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Aristotle's Theory of Music
from *Politics*, Book VIII
(1339^a 11 – 1342^b 34)

Aristotle's theory of music is set up within the frame of musical education. He discusses the reasons for teaching music to children, and claims the rewards of such an education far outweigh its initial difficulty. There are many different types of music and each type varies in its virtue and function. Each type of music can be further categorized according to what emotion it evokes, which also helps determine what purpose each is best suited for. All of these points come together to reveal the morality, purpose and necessity of musical understanding which begins in childhood and ultimately supports and enhances an entire lifetime.

It seems to Aristotle that most human beings desire to learn music, even though the act of learning usually involves pain in the form of struggle. People can endure such pain if they remind themselves that this pain is necessary in order to have the future ability of creating music, which will then give them pleasure. Learning music is not solely comprised of pain, however. It is lightly sweetened with moments of pleasure, beauty and satisfaction which is what makes it somewhat easy to teach to children. Aristotle states that "men rarely attain the end, but often rest by the way and amuse themselves, not only with a view to a further end, but also for the pleasure's sake, it may be well at times to let them find refreshment in music." In other words, the

struggle that one goes through while learning something can be ignored at times while one uses such skills to provide enjoyment of life whether or not the ultimate goal has been met.

Aristotle believes that rhythm and melody directly imitate feelings such as anger or ecstasy, which cause us to experience those feelings as if they were reality. Feeling such emotions causes our souls to “undergo a change.” We can experience the alleviation of past toils and pains by presenting them within the context of the beauty and virtue of music. He argues that physical arts, such as sculpture or painting, are simply a sign or symbol of emotion rather than an actual representation and therefore can only be enjoyed on the superficial level.

All people, regardless of intelligence or class, are affected deeply by music. It inspires enthusiasm, which Aristotle considers the ethical emotion of the soul. This effect of enthusiasm felt deeply in the soul proves that learning music serves a nobler purpose other than simple recreation. When one is well educated musically, one will rise above the simple types of music that are enjoyed by slaves and animals, even if one doesn't rise to the professional level. However, most paid performers are seen as immoral and lowly because their audience comprises of the “vulgar crowd composed of mechanics, laborers and the like.” The vulgarity of the audience lowers the music's character and therefore the character of the performer.

Certain melodies, rhythms and instruments are also considered vulgar, such as the flute, which Aristotle considers too exciting for children because it serves for the relief of theatric passions instead of providing instruction. There are three types of melodies according to Aristotle: education melodies, passionate or inspiring melodies,

and recreational melodies. The types usually overlap, but one element will be stronger in a particular piece of music. Education melodies are simple and pure instructional songs that help the performer understand and learn technical aspects of music. Passionate melodies can include religious music, which serves a purgative role. This type often leads to pleasure and relaxation because after purging one feels relieved and lightened. Poetry is considered a passionate melody, for it is often used in theatre because of its exciting and inspirational dramatic qualities. This type, according to Aristotle, can sometimes be classified as vulgar music because it can be deformed easily into simple recreational melodies for the uneducated lower classes who attend theatre for simple entertainment purposes.

Aristotle argues that the musical education of children is necessary and that it adds to their overall intelligence. It builds character and adds weight to a balanced life, which are also important parts of Aristotle's Nicomachean ethics. Not only does a musical education keep children busy, but while doing so it teaches them valuable lessons by providing strength of moral character and also the satisfaction of acquiring a skill. After all, in order to properly judge and truly enjoy the music of others it is imperative that one understand and be able to create music. During the time of Aristotle, there seemed to be doubts about whether music should be taught to the young. Also during this time, girls were not classically educated or put into schools. Aristotle says that many people believed that teaching their boys music in school was akin to teaching them how to cook- an "absurd"⁴ idea as both skills were best left to servants and women. No matter the justification, a child's education is simply unbalanced without the addition of learning how to play music.

In my humble opinion, Aristotle's theory of music is absolutely correct and deeply moving. I wholeheartedly believe that all children should receive an extensive musical education, in order to balance their overall knowledge but also to introduce to them a deep understanding of art. Many modern neuropsychological studies have been done regarding the positive effects of music on human brain chemistry, most of which coincide with Aristotle's statements that music replicates emotions and can help relieve emotional and even physical pain. As previously stated, music soothes many difficult memories and experiences by evoking such emotions through the virtuous beauty of music. Many people are unable to completely express their emotions through words alone. By using many differing modes of artistic expression I believe that the human soul can be more satisfied and can more easily express emotion and connect to others. Learning all different forms of knowledge, including music, will make any person feel full of confidence and self-respect, which is what this modern world seems to need in order to alleviate the amount of depression and emptiness that so many people feel.

Works Cited

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