

From Ancient Greece to Contemporary Music Education

(Music and character building – more than a myth?)

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Abstract—Already in ancient Greece philosophers argued about the influence of music on character building. For Plato and Aristotle there was no doubt, that music was crucial in education. But it had to be the “right” music as the ancient myth of Apollo beating the Satyr Marsyas in a musical competition had made clear. Plato’s book “Republic” and Aristotle’s “Politics” describe in detail the authors’ ideas about music and education. It is shown that many of these ancient thoughts still are relevant for today’s debates. But it has to be considered that music can be misused to brainwash children and might have impact on the character in a way that cannot be accepted. Contemporary music (and arts) education has to face new challenges especially in connecting musical traditions to modern music in an attractive and creative way. Music ensembles probably offer the most influential environments for young people to develop character traits such as sensitiveness, empathy, respect. Feature films or the documentary “Rhythm Is It!” among others prove that the expectation that music might influence character building in a positive way is still alive.

Keywords—music education; Greek philosophy; character building; Plato; Aristoteles; *El Sistema*

I. ROOTS: ANCIENT GREECE

At the first glance it might seem strange to travel back in time more than two thousand years ago. But remember that “music” is a loan word from Greek “*musiké*” that means “made by the muses” (“*musiké techné*”). It comprises among others music, play, dance, song and poetry. Music stands in the centre of the arts and has a significant role in Greek mythology. It is linked with the sphere of the gods by Apollo the lyre player and leader of the muses, favourite son of Zeus, the King of Gods. There are many tales connected with music. Probably the most prominent is the one about the musical competition between Apollo and the Satyr Marsyas who played the aulos. This is how the story goes:

Marsyas had learned to play the aulos (a double oboe) very well. When he met the god Apollo, known for his mastery of the lyre, he challenged him to a contest to find out who was the better musician. The people around were invited to be judges. Apollo began playing the lyre but when it was Marsyas’ turn, the people judged the music higher. Thus, for the next round,

Apollo sang and accompanied the song with his instrument. This time he was declared the winner of the contest. Marsyas claimed it was unfair because Apollo combined two arts – instrumental and vocal – and he himself could not. Apollo replied it was not unfair because both used an instrument and the mouth at the same time. Meanwhile Apollo was so enraged by the quarrel that he hung Marsyas on a tree and tore his skin off the body. Afterwards he was so shocked by his own violence that he destroyed his lyre and all the harmonies he had discovered were lost.

This myth is important in our context because it connects music with certain character traits and demonstrates the juxtaposition of the musical instruments lyre and aulos. The string instrument is played by the god who represents artistry, sensibility and truth whereas the wind instrument is played by a satyr, a creature half man half animal. Marsyas is among the mob who accompanied the god Dionysus, half sibling of Apollo, god of wine, dance and ecstasy. Apollo and Dionysus are antipodes. And as the character traits of Apollo seem to be desirable and serve as an idol for education, Dionysus is the opposite, his character traits may be human too, but they have to be defeated by education. As an educational consequence the musical instruments that serve as symbols for these gods the lyre has a good reputation but the aulos has to be rejected.

It was in this setting – differentiating between good and bad music, and debating positive and negative aspects of music – that Greek philosophers argued about the importance of music in education.

II. GREEK PHILOSOPHER ON MUSIC EDUCATION

A. Plato

Around 380 BC Plato (428/427 or 424/423 – 348/347 BC) wrote *Republic* a famous essay on the (utopian) perfect state. The book is written as a talk of Socrates (the “lyrical I”) with different prominent people of his time. One may wonder, if the arguments are really, as the book suggests, those of Plato’s teacher Socrates or if Plato puts his own ideas and convictions into the dress of Socrates’s speech.

Plato assumes music to play a major role in education [1]. Musical training has to begin in early childhood. But not all music is appropriate for educational purposes. To determine the value of music Plato (resp. Socrates talking to Glaucon) mentions three constituent elements of song: the words, the melody, and the rhythm [2]. Only the Dorian and Phrygian scales (or harmonies) are judged to be useful because they make the listeners courageous whereas Ionian and Lydian scales are said to be “relaxed”. Even Terminology of Jowett’s translation is not quite clear as sometimes the word harmony is used almost synonym to melody, probably meaning mode or scale. Concerning the instruments lyre and cithara are accepted and aulos or flute are rejected: “The preferring of Apollo and his instruments to Marsyas and his instruments is not at all strange’, I said. ‘Not at all’, he replied.” [2].

In their conclusion Socrates and his dialogue partner Glaucon confirm each other that music is the most powerful means in education as rhythm and harmony directly address the soul of the young. Or in other words: the use of “good” music will help to develop desirable character traits, whereas “bad” music might lead to the opposite. Education (character building) through music could be the catchphrase. But there is another idea that music might develop the sense of beauty. So music is not only a means of education but also the subject of education. It aims at the appreciation of music: „‘And therefore’, I said, ‘Glaucon, musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated ungraceful; and also because he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar.’

‘Yes’, he said, ‘I quite agree with you in thinking that our youth should be trained in music and on the grounds which you mention.’ [2].

B. Aristoteles

Aristoteles, disciple of Plato, described his view on music education in his book Politics. He devotes much attention to music and claims that music is – besides gymnastics for the body – the most important subject of education as it has influence on the character of the young [3]. So far there are no severe controversies between the two philosophers. But concerning our context there are important differences between Plato’s relatively strict position and Aristotle’s empathetic and relaxed view on music and education. For Aristotle it is not only the influence of music on the character that makes music valuable for education. To him, music is part of humanity and social life. Music can bring joy. He claims, music can be education, amusement and intellectual enjoyment at the same time [3]. And he makes another important point regarding music – in his own words: We cannot “attain true pleasure and

form a correct judgement from hearing others” and he therefore concludes that “the young ought to be trained in it” [3]. However, Aristotle clearly divides music and instruments appropriate for educational purposes from those that might be used in professional play and amusement for the common people just for relaxation, for those listeners who are not well educated and only search amusement [3].

This might resemble modern debates on the aesthetics of music and the question, whether there is a difference between ephemeral music for the masses and art music, that endures forever.

C. Modern thoughts form Ancient Times

There could be said so much more about Plato and especially Aristotle but let’s move on and see, which ideas and assumptions of the Greek philosophers are still relevant for today’s discussion of music or arts in general and character building.

- Music can serve as a means for education (“Education through music” Plato): Music can help to develop character traits – Greek philosophers call it “soul” or “character”.
- Music as a subject of education (Plato): You have to learn about music, to judge its aesthetic qualities.
- Music education should start in early childhood (Plato, Aristotle): Today psychologists think that the age of 4 is a good age to begin musical training, but some say you should begin directly after birth or even during pregnancy.
- Music and teaching methods have to be age-appropriate (Aristotle): For teachers of today this is common sense.
- Music can bring joy (Aristotle): Is there anybody who would disagree? Almost every human being around the world loves music. But musical preferences may differ.
- Learning by doing (Aristotle): In visual arts or design nobody would disagree, and for young children singing, dancing or playing approachable instruments like percussion instruments is the best way to music appreciation. For older students one might argue, that some topics require listening instead of playing an instrument. Think, for example, of a symphony by Beethoven or an opera by Handel. However, in my opinion, even in these cases we can learn by doing – by learning music perception.
- Influence of instruments and musical attributes on the character (Plato, Aristotle): Today most probably we would not agree. But there have been times when in Germany instruments like the saxophone, the electric guitar or the way of singing in jazz styles were judged critical. It was supposed this distorted the sense of music. Under the influence of emerging musical mass media especially radio and record in the 20th century the debate, what sort of music was acceptable at school, revived and it was assumed that popular music (especially the so called “Schlager” or in the 1950s rock

'n' roll) could have a bad influence on the character of young people.

- Rejection of professional music (training, contest, vulgar playing for an audience) (Aristotle): We all know that professional music needs much training and at school we usually don't have enough time for practicing. Therefore in many countries there is a complementary music education system of music schools where you can learn to play an instrument or to sing.

From my German perspective the last points are of less importance today.

With Plato and Aristotle on our side we claim that music education – and also arts or design education – contribute to character building. But is it really guaranteed, that this will make our world a better place? Unfortunately, I am convinced that this is not inevitably so.

Among German music lovers and amateur choristers, a quote from a poem by Johann Gottfried Seume (1763 – 1810) is very popular:

“Wo man singet, lass dich ruhig nieder, / Ohne Furcht, was man im Lande glaubt; / Wo man singet, wird kein Mensch beraubt; / Bösewichter haben keine Lieder”

It means,

“Wherever one sings, you may settle down, / without fear, what they believe in the land; / Wherever one sings, no man is robbed; / Bad people have no songs.” [4]

But history proves that this is not true. Bad people do have songs. Singing can be misused to brainwash children and has impact on character in a way we cannot approve. In German history for example this was the case during the Nazi-dictatorship (1933 – 1945) preceding the Holocaust and World War II or in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR, 1949 – 1990), the socialist eastern part of Germany, when singing was expected to contribute to shape a “well-educated socialist personality” but in fact meant political indoctrination.

III. CONTEMPORARY ISSUES OF MUSIC AND ARTS EDUCATION

Music and the arts (incl. design) are part of our history, our heritage and also part of contemporary culture of our children, of our students. The task of education is to help students to learn about culture in general, about the roots of music and arts to appreciate these historic artifacts they formerly probably did not understand or like. These roots may be different in Indonesia compared to China, South Africa or Germany. But probably the educational challenges of today are similar as young people tend to be critical whatever might be “old fashioned” in their eyes. As a consequence, we have to find ways to make these subjects attractive. To challenge children's creativity might be a successful way of teaching performing and visual arts because it is highly satisfying to be creative and feel proud about the results of these efforts. It is really eye- and ear-opening. Or I recall the dissertation of Yudi Sukmayadi [5]. He developed teaching models to combine modern art music

with traditional Indonesian music. I think this is an innovative way to teach musical roots to students.



Fig. 1. Angklung ensemble at UPI.

In Indonesia, as in most parts of the world, the Internet enables young people to share similar experiences in arts. Marshall McLuhan in 1962 coined the term “global village” [6]. This is almost 60 years ago and in times of the Internet the world really seems to be a village where everybody can get in touch with anyone anywhere and news are spread in seconds. I recall a little concert given by students during my first visit to the University Pendidikan Indonesia. I was impressed when they played traditional Angklung but had chosen an international hit by Bruno Mars *Just the way you are*. This is how music appears today: You can combine modern music with traditional instruments. And I had the impression the students liked what they played.

In German schools as in many other countries learning is competency-based. I do not want to complain about it. But I am convinced that music or art classes go much further than teaching knowledge, skills and abilities. But what are these extras beyond competencies?

Let me give you some musical examples. In Venezuela *El Sistema* offers young people especially from under-privileged social classes the opportunity to learn a musical instrument and to play with other young people in a symphony orchestra. The success of *El Sistema*, founded in 1975 is really impressive. Gustavo Dudamel, principal conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic confessed, “music saved my life and has saved the lives of thousands of at-risk children in Venezuela” [7]. More than half a million participated in *El Sistema* during four decades. And think of other musical initiatives all around the world – jail or community choirs – or what musicians tell about how they were influenced by music. I think nobody would disagree, that music education should teach more than musical facts or musical notation.



Fig. 2. Documentary “El Sistema” (promotional poster) [7].

I am convinced that the best way young people can benefit from music is to become a part of a music ensemble. It brings joy and musical understanding while children learn how to practice, listen to the fellow musicians, feel responsibility and solidarity, deal with failure and success, fight stage fright. There by character traits develop that will accompany the students all their lives and help to master challenges of living. A perfect example is shown by the documentary *Rhythm Is It!* [8] featuring the Berlin Philharmonic and their famous conductor Sir Simon Rattle. He and internationally renowned choreographer Royston Maldoom staged an education project in Berlin. More than 250 students from 25 nations attending different schools in Berlin worked hard to master a choreography to the music of Stravinsky’s “Sacre de printemps” (“The Rite of Spring”). Really amazing.



Fig. 3. Royston Maldoom working with a young German student (still from the documentary “Rhythm Is It!”) [8].

In Germany we had a long debate concerning so-called “transfer effects” of music classes. Music educators tried to convince politicians that music was important at school, because there were desirable side effects: Increasing the affordable time for music classes seemed to raise the score in

intelligence tests, comparable with the obscure “Amadeus-effect”. It seemed to make the students act more socially and less aggressively and so on. I was not happy with these arguments because it is not useful to fight for music classes solely with non-musical arguments.

We need music and arts at schools for their own sake, because they are part of our culture, because they are vital for human beings. Music and art can mean a lot to people even if they are not professionals, and of course they can shape the character too. Based on this widespread experience there have been quite a few successful feature films that tell stories about how people benefit from singing in a choir or playing in an orchestra or band. Well known and internationally distributed feature films are e. g. “Sister Act II” (USA 1992, directed by B. Duke, starring W. Goldberg), “Mr. Holland’s Opus” (USA 1995, directed by S. Herek, starring R. Dreyfuss “Les Choristes” (The Chorus, F/CH/D 2004, directed by C. Barratier, starring G. Jugnoz), “Boychoir” (USA 2014, directed by F. Girard, starring D. Hoffman) [9]. These films transfer the myth about the power of music into modern times. – I am sure that many musicians, artists, dancers would agree: The impact of music and arts on young people, on character building can’t be overestimated. Let’s be self-confident and innovative to improve music and arts education to raise these potentials.

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