

## ABSTRACT

Music and the Soul: Character Formation to Transcendence

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This creative thesis explored music's effects on the human soul. I used the lenses of Plato's "Republic," Alan Bloom's "The Closing of the American Mind," and Rodger Scruton's "Understanding Music," to explore music's power to shape humans. The second part of my project was a lecture-recital, in which I shared my research and performed solo Bach, Sarasate's "Carmen Fantasy," and Massenet's "Meditation from Thais." Each piece served to illustrate an aspect of my research. The goal of this thesis was to blend the practical with the theoretical, demonstrating academically and experientially the power music has to shape the human soul.

APPROVED BY THE DIRECTOR OF HONORS THESIS:

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MUSIC AND THE SOUL: CHARACTER FORMATION TO TRANSCENDENCE

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Honors Program

By

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## CHAPTER ONE

### A brief word of thanks

Hi everyone! Thank you for coming. As I've been preparing for this recital I've been struck time and again with what an incredible this is. Whenever I began to get stressed about preparing, I've been reminded of how this has all been gift. My dad gave me a love of music, taking us kids to symphony concerts, and always had his radio tuned to "Classical King FM. One of my favorite things was playing guess-the-composer in the car. He helped me practice when I began violin, accompanied my painful scratches on the piano. What my dad inspired, my mom enforced. I just want to take this opportunity to thank her for doing so. So many people here at Baylor have selflessly invested in me both academically and personally, especially Dr. Eka and Dr. Corey.

This is by no means an in-depth exploration of music's affects on the soul. This is only the very tip of a colossal iceberg of what could be said on the topic. But even this little iceberg tip has had a very significant impact on the way I think about and approach music, so I hope that it will do the same for you.

The reason I'm doing a recital is because I want to tie the practical in with the theoretical. Also, through my studies I've learned that one of the most important characteristics of music is its ability to draw people together. (It's already working since you're all here!) And if music is meant to be a communal act, it is actually closer to being "perfect" and in its "fullest form" when its shared than when its not, even if less mistakes are made in solitude of a practice room.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Great Texts and Classical Music

As many of you know, I am a Great Texts major, but have also continued to study violin while at Baylor. Music and Great Texts used to feel like two very separate worlds to me, but through doing this thesis, I've realized that the arguments for studying great texts are the same as the arguments for studying great works of music. Both have demonstrated their significance in enduring the test of time, both have the power to transform individual lives, and therefore culture, both demonstrate and point to the truth, and both are often disregarded AND underappreciated by culture at large.

Benjamin Zander, who was a professor at New England Conservatory of Music for 45 years, began his Ted Talk by telling the story of two salesmen who went to Africa in the early 1900s to see if there was an opportunity for selling shoes. One sent a telegram back saying "Situation hopeless. They don't wear shoes." The other one wrote "Glorious opportunity! They don't have shoes yet." This is the attitude he takes toward the state of classical music today. Rather than seeing the falling numbers in symphony attendance and thinking "it's all over," Zander looks at those who do not know classical music and says "you ain't seen nothing yet."

His talk was very exciting to me, as I have been playing the violin since I was 5, and I often felt like I am participating in a dying art. While I got the praise of everyone's grandparents, most of my peers were ambivalent toward my pursuit. I started to think that the only reason I liked classical music was because I was raised listening to it.

In all honesty, this is the attitude I've had for probably the last 10 years of my life. I played violin mostly because it had been part of my identity for so long, and listened to classical music because of its sentimental value rather than any inherent.

Deep down, however, I knew that there had to be something inherently good about classical music, so I decided to write my thesis on this topic. I began asking questions like: What is music? What does music do? How does music do what it does? What makes music good?

What I discovered was mind-blowing. Not only is there a long and powerful intellectual history that deals with what music is and how it affects humans, there also were very strong cases for some music being better than others, not just because of its aesthetic beauty, but because of the way it impacts and shapes its listeners. In this presentation I will argue that we can make certain value judgements about music, and therefore it does matter what you listen to. For those of you who are music majors, I hope to provide some good ammunition to defend the inherent value of your field of study. For those of you who are somewhat ambivalent about music, I hope to give some compelling reasons for why you shouldn't be. Overall, I hope that everyone comes away considering music in a new light.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Plato: Music as Character Formation

I began my research by looking at Plato's Republic. For those of you who haven't read The Republic, it is philosophical dialogue lead by a man named Socrates, in which he searches for the meaning of justice and goodness by constructing an imaginary city, what he calls a "city in speech." The parts of the city are meant to correspond to the various aspects of the human soul. A key element of the city are the "guardians," which are the elite warriors in charge of protecting the city from internal and external dangers. The "philosopher king" who rules the entire city is chosen from this class of warriors, so they must have the best training and education. Socrates says that all guardians need to be trained in "gymnastics and music." Lest you think that the ideal man is one who can sing show tunes while doing backflips, gymnastics means training of the physical body, and music includes all things that were influenced by the Muses, which would include poetry, dance, drawing, rhythm and melody. Yet between these two fields of training, Socrates says that musical training ought to be "most sovereign" because "rhythm and harmony most of all insinuate themselves into the inmost part of the soul" Socrates continues, saying "furthermore, music is sovereign because the man properly reared on rhythm and harmony would have the sharpest sense of what's been left out and what isn't a fine product of craft or what isn't a fine product of nature... And, due to his having the right kind of dislikes he would praise the fine things; and taking pleasure in them and receiving them into his soul, he would be reared on them and become a gentleman" (III.402a). Let me summarize everything Plato is saying in a sentence, because it is astonishing: music can make you a more virtuous person.



Now, this claim needs to be supported. Music and virtue seem like two very unrelated things. So the next question I asked in my research was: what is music? This is not a small question, and there is not a small answer. However, I did uncover some evidence that made me come to think that Plato's claim that music has ethical implications may be true.

This evidence came from another Great Texts favorite, St. Augustine, and read his treatise on music, he begins by defining music as "the science of measuring well." I was so thrown off by this definition. I totally bought into the idea that music is for the creative right brained, emotional people. I wanted to be the "passionate artist" who wasn't confined by rules and regulations. But when you think about it, music is dominated by rules, and was actually created by rules.

It turns out that both Augustine and Plato are both drawing on the ancient mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras. Pythagoras is famous for a number of things, including the development of the twelve-tone scale. Now I'm not going to get into the nitty-gritty math of how Pythagoras came up with a musical scale, (mostly because I don't understand how it works), but these are the basic takeaways:

Pythagoras thought that music was the audible manifestation of number. (Legend has it that he made this discovery while walking by a blacksmith's shop and noticing that differently weighted hammers rang at different pitches.) He realized that sound is calculable and measurable. Time likewise needs to be broken up into measured pieces and that's how we get rhythm. It isn't important to my argument how exactly one goes about dividing up pitch and time. I wish only to establish the inherently orderly and rational nature of music.

But that's only half of the story. If music is just different combinations of sounding numbers, we couldn't expect it to have much of an emotional impact on us. While one part of music is its rationality, the other part is its emotivism. Sounds have an emotional nature (Zbikowski).

Now sound on its own communicates a lot because it is always tied to some action and a reason behind that action. For example, when we hear a siren, we know that this sound is being produced by a loudspeaker on an emergency vehicle, and that there is some emergency. Similarly, the sound of laughter, crying, or screaming carry associations with them. It is not the sound itself that causes an emotional response, but reason and the action behind that sound. Plato recognized this reality, and therefore said that music harnesses the "barbaric" or "desiring" part of our soul.

Socrates talks about the soul as having 3 parts: the reasoning, the appetitive, and the spirited. The virtuous man is one who reigns in his appetites and emotions with his reason. Music is doing a similar thing by putting one's emotions and passions into orderly constraints. A virtuous person is not a person who feels no emotion, but rather one whose emotions are ordered and proportional. If music is a physical embodiment of ordering of emotions, then it makes a lot of sense how music can teach virtue. It can train your emotions into being measured.

To demonstrate all of this, I have decided to play Bach. Bach was a master of using musical number. He is calculating and formulaic, yet also harnesses deep feeling and emotion. The first movement is more reflective, I think of it as an internal dialogue someone is having. The second moment sounds rather argumentative. Yet both dialogue

and argument require emotion and reason. I want you to listen to the way that Bach so masterfully channels emotion through beautiful structures.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Alan Bloom: The Question of Censorship

So now that we've established that a) music as a highly emotive and highly rational nature, and because of this b) it has the ability to really affect us, what ought we listen to?

Socrates' solution in Plato's Republic is censorship. He ends his discussion of music with "purging" the city of many different modes of music he thinks are not helpful in the education of the guardians. Socrates talks about these modes as if each has a clear message. He says that there is no need for the Lydian mode, used for wailing and lament. He approves of the Ionian mode, for it imitates "a man who performs a peaceful deed." The Dorian and Phrygian Socrates says are for "warlike and violent deeds" and can be used sparingly and only at appropriate times.

This prompts the question: ought we censor? At first this sounds ridiculous, but governments have censored musicians many times in the past, and even the not too distant past, clearly indicating that they didn't view music as an inconsequential force. And while censorship on a mass level is dangerous, we have to acknowledge that as individuals, we censor ourselves all the time because we have to!

For example, there are roughly 30 million songs on Spotify, although that number is continually growing. If we say that each song is 4 minutes long, that is around 2 million hours of music. If you listened to music every hour that you were awake, it would take 342 years to listen to all the songs available on Spotify. Therefore, we *have to* filter, and with an understanding that music has the ability to shape our souls, the way we filter matters enormously.

Alan Bloom, late professor of political philosopher at the university of Chicago, wrote a chapter of his book *The Closing of the American Mind* on music (Bloom). Bloom also uses Plato as the starting point for his discussion, agreeing that different kinds of music cultivate different parts of the soul. He says “to Plato, the history of music is a series of attempts of give form and beauty to the dark, chaotic, premonitory forces of the soul – to make them serve a higher purpose.”

Bloom then argues that rock & roll music has emerged as the “embodiment of the glorification of the untrained, irrational part of the soul.” Further, Bloom says “rock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire – not love, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored”

This is some strong language. Though he was harsh, I was intrigued by his black and white view of things. It made things easier on my end: only listen to classical music and become a more virtuous person. However, I couldn’t get comfortable with it. What I concluded was that Bloom was too dichotomous. There are a wide variety of forces present in classical music, just like there are a wide variety in contemporary music.

## CHATPER FIVE

### Carmen Fantasy as a Counterargument

For example, one of the pieces I have loved ever since I was a little girl is Carmen Fantasy by Sarasate, which is an adaptation of Bizet's Opera Carmen. I loved this piece even before I knew the story of the opera. I was entranced by its playful rhythms, the bold dynamic contrasts, and the dance-like nature of it. I think I also liked that the piece was about a strong female character, and that part of the tradition of playing Carmen was wearing a red dress.

Yet when I started learning this piece and researched the full story of Carmen, I was a little scandalized. Carmen is a gypsy who is known for being a flirt. That's putting it too mildly. She is a seductress. She steals the fiancé of a nice girl that she works with, runs away with him to the mountains, then gets bored with him and goes off with a bullfighter. The words to one of her most famous arias are: Love is a gypsy's child, it has never, known a law / Love is a rebellious bird that no one can tame. She concludes saying "If you don't love me, then I'll love you, but if I love you, you best beware!"

I don't think Alan Bloom would characterize these lyrics as "virtuous." While the story of Carmen is perhaps milder than some of the lyrics rock songs today, it is by no means elevates your mind to contemplate the transcendent as Bloom supposes all classical music will.

I want to use this piece as a counterargument to Bloom's unqualified endorsement of classical music as wholesome. The excessive passion and promiscuity that he so detested in rock music is not unique to the sound of the electric guitar. We cannot simply

remove entire genres of music and think that the problem is solved. Pitches and rhythms are not inherently perverse or virtuous. It how they are used that gives them a character.

However, I do concede to Bloom that the subtlety and complexity in classical music is often not present in 3-and-a-half-minute songs pop song. There is far more going on in even Carmen than a gypsy breaking hearts. Also, bear in mind that at the end of the opera, Carmen's scorned lover, Jose, stabs her, and she dies, so this piece is not solely glorifying Carmen's reckless lifestyle. This music communicates passion, excitement, but also pain, anger, regret, and sorrow. So I hope you enjoy, Carmen!

## CHAPTER SIX

### Rodger Scruton: Transcendence and the Musical Community

This brings us to the final portion of my presentation which I want to consider the question: What is the proper end of music? From what I've read, the best answer I can give is that music's highest end is that it can lead to transcendence. By transcendence I only mean getting out of yourself. There are various levels of transcending. One is very otherworldly, the other is more immediate, but in both you are taken out of the immediate and mundane.

Evidence for music's ability to help you transcend to intimations of the divine, is at the end of Plato's Republic, Socrates tells a strange myth. Unlike the rest of the work, the myth is very otherworldly. He tells of 8 cosmic whorls, which I see as akin to planetary orbits. Socrates says, "Above, on each of its circles, is perched a Siren, accompanying its revolution, uttering a single sound, one note; from all eight is produced the accord of a single harmony...the whole is organized rationally and is knowable; and in this way the particular fates of individuals gain significance by their connection with the cosmic necessities."

Socrates seems to think that, through virtue, one can tune one's soul to resonate with the eternal order of things. Augustine says something similar, just calling Socrates' "cosmic necessity," the wisdom of God. He says, "The wisdom of God is made manifest in the soul through musical number and it is this which enables the body to be part of the universal harmony" (Augustine). I find these images beautiful, but also very mysterious.



But, one thing I do understand and know that I have experienced, is a communal transcendence. So that's what I want to focus on.

CHAPTER SEVEN  
A Musical Community

In the Great Texts Department, we often use the phrase “great conversation,” referring to the discourse you enter into when you read a great book. You get to engage with the author as well as everyone else who has read it. This same kind of conversation happens in the world of music, and I think, perhaps to an even greater extent.

First there is the composer who gets inspired. The composer writes this down in musical notation and gives some directions regarding how it ought to be played. It is the performer’s responsibility to read and interpret the written music. But also, the performer is responsible for engaging with the music personally, and “make it theirs.” Finally, there is the audience who comes to listen. However, the audience is not by any means in a passive role.

Rodger Scruton, philosopher of aesthetics and politics, comments that the fullness of musical experience depends hugely on the listener. He says that the audience is responsible for “taking up a work of music in one’s own response to it” (Scruton 51). This phrase “taking up” is the phrase Scruton uses to describe a kind of musical sympathy. He says that when you listen to music “You are not merely noticing analogies between the movement of the music and some state of mind: you are entering into dialogue with it, fitting your own emotions to the rhythm that it conveys, as you might when experimenting with inter-personal sympathies, and coming to understand both self and the other more completely. You are in the hands of the music.”

To demonstrate what this musical community looks like, I want to tell a story of one of my favorite musical experiences. When I was 13 I attended a music festival in central Washington, and performed a piece called “Hullamzo Balaton” by a composer named Hubay. Hullamzo Balaton means “waves on the Balaton,” which is a lake in Hungary. After the performance an elderly woman came up to me and said “thank you so much for performing this piece. My husband passed away recently, and he grew up near Lake Balaton, and your playing just took me back to sitting on the shores of the lake. I felt like I was with him again.”

Now, I don’t know what Hubay’s inspiration was behind writing this piece, other than looking at the waves on this lake, but I’m fairly certain he was not grieving the loss of his lifelong spouse. I was a 13-year-old girl, my only connection with the piece being that I enjoyed the sound of it. Yet somehow I helped this woman reconnect with her lost husband. Hubay, myself, and this old woman were joined in a mysterious community through our very diverse experiences of this piece. That is the communal power that music has that transcends time, place, language, and personal experience.

When I began my thesis, I thought that what would really help people connect with music was if they were told in detail exactly what they were supposed to be hearing. Though it is good and helpful to understand the composer’s intent, that is not the end of what music can do. What is truly important is that those who participate in music, both performers and listeners, open themselves up to empathize with the music. This is not an academic requirement. One can know everything there is to know about a piece of music and still fail to connect with it. Listening is an act of trust and surrender, as you allow

yourself to participate in the art. That is why dancing is sometimes an appropriate response.

I will conclude by playing one of my favorite pieces, called Meditation from Thais. It is just beautifully written. It has moments of complete peace, moments of angst and agitation, and moments of redemption. As you listen, I invite you to let yourself be carried by the music, sympathizing with the story being told. In the words of Rodger Scruton, let yourself be “taken up.”

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## APPENDIX

Link to performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7wwiMTAD43o>