

# **Music as a Moral and Ethical Force in Society**

by

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Composer Felix Mendelssohn once remarked that music is more specific about what it expresses than words written about it could ever be. That music has the power to express, convey and illicit powerful emotions is without question. Musicologist, David Tame opines: "Music is more than a language; it is the language of languages. It can be said that of all the arts, there is none other that more powerfully moves and changes the consciousness."

As perceptive as these statements may be, the issue of music's moral and ethical power and how that power affects individuals and society is one that receives too little attention in our post-modern world. Assessing art from an axiological, as well as a theoretical and/or aesthetic perspective, is an approach that too few artists consider in our post-modern society. Indeed, deconstructionist rationale makes such assessments highly vexatious.

Questions with regard to the origin of music, its spiritual, religious and mystical properties, its moral and ethical power, its transcendent qualities, as well as the role of the arts and artists in creating a culture of peace, are questions that we shall explore in the context of the theme of this conference: *God and World Peace: An Exploration of the Significance of God for a World in Crisis*.

At the outset of the twenty-first century it is undeniable that the pervasiveness of popular culture and the values it engenders has had a significant, and in many ways troubling effect on societies. In light of the current climate of Western popular culture, "art music" has become increasingly marginalized. In fact, the word "art" has been greatly trivialized as the lines between trend and tradition, the profound and the superficial, truth and cliché, have become increasingly indistinct. In this condition it has often become the case where the most inane works created by self-absorbed individuals of dubious talent are now

considered important works of "art." To this unfortunate situation it must be noted that though all art may be a form of self-expression, not all self-expression is art.

In ages past, music was not considered merely a form of entertainment, but was associated, in fact, interlocked with religious and philosophical beliefs and as such was viewed in the context of its socially redeeming potentialities. Examining the perceptions and understandings of the ancient's attitude about art and music can be most enlightening and instructive for our spiritual and social development as we begin our quest for a culture of peace in the new millennium.

### **Attitudes About Music in Ancient Cultures: The Musical Philosophy of Ancient China**

Any study of ancient cultures reveals that the ancients held strong beliefs in the moral and ethical power of art and music, thus it was imperative for artists working within those cultures to exercise a certain moral and ethical responsibility in their creative endeavors.

It is not at all implausible to suggest that contemporary attitudes about music might be surprising, even dismaying to the likes of Confucius, Aristotle, Plato, St. Augustine and Boethius. To the ancients, music and values were juxtaposed in ways that many today might find either elitist or politically incorrect. Yet the axiological and metaphysical aspects of music---as both indicator and measure of social values---were readily accepted notions in the ancient cultures of China, Egypt, Greece and India, There existed a common belief in those cultures that music had a fundamental power that could either uplift or degrade and therefore could contribute to the enhancement or corruption entire civilizations.

Chinese musical philosophy reveals a highly developed system of theory and mysticism that was most prescient in its attitudes about music. The Chinese attached a great deal of importance to the transcendent and therapeutic power of sound and music. Individual pieces of music were believed to possess an "energy formula" which in turn had the

ability to exert powerful influences over those who listened to it. This metaphysical concept of music also had religious connotations and as such, moral and ethical implications. To the ancient Chinese the issue of how music was utilized was of great importance. As David Tame observes:

The particular mystical influences of a piece of music depended upon such factors as rhythm, its melodic patterns and the combination of instruments used. Like other forces of nature, music itself, as a phenomenon, was not biased towards producing either beneficial or destructive effects. The Chinese understood the power within music to be a "free energy," which each man could use or misuse according to his own free will.

Of particular significance is the issue of freedom and its correlation to responsibility in the context of how music was utilized. Chinese philosophers understood that music was not composed or performed in a social vacuum, therefore there were significant social implications in the creation and presentation of music. Due to this heightened awareness of the influence of music on self and society, Chinese philosophers and educators directed a great deal of attention to the music of their culture. As a result of this awareness, appreciating music primarily as entertainment had little redeeming social value.

Music that endeavored to express or convey universal truths, which in turn could benefit the development of a person's character thereby making that person an asset to the society at large, was music that was considered good and proper. Conversely, music that was deemed to be sensual or exotic was seen as being immoral and was thought to have negative effects on one's spirituality and character. Consider Confucius' remarks about the music of certain composers of his time:

The music of Cheng is lewd and corrupting, the music of

Sung is soft and makes one effeminate, the music of Wei is repetitious and annoying, the music of Ch'i is harsh and haughty.

It is intriguing to note Confucius' highly subjective views vis-a-vis the moral and possibly corrupting aspects of the music of his countrymen. His view reveals an explicit concern about the effects of good (moral) music on a person's character.

The noble-minded man's music is mild and delicate, keeps a uniform mood, enlivens and moves. Such a man does not harbor pain or mourn in his heart; violent and daring movements are foreign to him.

As previously mentioned, two significant aspects of the ancient Chinese' philosophy of music were the effect of music on one's psyche and the issue of freedom and responsibility in musical pursuits. When compared to the rationales and motivation of artists of our modern age the Chinese ideal of music-making seems highly enlightened as evident in the consideration given to the effect of music upon the character of the listener. If individuals were affected by music it stood to reason that society as a whole could be influenced (positively or negatively) as well. Confucius' comment on this topic is most revealing:

If one should desire to know whether a kingdom is well governed, if its morals are good or bad, the quality of its music will furnish the answer.

The ancient Chinese text *The Memorial of Music* states: "Under the effect of music, the five social duties are without admixture, the eyes and the ears are clear, the blood and the vital energies are balanced, habits are reformed, customs are improved, the empire is at complete peace." It becomes highly evident that the Chinese believed that social order

was juxtaposed to music in a significant fashion and this concept played heavily into its philosophical ideals. The connection of the tonal arts to the ordering principles of physical laws and metaphysical ideals was considered important owing to the belief that the same laws and principles contained within music were present in the celestial order that governed the entire universe.

In the Chinese philosophical tome, the *I Ching*, the Taoist axiom of harmonizing the polarities of Yang and Yin is a central tenet. The fusion of Taoist principles and Confucian ethics gives rise to rationales that guided the Chinese in matters of art *and* social governance. Confucianism, primarily concerned with ethical relations, sought to promote humane relationships among family, friends and associates. The Five Relations: sovereign to subject, father and son, elder brother and younger brother, husband and wife and friend and friend, were to be based on the ethic of humaneness and social responsibility.

The cosmology of Yang and Yin is germane to both Confucian and Taoist doctrine and was considered elemental in humankind's pursuit of harmony and peace. Taoism promotes the concept of seeking a mystical identification with the patterns of the natural world ("the impersonal Tao") through meditation and trance. With its emphasis on the individual's harmonization with nature in a pliant fashion, it stands as a complimentary philosophy to Confucianism's strenuous efforts to mold society according to social archetypes and ethical standards. Since harmonization is a central goal of these two philosophies it is easy to understand the importance the Chinese placed on the role of music as a potential harmonizing agent. Consequently, the ancient Chinese believed such music must embody the attributes of truth, beauty and goodness in a sublime balance of content and form. The moral and ethical aspects of that equation were not to be minimized.

Beauty could be realized when the complimentary opposites of intellectual and emotional, masculine and feminine, metaphysical and physical were harmonized. If one could be harmonized in mind and body such a person would be able to achieve inner

peace and tranquility and become one with the cosmos and thus attain a "perfected" state--a state of harmonized relatedness to the world in which one exists. The Chinese text *The Spring and Autumn Annals* gives further insight into this concept:

The origin of music lies far back in time. It arises out of two poles: the two poles give rise to the powers of darkness and light. That from which all beings arise and in which they have their origin is the Great One; that whereby they form and perfect themselves is the duality of darkness and light. As soon as the seed-germs start to stir, they coagulate into a form. The bodily shape belongs to the world of space, and everything special has a sound. The sound arises out of harmony. Harmony arises out of relatedness. Harmony and relatedness are the roots from which music, established by the ancient kings, arose.

This is concomitant with the view of musicologist, Julius Portnoy, who affirmed that "music is the releaser into the material world of a fundamental, super-physical energy from beyond the world of everyday experience" and that "the voice of the priest within the realm of time and space becomes a vehicle for the energizing Voice of the Creator to manifest its forces through." The emphasis of harmony and relatedness and its genesis from "the Great One" is underscored countless times in Chinese writings. Tame alludes to the ancient text, *Li Chi*, and its view that "the harmony and sacred proportion of heaven is viewed as entering the earth through the mediation of music and ritual." The *Li Chi* states:

Music is the harmony of heaven and earth while rites are the measurement of heaven and earth. Through harmony all things are made known; through measure all things are properly classified. Music comes from heaven; rites are shaped by earthly design.

Manifesting balance, harmony and relatedness was to be the motivation and purpose of a musicians' work. By bringing these attributes to a performance it was thought that the musician was interfacing spiritually with the cosmic forces of heaven and personifying celestial order. For Confucius the harmony/relatedness paradigm was important, in that "...ceremony established the correct manner of physical movement in man, while music perfected man's mind and emotions." The moral inculcation of a person's character and the development of an ethical society are continually linked to the Confucian view of music. The ancient Chinese philosophy of "music as a microcosm," would be echoed by Pythagoras and Greek philosophers. As Catholic theologian E. Michael Jones observes: "Indeed, love, divine order, music and mathematics are simply four different ways of saying the same thing."

An interesting by-product of the harmony/relatedness paradigm was the intolerance in classical Chinese music for anything that was a result of chance or improvisation. These characteristics were considered antipodal to the reverence for order and balance. The intimate relationship of music and universal, cosmic order was not to be left to chance being that discipline and proficiency were hallmarks of the classical Chinese musical tradition. The dichotomy between traditional discipline and expressive freedom, it seems, has been a topic of debate from the earliest times.

To a society that was based largely on the philosophy of balance and harmony, the notion of expressive freedom would almost certainly be viewed as threatening and possibly corrupting. Innovation has challenged the status quo of all cultures and in ancient China this was especially vexatious due to the belief in the transforming power music. As David Tame points out virtually every major civilization of antiquity held this view.

The wise among them were therefore very much aware of the pitfalls of either extreme in music---over-rigidity or over-innovation---and sought to achieve a balance between the two. An unwise degree of innovation or a condition of outright musical anarchy could prove deadly to the State.



But, on the other hand, complete inflexibility could cause music to stagnate.

By invoking the balance/relatedness paradigm in the deliberations over the issue of innovation and progress in music, the Chinese possessed a viable philosophy to reconcile the over-rigidity/over-innovation dilemma. Tolerance without discretion could potentially lead to artistic license and inevitably, moral anarchy. Conversely, a zero-tolerance stance towards spontaneity would impinge on freedom of expression. Allowing artistic freedom within the confines of a highly developed tradition and discipline would be a crucial and daunting challenge.

The Chinese, like other civilizations, would adopt a system that would allow for expressive freedom within a set of well-defined "rules," not unlike those found in the Western tonality of the great J.S. Bach and his successors. New compositions were to conform to certain "rules" that were deemed to be in alignment with the higher order of the universe. Allowing new works with new compositional schemes that adhered to traditional ideals, would in turn reduce the likelihood of a static compositional landscape thus increase the likelihood for greater variances and degrees of emotional expressiveness.

This Confucian compromise is in accord with the Oriental concept of *Ih Bup* (reason-law), which is the correlation of reason and lawfulness, centered on purpose (Logos), which originates in God. This concept allows for freedom (choice) based on sensibility and reason (rationale) to work in accordance with natural law and mathematical principles (necessity). One is subject, the other is object and their harmonious union results in the incarnation of the Logos. Reason in Logos works freely as it influences the direction of the development of the universe, while preserving the efficacy of laws. Reason allows for varying degrees of adaptability and selectivity while law dictates the circumstance of principle and necessity. Indeed, the ancient Chinese philosophies regarding music and values continue to be coruscatingly insightful.

## **Music and Values in Greek Culture**

The Greeks, like the Chinese, held the view that music possessed influential properties. Greek theories and philosophies were similar to those of the ancient Chinese in that the Greeks believed that the nature of music, its relevance to the cosmic order and its power to effect individuals and society, was as important as the basic materials, structures and patterns of musical composition. From Pythagoras' scientific principles to the moral and ethical postulates of Aristotle and Plato, Greek insights of the tonal arts remain as illuminating today as they must have seemed ages ago.

Plato's poetic myth of "the music of the spheres" with its implications of a universal, interconnected, cosmic geometry has fascinated scientists and musicians throughout the ages. The Pythagorean concept of "music as a microcosm" was not unlike the philosophical tenets of Confucius, whereby music was governed by the same scientific and mathematical laws that governed the cosmos. One cannot understand the depth of Greek thought with regards to music without contemplating their understanding of the relation of melody and poetry. To the Greeks these two languages were one in the same. Music historian Donald Jay Grout writes:

Actually it is incorrect to speak of a "union," for to the Greeks the two (melody and poetry) were practically synonymous. When we now speak of the music of poetry, we are conscious of using a figure of speech; but to the Greeks such music was actual melody whose intervals and rhythms could be precisely described.

Grout points out that the marriage of spoken word and music, as exemplified by the Greeks, reappeared in other ways throughout the history of music; most notably in Wagner's theories about musical drama in the nineteenth century.

For many composers the "union" of words and music may lay primarily in the search for

a "correct rhythmic declamation of the text." There is another, perhaps more far-reaching implication of the Greek predilection for the word/music paradigm; namely the concept of music as a language, which like the spoken word can exert influence over human thought and actions. This gave rise to one of the most profound and significant doctrines of Greek musical thought---the doctrine of ethos. With this understanding the Greeks believed that once an artist became aware of music's moral power there was an obligation to exercise that power with a certain moral and ethical responsibility. Ethos was based on the dual convictions that music has an effect on moral and ethical behavior; that certain types of music affected people in different ways. The Greeks ascribed certain mythological characteristics to the basic character of music: Apollonian---music that was considered classic, characterized by its calm, tranquil and uplifting qualities, and Dionysian---music that was considered romantic, characterized by its excitement and enthusiasm.

Aristotle, like Pythagoras, considered music one of many forces that could affect the well being of the individual and society at large. His theory of imitation implicitly suggests that the soul can be influenced by listening to music.

Emotions of any kind are produced by melody and rhythm; therefore by music a man becomes accustomed to feeling the right emotions; music has thus power to form character, and the various kinds of music based on various modes, may be distinguished by their effects on character---one, for example, working in the direction of melancholy, another of effeminacy; one encouraging abandonment, another self-control, another enthusiasm, and so on through the series.

The corollaries between Greek ideals of music (and life) and Chinese concepts of relatedness, balance and harmony are too obvious to ignore. Consider Plato's example of the relationship of mind and body *vis-a-vis* music and athletics as articulated in the *Republic* (380 B.C.) For Plato, musicians needed to have regular give and take with

athletics since music represented the feminine (beauty) and athletics represented the masculine (strength.) As he stated: "He who mingles music with gymnastics in the fairest proportions, and best attempers them to the soul, may be rightly called the true musician and harmonist."

Like the Chinese, the Greeks wrestled with the issue of freedom of expression for they too attached great significance to the social implications of law and order (or lack of such) in music. For Plato, change could be equated with lawlessness and license and therefore could possibly lead to moral anarchy. In *The Republic*, Plato contends:

The care of the governors should be directed to preserve music and gymnastics from innovation; alter the songs of a country, Damon says, and you will soon end by altering laws. The change appears innocent at first, and begins in play, but evil soon becomes serious, working secretly upon the characteristics of individuals, then upon the social and commercial relations, and lastly upon the institutions of the state; and there is ruin and confusion everywhere.

Furthermore, Greece, like other ancient civilizations, exercised certain censorship by prohibiting certain types of music when it was deemed by the authorities that the music was in some way harmful or corrupting to the ethical climate of the society. As Grout states:

Music was regulated in the early constitutions of Athens and Sparta. The writings of the Church Fathers contain many warnings against specific kinds of music. Nor is the issue dead in the twentieth century. Dictatorships, both fascist and communist, have attempted to control the musical activity of their people; churches usually establish norms for the music that may be used in their services; all enlightened educators are concerned

with the kinds of music, as well as the kinds of pictures and writings, to which young people are habitually exposed.

The correlation to the decline of classic civilizations in China, India and Greece, with the "corruption" of their music is too pronounced to be merely coincidental. As Greek music began to deviate from its classic attributes of discipline and lawfulness towards a greater emphasis on the purely decorative and innovation, the denigration of society was soon to follow. Plato lamented the "unmusical anarchy," the "foolishness" and the "thinking that there was no right or wrong in music" which was anathema to traditional Greek thought and thus a threat in maintaining an ethical society. He writes in his work *Laws*, "As it was, the criterion was not music, but a reputation for promiscuous cleverness and a spirit of law-breaking."

David Tame points out that all civilizations have been confronted with the choices between music that denigrates and/or music that "encourages the contemplation of the eternal verities." Those choices are, in some ways, a microcosm of the history of civilization itself. Tame observes that when corrupting or degrading music appears within a culture it happens very suddenly and with almost cataclysmic results. Destructive music "attains to a position of power and of widespread popularity with the masses within just a few years or decades; and its influence upon society in general is often similarly sudden, bringing swift and negative change in philosophies, politics, morals and lifestyles." We need only to look at our own contemporary age to see evidence of this.

### **The Genesis of Western Music**

With the decline of Rome and the ascendance of Christianity in Europe during the third and fourth centuries, the seeds that would blossom into the great art of the Western world were planted deeply into the fertile soil of religious faith and practice. Arnold Toynbee's assessment that the Church was "the chrysalis out of which our Western society emerged," attests to the role that Christian thought played in the development of Western

musical theory, aesthetics and axiology. The early church was a small, thus vulnerable group with the "mission" of converting Europe and thus endeavored to resist any association and influence of the surrounding pagan cultures. Early Christians felt this to be absolutely crucial to their "mission" and deemed it necessary to subordinate all earthy things, including music, to the ultimate goal of protecting the eternal condition of one's soul.

The Greek philosophy (which came to the early Christian Church via Rome) that music was a medium that had connections to the forces of nature and possessed the power to affect human thought and conduct, was assimilated into early church culture and reiterated in the writings of several Christian philosophers, most notably Boethius (ca. A.D. 480-524) and St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430.) Boethius' treatise *De Institutione musica* stood as an authoritative source of understanding for writers of medieval times with regards to harmonization the physical world (*musica mundana*), the mind and body (*musica humana*) and tones/music (*musica instrumentalis*.)

The evolution of music and its integration into liturgical practice throughout the Middle Ages gave rise to new attitudes about music and its purpose and function; most notably the idea that music was to be the "servant" of religion. For the Church elders of the Middle Ages, music was deemed good only when it "opens the mind to Christian teachings and disposes the soul to holy thoughts." The church in the Middle Ages was highly concerned with the potentially "corrupting" elements of music and as a result certain factions within Church hierarchy that felt art in general, and music in particular, was inimical to religion.

Yet the aesthetic beauty and psychic power of music could not be denied. The medieval Christian concept that spiritual fulfillment and redemption was somehow hindered or obstructed by pleasurable things like music is one that troubled even the most enlightened practitioners of the faith. Consider St. Augustine's observations on this dilemma:

When I call to mind the tears I shed at the songs of my church...I then acknowledge the great utility of this custom. Thus vacillate I between dangerous pleasure and tried soundness; being inclined rather to approve of the use of singing in the church, that so by delights the ear the weaker minds may be stimulated to a devotional frame. Yet when it happens to me to be more moved by the singing than by what is sung, I confess myself to have sinned criminally, and then would rather not have heard the singing.

As Grout points out, there is music in every Age that is not suitable for religious or devotional purposes and we should not be too quick to condemn the Church for its seemingly narrow and "timorous distrust of the sensual and emotional qualities of music." The Christian church, like the ancient cultures of Ages past, was merely making a distinction between sacred and secular art which it thought necessary to the process of inculcating its early converts with an ascetic principle that could endure and survive any corrupting influences.

As mentioned previously, it was thought that instrumental music could not illicit the spirit of divinity as well as vocal music, therefore instrumental music was for the most part excluded in liturgical services in the early church. This preference for vocal music was a significant factor as to why Gregorian chant and plainsong became the predominant mediums for liturgical music for hundreds of years.

Like the ancients, many church composers believed that the act of creating music had innate divinity and that the assembling (ordering) of pitches, rhythms and structures could manifest "heavenly" properties. For Johann Sebastian Bach, the greatest church composer, "The sole and end aim of figured bass should be nothing else than God's glory and the recreation of the mind. Where this object is not kept in view, there can be no true music but only infernal scraping and bawling."

It is interesting to note that the aforementioned Oriental concept of *Ih-bup* (reason-law) is

evident in the development of Western compositional rationale, specifically the modification of acoustically pure intervals (equal temperament.) As early as 1496, church organists in Northern Italy engaged in the practice of pitch modification. As musicians sought greater means of expression the practice of temperament became a practical compromise. The practice of pitch modification in turn allowed for such compositional devices as modulation or intervallic variation to occur within changing melodic and harmonic contexts. The implementation of temperament as it pertains to the evolution of tonality is a classic example of the earlier definition of Logos, whereby the efficacy of acoustic principles (law) are preserved while allowing for greater expression (reason). The importance of this acoustic adaptation (choice) was to allow for music to express and wider range of emotions (heart). As tonality emerged as the prevalent syntax of Westerns composers, this "key-centered" music exhibited new and highly evocative expressive dimensions.

Musicologist Richard Norton notes that a prevalent theory has emerged among modern musicologists and theorists, which suggests that the "era of classic tonality" in the West was something "that had to happen." He points out that this concept, with its very definite ideological underpinnings, is a form of historical determinism and as such ignores the fact "that tonality appeared as and how it did through economic, social, political, philosophical, cognitive and aesthetic, as well as 'natural' means." It was neither accidentalism nor "natural law" that spawned tonality and its wider usage, but rather the aforementioned ideal of a God centered Logos---the synthesis of law (adherence to acoustic principles) and reason (the desire to find greater means of expression.)

The Enlightenment, with its predilection for "natural law" and "practical morality" over supernatural religion and metaphysics, constituted a major shift in attitudes about music and the arts. The spirit of the Enlightenment was clearly secular with an eye for the egalitarian in all things. Public concerts, as opposed to private concert events (often sponsored by wealthy benefactors and patrons) were becoming more prevalent and as a result, music itself began to change. Music was to aspire to simplicity and avoid the complexity of contrapuntal devices and the excessive elaboration and ornamentation that



was characteristic of the music in the Baroque period.

The social upheaval of the French Revolution in 1789 and the attitudes it engendered, specifically the primacy of individual rights, signified another important cultural change for music and musicians. Ludwig van Beethoven, who was literally a child of the French Revolution, asserted that as an artist he possessed the same basic rights of kings, the clergy and nobles. (This attitude, coupled with anti-social behavior and self-absorbed turbidity, would become a defining trait among many artists of the Romantic era.)

This attitude also requires the listener of music to be a more significant partner in the appreciation of music. Author Charles Williams states: "The word Romanticism...defines an attitude, a manner of receiving experience." Nietzsche echoed this stating: "In order for an event to have greatness two things must come together: The immense understanding of those who cause it to happen, and the immense understanding of those who experience it." As Grout suggests:

In a very general sense, all art may be said to be Romantic; for, though it may take its materials from everyday life, it transforms them and thus creates a new world which is necessarily, to a greater or lesser degree, remote from the every day world.

Beethoven personified the attitude that music was "a direct outpouring" of a composer's personality, his individual triumphs and tragedies. This became a prevalent Romantic notion among many artists of the late nineteenth century. Gustav Mahler has been said to be the "most confessional" of composers based on this particular Romantic ideal. The irony here is that as the egalitarian attitudes of Romanticism (its *Zeitgeist*) would give rise to the aforementioned anti-social attitudes among artists; a condition diametrically opposed to the philosophical tenets of antiquity. Music became intensely personal and as Richard Wagner averred, the creative impulse could "usurp" one's "whole being at the time of conception."

That said, certain aspects of Romanticism are akin to the ancient concept of "microcosmic relatedness," for Romantic art as Grout suggests, "aspires to immediate times or occasions, to seize eternity, to reach back into the past or forward into the future, to range over the expanse of the world and outward through the cosmos." Romanticism celebrates metaphor, ambiguity, suggestion, allusion and symbol and as a result, instrumental music, which was shunned by the early Church, is now favored over music with words due to its "incomparable power of suggestion" and mystery. It could be said that the invisible, vibratory world of instrumental music corresponds to the unseen, vibratory incorporeal world. Schopenhauer believed that music was "the very image and incarnation of the innermost reality of the world, the immediate expression of the universal feelings and impulses of life in concrete, definite form." Goethe's assertion that the head is only able to grasp a work of art in the company of the heart could stand as defining axiom for the cultural attitudes of the nineteenth century.

### **Art in the Twentieth Century---A Moral Dilemma**

It has become evident that in the twentieth century the condition of art in Western culture has undergone a transformation that few could have envisaged one hundred years ago. The reasons for this transformation are many and varied including the influence of technology, the media, multiculturalism, commercialism, the increased emphasis on visual media and various philosophical, ideological and social changes.

Perhaps the most significant philosophical change in our attitudes about art is that religion, for so long the "moral compass" of society, is no longer the potent force in guiding society in the matters of morality and ethics, resulting a condition of increased moral and ethical relativism. One result of an increasingly secular society has been that artists are less aware of the moral and ethical power of art and in many cases have slipped into a relativist mindset regarding their creative endeavors.

Consider the views of early twentieth-century German composer, Paul Hindemith,

regarding the state of modern music in the first half of the century: There are composers:

...who flatly deny the ethic power of music, nor do they admit any moral obligation on the part of those writing. For them, music is essentially a play with tones, and although they spend a considerable amount of intelligence and craftsmanship to make it look important, their composition can be of no greater value, as a sociological factor, than bowling or skating.

For Hindemith, the composer who has become aware of the beacons that lead to truth and perfection:

...will then know about musical inspiration and how to touch validly the intellectual and moral depths of our soul. All the ethic power of music will be at his command and he will use it with a sense of severest moral responsibility. His further guides will be an inspiring creative ideal and the search of its realization; an unshakable conviction in the loftiness of our art; a power to evoke convincing and exalting forms and to address us with the language of purity. A life following such rules is bound to exemplarily persuade others to become associated. This life in and with music, being essentially a victory of external forces and a final allegiance to spiritual sovereignty, can only be a life of humility, of giving of one's best to one's fellow man. This gift will not be like alms passed on to the beggar; it will be the sharing of a man's every possession with his friend.

The moral and ethical implications of Hindemith's statements are deeply profound and insightful. For many artists in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s, aligning with the Nazi party (or not) became a life and death decision. In his opera *Mathis der Maler* (composed in 1933-34) the narrative deals with the responsibility of the artist in the face of a corrupt aristocracy and the "moral and ethical power" of the arts. Hindemith's post-War

perspectives are concomitant with the Theory of Art as espoused in *Unification Thought*.

### **Unification Thought**

A fundamental tenet of *Divine Principle* (the Principle of Creation) is that the original mind of the human mind has three primary faculties: emotion, intellect and will. The mind (subject) commands the body (object).

When the body responds to the mind's emotion, intellect and will, its actions pursue the values of beauty, truth and goodness respectively. God is the subject partner to the human mind; hence He is the subject partner to human emotions, intellect and will. Desiring to realize his original value, a person responds to the perfect emotion, perfect intellect and perfect will of God through his mind, and acts accordingly through his body. Thus, he manifests the values of original beauty, original truth and original goodness.

In this context any attempt in assessing art must include the moral and ethical dimension. *Unification Thought* speaks to the importance of defining beauty, not only from the view of aesthetics and truth, but also from a moral and ethical perspective. This is akin to the "beauty, truth and goodness" paradigm expressed in *Divine Principle*. *Unification Thought* views morality as the individual's adherence to divine law (one's relationship with God) and ethics as how one relates to others (one's relationship with his/her family, society, nation and world.) As such, beauty is defined in large part in the context of heart and love and the manifestation of loyalty, filial piety and fidelity.

Artistic endeavors that seek to embody these attributes, regardless of style, genre, techniques (or popularity), can be said to possess divine qualities for they resemble the original beauty, truth and goodness paradigm. In this respect *Unification Thought's* Theory of Art corresponds to the view of the aforementioned philosophers of ancient China, Greece and Europe with its emphasis on the moral and ethical responsibility of

artists in cultivating a harmonious society. In this context the issue of censorship inevitably comes into play. From the view of *Divine Principle*, God endowed human beings with the attributes of creativity and freedom as an expression of parental love. Without freedom, love cannot exist. Freedom however, must be used in a responsible fashion.

Accordingly, God also provided commandments and strictures as conveyed through the world's religions. These strictures were to be the guidelines, or the "moral compass" by which humankind could achieve a higher consciousness and conduct itself accordingly. In this sense the only censorship that should come into play is self-censorship---a condition where each artist evaluates his/hers creative endeavors in accordance with divine law and true love, i.e., living (writing, composing, painting) for the sake of others.

Contemporary society's emphasis on the instant gratification, materialism and humanism is diametrically opposed to the tenets put forth by the ancients. The increasingly nihilistic and hedonistic qualities evident in much of popular culture, gives rise to a condition of moral and ethical confusion approaching anarchy. Of particular concern is the trend towards artistic freedom apart from responsibility, which fosters the tendency towards license, indiscretion and moral relativism. Contemporary popular culture, with its predilection for what is fashionable, trendy and external, has become increasingly superficial, even intolerant of music that espouses higher ideals or focuses on achieving a higher consciousness. In this respect it can be said that much popular music can be considered inhumane. Attitudes, and music, that embrace the external, glossy, trendy and superficial, to the total exclusion of the internal, spiritual and divine aspects of the human condition, can never embody the attributes of original truth, beauty and goodness.

*Unification Thought's* emphasis on relationships, specifically the proper understanding of position (God and man, parents and children, e.g.) is rooted in a belief that order and hierarchy are important conditions in developing ethical societies. Art that is created according to this understanding can more fully manifest the attributes of original beauty, truth and goodness. Oriental cultures are predicated fundamentally on the Confucian

concept of respect for elders and the valuing of the wisdom that age begets. Children in Oriental cultures are instilled with the concept of respect for elders from the earliest ages. Inculcating children with the values of loyalty, honor, obedience and filial piety has been a social archetype in Oriental cultures throughout their collective histories. A similar concept is present within earlier Puritan and European cultures as well.

The assault on and mistrust of authority figures that permeates much of Western popular culture has contributed greatly to a condition where the proliferation of situational ethics goes unimpeded and objective standards are viewed as being inherently suspect. This in turn has led to a *faux* egalitarianism in which there exists a rather spurious means of evaluating any creative endeavor. Musicologist Leonard B. Meyer states, "Making explicit value judgments about individual works of art is considered invidious and elitist...because privileging any work or style is non-egalitarian." Making distinctions on the basis of any objective standard---aesthetic, moral, ethical, technical---is considered highly discriminatory in our current social climate.

British composer and author Julian Johnson observes, "To be discriminating used to mean to be capable of exercising judgment---to be wise, in fact." In our politically correct society making critical distinctions in matters of art and creativity has become antipodal to realizing genuine democratic ideals. Instead we find ourselves in what Johnson calls a pseudo-democracy; a situation where it is no different "to discriminate against" than to "discriminate between." Not seeing the difference between things is in a sense, anti-pluralistic. He writes:

And that pseudo-democracy is built not on mutual respect but on lack of respect for one another and even for ourselves. Because discrimination (being aware of the difference between things) is a corollary of our fundamental insistence on our own individuality and that of others, recognition of differences is a confirmation of human individuality, of the inviolable identity of every one of us.

Capitulating to the notion that making distinctions is discriminatory in a pejorative sense undermines any attempt to adhere to a balanced perspective when attempting to assess art and music. Many things can be demonstrated as being objective in the art of music. Even if a great deal of what goes into aesthetic judgment and criticism is ultimately (or primarily) subjective, it is the attempt to apply objective standards which makes any sort of arrival at a judgment meaningful. If everything is just a matter of personal opinion then any great art form is rendered to be something very much less powerful and important than it actually is. In a pseudo-democratic condition where *faux* egalitarianism rules the day, we are confronted with the condition where everything could be considered art, or conversely, nothing is art.

The contempt for expertise or anything related to the objective assessment of art, has given rise to form of radical egalitarianism; a circumstance which has contributed greatly to the “dumbing-down” (or as William Safire has called it, the *knowing-down*) of contemporary culture. It is this spate of cultural arrested development that has promulgated the trend towards unbridled relativism. This condition is a central topic of cultural theorist Theodor Adorno in his *Essays on Mass Culture*.

The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment...that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves. These, however, would be the precondition for a democratic society which needs adults who have come of age in order to sustain itself and develop.

The pervasiveness of popular culture and the values it engenders has resulted in a cultural skepticism about the past and tradition. Music journalist Edward Rothstein states, "The very word 'tradition' has taken on the suggestion of something rigid, stultifying,

restrictive, mindless. The prophecy that tradition will kill art has become self-fulfilling." Still worse, the distinction between trend and tradition, art and cliché, has become hopelessly blurred in popular culture. Artists work with a context of tradition. "Traditions," according to Rothstein, "challenge and nestle, even oppress artists". Rothstein writes:

Trends nestle nobody. Tradition can be cautious to a fault; trends can be reckless to a fault. Tradition demands an active creator who tries to mold it for new purposes; trends create passive participants. Tradition requires dedication; "If you want it," wrote T.S. Eliot, "you must obtain it by great labor." A trend is almost always a cliché, always something that is widely accepted, requiring no proof; it attracts followers rather than leaders, crowds rather than individuals.

The adolescent desire for instant gratification in a live-for-the moment culture has led to a condition where there is little tolerance for art that cannot be digested with a minimum of effort or involvement. As a result serious art is either marginalized or considered irrelevant as a moral and ethical force.

The question remains: Should we renounce past legacies as being irrelevant to our current realities in society and the arts? Or can the past be instructive in creating a condition conducive for peace and harmony for our global family? I believe that our sense of altruism would lead us to the conclusion that we should seriously consider the issue of moral and ethical accountability as it pertains to that which we create and how our creative endeavors affects our collective humanity.

Any philosophy or rationale that rejects the premise that art and music need not be concerned with a moral and ethical dimension contributes to the continual demise and social debasement of the human condition. Our greatest religions, philosophies and social ideals have been predicated on principles that seek to connect us to a divine reality and in



so doing give us the means to achieve dominion over our external realities by transforming our consciousness---individually and collectively. The artist's role in that quest, as Paul Hindemith stated, is "essentially a victory of external forces and a final allegiance to spiritual sovereignty" and as such, must be "a life of humility, of giving of one's best to one's fellow man."

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Links: [www.nycsymphony.org](http://www.nycsymphony.org)

[www.peacemusicfoundation.org](http://www.peacemusicfoundation.org)

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_3EuH1Kie\\_4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3EuH1Kie_4)

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