

The Philosophers Talk Music

Even thousands of years ago, philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates understood the tremendous influence music has on its listeners.

Over 2300 years ago, Aristotle spoke about music and its ability to communicate the emotional states of humans:

Music directly imitates the passions or states of the soul...when one listens to music that imitates a certain passion, he becomes imbued with the same passion; and if over a long time he habitually listens to music that rouses ignoble passions, his whole character will be shaped to an ignoble form.ⁱ

Aristotle recognized that music communicates emotion, and that immoral music can shape our character for the worse. Plato also observed the effect that music had on society in his day and made this thought-provoking statement:
Any musical innovation is full of danger to the whole state, and ought to be prohibited. When modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state

always change with them.ⁱⁱ

Plato also spoke about the contribution music made to the moral decline of ancient Greece:

They were men of genius, but they had no perception of what was just and lawful in music...And by composing licentious works, and adding to them words as licentious, they have inspired the multitude with lawlessness and boldness, and made them fancy that they could judge for themselves about melody and song...in music there first arose the universal conceit of omniscience and general lawlessness; freedom came following afterwards, and men, fancying that they knew what they did not know, had no longer any fear, and the absence of fear begets shamelessness. For what is this shamelessness, which is so evil a thing, but the insolent refusal to regard the opinion of the better by reason of an over-daring sort of liberty?ⁱⁱⁱ

Socrates also extensively studied effects of music, recognizing its potential as an instrument of indoctrination and character development:

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.^{iv}

Early Christian philosopher Boethius said this:

Music is part of us, and either ennobles or degrades our behavior.^v

Sixth-century Chinese philosopher Shu Ching agrees with Boethius, saying, "for changing people's manners and altering their customs there is nothing better than music."^{vi}

It is plain to see that these philosophers understood the immense power of music. But it is sad that most people today don't know about these observations made so long ago. It is crucial that we teach our youth about the power of music—especially as it is such a big part of their lives.

If these philosophers are correct, then our music is contributing to many of today's issues in our society. If music can shape our characters and passions—and therefore our morals and values—then these effects will also be noticeable in our relationships, our laws and government, and in our psychological challenges such as depression and anger.

Music, video games, and television all have a profound effect and will continue to shape society.

It is imperative that we wake up to some of the influences that are affecting our society for the worse, and take control of our own personal choices. The effect of music and media on the public is not a secret to music makers and those in the entertainment industry. **They have spoken about it themselves.** It is our own ignorance that permits us to be controlled by the media.

If we expect our society to improve, we must start putting controls on ourselves and on our youth and even on the entertainment industry, if possible, to limit its effect. Otherwise, problems of aggression, depression, suicide, and addiction will continue to overtake our world.

In this context, the Bible's offer of a **better life** to those who obey looks better and better. Freedom without controls is not freedom at all. It is anarchy and chaos, and leads to pain and death. Attention to the principles of **good living**, self-control, and submission to God lead to life and happiness.



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- i. Donald Grout, *A History of Western Music* (Norton, 1988): 7-8.
 - ii. Eitan Gavish, "Music has always been a tuneful force for political change," *Daily News* (October 11, 2009).
 - iii. Plato *Laws III* 700-701, from *Great Books* volume 7: 675-676.
 - iv. Benjamin Jowett (trans.), *The Republic of Plato* (Oxford Clarendon Press, 1888): 88.
 - v. Boethius, as quoted on hubpages.com
 - vi. Shu Ching, as quoted by Alexander Mileant, *Rock Music From a Christian Viewpoint* (2001).