Was Dionysus a Music Therapist?: Therapeutic Musical Ecstasy in the Ancient Greco–Roman World

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I. Dionysian Music in Mythology

In Ancient Greco-Roman mythology, music could have either positive or negative psychological consequences. This concept is embodied by two musical gods: Apollo (god of music and poetry) and Dionysus.

- The Homeric hymns (c. 7th century BCE) illustrate both Dionysus’s prominence in musical spaces and his integral role in song composition, suggesting that he did not simply preside over music, he was music.
- However, Dionysus was most often associated with noisy, instrumental music, while Apollo was associated with sweet, lyrical music.
- In mythology, Dionysus’s followers, the Bacchae, are often portrayed in states of musical ecstasy.
  - In Euripides’s (c. 480 – 406 BCE) The Bacchae (c. 406 BCE), the Bacchae are always accompanied by ecstatic music composed in the Phrygian mode, featuring aulos (double flutes) and lyra (hand drums).
  - In Ovid’s (14 BCE – 17 CE) Metamorphoses (8 CE), the frenzied Bacchae kill Orpheus to the soundtrack of Dionysian music.
- In contrast, rational Apollonian music is consistently portrayed as more valuable than uncouth Dionysian music.

If Dionysian music was portrayed as a negative contrast to the positive psychological effects of Apollonian music, then how can one make the claim that it could have therapeutic uses? In order to explore this question further, a third mythical figure must be factored in more prominently. This figure is the legendary musician, Orpheus.

II. Orpheus and Therapeutic Music

Orpheus was a magico-musical and religious leader acting as a mediator between rational Apollonian music and ecstatic Dionysian music, indicating the therapeutic value of all types of music in the Ancient Greco–Roman world.

- Orpheus is associated with both Apollo and Dionysus.
  - Identified by various authors as a literal and/or metaphorical child of Apollo
  - Apollo (c. 180 – 120 BCE) and Ovid both name Orpheus as the originator of the Dionysian mysteries (religious cult).
- Orpheus demonstrates the magical and psychological effects of music.
  - Persuasion of Pluto and Proserpina in Ovid’s Orpheus and Eurypdice myth.
  - Musical resolution of the Idas/Idmon dispute in Apollonius Rhodius’s (c. 3rd century BCE) Argonautica (c. 3rd century BCE).
- Divinity and magic were imperative to Ancient Greco-Roman medicine.
  - Divinity was imperative to understandings of disease.
  - Medicine encompassed all curative, conciliatory, or magical effects.

Orpheus’s role in mythology as a magico-musical leader associated with both Dionysus and Apollo suggests that both types of music could both be used therapeutically.

For this reason, Dionysian music can be examined for its therapeutic qualities.

III. The Therapeutic Value of Dionysian Music

While exact theories may vary, both ancient and modern sources agree that Dionysian music wields its therapeutic power through two related functions: Emotional expression and emotional regulation.

- Music is agreed to have the ability to express emotions.
  - In Ancient Greece, this was called mimēsis (imitation).
  - In modern psychology, music expresses emotions through 3 different types of coding: iconic (similarity to movement or voice), intrinsic (in the music itself; tension and release patterns), and associative (societal conventions that associate specific musical elements with emotions).
  - Plato (427 - 347 BCE) associated Dionysian music with the state of calmness.
  - Derived from idea that ecstasy was literally a separation between mind and body, which gave one insight into themselves, thus producing a state of calmness.
- Emotional expression through music was leveraged to help regulate emotions.
  - By arousing specific emotions, they can also be regulated.
  - Aristotle’s (384 – 322 BCE) katharsis involves the stimulation of ecstatic persons with more ecstatic music to express and discharge their excess emotions.
  - Consistent with modern clinical research, this efficacy of this type of katharsis was linked to an individual’s personality and temperament.
  - Similar to Plato’s ideas, Aristotle’s katharsis proposed that Dionysian music could produce a state of pleasurable calmness.

In short, Plato and Aristotle both described similar psychological phenomena to the ones that are explored in modern research. These similarities highlight the value of Dionysian music to twenty-first-century therapeutic settings.

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Dawn and Maxima’s slumber broke together, soft light spilling over her form. She staggered back into the street, a wine stain on her half-worn toga. Birds sang out, the tunes of the wild beasts somehow more calm than the music of the night before. Peace filled her body, bliss and beauty mixing as she could not stop a grin that spread across her face. She had danced and romanced with a sacred savior. She had drank the wine, experienced pure ecstasy, and gone to her first Bacchanalia.

The aulos droned out wild tunes, and the tympana beat out a frenzy. Maxima felt her mind separate from her body, her nostrils flared, her pupils dilated. A hairy arm beckoned her to dance, and Maxima gave herself over to the ecstasy of her god, as she spun into the arms of his savagery.

As she strode along, Maxima heard whispers about the Bacchanalia once more. They called it debauched and immoral. Maxima hid her smile behind her hand – those acts were the point, after all. A man passed her by – she recognized him from last night’s festivities. Unlike yesterday, he had a sad expression, telling his fellow cultist the bad news – The Bacchanalia was disbanded, on order of the Senate. Maxima could not believe her ears – but at least she had experienced it once.