

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

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Introduction

In the Ancient Greco-Roman world, Dionysus (AKA Bacchus) was the deity to call upon for all things relating to intoxication, ritual madness, and religious ecstasy. But what if he was more than just the party god? By applying both Ancient Greek and modern interpretations to close readings of Ancient Greco-Roman mythological texts, my research explores the potential therapeutic value of Dionysian (ie. ecstatic) music.

The accompanying story, inspired by the Ancient Roman historian Livy, illustrates key concepts of my research



Maxima heard whispers from the corners and alleys of the city as she strode through the street. One word, repeated. Bacchanalia. The celebration she had waited for, that a horned agent of Bacchus himself invited her to, would be tonight. Let the prudes whisper, let the faithful prepare their goblets. Soon, wine would flow freely, for the greatest party in Rome would begin.

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. 405 BCE), the Bacchae are always accompanied by ecstatic music composed in the Phrygian tonos (mode), featuring *auloi* (double flutes) and *tympana* (hand drums)
 - In Ovid's (43 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.



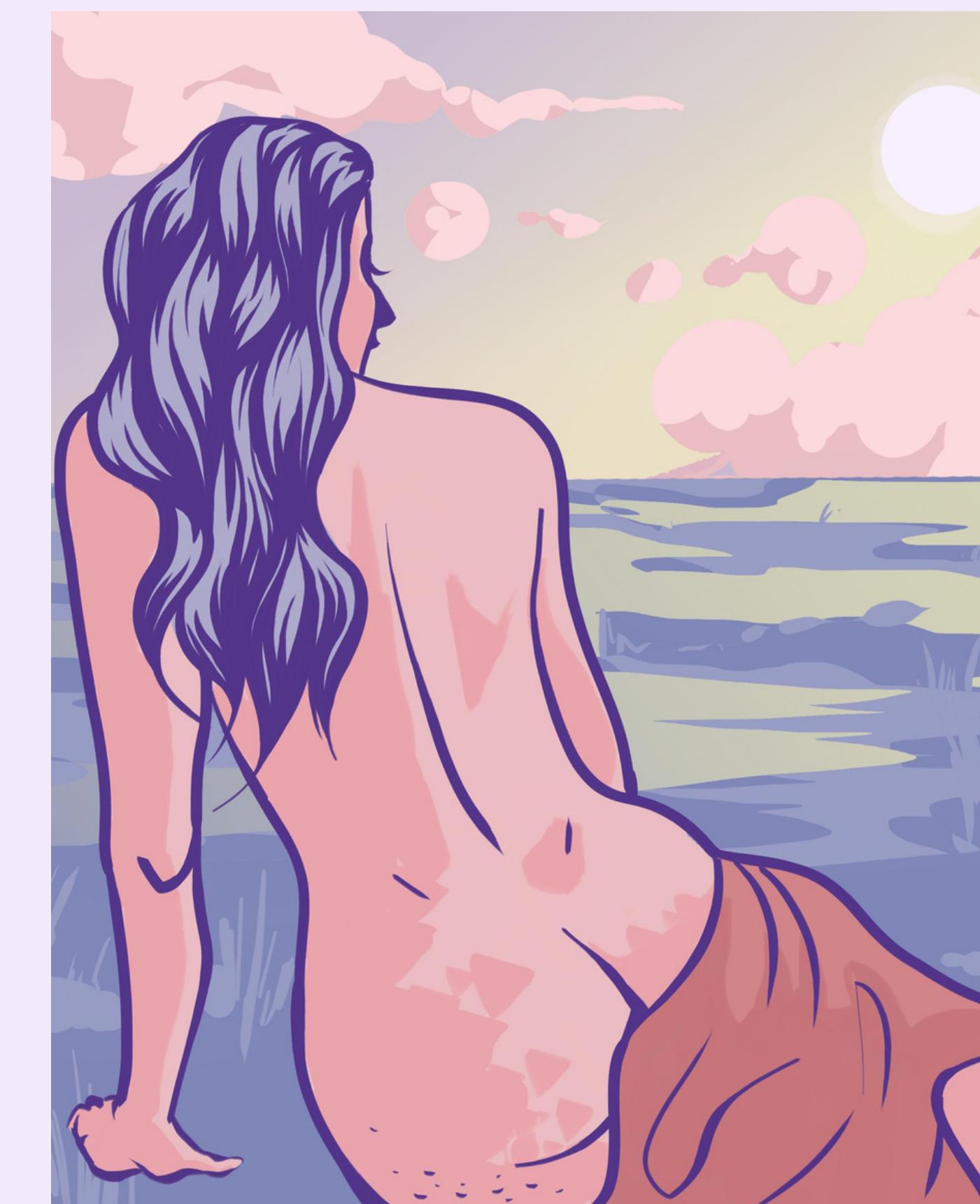
The *auloi* droned out wild tunes, and the *tympana* beat out in a frenzy. Maxima felt her mind separate from her body, her nostrils flared, her pupils dilated. A hairy arm beckoned her to dance, and Maxima gave herself over to the ecstasy of her god, as she spun into the arms of his servants.

II. Orpheus and Therapeutic Music

Orpheus as a magical musician and religious leader acts as a mediation 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
 - Apollodorus (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 Eurydice* 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 magical musician 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.



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 Satyr. She had drank the wine, experienced pure ecstasy, and gone to her first Bacchanalia.

Was Dionysus a Music Therapist?

Based on the mythology, it is indisputable that Dionysus stood for unrefined and chaotic music, with his sonic effects being linked to madness and other negative psychological states. For Aristotle, Dionysian ecstasy was even a pathological state.

However, Dionysian music was not exclusively a cause of psychological disturbance. Through the mythology portraying Orpheus as a son of Apollo, the originator of the Dionysian mysteries, and a magical healer-musician, Dionysian music also emerges as a potential cure for mental illness.

Both Ancient Greek philosophers and modern psychologists agree that Dionysian music could be used for emotional expression and regulation.

Thus, although Dionysus himself may not have been a music therapist in the modern sense, he and his Bacchae certainly highlight the therapeutic value of Dionysian musical ecstasy.

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.

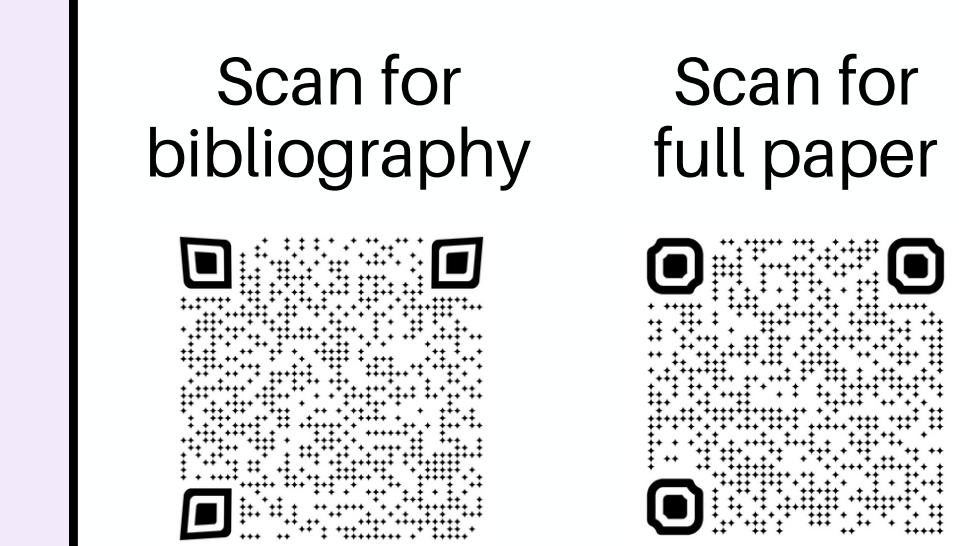


III. The Therapeutic Value of Dionysian Music

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 mimesis (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 calm emotions
 - 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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