



A Review of Western Ancient Greek Musical Psychology

Linxia Zhu, Shangfeng He

School of Music, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, China

Email: 1017449668@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Zhu, L.X. and He, S.F. (2022) A Review of Western Ancient Greek Musical Psychology. *Open Access Library Journal*, 9: e8810.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1108810>

Received: April 29, 2022

Accepted: July 4, 2022

Published: July 7, 2022

Copyright © 2022 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Ancient Greek music psychology thought is the root of western music psychology on their end, and has a deep and wide impact on the later music development. This paper divides the development stages of ancient Greek aesthetics into ancient times, classical times and Hellenistic times. The research object is the most representative musical psychological thoughts emerging in various historical periods of ancient Greece. This paper selects the research perspective of music aesthetics, through the collation, reading and analysis of literature, introduces and summarizes the characteristics of music psychology.

Subject Areas

Art, Music

Keywords

Psychology of Music, The Ancient Greeks, Psychological Function of Music

1. Introduction

When the ancient Greek music aesthetics appeared and developed, their culture had existed for a long time. Music had an important social status in ancient Greece and was closely linked with religion, politics, philosophy and science. Since the psychology of music was not studied as an independent discipline until the middle of the 19th century, it can only be understood through the ideological viewpoints in the treatises or fragments of the time. The author summarizes the psychological thoughts of ancient Greek music into three aspects: the psychological function of music, the aesthetic psychology of music and the psychology of music performance. According to the sequence of historical development, it is discussed, sorted out and summarized.

2. The Psychological Function of Music

The psychological function of music includes entertainment, education, therapy and other functions. Morality, as an important political means of the ruling class, played an important role in coordinating social psychology no matter in the period of slavery in Ancient Greece or the period of state system in the form of city-state democracy. War and plunder filled the three stages of the development history of ancient Greek civilization, and the psychological function of music was also reflected accordingly, such as encouraging the morale of soldiers in fighting and celebrating in triumph.

The Pythagorean School (6th-4th centuries BC) was a religious, scientific, and moral organization. They believe that in the process of performance, music not only plays a role in experiencing emotions for performers, but also can arouse the inner emotions of viewers, that is, “music can guide and purify the soul”. The specific performance is as follows: first, music has an impact on people’s character. If the person with strong character listens to soft music to be able to make its mood is relaxed, thus causing the change of character. Two, music can cure people manic, depression and other psychological symptoms, mood and lust, conducive to physical and mental health. And so on... The word “purification” was later attributed to Pythagoras from a physiological point of view, confirming him as the founder of the theory of music therapy.

Plato (427-347 BC) wrote in his Republic, the most widely known and popular political thought: “One who has been trained in this kind of fine music can readily perceive and rightly dislike the ugliness of all works of art and things in nature; But as soon as he saw beautiful things, he admired them, and gladly absorbed them into his mind for nourishment, and thus became noble and beautiful in character. This correct preference for beauty and ugliness had been with him from his infancy, when the reason had not developed, and when it had, he was close to it.” [1] It can be seen that Plato opposed music as a means of entertainment and emphasized the educational significance of music, believing that good music has positive effects on people’s character building and physical and mental health. He also affirmed the social role of music and advocated it as a means of governance to cultivate people. The specific content is as follows: 1) The idea of “pre-school education” is proposed for the first time, which holds that 0 - 7 years old children need to receive simple music education at an early age, so as to promote the formation of character and quality such as optimism and courage [2]. 2) Due to the rich musical life of ancient Greece, the idea of “careful selection of teaching materials” was first proposed. Plato believed that teenagers aged 7 - 17 were in an important period to develop their characters and learn how to behave and do things, and that only beautiful music could edify their sentiments and enhance their sense of morality. Therefore, it is necessary to select suitable textbooks for teenagers from ancient Greek art genres (such as tragedy and comedy) for music education. At this time, music education not only included music, but also poetry, reading, mathematics and other subjects

besides physical education. 3) Influenced by the Half-century Spanish-Polish War and Spartan educational philosophy, he proposed that some young people should be selected to receive military training after the general education, and continue to receive music education during the two-year military training. Plato believed that sports and music should complement each other. Sports are used to strengthen the body, train the willpower and cultivate military talents to defend the country, while music has the function of strengthening the soul. If you want to achieve physical and mental health effects, you need to combine sports with music. 4) At the age of 20, people are again carefully selected, and the few who remain receive elite education and pursue advanced studies in their respective fields of expertise, such as music, philosophy, mathematics, etc. Although Plato's thought of music education brought profound enlightenment to the later generations, he ignored the value of art and thought that art should serve for political opinions by choosing music teaching materials according to the will of the ruling class.

Aristotle (384-322 BC) is Plato's student, he put Plato's metaphysical aesthetic thought into practice, combined the concept of nature and sociology, in order to treat the problem of music aesthetics. Aristotle believed that art had the functions of education, purification, entertainment and so on. From the point of view of the educational function of music, he formulated corresponding educational policies according to the age of people according to the view that education needs to be based on the natural characteristics of human physical and mental development. The specific content is as follows: 1) The first place for 0 - 7 years old children to receive physical training should be in the family, supplemented by music and other entertainment activities while exercising. He inherited Plato's concept of "preschool education" and "careful selection of teaching materials", and attached importance to the role of music in the enlightenment education, believing that this stage is a good time to cultivate children's good habits, and take it as the basis for further education after family education. 2) Youngsters aged 7 - 14 should adopt a combination of intellectual education, aesthetic education and physical education, and enhance their moral sense and aesthetic ability through music training. He inherited Plato's teaching scope of music education, emphasizing the all-round development of young people. 3) Young people aged 14 - 21 should accept the education mode centering on intellectual education, and aesthetic education should serve for intellectual education, so as to cultivate rational talents. In terms of "purification", Aristotle believed that music could influence people's character, morality and emotions, and bring people the experience of enjoyment and recreation in leisure time [3]. Unlike Plato, Aristotle did not believe that music was harmful. He believed that music could make people relaxed and happy. To a certain extent, this also confirms the positive significance and entertainment role of music.

Aristocoxen (c. 4th century BC), a student of Aristotle, proposed that emphasis should be placed on the cultivation of musical talents, believing that a good

musical education can lead people to recover from their misdirection. Empiric (2nd century BC) denied the active role of music, including the role of cognition, education and ethics, and denied that music could not affect people's character, emotion and moral sense, and completely denied the psychological function of music. He believes that music is a tool that can make people temporarily leave or escape from the real world, such as alcohol and dreams, but it cannot solve the negative emotions encountered in the real world.

3. Music Aesthetic Psychology

The advancement of history depends on the thinking of philosophy, which includes many psychological viewpoints. Ancient Greek philosophers constantly explored the question of how the world originated, and their cognition of natural theory influenced their research in the field of music aesthetics imperceptively.

The Pythagorean school focused on mathematics. "The world is made up of numbers," he said, and music was regarded as a science of numbers. It is said that Pythagoras passed by the forge one day and was attracted by the sound of the hammer, so he immediately entered the shop to study why the sound sounded good. Therefore, by changing different sledgehammers and small hammers, he found that some combinations of hammers produced pleasant sounds. After comparison, he found that if the weight ratio between sledgehammers and small hammers was an integer or a rational number with a small denominator (such as 3:2), the sound produced by hammering was pleasant to listen to. Later, he experimented with Monochord, using the chord code to adjust the length of the strings while playing, and found that the ratio of chord lengths of two notes 4:3, 3:2, and 2:1—namely, intervals of four, five [4], and octave respectively—produced a pleasant sound. The Pythagorean school did not see things through the lens of musical aesthetics, so it did not use the word "beauty" to describe sound, but "harmony". They explained "harmony" from the perspective of philosophy and mathematics, and proposed that "music is the harmonious unity of opposing factors". Later they would apply this idea to study in the field of astronomy, they think the objects in the universe in motion will form a union wonderful voice, and we can't find a human voice because we live in the since birth voice, with the passage of time naturally become accustomed to it [3], so we cannot distinguish with quiet voice, And in a harmonious state of existence with the sound of reality. It follows that Pythagorean thought harmony was not only a mathematical relation, but also a property of the universe.

Heraclitus (539-470 BC) affirmed the Pythagorean theory of harmony, but his idea of harmony arose out of opposition and struggle, recognizing that the world was in constant motion and that harmony was not eternal. This view is of great significance in the western aesthetic field.

Democritus (c. 460-370 BC) believed that art was inextricably linked with nature, that art came from imitation of nature, and that the ability to discuss and

pursue the beauty of art was a gift from nature. In Plutarch's *On the Astute Animal*, it is recorded: "...We are pupils in many important matters: from the spider we have learned to weave and sew, from the swallow we have learned to build a house, and to imitate the singing of the swan and the nightingale." [5] As a simple materialist, he affirmed that art comes from real life, different from the ancient aesthetic concept—art is inspired by god, with innovative significance. At the same time, he also thought about auditory psychology. Democritus believed that the essence of the world is atoms and void. When sound enters the ear as a substance, it moves through the void inside and makes people hear the sound. This point of view is different from the mysterious nature of sound given by the ancients, and more scientific.

Plato was the disciple of Socrates, after Socrates was executed, he left Athens, traveled to many places, and studied with many people who had outstanding achievements in their respective fields at that time. Therefore, his theory integrated the famous Greek thought theory, and established the philosophical view of objective idealism. His dialogues often use Socrates as a character to express his views. Unlike Democritus, he saw inspiration as a divine gift, endowed with mystery. Plato got to know the representative figures of Pythagorean School when he traveled, and was deeply influenced by the school. He inherited and developed the "harmony theory" of the school. Plato affirmed the idea that "harmony is the fusion of opposites" [6] and "harmony depends on size, proportion and number", but he believed that the harmony of music should rely on intuition and perceptual knowledge, and acknowledged the importance of auditory psychology. Pythagoras thought that harmony was the property of the universe, and Plato believed that there was mathematical order among the seven planets on a positive basis, which was associated with the interval relationship, that is, the harmony of the universe and the harmony of music were consistent. Therefore, music can embody the essence of the universe and put forward the idea that "harmony is eternal". Pythagorean school explained the concept of "observation", that is, people observe and examine objective things in the state of ignoring fame or winning, and later developed into the observation of beauty in the field of aesthetics. Plato believed that the harmony of the soul comes from the soul's observation of the harmony idea, and the harmony of music is the imitation of the harmony idea, and put forward the view that "music can reflect the harmony of the soul" [6]. Plato divided the state into three classes, namely rulers, soldiers and freemen. The ruler must be a philosopher of noble virtue and good educational ideas. Plato believed that the popular music in the democratic regime at that time did not have good taste, but immersed people in low interest, resulting in negative social influence, so he advocated the ruler to strictly manage musical activities. He believed that music caused emotional and moral changes and strictly controlled the use of modes, instruments and other forms in ancient Greek music in the Republic. Plato, as a classicist following the tradition, tried his best to prevent the novelty and variety of music for fear of causing social turmoil and chaos, which to a certain extent hindered the development of

ancient Greek music, especially the progress of music creation.

Aristotle enriched and developed the imitation theory of Democritus. He opposed Plato's idealist thought that "the real world imitates the conceptual world" and explained the imitation theory from a materialist perspective. Aristotle points out that there is a certain connection between art and reality, that is, "art imitates the real world", which confirms the initiative of human beings in the process of art creation and enhances the status of art. There is a passage in his book *Poetics* that says, "People are always happy with imitations. Experience has proved this: although the appearance of things itself causes pain, the appearance of vivid images causes pleasure..." [6]. Thus, Aristotle believed that in the process of imitation, people could learn about art, satisfy their thirst for knowledge and improve their aesthetic ability.

Empiric affirmed the idea of Democritus—"the world is made up of atoms" and Plato's idea—"the world is made up of ideas". Therefore, he believed that sound does not exist, and music as a sound art does not exist, completely denying the value of art and imitation theory. He rejected the Pythagorean view of the harmony of the universe, arguing that the universe is not built on the rule of harmony.

4. The Psychology of Music Performance

Ancient Greek music has an indelible relationship with religious belief, sacrificial activity and witchcraft. The music of ancient times plays an irreplaceable role in the trinity dance and often expresses the emotion to the gods in the sacrificial performance.

Both Plato and Aristotle suggested learning Musical Instruments in music education. The latter believed that music should be recognized in practice, to express emotions through musical performances, and to improve their own perception and appreciation of music while watching other people's musical performances.

Although he lived in a city where Pythagorean influence was strong, He did not agree with the Pythagorean School's mathematical interpretation of music. Alystokosen believed that music should be studied from practice, from performance and creation, and advocated the combination of music theory and music practice to grasp "harmony". In his book *The Harmonic Factor*, he says: "Knowledge of a melody played... So understanding music is made up of two parts, it's made up of feeling and memory. We need to feel what is being produced, and grasp with memory what has been produced..." [6] Alystokosen believes that in the process of musical performance, not only emotion should be invested, but also reason should be used to control, which reflects the philosophical dialectic idea of the unity of emotion and reason.

5. The Enlightenment of Ancient Greek Music Psychology Thought

In the history of western music psychology, the ancient Greek thinking on the

psychological function of music has occupied a position of light weight, many theories for China's music career have a lot of reference value. First, in the aspect of education, it prompts us to cultivate preschool age children's love and learning of music. From the development track and law of instrumental music learning, this stage (4 - 7 years old) is the best opportunity. We should carry out all-round quality education for teenagers, and take music as an indispensable part. The music major in colleges and universities is divided into normal direction and professional direction, aiming at training music education talents and music performers to carry out courses. The music major should be established in vocational colleges to train personnel for the development needs of social art institutions and improve the national quality and moral level. In terms of "purification", we will develop music therapy to study the effects of music on human body and mind. Holding music performance activities with high quality, high aesthetic value and high standard not only requires music performers to improve their professional ability, but also has a positive impact on the public, establish a sense of national unity and cultivate cultural confidence. Third, in terms of entertainment, it will provide opportunities and subsidies for music creation talents, and integrate traditional music into the spirit of The Times and popular factors for people to relax and comfort their hearts at leisure. To sum up, ancient Greek music psychology thought has a long history, from which the essence can promote the development of music in China, has practical significance.

6. Conclusions

Exploring the history of music psychology in ancient Greece, we can find that the formation and development of music aesthetics are influenced by geographical environment, social and economic conditions and political culture. All the representative thinkers expressed their views on music from their own philosophical standpoint and formed a unique ideological system. Since the psychology of music was independent in the second half of the 19th century, the content of psychology in ancient Greek music thought was interwoven with other subjects, and the author distilled it and classified it. Among them, harmony theory and imitation theory are the mainstream thoughts about the aesthetic psychology of music, but there are few views about the psychology of music performance. Most of the ancient Greek thinkers affirmed the psychological function of music, among which the skeptics disagreed, but did not provide a new theory of music.

The deficiency of this paper is that only a few famous philosophers in ancient Greece period are selected as the research objects, and the economic, cultural and political outlook of each period is not sorted out and introduced through the historical development context, and the process and reasons of the formation and change of musical psychological thoughts are ignored. Due to the long history, some documents have been lost or cannot be found in their entirety, and there is a huge difference between the first-hand materials and the establishment

time of the discipline of music psychology. Therefore, the documents referred to in this paper are basically extracted from the ideological views of philosophers, and then divided into three aspects: the psychological function of music, the aesthetic psychology of music and the psychology of music performance. We believe that the study of musical psychology in ancient Greece can further deepen the understanding of its ideas in the future by looking for and reading as many works and fragments of philosophers in this period as possible. And on the basis of understanding the philosopher's historical background, extract the content of music psychology in his ideas, which can not only improve its enlightenment to the development of Chinese music career, but also study its influence on the history of western music culture.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] Pan, S.P. (2019) *Classicism in China*. Jinan University Press, Guangzhou. (In Chinese)
- [2] Liu, J.J. (2012) *Enlightenment of Ancient Greek Music Education Thoughts to Us*. Master's Thesis, Yunnan University of Arts, Kunming. (In Chinese)
- [3] He, G.S., Selected (1983) *Western Philosophers, Litterateurs and Musicians on Music from Ancient Greece and Rome to the Nineteenth Century*. People's Music Publishing House, Beijing. (In Chinese)
- [4] Zhu, C. and Bi, J. (2015) "Harmony" and the Beauty of Music—Ancient Greek Musical Aesthetics. *Theory*, No. 18, 93-95. (In Chinese)
- [5] Tatarkiewicz, W. (1990) *Ancient Aesthetics*. Yang, L., *et al.*, Trans. China Social Sciences Press, Beijing. (In Chinese)
- [6] He, G.S. (2004) *History of Western Music Aesthetics*. Central Conservatory of Music Press, Beijing. (In Chinese)