

Doctrine of Ethos (ethos-moral character of people)

Synopsis by Ravonna Martin

Both Plato and Aristotle from the 4th century B.C.E. wrote about the importance and power of music. The Greek idea was concerned with the ideas that there is a power in music akin to the power of words for influencing human thought and action, and an artist, whether in music or words was obligated to exercise this power with due regard for its effect on others. Aristotle felt that music directly imitates the passions or states of the soul-gentleness, anger, courage, temperance, and their opposites. (as well as other qualities). So, when someone listens to music that imitates a certain passion, that person becomes imbued with the same passion. If the person listens habitually to the kind of music that compels behavior that is harmful, then that person will become that in nature.

The Greek doctrine of ethos was founded on the idea that music affects character and that different kinds of music cause certain responses. There were two classes; Music that caused a calm spirit and was uplifting, and music that produced excitement and enthusiasm. The first class was associated with the worship of Apollo, its instrument was the lyre and its related poetic forms were the ode and the epic. The second class was associated with the worship of Dionysus; its instrument was the aulos and the related poetic forms were the dithyramb and the drama. Both writers were concerned with the welfare of the state. They felt that music had the power to change moral character and in order to have a perfect utopia, the government needed to regulate or censor music. Both rhythm and mode needed to be carefully scrutinized. If a rhythm was too complex or fast, then the soul would be compelled to act out in an uninhibited fashion. This was related to the worship of Dionysus-which for the most part was sexual in content and ritual. If a person listened to sad, mournful melodies, then they would become depressed and not be productive. Music could also be used to defeat an enemy. If the enemy was exposed to music with weakening attributes, then their defenses could be weakened and they could be conquered.

According to the Greek Philosophers, the welfare of the state is determined by the ethics of the people and those ethics could be shaped by the kind of music the populace listened to. Music and physical exercise were to be used to provide the proper degree of tension and relaxation-so that the soul and body were in sync with each other.

Fast rhythms increase our heart rate-it is a biological fact. Do you drive faster when listening to a tune with a strong, fast beat? I do.