Music and Medicine: A Partnership in History

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The ancient Greeks declared the partnership between music and medicine when they created the god Apollo, whose functions included both the musical and healing arts. Aeschylus (The Suppliant Maidens 263) and Aristophanes (The Plutus 11) refer to the filial relationship of the physician Aesculapius to Apollo—a bond that further strengthened the ties between music and medicine. Meinecke (1948) tells us that even the great Vestals recognized Apollo's curative powers, and Suetonius noted that the Romans made a similar declaration when the god was adopted by the Emperor Augustus.

In the sixth century B.C., the Greek philosopher and scientist Pythagoras proposed his theories of numbers and harmony. He saw the human soul as a harmony within itself and believed that daily singing and playing helped one achieve emotional catharsis (Aristotle Politics 8. 1341 b. 38).

By the fourth century B.C., both Plato and Aristotle had proposed a unity and interrelationship between the soul and body. Plato (The Timaeus 47) stated that order and harmony were restored to the soul by means of melody and rhythm. Aristotle (Politics 8. 1340 a. 5), the great logician, made specific distinctions about appropriate melodies, instruments, and harmonies, and their effects on the soul and body. He noted, for example, that the Mixolydian mode weakened the mind, while the Phrygian appeared to make listeners enthusiastic (Politics 8. 1340 b).

The psycho-physical tenets of the Greeks were adopted, in large measure, by the Romans. Both the Greeks and Romans had theories of music therapy and its usefulness in arousing or suppressing passions, curing illnesses, molding character, or simply reaching a state of harmony. Specific claims for cures effected by music are made by Plutarch (De Musica 1146. 42), Homer (Odyssey 19. 457), and Aristides Quintilianus (De Musica Book 2).

Around the first century, the historian Celsus displayed intimate knowledge of Greek medical works. In the Proemium of the De Medicina, he declared that Hippocrates (fl. 400 B.C.) was the first to make the
science of medicine independent of philosophy. It is entirely possible that the *De Medicina* may have been drawn from works such as those contained in the Hippocratic treatises. The corpus of treatises attributed to *Hippocrates* was actually a collection of early Greek medical works compiled in the third century by Alexandrian medical scholars. The famous oath, traditionally sworn by the neophyte medical practitioner, was undoubtedly written long after the death of *Hippocrates*.

*Galen*, born in the second century in Pergamum, Asia Minor, is the next giant in medical history. Strongly rooted in the Greek tradition, he recognized the liberal and honorable nature of music and recommended that the art be a part of the educational curriculum (*Adhort. Ad. Art. Addisc. 1*).

It is important to note *Galen*’s emphatic advocacy of the Hippocratic tradition of treating “the whole man”. Much of books one through three of his magnum opus, *On the Natural Faculties*, are an attack on the mechanistic and atomistic approaches of the physicians, *Asclepiades* and *Erasistratus*.

During the Middle Ages, the Christian church struggled to free itself from the pagan influences of the Greeks and Romans. *Augustine*, one of the leading Christian thinkers, tried to maintain the educational legacies of these traditions. *Boethius* (*De institutione musica* 1. 1. 13–15) maintained the notion of music’s effects on moral development. He also commented on the physiological effects of music on infants, by contrasting the calming effect of a lullaby with the excitation of a “shrill and harsh” melody. This was a period of superstition during which the European clergy claimed the power and right to cure disease of the body as well as the soul.

The preservation of the Hellenic medical tradition and the development of medical science in the Middle Ages rested in the hands of the Arabs. During the eighth and ninth centuries this Arab culture reached its apex. The Arabians preserved the writing of *Hippocrates* and *Galen*. Many of these Greek books were translated into Arabic, the intellectual language of Islam. Donald *Campbell*, the distinguished physician-historian, states that “it is entirely owing to the Arabic writers that some of the works of *Hippocrates* and *Galen* are preserved to us” (*1926 Arabian Medicine and Its Influence on the Middle Ages*, vol. 1, p. 14). The College of Translators in Toledo, Spain, was responsible for transferring the Arabic culture to the Latin West. There is no doubt that European medicine in the later Middle Ages was directly influenced by the Arabs. The medical