

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

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Abstract

In the Ancient Greco-Roman world, the deity Dionysus presided over intoxication, ritual madness, and religious ecstasy. Living firmly in the realm of festivity and celebration, he often appears in popular culture as a one-dimensional pleasure deity. This article questions whether Dionysus was more than the god of parties. I propose the potential therapeutic value of Dionysian (i.e., ecstatic) music by applying both ancient and modern interpretations to close readings of Ancient Greco-Roman mythological texts. In section one, I define Dionysian music against its more demonstrably therapeutic Apollonian counterpart by drawing from a variety of ancient writers, including Homer, Euripides, and Ovid. While this section emphasizes the negative psychological effects of Dionysian music, section two argues that the mythical hero-musician, Orpheus, links Apollo to Dionysus, which thus suggests the therapeutic potential of Dionysian music. I further this argument in section three through a discussion of how Dionysian music can be interpreted as therapeutic through Plato, Aristotle, and modern psychologists due to the ability of Dionysian music to both express and regulate emotions through religious and secular means. I conclude that although Dionysus does not belong amongst modern music therapists, his presence is certainly at home in modern music therapy settings.

Keywords: Ancient Greek mythology; Ancient Greek philosophy; historical musicology; music therapy; music psychology

¹ This research was supported by the Jamie Cassels Undergraduate Research Award. I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Maria Virginia Acuña, and *The Arbutus Review* editors and reviewers for their time, guidance, and support.

Introduction

For three days each year, hundreds of Ancient Romans gathered for festivities in celebration of the Greco-Roman god of wine, ritual madness, intoxication, liberation, and religious ecstasy. According to Livy's *History of Rome* (29–27 B.C.E./1936), the god Dionysus, or Bacchus,² was celebrated by a Roman mystery cult in a festival known as the Bacchanalia. These festivals were scandalous affairs, with men and women of all social classes mingling freely, drinking to excess, and performing loud music that contributed to manic and ecstatic states. In Livy's account, the shocking activities of the Bacchanalia were investigated by Roman senators, who deemed the festival inappropriate, immoral, and illegal. In 186 B.C.E., the Roman senate passed legislation to bring the Bacchanalia under government control.³ Under this law, Dionysus's followers were no longer legally permitted to engage in their unbridled musical ecstasy.

Based on the alleged Bacchanalia scandal resulting in legislative prohibition, Dionysian music certainly appears to have lacked therapeutic effects. According to Livy (29–27 B.C.E./1936), Dionysian music was debased and madness-inducing, leading its participants to immoral acts. In other words, Dionysus and his followers seem to have used music to prompt psychological disturbance rather than to promote mental health. But what if there was more to this festival than mere debauchery? By applying both ancient and modern interpretations to close readings of Ancient Greco-Roman mythological texts, this article proposes the potential therapeutic value of Dionysian music.

Over the past three decades, scholars have drawn significant attention to Apollo (the Greco-Roman god of medicine, music, and poetry) and his connection to therapeutic music (Ardito, 1999; Rutherford, 2020; Tainmont, 2011), with psychologists having also acknowledged the general contributions of Ancient Greco-Roman ideas to modern music therapy (Thaut, 2015). While classics scholar Giorgio Ierano (2020) has reviewed Dionysus's connection to musical life in Ancient Greece, Dionysus is typically overlooked in discussions of therapeutic music. This article is therefore unique in synthesizing ancient and modern sources to focus on the value of Dionysian music to both Ancient Greco-Roman and modern-day therapeutic settings.

In order to demonstrate this link between Dionysian music and music therapy, section one of this article explores how Dionysian music relates to ecstasy and details how the genre remained distinct from Apollonian music in the Ancient Greco-Roman world.⁴ A variety of primary mythological sources focusing on Dionysus and his followers are examined, including the Homeric hymns (ca. seventh century B.C.E./2004), Euripides's *The Bacchae* (ca. 405 B.C.E./2013), and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 C.E./2008). In keeping with Livy's description of the Bacchanalia (29–27 B.C.E./1936), this article posits that these myths demonstrate the ecstatic effects of Dionysian music. Despite the mythology's focus on these ecstatic effects, section two suggests that Orpheus

² Dionysus is the Greek name for the deity. The epithet Bacchus was used by both Ancient Greeks and Romans but is associated with the Roman version of Dionysus. Since Dionysus/Bacchus remained relatively unchanged between the Greek and Roman pantheons, the two names can be considered interchangeable when dealing with the Ancient Greco-Roman world. For clarity, the deity will henceforth be referred to only as Dionysus.

³ This legislation, dated ca. 186 B.C.E., is referred to as the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*. For further reading, see Tierney (1945).

⁴ Henceforth, Ancient Greco-Roman refers to the Mediterranean world from approximately the seventh century B.C.E. to the early first century C.E. This definition includes Ancient Greece as well as Ancient Rome, with significant overlap between the two civilizations due to the cultural exchange and amalgamation of mythologies that took place during this era.

was a key mythical figure who embodied the therapeutic potential of Dionysian music. This claim is substantiated by revealing how Orpheus links Dionysian music to its more demonstrably therapeutic Apollonian counterpart through Orpheus’s relationships to both psychological music and religion. Section three furthers the argument that Dionysian music can be reinterpreted as therapeutic through a discussion of the genre’s ability to both express and regulate emotions through religious and secular means. Evidence is drawn from ancient and modern sources, with a focus on the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, as well as from the scholarship of 21st-century cognitive and clinical psychologists. By drawing on primary sources to define Dionysian music, Orpheus’s connection to therapeutic Dionysian music, and the potential therapeutic uses of the genre, this article contributes to extant knowledge by suggesting that Dionysus’s connection to modern music therapy illuminates the potential value of incorporating ecstatic music into present-day therapeutic settings.

Dionysian Music in Mythology

In Ancient Greco-Roman mythology, music could function both as a cure for and cause of disturbance (Lippmann, 1963). In other words, music could have either positive or negative psychological consequences. This concept is embodied by two musical gods: Apollo and Dionysus. The singer, lyrist, and god of music and poetry, Apollo, represents the cure for disturbance or the rational side of music, whereas Dionysus, whose followers played *auloi* (flutes) and *tympana* (drums),⁵ represents the chaotic side of music. Thus, two main streams of psychological music are portrayed in Ancient Greco-Roman mythology: Dionysian music that incited ecstasy and Apollonian music that produced rational and ethical effects.⁶

To explore the potential therapeutic benefits of Dionysian music, Dionysus’s role in the pantheon (the collective of all Greco-Roman gods) and his distinction from Apollonian music must be understood. These aspects are revealed through the Ancient Greco-Roman world’s characterization and worship of Dionysus. As the god of ritual madness, religious ecstasy, theatre, and pleasure, Dionysus is portrayed in the mythology as presiding over musical domains. In “To Dionysus” (ca. seventh century B.C.E./2004), Homer wrote that “bards sing of [Dionysus] first and last; there is no way to forget [him] and still remember holy song” (lines 46–47)—a sentiment that demonstrates how invoking or appeasing Dionysus may have been a crucial component of an effective religious song. Notably, Homer placed the hymn “To Dionysus” first in his set of 34 hymns addressed to various deities. Furthermore, the poet dedicated three hymns to Dionysus—one of the highest number of dedications to a single deity in the set.

Other ancient poets likewise honoured Dionysus in celebratory choral songs with *auloi* accompaniment, known as *dithyrambos*, as early as the seventh century B.C.E. in Ancient Greece (Brown & Greaves, 2001). The development of the *dithyramb* (ca. 500 B.C.E.) also coincided with the flourishing of Greek lyric poetry, with prominent figures, such as Pindar, Bacchylides, and Melanippides of Melos, composing *dithyrambos* and adding stylistic flair or musical innovations to the genre (D’Angour, 1997; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2013). Thus, the Ancient Greek poetic style was developed through songs dedicated to Dionysus. These Ancient Greek choral invocations

⁵ The *aulos* is usually translated as “flute” or “double flute” but is actually a polyharmonic instrument closer to the modern oboe or bagpipes. The *tympanum* is a type of hand drum that approximates a modern tambourine.

⁶ Dionysian and Apollonian are terms drawn from Friedrich Nietzsche’s aesthetic criticism in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). Nietzsche used the opposing terms to describe the literary and theatrical juxtapositions of order and reason versus chaos and passion.

and dedications to Dionysus demonstrate his prominence in the musical venues of the Greco-Roman world.

The inclusion of music in Dionysus's domain both connects and separates him from Apollo. As the god of poetry and music, Apollo was likewise considered to be the patron of poets' songs. In "To Apollo" (ca. seventh century B.C.E./2004), Homer's characterization of Apollo echoes the earlier depiction of Dionysus: "the sweet-sounding bard, with lyre pitched high and clear, always sings of [Apollo] first and last" (lines 3–4). Thus, Homer linked Dionysus to Apollo: their domains both included music, and both deities were essential to song. However, unlike Apollo, Ancient Greco-Roman mythology did not often directly associate Dionysus with choral songs. In fact, the Homeric hymns appear to be an anomaly in their characterization of Dionysus as imperative to effective lyric. Instead, Ancient Greco-Roman mythology more readily associates Dionysus with noise, clamour, and non-vocal music (Ierano, 2020). A common epithet for Dionysus was "Bromius" (Euripides, ca. 405 B.C.E./2013, line 67; Aeschylus, ca. fifth century B.C.E./2013, line 24)—a term etymologically linked to adjectives such as noisy or boisterous, which supports the association between Dionysus and more unpleasant music. Thus, while both Apollo and Dionysus are musical, they represent substantially different types of music: the sweet and lyrical Apollonian music versus noisy and instrumental Dionysian music.

Though Apollo and Dionysus are both considered musical deities, only one was identified as a musician. While many myths portray the character of Apollo as a skilled lyrist and singer, the character of Dionysus rarely appears as a musical performer (Ierano, 2020). Furthermore, while other deities (such as Hermes, Apollo, and Athena) are often credited with inventing certain musical instruments, Dionysus is only rarely considered an inventor of such instruments (Ierano, 2020). For example, in Euripides's play, *The Bacchae* (ca. 405 B.C.E./2013), Dionysus mentions that he helped to invent the *tympanum*; however, this claim is not supported elsewhere in Ancient Greco-Roman mythology and is even contradicted by Euripides himself 64 lines later.⁷ The other instrument commonly associated with Dionysus, the *aulos*, was reportedly Athena's invention (Apollodorus, ca. first–second century C.E./1921). Strikingly, the differences between Dionysus and other deities as characters demonstrate that, although Dionysus is musical, he is not a musician. Instead, his connection with music-making is realized through his followers.

In Greco-Roman mythology, Dionysus is typically accompanied by a troupe of satyrs, nymphs, and mortal women. The latter category also extends to the real-world: the almost exclusively female Bacchae were devoted followers who were initiated into the Dionysian cult.⁸ In Ancient Greece, the cult was referred to as the Dionysian mysteries, which later became integrated into the Ancient Roman Bacchic mysteries. Unfortunately, there is limited information on the real-world activities of the Bacchae. Even Livy's (29–27 B.C.E./1936) account of the Bacchanalia scandal must be taken skeptically, since the historian wrote over a century after the alleged events.⁹ However, there are several fictionalized descriptions of the Bacchae that historians generally accept as reflecting some of the real-world activities of Dionysus's followers. The most

⁷ Here, the *tympanum* is said to be invented by the Corybantes (mythological worshippers of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, who are known for their dancing and drumming rituals), who later give the instrument to Rhea. In this context, Dionysus is mentioned only as a mere enjoyer of *tympana*.

⁸ In some Greek sources, the female Bacchae are called *maenads*, which translates roughly to "mad woman."

⁹ Based on the date of the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*, the Bacchanalia scandal likely took place around 186 B.C.E., whereas Livy wrote his *History of Rome* ca. 29–27 B.C.E. Livy is also believed to have been influenced by personal and political biases, which likely caused hyperbolic inaccuracies in his account of the Bacchanalia. For further reading, see Walsh (1996).

notable ancient source is Euripides's *The Bacchae* (ca. 405 B.C.E./2013), which provides a colourful depiction of the musical activities of the eponymous characters. By extension, Euripides's play also describes the qualities of Dionysian music. According to Euripides, Dionysian ritual dances and sacred songs were composed exclusively in the Phrygian *tonos* (a specific Ancient Greek musical scale)¹⁰ and were accompanied by percussion (*tympana*) and wind instruments (*auloi*). Such rituals were also characterized by the ecstatic or manic states of participants. The “ecstasy of joy” and mania induced by the music and dancing of the Bacchae is the main theme associated with Dionysian music in Ancient Greco-Roman mythology (Euripides, ca. 405 B.C.E./2013, line 22).

Ecstasy-inducing Dionysian music is depicted in Ovid's (8 C.E./2008) account of Orpheus's death in the *Metamorphoses*. According to Ovid, manic Bacchae were to blame for the death of the hero, Orpheus. The women of Thrace, to whom Orpheus had previously taught the Dionysian mysteries (Apollodorus, ca. first–second century C.E./1921), were enraged at being scorned by the hero, who still mourned his late wife Eurydice. The Bacchae attack Orpheus, accompanied by “the huge clamour, the drums, the curving Phrygian fifes [likely *auloi*], handclapping, [and] Bacchic screaming” (Ovid, 8 C.E./2008, XI.19–20). The Bacchae's noise drowns out Orpheus's lyre and singing, rendering him helpless to the attacks of the manic women: “[Orpheus's] words were useless and his voice of no avail” (XI.41–42). The women dismember Orpheus and his severed head, still singing, is left to float down the River Hebrus.

Dismemberment, or *sparagmos*, was reportedly a common activity of the Bacchae due to the prominence of dismemberment in the storied death and rebirth of Dionysus (Russell, 1996). Along with their noisy music, the act of *sparagmos* was one method used by the Bacchae to induce ecstatic states. Since Ovid (8 C.E./2008) associated Orpheus with Apollo and characterized the hero as a powerful musician and orator, the myth of Orpheus's death places ecstatic Dionysian music in direct opposition with its rational Apollonian counterpart. Although the aforementioned myth exemplifies the negative effects and perceived debauchery of Dionysian music, the Bacchae were not acting in accordance with their patron god. In fact, Dionysus was “distressed to lose the minstrel of his mysteries” (XI.71–72) and punished the Thracian Bacchae by turning them into oak trees. Whereas Ovid's story portrays the triumph of Dionysian ecstasy over Apollonian rationality, Dionysus's outraged reaction to Orpheus's *sparagmos* indicates that this victory was not intended to be celebrated.

In other myths, it is significantly more common for Apollonian music to triumph over Dionysian music. A key example is the musical contest between Apollo and the Phrygian satyr, Marsyas. In his *dithyramb* entitled *Marsyas*, Melanippides of Melos (ca. 480–430 B.C.E.) wrote that the satyr encountered the *aulos* after Athena discarded the instrument upon discovering that playing the *aulos* misshaped her face (as cited in Athenaus, ca. third century C.E./2007).¹¹ Marsyas learns to play the instrument and challenges Apollo to a contest. While Marsyas's music puts the judges into an ecstatic dancing frenzy, Apollo's music appeals to their emotions.¹² Ultimately, Apollo is judged victorious, and the satyr is punished for his hubris by being flayed alive. There are diverse accounts of how Apollo appealed to the judges' emotions. Some depictions show

¹⁰ A *tonos* (pl. *tonoi*) can also be understood as similar to a modern musical key or mode. Ancient Greek *tonoi* do not correspond with the modern-day modes of the same name. For further reading, see Nowacki (2020).

¹¹ This misshapeness was probably due to puffed cheeks, which were necessary to play the *aulos* because the instrument required circular breathing.

¹² Visual art depicting this myth often shows the judges dancing in response to Marsyas's playing. For further reading, see Van Keer (2004).

Apollo adding singing to instrumental music, while others depict Apollo physically inverting the lyre in a manner that Marsyas could not replicate with the *aulos* (Diodorus Siculus, ca. first century C.E./1933; Hyginus, ca. first century C.E./1960). Marsyas's musical defeat suggests that Apollonian lyre music was more versatile than Dionysian wind music. In this way, both the death of Orpheus and the myth of Marsyas demonstrate that although Dionysus recognized the value of Apollonian music vis-à-vis Orpheus, Apollo did not likewise recognize the value of Dionysian music. Thus, Apollo's victory over Marsyas's hubris establishes Apollonian music as a musical genre superior to Dionysian music.

Across other myths, the superiority of Apollonian to Dionysian music prevails; Dionysian music is considered "uncouth" (Ovid, 8 C.E./2008, XI.24) and unrefined. Moreover, the state of ecstasy inspired by Dionysian music is thought to be no match for the rationality of Apollonian music. This distinction between the opposing musical genres raises the following question: if the ecstatic state inspired by Dionysian music negatively contrasts with the positive psychological effects inspired by Apollonian music, then how can Dionysian music be said to have therapeutic uses? To explore this question further, a third mythical figure must be factored in more prominently: the legendary musical hero, Orpheus.

Orpheus and Therapeutic Music

Orpheus is a major character who appears in the mythos around both Dionysus and Apollo. As the alleged founder of the Dionysian mysteries, as well as a skilled lyrist and singer capable of feats such as charming plants and animals and calming sea storms (Ovid, 8 C.E./2008; Apollonius Rhodius, ca. third century B.C.E./2009), Orpheus is associated with both Dionysus's ecstasy and Apollo's rationality. In Aeschylus's lost tragedy *Bassarids*,¹³ the hero originally worships Dionysus yet later abandons the god to worship Apollo (Marchenkov, 2009), thus highlighting Orpheus's association with both Dionysus and Apollo. In this way, Orpheus serves as a link between the two deities. Orpheus is frequently identified with Apollo via his parentage: Apollo and Calliope, the muse of epic poetry and eloquence (Mojsik, 2020). While other sources list Orpheus's father as the Thracian king Oeagrus (Apollonius Rhodius, ca. third century B.C.E./2009; Hyginus, first century C.E./1960),¹⁴ Orpheus is generally considered to be the metaphorical child of Apollo. In fact, Apollodorus (ca. second century C.E./1921) wrote that Orpheus was born to "Oeagrus or, nominally, to Apollo" (1.3.2). Similarly, Ovid (8 C.E./2008) refers to Orpheus as "Apollo's minstrel" (XI.10) and describes the hero's skill on Apollo's signature instrument, the lyre. Multiple myths attest to Orpheus's prowess on the lyre: the persuasion of Proserpina and Hades in the Orpheus and Eurydice myth (Ovid, 8 C.E./2008), as well as the resolution of the Idas-Idmon dispute and the overcoming of the Sirens in the *Argonautica* (Apollonius Rhodius, ca. third century B.C.E./2009). In each of these myths, Orpheus's songs alter the emotional states of others, which thereby allow Orpheus to generate peace and safely pass through dangerous environments. In the case of Idas's dispute with Idmon—the story most applicable to therapy—Orpheus takes on the role of a relationship therapist to resolve interpersonal conflict, restore peace, and calm the ship's crew. These depictions of

¹³ No full reference is available. This play survives only in the fragments quoted by other ancient authors. In Aeschylus's version of events, Orpheus's shift in godly allegiance ultimately costs Orpheus his life at the hands of the enraged Bacchae.

¹⁴ This genealogy is most commonly attributed to Orpheus in instances in which the author believed the hero to be an historical figure.

Orpheus highlight not only the hero's link to Apollonian music but also Orpheus's association with any music that alters the psyche—both Apollonian and Dionysian music. While Ancient Greco-Roman mythology supports the positive psychological powers of Apollonian music, Orpheus's link to Dionysian music does not immediately reveal potential therapeutic effects. In order to explore the connection between Orpheus, Dionysian music, and therapy further, Orpheus must also be considered in his role as a religious leader.

Numerous ancient sources, including Apollodorus (ca. second century C.E./1921) and Ovid (8 C.E./2008), claimed that Orpheus was either an originator or a teacher of the Dionysian mysteries. Classics scholar Andromache Karanika (2010) noted that Orpheus was also depicted as a spiritual leader in Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*, although the spiritual activities led by Orpheus are not exclusively Dionysian. Orpheus's role in the *Argonautica*, combined with sources suggesting that Orpheus invented the Dionysian mysteries, demonstrate that the Ancient Greco-Roman world widely regarded Orpheus as a religious leader. In fact, Orpheus is the alleged author of a set of texts integral to Orphism.¹⁵ Developed around the fifth century B.C.E., this Orphic mystery religion is generally considered a reformation of the earlier Dionysian mysteries (Henrichs, 2003). The strong association between Orphism and Dionysus is reinforced by the conclusion of the Orphic theogony (i.e., the genealogy of the gods according to Orphism), which ends not with Zeus but with Dionysus as the ruler of the gods (Marchenkov, 2009). Therefore, Orpheus is identified with Dionysian religion in addition to Dionysian music. Given the strong connection between religion and medicine in the Ancient Greco-Roman world, this link between Dionysian religion and Orpheus is crucial for understanding how Dionysian music could be considered therapeutic.

Religion and spirituality were imperative to Ancient Greco-Roman understandings of disease and medicine. Several classics scholars have highlighted how the Ancient Greco-Roman world considered nature to be the root of disease (Edelstein, 1937; Edmonds, 2019). Since the natural world involved divinity, the Ancient Greco-Roman world generally accepted divinity as an aspect of disease (Edelstein, 1937; Edmonds, 2019). In turn, spiritual and religious practices were considered valid supplements to more traditional forms of medicine (Edelstein, 1937; Edmonds, 2019). Since music is an integral component to many religious activities (Lippman, 1963), it is plausible that music may have also played a role in Ancient Greco-Roman religious healing practices. Homer's *Iliad* (ca. eighth–seventh century B.C.E./1951), which features a *paean* (i.e., type of choral song) sung to appease Apollo and stop a plague, supports this connection between medicine, religion, and music.

While modern scholars may consider religious activities and curative music to be magical rather than medicinal, classics scholar Radcliffe Edmonds (2019) emphasized that the Ancient Greco-Roman world likely made no such distinction between magic and science. Medicine was believed to encompass all curative, conciliatory, or magical effects, which included the psychological effects produced by music (Ardito, 1999). Thus, an Ancient Greco-Roman healer could practise the medical art through a combination of traditional medicine and religious practices, such as musical rituals. Since Orpheus was a spiritual leader and skilled musician, I propose that it is realistic for the hero to have incorporated music into various religious activities, including activities used to heal. This claim not only ties Orpheus to therapeutic Dionysian music via Orpheus's relationship to Dionysian religion, but also suggests that Dionysian music can be examined for its therapeutic qualities.

¹⁵ For further reading, see Guthrie (1994).

The Therapeutic Value of Dionysian Music

While Orpheus’s central role in mythology indicates that Dionysian music could be used to achieve therapeutic goals, it remains to be seen exactly how a therapist can produce these effects in their clients. That is, how does Dionysian music alter the psyche? A comparison of the Ancient Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle with modern psychological research may furnish an answer to this question. While theories pertaining to the psychological processes and effects of music may vary, both ancient and modern sources reveal that Dionysian music wields its therapeutic power through two related functions: emotional expression and emotional regulation. As a natural method for safely arousing and communicating intense emotions, music can facilitate emotional regulation.

Plato believed that the psychological power of music operated through mimesis, or imitation (Provenza, 2020). This concept developed in relation to Ancient Greek theories of perception, whereby all things were perceived as images imprinted on the lowest part of the tripartite soul (Tomlinson, 1993). Under this framework, art that expressed ethical dispositions and emotions was believed to be impressed upon the soul (Pelosi, 2020). Through mimesis and the related concept of imitation begetting imitation, art was believed to hold power over reality (Potolsky, 2006).¹⁶ In other words, by imitating ethical dispositions and emotions, art was thought to inspire the same behaviours or emotions in the creator and viewer. According to Plato (ca. 375 B.C.E./2004), music affected the human soul “more powerfully than anything else” due to the “rhythm and harmony permeat[ing] the innermost element of the soul” (401d5–6). Furthering Plato’s point, Aristotle (ca. 335 B.C.E./1996) added that musical imitation was particularly effective because of natural human inclinations towards melody, rhythm, and language. In fact, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992) maintained that the natural affinity between music and the soul led “many experts [to] say the soul is a harmony, others that it has harmony” (1340b10). Thus, Ancient Greek philosophers believed melody and rhythm to be ideal media through which to induce certain characters, or emotions, in the soul.

From a modern perspective, Ancient Greek musical mimesis is best described as emotional expression through music. The term “emotional expression” is generally used in reference to one of three phenomena: the emotional expression of performers through music, the listener’s perceptions of emotional content in music, or the ability of music to arouse emotion in either the listener or performer (Juslin, 2013). Based on Ovid’s myths (8 C.E./2008), the Bacchae seem to have participated in a variety of emotional expressions; their clamorous and noisy Dionysian music both communicated their frustration over being scorned by Orpheus and produced ecstatic states. Since poetically representing the abstract concept of emotional expression is challenging,¹⁷ Ovid may have literalized the psychological phenomenon through Orpheus’s dismemberment. In other words, the *sparagmos* of Orpheus offered a literal indication that the Bacchae’s musical emotional expression was effective at both communicating and arousing emotions in the performers. While such emotional expression is not therapeutic in itself, the same principle can be applied to the context of music therapy. Since music can often be a more familiar and direct method to convey

¹⁶ While Plato (ca. 375 B.C.E./2004) first developed the concept of mimesis (imitation), Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992) also expanded upon this concept in *Politics*.

¹⁷ This reading is supported by the notion that myth presents reality but does not attempt to explain it (Marchenkov, 2009). In other words, myth *shows* something that is otherwise difficult to explain. Thus, it operates through metaphor and allegory, which include literal representations of abstract ideas.

emotions in complex social situations (Levitin, 2008), both therapists and clients can harness music to communicate what they may be otherwise unable to convey through verbal or gestural language.

Both the Ancient Greeks and modern psychologists agree that music is ideal for expressing emotions. However, the question of what makes music more effective at expressing emotions than other modes of communication remains outstanding. One answer may lie in psychologist Patrik Juslin's (2013) theory of the three-layered emotional coding of music: iconic coding, intrinsic coding, and associative coding. The core layer, iconic coding, describes music's ability to express emotions due to its similarity to other types of communication, such as movement or vocal expression. For example, different pitches or rhythms may be related to specific vocal expressions that have emotional meanings. Through iconic coding, music can portray basic emotions such as happiness, sadness, and anger. However, these basic emotions only account for a portion of the full range of emotional expressions available through music.

As proposed by Juslin (2013), intrinsic and associative coding as two additional layers that enable more complex emotional perception in music. Since these layers do not relate to spoken or signed language, these types of coding give music its unique ability to communicate complex emotions more effectively than other forms of language. Firstly, intrinsic coding focuses on the emotional communication of music itself. This type of coding generally describes an emotional response to tension and release in music and its potential subversions. Music psychologist David Huron (2006) highlighted this idea in his Imagination, Tension, Prediction, Reaction, and Appraisal (ITPRA) theory, which postulates that tension and release in music can serve as a micro-environment in which to practise emotional skills related to survival. By subverting the listener's expectations, music also allows the brain to explore different emotional responses. In this way, music can be a tool for learning and practising emotional self-regulation skills in a non-threatening environment.

In addition to intrinsic coding, associative coding is the third layer. Associative coding refers to the ability of humans to perceive music as emotionally expressive due to societal conventions that associate certain musical elements, such as *tonoi*, harmonic progressions, or *tempi*, with specific emotions (Juslin, 2013). For Ancient Greco-Romans, these conventions could originate from mythology and/or real-world musical practice. For example, Ancient Greek *tonoi* had ethnic names according to the geographical region and cultural sub-group in which they originated, but mythology gave the *tonoi* additional associations, often through deities with strong connections to specific locations and/or songs composed in a particular *tonos*.¹⁸ While associative coding is only one of the three layers of emotional coding found in music, according to modern music psychology, associative coding is a concept that ancient thinkers seemed to understand best.

Plato's *Republic* (ca. 375 B.C.E./2004) provides one of the most illuminating ancient literary descriptions of the associative coding of different *tonoi*. In Plato's imagined ideal city-state, Kallipolis, the Ionian *tonos* is not necessary because there is no need for the drunkenness inspired by that scale. From this passage alone, it seems that Kallipolis excluded Dionysian music. How, then, can the argument that Dionysian music possesses potential therapeutic effects be substantiated by Ancient Greek philosophy? Curiously, Plato's ideal city allowed the Phrygian *tonos*, which both the philosophical texts of Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992) and Ancient Greco-Roman mythology associate almost exclusively with Dionysian ecstasy. In fact, Phrygian is one

¹⁸ For example, Dionysus is associated with the Phrygian *tonos* through its use in *dithyrambos* (songs dedicated to Dionysus) as well as his connection to the region of Phrygia (where Dionysus's madness was allegedly cured); Apollo is associated with the Dorian *tonos* through its use in *paeans* (songs dedicated to Apollo) (Rutherford, 2020).

of only two *tonoi* permitted in Kallipolis. Plato referred to the Phrygian *tonos* as expressing peaceful emotions and having a calming effect. While uncommon, this association suggests that Plato and his followers viewed Dionysian music through a therapeutic lens. Indeed, a reinterpretation of what “ecstasy” means can reveal the relationship between Dionysian music and the calmness described by Plato.

As Giorgio Ierano (2020) proposed, the inclusion of the Phrygian *tonos* in Kallipolis suggests the possibility that Plato considered this scale from a psychological perspective. This finding is supported by two main arguments. To begin with, mythology already indicates that the Phrygian *tonos* was thought to affect the psyche. If Plato described this *tonos* as peaceful, then the *tonos* must produce a positive effect. In fact, Ierano (2020) highlighted the possibility that Plato associated the Phrygian *tonos* with the mystical state of calmness that could follow a state of ecstasy. This observation is rooted in the Platonic idea that, by succumbing to madness and allowing oneself to be overtaken by a god, a human could become both liberated and psychologically well (Burkert, 1991). Liberation resulting from godly possession seemed to be the main goal of the Bacchae, and this goal was supported by Dionysus’s status as the god of *religious* ecstasy and the cult’s participation in ritual *sparagmos*. Since ecstasy can be defined as “standing outside oneself,” or the removal of the mind “from its normal place or function” (Versnel, 2015, para. 1), this state could remove one from the typical realm of experience and could have appeared to the Ancient Greeks as a form of godly possession. In Platonic thought, this experience could provide higher insights into the objective truth of reality (Versnel, 2015). Such insights could take place either during or directly after a state of ecstasy. Therefore, Dionysian music, as Plato conceived it, had a positive psychological power: such music could instill calm because its provocation of ecstatic states could allow individuals to connect with themselves, their religion, and their reality. In this way, Dionysian music was a valuable method to arouse and, in turn, regulate emotions.

The ability for Dionysian music to produce a state of ecstasy followed by a state of calm is also explored in the Aristotelian concept of *katharsis*. Although *katharsis* is the basis for the theory of catharsis popularized by Sigmund Freud (1957), in Ancient Greek, the term is used in a different sense from Freudian catharsis.¹⁹ Typically, *katharsis* is translated as “purgation,” “purification,” or “cleansing” (Knowles, 2005, para. 1); however, “release” is also a reasonable translation in the writing of Aristotle (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1992). This translation stems from Aristotle’s concept of *katharsis* as the deliberate expression and release of an emotion harmful to the psyche (Curran, 2015). By imitating an emotional state to which an individual was already prone through the mimetic process (such as ecstasy, pity, or fear), *katharsis* could release harmful emotional excesses (Heath, 1996). Through this discharge of negative emotions, *katharsis* was believed to restore the soul to a healthy state, “as if [it] had undergone a curative and purifying treatment” (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1992, 1341b32). In *Politics*, Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992) refers to this process as “pleasant purgation and relief” (1341b32), which implies a state of calmness is reached following *katharsis*. While the *kathartic* release of pity or fear could be achieved through watching tragic plays, *kathartic* ecstasy was best achieved through Dionysian music (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1992; ca. 335 B.C.E./1996).

¹⁹ In the 19th and 20th centuries, catharsis referred to eliminating unconscious complexes by bringing them into the conscious mind so that they could be expressed. For further reading on Freudian catharsis, see Breuer and Freud (1957). While the efficacy of Freud’s theory of catharsis has since been disputed, it has nevertheless influenced modern psychology. For modern interpretations of Freudian catharsis in the context of the arts, see Gümüş (2021).

At the same time, Aristotle placed some caveats on ecstatic *katharsis*: it affected only those predisposed to or pre-afflicted with ecstasy (ca. 335 B.C.E./1996). Those predisposed to an ecstatic state could be calmed by Dionysian music, which expelled their excess of emotion; however, Dionysian music would have no therapeutic effect on those not naturally prone to ecstatic episodes. By this description, ecstasy in the Ancient Greco-Roman world emerges as a pathological state: since susceptibility to enthusiasm, such that one is “possessed” by a deity, was considered abnormal, this form of ecstasy fits the criteria for what modern psychologists would label a disorder (Lord, 1982). If ecstasy was considered a disorder in the Ancient Greco-Roman world, then Aristotle’s musical *katharsis* functioned as a homoeopathic cure: Dionysian music induced ecstasy and, therefore, was also the best remedy for the affliction.

Modern psychologists tend to support Aristotle’s point that therapeutic music affects individuals differently. The ability of music to arouse or regulate certain emotions is contextual and relies on factors, such as an individual’s musical preference, personality, and temperament, as well as cognitive and psychological differences (Cheng, 2020; McFerran, 2016). In clinical practice, these individual differences influence how music therapy sessions are designed and delivered (Canadian Association of Music Therapists, n.d.). In other words, different psychological disorders necessitate different approaches to music therapy, and not all individuals will benefit from the same type of therapeutic music—a point on which both Aristotle and modern psychologists can agree.

Ultimately, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies demonstrate that the Ancient Greco-Roman world conceptualized the therapeutic value of Dionysian music akin to how modern psychologists understand the psychological benefits of music. It is undeniable that music can be used therapeutically to communicate, arouse, and regulate emotions. In the Ancient Greco-Roman world, all of these functions were derived from the concept of mimesis, while in the modern world, these functions are best described as emotional expression. For Plato (ca. 375 B.C.E./2004), the associative coding of Dionysian music with ecstasy made the musical genre ideal for arousing a state of ecstasy that, in turn, produced a state of calm due to the spiritual separation of the mind and body. In other words, ecstasy was a spiritual experience that produced calming effects. Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992; ca. 335 B.C.E./1996) likewise believed that individuals could achieve a state of calmness through Dionysian music. Specifically, the *katharsis* of ecstasy, incited by ecstatic music, expressed then discharged the excess emotions that afflicted those in that pathological state. Through *katharsis*, the soul was believed to return to a natural and ordered condition, which engendered a pleasurable feeling of relief. In this way, the scholarship of Plato and Aristotle describe similar psychological phenomena to that explored in modern research, which highlights the potential value of bringing Dionysian music into 21st-century therapeutic settings.

Was Dionysus a Music Therapist?

According to Livy (ca. 29–27 B.C.E./1936), Ancient Roman Bacchanalia festivals were a sign of Rome’s inexcusable moral decay: “Whatever villainy there has been in recent years due to lust, whatever to fraud, whatever to crime, I tell you, has arisen from this one cult” (39.16). This colourful account disparaged the cult of Dionysus and the debauchery for which it stood. As mythology reveals, Livy was not entirely unjustified. After all, the screams, *tympana*, and *auloi* of the frenzied Bacchae formed the soundtrack to Orpheus’s brutal death. In Ancient Greco-Roman myths, this genre of music was considered inferior to the calm, rational sophistication of

Apollonian music. From Aristotle’s descriptions (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992; ca. 335 B.C.E./1996), Dionysian music-induced ecstasy is in keeping with the diagnostic criteria modern psychologists use to describe a pathological state (American Psychological Association, 2013). Thus, it is indisputable that Dionysus stood for unrefined and chaotic music with sonic effects linked to “madness” and other unwanted psychological states. However, Orpheus’s connection to both Apollo and Dionysus suggests that Dionysian music was not exclusively a cause for psychological disturbance. As the skilled son of Apollo, capable of affecting the psyche through song, and as the originator of the Dionysian mysteries, Orpheus bridges the gap between the two deities. Indeed, Orpheus demonstrates the value of incorporating Dionysian music into healing practices, which allows Dionysian music to emerge as a potential cure for disturbance, thus begging the question: could the Bacchae described in Livy’s *History of Rome* (ca. 29–27 B.C.E./1936) have used the ecstasy of the Bacchanalia to promote their own psychological well-being?

While it is impossible to determine the exact activities or intentions of the Bacchae, synthesizing both modern and Ancient Greek theories on the psychological effects of music suggests the possibility that this cult engaged in an ancient precursor to therapeutic music during the Bacchanalia. According to Platonic theories, the Bacchae used Dionysian music to influence a state of religious ecstasy—a separation of the mind from the body that mirrored godly possession. By allowing Dionysus to overtake worshippers through music and dance, a Bacchant could reach a calm state of heightened connection with themselves, their religion, and their reality. Plato was not the only philosopher to link musical ecstasy to mental well-being; Aristotle (ca. 350 B.C.E./1992; ca. 335 B.C.E./1996) also believed in the calming effects of Dionysian music. Through the process of *katharsis*, excess and extreme emotions could be expressed and discharged to return the soul to a healthy and ordered state. Like music-induced religious ecstasy, *katharsis* was thought to produce a feeling of pleasurable and calming relief. To the modern psychologist, both Plato and Aristotle seem to describe emotional expression and regulation through exposure to music. Dionysian music was believed to provide not only an outlet in which to release excess emotions and regain calm but also a micro-environment in which to practise emotional regulation skills. In both the ancient and modern worlds, the results of therapeutic music have varied depending on individual circumstances and predispositions. Understanding the relevance of Ancient Greco-Roman theories on the expression and regulation of emotions through Dionysian music-induced ecstasy and *katharsis* can strengthen the evidence base for the continued research of modern-day clinical music therapy. Although Dionysus does not directly fulfil the role of a music therapist in the modern sense, he represents the potential for ecstatic music to be used in therapeutic ways to promote emotional expression and regulation.

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