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PERSONAL AND SOCIAL ETHICS
AESTHETICS VERSUS ETHICS: IS THERE GOOD AND EVIL IN MUSIC?
ETS Annual Meeting - New Orleans, Nov 19, 2009
Lilianne Doukhan, Ph.D. – Andrews University

The topic of good and evil in music raises two ethical questions, one of social ethics, and one of personal ethics. Whenever the question of music is addressed in the context of church life, it places us immediately into an ethical context. Music in the church does not happen just on the individual level, it concerns a whole group of people who are involved in a common musical event, such as a worship service. Opinions and tastes in matters of music are as diverse as the number of individuals who share this common event. As much as music is generally experienced as a factor of unity–as for instance in the world of sports or popular music–it is no secret that the debate about the power of music for good and evil has created division in churches, especially in those with a less progressive approach to worship. This was true for the past as well as it is for today. Discussions focus primarily on what music is "good" for church, and what music is "bad" or "evil", and therefore not acceptable for church. Already from a terminological point of view, then, the issue appears to belong to the ethical domain. However, the question that lies at the basis of this debate is really a question of personal ethics, namely, the assumption that there is a power inherent in music that can transform and change us as individuals on the moral level. A power that can make us become morally better people or, as the discourse most often goes, to make us become morally less good people. Elements in music that are attributed good or evil influence on our morals are generally seen inherent to certain melodies, rhythms, chords, or instruments.

Some people will affirm that, as they listen to "good" (secular or sacred) music, they feel

elevated in their minds and souls, and it helps them become better and more spiritual people. In the words of professor Karen Hanson, there is, then, a tendency to "intertwine and even fuse moral and aesthetic judgment,"[1] that is, to identify an aesthetic experience with an ethical experience. Such a perspective assumes that beautiful music is necessarily good music, that listening to something beautiful and artistic has a moral effect on us, namely, it makes us to become better people. Conversely, the contemplation of something considered to be debasing, ugly or vulgar, would have a moral effect on us, in making us become "immoral."

It is important, therefore, to distinguish between an aesthetic and an ethical experience; they are not equivalent. In his book *Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, Harold Best, Dean emeritus of the Wheaton College Conservatory of Music, distinguished quite clearly between the two experiences:

> The beauty of God is not aesthetic beauty but moral and ethical beauty. The beauty of the creation is not moral beauty; it is aesthetic beauty, artifactual beauty. Aesthetic beauty lies in the *way* and the quality with which something is made or said. Truth lies in *what* is said. . . . Being emotionally moved by music is not the same as being spiritually or morally shaped by it (p. 43-44, 151).

While on the level of God, aesthetic and moral beauty (excellence and goodness) are one and the same, on the human level, aesthetic beauty is not necessarily synonymous with goodness. When we contemplate some art work or listen to music–to what we commonly call "beautiful music," "art music," the question must be asked: does this imply that we become better persons? Can a particular instrumental sound, a melody, a chord, or a rhythm carry and convey good or evil? If that was indeed the case, music would have the power to carry moral meaning, that is, to implant good and evil in the human soul. Some people have advocated this theory and still do so. It grew

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[1] "How bad can good art be?," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection,* ed.

out of a legitimate concern for the well-being of the human soul and its preservation from evil. These theories reach all the way back to the ancient Greek philosophers, and were then perpetuated by the church fathers and earliest music theorists of the Christian era, as well as some theologians of the modern times. Together with other concepts taken from Hellenistic thinking, Greek theories about the moral power of music strongly infiltrated and permeated Christian theology and philosophy. There was a common thread of belief in the capacity of music to affect and change the character, reaching all the way back from John Calvin (16th century)[2] to Justin Martyr (2nd century A.D.).[3] For the early church fathers,[4] the only real world

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Jerrold Levinson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 214.

[2]John Calvin, "Epistle to the Reader," *Cinquante Psaumes en français par Clém. Marot (1543),* in *Corpus Reformatorum*, eds. Wilhelm Barum (Brunschwig: C. A. Schwetschke and Sons, 1867), vol. 34, chapter 6, p. 165-172.

[3]Justin Martyr, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, transl. A. Lukyn Williams, D. D. (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1930), chapter 2:4, p. 5.

[4] Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus,* ed. J. C. M. Van Winden (Boston: Brill, 2002), book 2, chapter 4, par. 41; idem, "The New Song," in *Protreptikos*, transl. Thomas Merton (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1962), par. 9, p. 15-18. Basil the Great, "Homily on Psalm 1:1-2," in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Paris: Excecudebatur et venit apud, 1857-66), vol. 29, col. 209, quoted in James McKinnon, ed., *The Early Christian Period and the Latin Middle Ages*, vol. 2 of *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, revised ed., general ed. Leo Treitler (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), p. 11; Basil the Great, *Exhortation to Youth as to How They Shall Best Profit by the Writings of Pagan Authors*, vii, in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Greaca*, vol. 31, col. 581-584, quoted in James McKinnon, *The Early Christian Period and the Latin Middle Ages*, p. 69. John Chrysostom, "*Exposition of Psalm 41*," in J.-P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, vol. 55, col. 156-159, quoted in James McKinnon, *The Early Christian Period and the Latin Middle Ages*, p. 13. Saint Augustin, *De Musica*, transl. Frank Hentschel, Philosophische Bibliothek, 539 (Hamburg: Felix Reiner, 2002), book 6, chapter 17, par. 56. Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music* ed. Claude V. Palisca, trans. Calvin M. Bower (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 2-3. Cassiodorus, *An Introduction to Divine and Human Readings,* transl. Leslie Webber Jones (New York: Columbia University Press, 1946), book 2: *Secular Letters*, part 5: "On Music," p. 190. Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, book 3, chapter 17, transl. Helen Dill Goode and Gertrude C. Drake, Colorado College Music Press Translations, 12 (Colorado Springs, CO: Colorado College Music Press, 1980), p. 14.

was the spiritual world, and music–among other material effects–was only a sign of spiritual reality, but this sign was able to exert spiritual power in the lives of the believers.[5]

In the following presentation, I will take a look–which by necessity must remain schematic–at the ideas which lie at the basis of this theory, namely, the Greek theory of ethos. I will, then, discuss this theory in relationship to the biblical point of view, and in the light of the reality of the musical experience.

The Greek Theory of *Ethos*

The belief in the moral power of art is illustrated by the famous saying of Plato in book 3, (par. 401d) of his *Republic*:

> Rhythm and *harmonia* find their way to the inmost soul and take strongest hold upon it, bringing with them and imparting grace, if one is rightly trained. ... One who was properly educated in music ... would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good.

In this passage Plato does not refer exclusively to music but to the rhythms and *harmoniai* which govern all the arts–architecture, sculpture, music, poetry, etc.–and on a larger level the human soul, the city, and the universe. In Greek thinking, the universe and all of its manifestations were understood as forming harmonious relationships. These were governed by mathematical laws

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[5]For more detailed information on this topic, see James McKinnon, ed., *Music in Early Christian Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Unviersity Press, 1987); idem, "The Church Fathers and Musical Instruments," Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1965; James McKinnon, ed., *The Early Christian Period and the Latin Middle Ages*; David W. Music, *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings*, Studies in Liturgical Musicology, No. 4 (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1996); and Johannes Quasten, *Music & Worship in Pagan & Christian Antiquity*, transl. Boniface Ramsey, O. P. (Washington, D.C.: National Association of

which demonstrated order, measure, and balance. Beauty was also defined in terms of mathematical rules, as can be seen in the principle of the golden mean or the mathematical proportions found at the core of the theoretical system of music.

As applied to music, the term *harmonia* must not be understood as "harmony" in our modern sense, namely, as referring to multiple parts sounding simultaneously, or the rules governing these polyphonic structures. It was rather used in Greek Antiquity to indicate the various musical modes—Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian—referring more precisely to the intervallic relationships (including microtones) between the adjacent pitches of these various octave species. These relationships were expressed in terms of numbers, especially the fundamental ratio 1:2 which in music yields the octave that contains all the other numerical relationships of pitches. To Plato, as to the Pythagoreans, numbers expressed reality, and intervals were heard as "material representations of numerical truth."[6] This is what the 3rd-century Greek sculptor Polyclitus referred to in saying that "the beautiful comes about, little by little, through many numbers."[7] It was these rational orderings of pitches that were understood to have an influence on the soul.

Both elements–rhythm and *harmonia*–responded to the principle of Unity, where all parts were seen as fractions or multiples of a basic common measure. The highest principle, Unity, the One, was constituted of perfect Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Since the "Good" was also the Indivisible, the One, and since the highest pursuit of humankind was the soul's fusion with the

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Pastoral Musicians, 1973) .

[6] C. André Barbera, *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 1986 ed., s.v. "Greece - I. Antiquity".

[7] Philo of Byzantion, *Mechanicus*, 49.20, in "From the Fourth Book of Philon's *On the Making of Artillery*," par. 2, in Philon and Heron, *Artillery and Siegecraft in Antiquity*, transl. by

One,[8] the ideas of unity, indivisibility, and simplicity were fundamental qualities to be emulated in the pursuit of all human endeavor.[9] Variety, excess, divisibility, that is, complex numerical relationships, were considered as contrary to the acquisition of virtue. Herein lies the fundamental criterion for the classification of melodies or rhythms into "virtuous" or "vulgar."

On the level of the musical modes, the simpler the numerical relationships of the intervals formed between the pitches of a mode, the stronger and more desirable was the mode. Those modes featuring more complex numerical relationships, that is, more chromatic or microtonal intervals, should be avoided since they fostered more excessive and undesirable attitudes, such as sadness and melancholy, but also joy, excitement, and intoxication. The Dorian mode, for instance, was considered of a sedate and manly ethos, and represented the virtue of bravery, making it the most desirable one. The Mixolydian mode, on the contrary, was mournful and restrained, and was used for lamentation, that is, a lack of discretion or temperance; it was, therefore, considered undesirable. The Lydian mode was understood as decorous and educative, thus suited to the age of boyhood. However, it was rejected for mature men because of its lack in imparting power to the warrior.[10] The Phrygian mode was seen as an exciting mode recommended only for older people for purposes of catharsis (or purification), but was to be avoided in the education of the young.[11]

As far as rhythm was concerned, both Plato and Aristotle pointed to the intimate

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James G. DeVoto (Chicago, IL: Ares Publishers, 1996), p. 7.

[8] "The form of the Good is the greatest object of study, and it is by their relation to it that just actions and the other things become useful and beneficial" (Plato, *The Republic*, book 6, par. 505a, p. 159; cf. Book 7, par. 517c, p. 170).

[9] Thus, e.g., one should fulfill only one function in the city, *The Republic* book 2, par. 370b, p. 40.

[10] Aristotle, *Politics*, book 8:7, in Mathiesen, ed., *Greek Views of Music*, 33-34.

connection between poetic meters and musical rhythm. For Plato, rhythm (whether poetic or musical) was a poetic ornamentation that heightened the intensity of the emotion (*Republic*, 10:601b), and he thus advised that one "must not pursue complexity nor great variety in the basic movements" (Plato, *The Republic,* book 3, par. 399e, p. 70). The more varied and complex the rhythmic relationships, the less appropriate was their use for educative purposes, because they would bring about undesirable states of the soul.

The same reason of unity and simplicity was also at the basis of the acceptance or rejection of some instruments: the use of those which were capable of producing multiple sounds was discouraged. Thus, the playing of the aulos, a double reed oboe-type instrument (with two pipes), or the harp (kithara) was not considered as desirable or contributing to a strong education, since on both of these instruments one could play more than one sound simultaneously.[12]

For a number of Greek philosophers, Aesthetics and Ethics were thus intimately interconnected. Not all Greek philosophers, though, shared this belief. The 2nd-century (A.D.) Graeco-Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus refuted the theory:

> It is not conceded offhand that by nature some of the *mele* (songs) are exciting to the soul and others are restraining. ... That the cosmos is ordered in accord with *harmonia* is shown to be false in various ways; even if it is true, such a thing has no power in reference to happiness–just as neither does the *harmonia* in the instruments.[13]

As examples to the contrary, he mentioned the failure of music to prevent Clytemnestra, in a fit of "excessiveness," from slaying her husband Agamemnon who had especially appointed a bard to endow her with discretion. Sextus Empiricus attributed the effect of music not to its power of

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[11] Aristotle, *Politics*, bk. 7.

[12] Aristotle, *Politics,* book 8, par. 6, in Mathiesen, ed., *Greek Views of Music*, vol. 1 of *Strunk's Source Readings in Music History*, rev. ed., ed. Leo Treitler (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 31.

imparting manly courage or discretion, but rather to its power to *distract*, either from the painfulness of work or the agony of warfare (ibid., 100): "It is not because it [music] has the power of discretion that it restrains the heart, but rather because it has the power of distraction" (idem). Similar views were also shared by the Epicurians (ibid., 101).

Both Aesthetics and Ethics belonged, then, to the ideal world of forms and ideas. According to Plato's analogy of the cave (*Republic*, bk. 7, p. 168-191), manifestations of human achievement could only be mere reflections of the invisible forms. Art, however, was understood to be one way to embody–and lead to–this ideal world. Indeed, artworks were not merely seen as the product of inspiration, applied to the world of the senses. In obeying the same mathematical rules that governed the whole universe, art and especially music became a mirror of the cosmic, enabling the human being to participate in the ideal world. Aesthetics (beauty) and ethics (virtue) shared a similar nature, as expressed by Aristotle in book 8 (8:5:1340) of his *Politics*: "Mele (melodies) do actually contain in themselves imitations of ethoses (character)" and "we seem to have a certain affinity with the *harmoniai* and rhythms."

But beyond sharing a similar *nature*, Aesthetics and Ethics had also a common *function*, namely, to regulate, order, and moderate excessive (irrational) passions of the human soul. The human soul (the microcosm of the universe) had been created as a mirror of the universal soul (the macrocosm of the universe) and partook of the same laws and properties as the universe. According to Plato (*Republic,* bk. 3, par. 400d-401d), there was a relationship between beauty and order in music, and the idea of order and harmony in the soul, that is, the relationship between its rational, emotional, and appetitive parts. Both the philosopher and the musician

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[13] "Against the Musicians," par. 27, in Mathiesen, ed., *Greek Views of Music*, 99, 103.

shared a common source of inspiration: "The wise man is similar to the musician since he has his soul organized by *harmonia*."[14] The philosopher was responsible for the education of the rational part of the soul by teaching virtues through the exercise of the intellect. The musician dealt with the irrational (emotional) part of the soul, allowing it to receive virtue by means of particular modes *(harmoniai)* or rhythms. Thus, according to Aristides Quintilianus, music was capable to organize "harmoniously" all things.[15] The moral value of music resided precisely in the apprehension of the rational principles of balance and harmony (equity). It was the rational approach to music, in Plato's words, that "compels the soul to look upward and leads it from things here to things yonder," thus helping the soul toward the apprehension of the beautiful and the good (*Republic*, 7:529a-531c). The same line of thought, by the way, led the Greeks to consider the actual practice and performance of music as inferior to the study of the rational principles of music. In Greek thinking, music served as an avenue to gain a better understanding of the ideal forms of the virtues of beauty and goodness, thus bringing the individual closer to the ultimate goal of existence, the contemplation of the eternal One.

What was the process that made it possible to arrive at this aesthetic/ethical experience, that enabled music, the arts, to have an impact on the human soul? An essential step in reaching the aesthetic–and therefore ethical–experience in Greek Antiquity was through contemplation. According to Plato, during contemplation of works of art (architecture, sculpture, paintings, music, drama, etc.), the individual would [as we mentioned at the beginning] "take delight in

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[14] Related by Sextus Empiricus, "Against the Musicians," in Mathiesen, ed., *Greek Views of Music*, 98.

[15] Artistides Quintilianus, *On Music: In Three Books*, transl. Thomas J. Mathiesen (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), book 1, par. 1, p. 72.

[beautiful things] and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good." (*Republic* 3:401e). Through the intellectual exercise of contemplating works of art, the human soul would be able to obtain "knowledge" and to identify with the One, which is eternal virtue, truth, goodness, and beauty.

The contemplation of works of art such as the statues, which typically represented gods, was primarily meant to elevate the human soul and become a model for it. As we "dwell amid fair sights and sounds," wrote Plato, "and receive the good in everything, beauty shall flow into the eye and ear ... and insensibly draw the soul ... into likeness and sympathy with the beauty of reason."(*Republic* 3:401c). Greek philosophers believed that the physical object, or musical sound in itself, stood for the spiritual power it represented. Contemplating the object would then naturally affect the spiritual dimension within the contemplator. The oversized dimension of these statues referred the human being to the "ideal" and metaphysical nature of the contemplation in which beauty transcended virtue. In a similar manner, the contemplation of music, while passing through the sensory aspect of the soul, was able to lift the human soul out of the transitory and accidental character typical of the musical experience, onto the permanent and essential level of the universal experience.

Discussion

As one considers the Greek approach to music, one might feel quite attracted to or in agreement with such a perspective. We all know from experience that music affects us on the levels of our bodies, minds, and feelings. We speak of music as cheering us up, energizing us, and elevating us, but also as making us sad or nostalgic. But does this mean that music, indeed, has the capacity to change our characters, in the image of the contemplated affection? Are we

helplessly at the mercy of musical influences? To the Greeks, the impact of certain melodies, rhythms, and instruments went beyond a mere effect on the emotions which are essentially of a transitory, fleeting nature. These musical elements were understood to act directly on the very character of the person, and to have power to shape, change, and transform permanently. Art, in Greek thinking, involved a process of identification. According to Aristotle, "mele," that is, the functional complex of text, rhythm, and pitches, "do actually contain in themselves imitations of ethoses; ... people when hearing them are affected"(*Politics*, bk. 8, par. 5). This would mean that when we listen to music representing anger, courage, temperance, etc., it would permanently inflect our soul to these various states. Such transformations were possible because of a "certain affinity of the soul with the *harmoniai* and rhythms."[16] The soul becomes the *harmonia*, i.e., the character is changed to express the affection contained in the music: "Music has the power of producing a certain effect on the ethos (character) of the soul." (Aristotle, *Politics* 8:5).

The Greek theory of ethos is still with us today, although it appears that the transfer from the Greek understanding of the aesthetic/ethic relationship to our modern-day understanding of this relationship came with a shift in emphasis. While in both approaches the physical object or phenomenon is endowed with spiritual powers, there is a difference in the understanding how this power was imparted to the object or phenomenon. For the Greeks, it was obtained through an intellectual exercise, namely, the contemplation of an aesthetic object or phenomenon. It was a rational principle that gives the object its power. The process takes place on the level of reason.

In today's understanding of the aesthetic/ethic relationship, the spiritual power is conferred upon the object or phenomenon because of its association with a place or an event in

[16]The soul "is a *harmonia*" or "has a *harmonia*" (Aristotle, *Politics*, book 5, in Mathiesen,

or during which it was or still is used. Thus, for example, an African rhythm or instrument (such as the drum) will necessarily be inhabited and carry in itself the power of evil spirits, because at one point in time it was used as an instrument in demon worship. Similarly, jazz scales and playing techniques will inevitably carry with them and convey to the listener or performer, the values and practices of the French quarters in New Orleans where—as it is generally assumed—it took its origins. In this perspective, it is then its function within a given context that lends the object/phenomenon its power. Such a process belongs to the realm of superstition, and has more to do with magic and possession than with an intellectual exercise.

I would like to challenge this theory of the moral power of music on two levels: (1) the biblical perspective, and (2) the reality of the musical experience.

The Biblical Perspective

The belief that a physical component of music has the power to determine an ethical or spiritual condition–leading into evil or good behavior or thinking–belongs to a pagan way of thinking which leads to a spirit of idolatry. In idolatry, the object in itself is granted a magic power. In the case of music, such power would be attributed to a melody or scale pattern (e.g. the blues scale, or a folk scale), a particular chord structure (such as jazz chords, the 9th chord, or the major triad), a rhythmic pattern (syncopation or marching rhythm), or the sound of a particular instrument (guitar, drum, saxophone, piano, organ).

For the Greeks, this power became effective through contemplation. Scripture teaches us though, that the power which operates a transformation in the human soul does not result from

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ed., *Greek Views of Music*, 29-30).

the contemplation of an object or phenomenon, whatever human work it represents. Instead, the transforming power belongs only to the divine action–it is the work of the Holy Spirit. Thus Paul writes, in 2 Corinthians 3:18: "We all ... beholding ... the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image ... just as by the Spirit of the Lord." (New Living Translation) The Good resides in God alone, and it is only as we look to Christ that, by contemplating Him, we become changed. While Paul uses a familiar concept in Greek philosophy, "contemplation," he introduces a new truth of a completely different order. He too speaks of contemplation, but operates a shift on the level of the object of contemplation, referring to the transforming power that comes from the "contemplation of the glory of the Lord."

Moreover, in Biblical thought, the transforming power does not reside in a passive act, such as it is found in contemplation, but in the active response of hearing and obeying the divine voice of Revelation. As the Jewish commentator Samuel R. Hirsch put it, "human excellence does not consist in lifting our eyes towards God in the hope to contemplate Him, but rather in being elevated by Him ... so that we may see the world according to his point of view."[17] When our wills are aligned with the will of God, when we see the world from the perspective of God, then character excellence and highest ethical behavior may be achieved. Biblical ethics are not arrived at and developed by means of passive contemplation of an object, but by the responsible act of listening and submitting oneself in willful obedience. Biblical ethics imply active collaboration between the effects of the Holy Spirit convincing us of sin, and our response through hearing and obedience. It is not a human object that acts upon me but rather the Spirit and Word of divine revelation.

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[17]Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Der Pentateuch*, vol. 2: *Exodus* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag

There appears, then, to be a fundamental difference between the Greek view of Good and Evil and the biblical understanding of what is right or wrong. The Greeks conceived Good and Evil in terms of harmony and disharmony. Good music was music whose language reflected the mathematical principles of balance and harmony. Moreover, it was not the concrete things on earth which were important for them but rather what pointed to a higher level, in order to reach closer to the perfect understanding of the Good.

If we want to place our discussion of music into a biblical perspective, we must be aware of the differences between these various concepts of ethics and be careful not to apply a Greek concept of ethics to a modern, or even more so, a biblical approach. The ancient Greek understanding of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics can still be traced in the terminology which characterizes our conversations about music, that is, our use of the terms "good" and "bad" in speaking about music.[18] Expressions such as "good" and "bad" belong to the realm of ethics and can, therefore, become very equivocal and misleading. This is true especially when people use these terms indiscriminately, applying them when speaking about music in aesthetics terms: good music, that is, artistic and well crafted, versus bad music, that is, simplistic and of poor craftsmanship. In terms of ethics, the qualifiers "good" and "bad" refer to ethical/unethical or moral/immoral actions or thoughts. In terms of aesthetics, the same terms are thus misused to refer to external qualities of things (how something looks or sounds).

The Reality of the Musical Experience

Contrary to popular belief, music does not convey in itself, in its vocabulary (scales,

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der Kauffmann'schen Buchhandlung, 1869), p. 555-556.

[18]On this common confusion of terminology, see also Karen Hanson, "How bad can good art be?" in *Aesthetics and ethics: Essays at the intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson (Cambridge,

chords, instruments, etc.), a specific meaning. What lends the music its meaning is the context in which it is performed, the nature and degree of knowledge of the listener about this particular music, and the ideas or associations in the listener's mind at the time of the listening experience.

French scholar Jules Combarieu, who did an extensive study on the relationship between music and society [and, for that matter, music and magic], observed that the quality of music (its vocabulary) and the mode of performance (its context) are only one side to the way music is understood. He points out that one also needs to consider "the ideas which are in the mind of the listener and which associate with the listening experience."[19]

Harold Best addressed the same issue in a religious context:

> Music has no interior beacon that guarantees permanent meaning. Unlike truth, which is transcultural, absolute, and unchangeable, music can shift in meaning from place to place and time to time. . . . The more a piece of music is repeated in the same context, the more it will begin to "mean" that context. (*Music Through the Eyes of Faith*, 54).

Music has no magical power per se. We hear in music what we want and expect to hear in it. What we hear is a result of what we invest into our listening experience. The seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza made the same point:

> "As for the terms 'good' and 'bad,' they likewise indicate nothing positive in things considered in themselves, and are nothing but modes of thinking, or notions which we form from comparing things with one another. For one and the same thing can at the same time be good and bad, and also indifferent. For example, music is good for one who is melancholy, bad for one in mourning, and neither good nor bad for the deaf."[20]

Music does not belong to the pagan realm of spirits and forces of nature that are believed

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UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 214-215.

[19] Jules Combarieu, *La musique et la magie: Étude sur les origines populaires de l'art musical, son influence et sa fonction dans les sociétés* (Paris: Alphonse Picard & Sons, 1909; reprint Geneva: Minkoff, 1978), p. 86.

[20]Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, transl. Samuel Shirley, ed. Seymour Feldman (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publ. Co., 1992), p. 153-54.

to have power over human beings and against which we apparently have no defense. It is true that such theories have been perpetuated through the ages and were adopted by religious and secular powers, in turn. As Christians we do know, however, that we are called to take responsibility in regards to our thoughts and actions which are the result of the state of our hearts, not the inevitable influence of an exterior agent. The gospel of Mark makes this very clear:

> Nothing outside a man can make him "unclean" by going into him, rather, it is what comes out of a man that makes him "unclean". . . . For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man "unclean."(Mark 7:15, 21-23, NIV)

cf James 1:13

Commenting on this passage, Harold Best observed,

> It is not what music does to us, it is what we choose to do with music, by virtue of the condition of our heart. . . . It is up to each individual and within each person's power to decide what moral actions can be taken or refused when music is heard. (p. 57, 151).

In the same way that music has no magical power to lure us into wrongdoing, music also has no power to make us better persons. Music has failed, indeed, through history, to make us more ethical or moral persons. It was a recurring dream of more than one political power to use music to better humanity. In modern times, it was picked up particularly by the theorists of the French Revolution (Marie-Joseph Chénier, etc.) and then by the great Romantics of the nineteenth century (Lammenais, Liszt, etc.). They invested music with the role of educator of humanity in order to create, as proposed by the Greek model, a better society. Once the church had been abolished by the Revolutionaries, the arts, and especially the musical arts, were meant to take its place and to fulfill the role of religion.[21]

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[21] Franz Liszt, "Concerning the Situation of Artists and Their Condition in Society,"

History has repeatedly shown the failure of this undertaking. The Biblical account of David playing the harp before Saul (1 Samuel 16:15-23) reveals the precarious character of this position. Saul had David come before him to play the harp to soothe his "evil" spirit. The text tells us that David would take his harp and play, then "relief would come to Saul, he would feel better and the evil spirit would leave him."(1 Samuel 16:23). It is significant, then, to observe that on a later occasion, the same music David had played earlier to soothe Saul's spirit, had no calming effect; on the contrary, it incited Saul to kill David.

If there was a direct relationship between the music and the behavior of the listener, classical music, because of its high aesthetic standards, would lead the listeners to treat their fellow humans with the greatest respect and according to the highest moral standards. The Nazi example belies such theories in a flagrant manner. The daily performances of classical music to which the officers would gather religiously, did not prevent them from perpetrating inhuman and brutal acts against their fellow humans, and this immediately following those musical performances.[22] Indeed, centuries of artistic education and refinement have not been able to achieve one of the purposes political and spiritual leaders have, in vain, long attributed to music: to change people and make the world a better place. If there is no power in music to make us more moral, there is no power either to make us less moral.

These examples make us reconsider the theory of the moral power of music. Regular

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Gazette musicale de Paris, 30 August 1835; in Jean Chantavoine, ed., *Fr. Liszt: Pages romantiques* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1912), p. 65-67, quoted in Piero Weiss and Richard Taruskin, eds., *Music in the Western World: A History in Documents* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1984), p. 366-367).

[22]For a live reaction to this incongruent situation, see the testimony of a former member of the Birkenau camp orchestra, in *Bach in Auschwitz*, videorecording (New York: WinStar TV and Video, 2000).

exposure to classical music may contribute to a certain intellectual refinement. It may foster structural qualities in our thinking. But it certainly does not have the power to make us better people in terms of ethics or morality. Conversely, loud, rhythmic music, or music that is cheap or vulgar, cannot make us more immoral.

At this point, inevitably, the question arises: "Is music, then, neutral?" Music experiences certainly do affect, inflect, and stimulate our senses, emotions, and attitudes. The answer to this question must, then, be articulated very carefully. There are two predominant views on the matter. One view approaches it from a quasi mystical, almost superstitious perspective, lending music a magical power. The other view takes a materialistic stance and defends the opposite extreme: music has no effect whatsoever on the human being.

A balanced and informed approach to the topic must take into account the dynamic character of the musical experience. Musical meaning cannot be attached to isolated elements of the musical language, such as an instrument, a chord, a melody, or a rhythmic pattern. Those elements are neutral in themselves. However, music does affect us strongly when it acquires meaning within an event, an experience. When melodies, chords, rhythms, and harmonies are combined together, they are given a specific meaning within a particular cultural setting and are, then, interpreted as happy or sad, elevating or debasing. Every society or sub-culture develops a concept of what is sacred and what is entertaining, of what is tasteful or vulgar. Expressions of respect, veneration, adoration, and solidarity–sacred or religious attitudes basic to the human race–are shaped according to established value systems. Every culture group develops its own verbal and musical languages to translate these concepts. The interpretation of musical content does not primarily happen on the basis of the innate nature and quality of the musical sounds

produced, but rather according to the context in which this type of music is created and performed, i.e., the circumstances the music is associated with. As such, music cannot be said to be neutral. As it affects individuals, it always does so within a given context—based on prior experience, knowledge, and associations—that determine the understanding of its meaning. Rather than lending music magical powers for good or evil, it must be put back into its rightful place, namely, as a tool that can be used for many purposes, but should be handled with a strong sense of responsibility, toward oneself and toward society at large.