not specifically state anywhere that music specifically makes us holy or more like God. Psalm 98:4 states to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord," and "sing praises."<sup>15</sup> This instructs the readers to sing praise and make noises of joy. It does not specify as to what kind of noises these are and leaves it up for interpretation. It also does not state that this singing or music must be sung with any specification, such as perfect harmonies, unison, or even beautiful tones. Even so, it still instructs that the readers sing to the Lord, regardless of these things. If one's quality of music

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<sup>14</sup> Herbert Lockyer, Jr: *All the Music of the Bible* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc, 2004), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ephesians 2:8 (*New International Standard*).

affects how perfect or Godly one is, then ultimately, this means people can work for their perfection or salvation. However, Paul strictly warns the Ephesians that their salvation is not by their own deeds, but by faith and grace. He also mentions that this is so that no man can boast. Thus, music is not a means of gaining perfection or Godly beauty but understanding and appreciating God and his creation.

In conclusion, some philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and even Augustine on music share a great deal of similarities with the Biblical view of music. Pythagoras introduces the theory that music is more than just entertainment as it unites the spheres and universe but fails to align with the biblical view of stars as mere creation. Plato, drawing on Pythagoras' notions, explains that music has the power to influence people and thus should only have good music. Even though the Bible agrees with this notion, it does not specify as to what degree music influences people and what ultimately defines "good" music. Lastly Augustine provides his argument that music provides a means in numerical beauty that brings us closer to God, or even closer like God. The Bible supports using music as a means to worship and praise God, bringing closeness in the relationship, but not in the sense of making one more perfect and like God. Ultimately there proves to be some conflict in the roles and importance of music in society between these theories and the Bible. Even so, these theories helped develop and increase the popularity of music in early European society and in the early church.

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