Virtue through Harmony: An Exploration of the Ethical Role of Music in Society

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Virtue through Harmony

An Exploration of the Ethical Role of Music in Society

by

Sylvan Tovar

Senior Thesis

Directed by Jesús Ilundáin-Agurrusa
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Framing the Issue

In these pages I am going to delve into the topic of music. Specifically, I am going to explore the morality of music in societies. This is the basic premise of this exploration: music can profoundly affect individuals and societies. Individuals use music to express themselves, their opinions, their worldview, their emotions, all channeled through the medium of sound. Societies use music to help give identity to their culture; for many, when they hear “What a Wonderful World,” the association with Louis Armstrong and New Orleans in the early 20th century follows closely behind. What this song says about Louis Armstrong when he performed it, even though he did not write it, bespeaks to who he was as a musician, as a performer, and as a person. However, it does not stop there, no, instead it goes beyond Louis Armstrong to represent Jazz as an American Art, the easing of racial tensions, and the values of the day. One song, reproduced repeatedly, both by musicians and records, spread across the country and touched the lives of millions of Americans across multiple generations. What is amazing is that this is not unheard of— in fact it is a universally accepted aspect of music, and musical expression.

Music has inspired people to take up arms for their country, or to revolt. It has gathered people of different backgrounds together under the banner of peace and of war. It has inspired people to march, it has driven them to yell, to scream, to dance, to pray, to kiss and hold, to break down and cry. Music can help people sleep, can affect their dreams, or it can keep them awake, help them be alert. With the right intention and inflection music can influence people in any number of ways. It is because of this the there exist national anthems, lullabies, wedding songs, hymns, and any other ceremonial tune for any reason; it is because music is influential, because music is powerful.
Given this influence and power, it then follows that there should be an ethical responsibility to people when making or listening to music. Is it wrong or right for a preacher to have a choir, or for a mother to sing to her child? How about torturing prisoners with offensive themes being played for days on end at uncomfortably high volumes? Where is the line between these extremes? These are the issues that I am delving into. What is the normative ethical role of music in society? How does one ethically participate in musical traditions? What does the opposite look like?

In this paper, I will attempt to define the relation of music to society. With that relation in mind, I will then explain the responsibility that follows from participating in a musical tradition; Music should be a morally enriching cultural experience.
What is Music?

For the purposes of discussing music in a meaningful way that does not get mired in a definitional battle unlikely to be won, I'm going to give a stipulative or working definition of music. Effectively, music is sound produced by people in a set time, involving rhythm and melody. Rhythm is a repeated pattern of sound, the temporary aspect of music, while melody is a sequence of musical notes. These notes, standardized pitches, in different combinations and sequences make up every song in the Western tradition of music. Music can be the sonic expression of an individual, or the combined conversation of multiple people. A musician is someone who actively participates in musical expression. There are many more facets to music, such as harmony, counterpoint, instrumentation, timbre, the list goes on. On ground level, though, music is intentional sounds made by voices or instruments with a melody and a rhythm. Music can be complex, with any number of people, using instruments or voices to make any number of sounds, contributing to a piece in any number of ways. Conversely, it can be one voice repeating a nursery rhyme to a sleeping child as softly as you please. It can be two people rhythmically hitting sticks together (even simple melodies can be melodies just the same). Music is a extremely open art form, potentially incorporating anything that makes a sound. People have found ways to within this vast medium to express all sorts of ideas and emotions, all in unique ways.

The experience of music is unique to every individual, and yet certain ideas and emotions impress themselves onto the listener. Similar to how language works, there are inflections and motifs that are understood intra-culturally; there are ways of playing that are understood to set a certain stage for understanding, such as "sad" or "upbeat" which are words often used to describe these motifs. Experienced musicians are often aware of how to play in a way that is seen as "sad" or
“happy,” etc., and can exploit this to change the meaning of a song. It is this “mood setting” that gives music such a deep impact on the human experience.

In songs that have words the different parts being played give significance and emphasis to the words, which conversely informs the listener about the meaning of the music. One can easily separate the words from the music, but because they are expressed simultaneously it would be a mistake to think of them separately. They are one and the same, a musical expression of self. One could be saying very happy sounding things with words, all the while playing a dirge behind it, which would shape even the happiest of words into something more different and more complex. And the opposite is also true: The happy words would inform the meaning of the dirge, and may alter how one might hear the music itself. This synthesis of tonal variation and words is part of what makes vocal music so powerful.

There are many ways that musicians manipulate the sound to express ideas and emotions. One way is instrumentation, which instruments the musician(s) use in a song. A piano playing the same thing as a cello is going to sound very different, even though the notes are the same, in the same order, at the same time; how one makes sound is basic to the construction of a musical statement. This is because of what musicians call timbre. Timbre is the way the instrument sounds, and varies widely among instruments, which is why there are so many different instruments; musicians have always sought new sounds with which to express themselves. Timbre can also vary widely within instruments. For example, the guitar is capable of a variety of timbres depending on how one plucks the strings, with what they pluck the strings, and the force with which one plucks the strings. And with the introduction of electronic effects, such as distortion or reverb, there is no limit to the different timbres electric guitar players can explore (except money, perhaps). Tempo is a pillar
of music that is the pace at which the musicians agree to play. It is important for music to have a tempo established because rhythm only makes sense within the context of tempo (which is open to change, but must still be established). It is easy to see how tempo is useful in the expression of ideas or emotions, because it mimics the human experience—a sad person might walk slowly, or an excited person might move quickly. It is through reinterpreting a human reaction to an emotion or idea through sound (which many emotions and ideas are communicated anyways) that musicians express themselves. Now that the issue of how music is made has been discussed, for it to have significance as an expression of the musician it must then be experienced by an audience.

So how is it that people experience music, as to be so influential that both Plato and Confucius would issue such caution? I postulate that music, in most known musical traditions, is primarily neither imitative nor representational, though some conceptual composers have explored the imitative. Which is to say, it neither imitates sounds found in nature to convey meaning and expression, and neither does it represent/stand for an idea, object, or emotion that is being expressed. Music draws upon the physical nature of sound, and the interpretive nature of subjects to convey meaning. Music “is perceived only within the field of perception as opened up by the subject-object dyad.” (Dufrenne, 251) This means that music imposes itself physically on the listener, who interprets it as music as it is perceived. The listener experiences the music objectively and subjectively concurrently; he will interpret the music based on his past understanding of the musical tradition from which this specific song has been written. For example, when John Cage debuted his controversial composition, entitled “4′33″ (read ‘four minutes, thirty-three seconds) in which the orchestra sat silently for four minutes and thirty-three seconds, his audience did not recognize it as music (and some still do not). Now, the music in this situation was intended to be everything that one
might hear in the background, so it was not total silence, merely not sound made by musicians. It was so far outside the experience of the audience that they did not know how to interpret what they heard, even as they heard it. Or, if they did, they failed to interpret it as music, as was intended. This illustrates my previous point of how people only understand music within the musical tradition that they have experienced. 4’33’ challenged the boundaries of the musical tradition to the point that it lost most of its audience. It is for this reason that music has often been compared to language, and for good reason. Mikel Dufrenne poignantly elucidates this common idea:

The cultural reality of the matter of sound is similar to that of language. It possesses the same consistency and cohesion. The writer calls on language, that is, on a system of words which, because they have meaning, are defined by each other and are brought together in a sentence. Since the words have their own sound structure, they attract or repel one another according to rigorous demands of signification. In the same way, the musician has to do with a codified system of sounds perpetuated by a long-standing and prestigious tradition, in which the varying possibilities of timbres are themselves determined by the technique of the instrument or, as in vocal polyphony, by as many vocal possibilities as the performers offer. (Defrenne, 251)

What this means, is that it is by understanding the social construction of a musical tradition that one can have more accurate interpretations of music, just as in language. This is what gives sounds a context, which is the necessary condition for any meaning. This context is what allows other musicians to understand and participate with the same music, or with themes brought up in music. It is what allows themes to be recognized in music. Most musicians experience music differently than they do language, but there certainly commonalities.

It is self-apparent that musicians perceive music differently than an audience member can perceive it, by virtue of being, in that moment, a musician. Therefore the context through which the musician understands the music he is making is inherently distinct from the context of ‘audience
member.' Music, being an intentional artistic endeavor, must be produced by a musician. To be a musician is to engage with a tradition of music by making music. Often that entails furthering and expanding the limits and boundaries of that tradition.

A musician will experience a variable range of phenomena while playing music, depending on innumerable factors, some of which include the music that is being played—Is it improvisational? Has it been rehearsed and memorized? Did the musician write this song, or was it written by someone else? What was it written for? And then who the musician is and where he's coming from can play a part—Is he the lead player/singer, or is he supporting the melody? Is he playing alone or in a group? What instrument is he playing? How familiar is he with the song, the group, the genre, or the audience? Is there an audience present, is he practicing, or is he recording? All of these factors and more contribute to the experience of making music before even a single note has been played. When the music starts, there's still a wide range of phenomena possible to the musician, but there are consistent patterns in the engaged and experienced musician: an active participation with the music, in which one is constantly adjusting himself, maintaining the proper time, playing the right notes. The musician is catering the sound to his purposes.

The way that musicians are able to manipulate the sound for their own goals is not a purely intellectual process, like the Western tradition of music theory would imply, but rather is also felt. This feeling is tempered through years of training and practice, familiarizing one's self with the making of music: The production of sound, the relationship of notes to each other, the rhythm and time. It is, however, a process of trial and error, of discovery, of forming a personal relationship to one's own art that informs the musician whether or not their music is connecting to their audience meaningfully. Once one has learned the 'language', then he can speak meaningfully.
The listener is involved in this process every step of the way, not as an individual, but as the archetype “one who listens.” It is the listener that distinguishes for themselves whether or not the music was enjoyable (or meaningful, impactful, or significant in any number of ways), which guides the musicians future musical endeavors. The relationship between musicians and listeners is what promotes musical innovation and development. If musicians choose to ignore the tastes of their listeners, expressing themselves in a way that does not connect to an audience (which usually involves straying far from contemporary musical ideas and trends), then the music they make will not be listened to and enfranchised by the culture. The music that the audience agrees is “good” will resonate with their experience, while hopefully bringing something new to their collective experience, and will promote the values of that culture and perpetuate musical traditions. On the other hand, if the musician relies solely on appealing to the tastes of his audience, he will lose the validity of his music as being any sort of self-expression. It will be an empty reiteration of cultural whims, and while it may be well received by the audience, it won't contribute to the progress of the culture or the musical tradition. A song that does not bring new material to the audience is already cliché, relying completely on the themes and motifs already present in the tradition. It is difficult to demonstrate a recognizable example of this because such music falls almost immediately into anonymity by nature of its vapidity.

It is through the symbiotic relationship of music and culture that both progress. Balancing innovation and self-expression with audience enfranchisement is what made great musicians great. The Beatles are a classic illustration of this idea: They changed rock 'n' roll by first participating in the rock and roll tradition while adding their own ideas and expression to it, which inspired others to do the same. The tradition was never the same afterward, and continues to evolve with new innovative
musicians, while still retaining themes and motifs that were introduced by the Beatles. When great musicians command great respect by listeners and musicians alike, often inspiring other musicians, furthering the cycle of innovation. This is the very reason that Plato saw music as important for education, while noting that innovation is dangerous in an ideal state; it is because musical innovation can shape culture, and hence values and ideas, without approval from the governance. Confucius, whose views are explained in the next section in more detail in connection with the issue of moral responsibility and the phenomenon of music, saw this as well, and for this reason he supported the mediated musical innovation of the people; this invests and involves the people in the culture and their values, validating their importance, because it comes from themselves. Confucius and Plato (also considered in the next section) both saw music as being an essential aspect of education, which is necessary to propriety and virtue.
The Issue of Music

The ethical role of music in society has been a long standing issue, with its roots in the writings of Plato and Confucius. Music, in the vein of art and poetry, has a universally recognized influence over people. This influence can only exist in people that participate in the musical traditions of the culture that these people comprise. Throughout this inquiry, I reference musical traditions as a way of talking about music more concisely. While 'music' is a term that can refer to any part of the process of writing music, practicing music, performing music, listening to music, or even the music itself, a musical tradition is the context in which all of these things are done. For an individual to participate in a musical tradition, it means that he listens to music in the culture of which he is a part. More than that, it is to be familiar with the way that music in that tradition is played, so that when this person listens to music, writes music, records music, or even just hears music, he knows what it is and how to interact with it. Musical traditions play a large role how we come to understand music.

To explore how musical traditions affect and are affected by culture, we are going to explore a variety of perspectives, starting with the Ancients, and how they framed the issue.

When the esteemed philosopher Plato banished the poets from his ideal state in the tenth book of The Republic, the reasons he cited applied also to painters, claiming that artists are "thrice removed from the king and from the truth." (Plato, page 271) They are three times removed because they imitate an object, which is a manifestation or copy of a form; art then is essentially the imitation of an imitation. Plato believed that the physical world is an imperfect reflection of a world of perfect forms, which is a more "real" world in so far as therein we find perfection and immutability. A form is the essence of an object, to use Plato's example, the "bedness" or essence of a bed that allows us to
identify two very different objects as both being beds. (Plato, 271)

To illustrate this further, when an artist paints a picture of a bed, he is not painting a bed. It remains in its whole, a picture of a bed. The bed that he paints is not the essential bed, but merely a physical representation of the form 'Bed.' His perception of the physical bed is then represented on a canvas. "Beds, then, are of three kinds, and there are three artists who superintend them: God, the maker of the bed, and the painter? Yes there are three of them.” (Plato, 270) God created the form, which was imitated by the maker of the bed, which was then imitated by the painter. Art is so far away from reality (the Essence of things) that it dilutes the truth and leads people astray. Worse than that, art is compelling; it influences people, not through reason, but instead through appeal to emotion, self-identification and fiction. Plato writes this about the poet:

“-Then the imitative poet who aims at being popular is not by nature made, nor is his art intended, to please or to affect the rational principle in the soul; but he will prefer the passionate and fitful temper, which is easily imitated? ...and therefore we shall be right in refusing to admit him into a well-ordered State, because he awakens and nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the reason. As in a city when the evil are permitted to have authority and the food are put out of the way, so in the soul of man, as we maintain, the imitative poet implants an evil constitution, for he indulges the irrational nature which has no discernment of greater and less, but thinks the same thing at one time great and at another small—he is a manufacturer of images and is very far removed from the truth.” (Plato, 279)

Plato recognized that the way people listen to and interpret music is different from that of the rational speaker or writer, and this is dangerous for maintaining any universal ethic. One does not argue in song or poem, but artistic innovation potentially reflects new or different values on various levels of subliminality. For Plato's Republic, this is unacceptable because for something to be considered good, it must contribute to society. Plato’s Republic is a dialogue where he repartees with various peers. The man that he speaks to in the tenth book is named Glaucon, and it is against him
that Plato discusses his ideas. For example, some of the questions that Plato poses to Glaucn raise
whether Homer, the great poet, has contributed to knowledge of medicine, politics, military tactics,
or education, given that he talks about these in his poems. He asks also “...is there any invention of
his, applicable to the arts or to human life, such as Thales the Milesian or Anacharsis the Scythian, and
other ingenious men have conceived, which is attributed to him?” (Plato, 273) To which Glaucn
responds, “There is absolutely nothing of the kind.” (Plato, 273) To Plato, music and poetry are
dangerous without being constructive.

This discussion, while being on painting and poetry, is also applicable to music because the
latter is so closely and conceptually tied to painting and poetry (with multiple examples of overlap).
The musician is also guilty as he “nourishes and strengthens the feelings and impairs the
reason.” (Plato, 279) He will express through melody, harmony, and rhythm his feelings and
perspectives; he does not appeal to reason, nor to logic. (Plato, 110) Plato attacks musicians a little
more directly in book IV of The Republic, when he claims that no musical innovations will be
permitted, and that the songs of the culture, being established as they are, shall remain static,
embalmed in the rational imperatives of the Republic.

“This is the point to which, above all, the attention of our rulers should be directed, —that music and gymnastic be preserved in their
original form, and no innovation made. They must do their utmost to maintain them intact. And when anyone says that mankind most regard
the newest song which the singers have, they will be afraid that he may be praising, not new songs, but a new kind of song; and this ought
not to be praised, or conceived to be the meaning of the poet; for any music innovation is full of danger to the whole State, and ought to be
prohibited ....when the modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the State always change with them.” (Plato, 109)

Plato writes about the power of music as something to be feared, something that is a vehicle
for change and growth, something that “imperceptibly penetrates into manners and customs”
thereby influencing people outside the sphere of pure rationality (Plato, 110). This is not to say that Plato was against the learning or playing of music; Plato instead thought that music was an essential part of education. What he condemned was musical innovation, inspiring a shift in culture. For Plato, the State should be ruled by philosophers, because “philosophers only are able to grasp the eternal and unchangeable...” (Plato, 165). Philosophers are able to more clearly and adeptly work through the problems of the state. If, however, the people can be easily influenced by such things as poetry and music, then that takes control away from those that should be in charge: the philosophers. This is why Plato advocates for education, and music as tool thereof, but rejects musical innovation.

Confucius also made note of the influence of music on people, but reached a different conclusion about its role in society.

For Confucius, similarly to Plato, music was an important aspect of education and moral development, but instead of prohibiting musical innovation and casting the poets out of society, he calls for a discerning audience. Thus, rather than casting off music he opts to embrace it—with some strictures, of course. He claims that music must be judged based on its form and content – meaning if it sounds nice, but praises war, then it is bad music. For Confucius, “Music functioned as a tool in moral education, for music was promoted to help in the teaching of the propriety that improves human relationships and raises society’s moral standard.” (Wong, 112) Confucius wrote in his Analects that, “If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with the rites of propriety? If a man be without the virtues proper to humanity, what has he to do with music?” (Confucius, 11) This illustrates how closely music is tied to virtue and propriety. Music is written by people, as an expression of their experience within their culture, meaning that a virtuous man will write music that reflects or integrates virtue and propriety. This is the music that Confucius is talking
about, the kind of music that teaches people to live virtuously. Virtue is something that I will discuss in more detail later on, but virtue is a way of being that is beneficial to people and communities. Some such virtues would be generosity and kindness, for instance.

For Confucius, the virtues and propriety are necessary for a harmonious society. Confucius' Analects are a guide to a harmonious society, which was the ideal for Confucius. He writes of six virtues that contribute to harmony, central to which are Jen, Yi, and Li. Jen is the virtue concerned with love, benevolence and compassion, about caring about people and things (Confucius, 74). Yi is primarily constituted by righteousness, justice, and fairness (Confucius, 16-21). Li is composed of rites and rituals, which hold a community together, and from which the community draws a shared identity (Confucius, 34). All of these are essential for a harmonious society. I am going to focus on Li, which encompasses musical traditions, to establish music as playing an essential role in Confucius' harmonious society. It is through Li, the rites and rituals in a society, that people gain knowledge of Jen and Yi. It is through the practice of music and other cultural rituals that one learns compassion and benevolence, justice and fairness. Without Li, a harmonious society would not be possible.

Confucius writes about the Odes, musical poems that teach about virtuous living, as being a necessary part of education. “If you do not learn the Odes, you will not be fit to converse with.” (Confucius, 105) The Odes are part of the Confucian tradition; they are approved songs that help people understand the teachings. When Confucius claims that one must learn the odes to be fit to converse with, he is saying that without knowledge of these songs a person will not understand necessary virtues, like respect or humility. The odes teach people how to be virtuous, and without them a person will not be fit to converse with. For Confucius, the content of music is very important. For songs to be good, they must appeal to the ear, and also to the virtues; the odes are a good
example of this. "The Master said, 'In the Book of Poetry are three hundred pieces, but the design of them all may be embraced in one sentence—"Having no depraved thoughts.'" (Confucius, 5) This quote shows both the importance of music and the arts, but also the strict limits placed on them. Confucius recognized the influential nature of the arts and encouraged a strict teaching of them.

Li, being primarily concerned with propriety, ceremonies, traditions, and rituals, is presented as a central virtue to a harmonious society. One could argue that musical traditions are therefore a good in themselves, as providing ritual and tradition to a community. This intrinsic good that music (and ceremony and tradition) provides is something of an interpersonal adhesive. It is in this way that Li compliments the virtues Jen and Yi: through the interpersonal enjoyment/participation in traditions like music, Li connects people and allows for righteousness and justice to be discussed. Confucius illustrates this by saying "The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment." (Confucius, 112) It is not by way of songs and rituals that these virtues are established, but rather how they are developed in people. This is clear in the instance of how, when children are very young, many of the songs sung to them are songs about love, like "hush little baby," in which a baby is reassured that his wants and needs will be taken care of. Later on, the alphabet is taught to children in song as a way of learning the letters and attaining literacy. Li is also expressed by way of people caring about traditions, about customs, and about music, and it is through music that love and compassion can be expressed culturally. "The Master said, 'It is by the Odes that the mind is aroused. It is by the rules of propriety that the character is established. It is from Music that the finish is received.'" (Confucius, 43) The rules of propriety, which are culturally accepted moral standards, are the rules by which a person should act. These are learned through the odes, and by which character
developed. It is through music and other such cultural rituals that people learn to live virtuously.

In addition to its role in education, people come together through the playing and enjoying of music; relationships are formed and strengthened, as well as people receiving personal enjoyment. Confucius, being a musician himself, recognized the benefit of playing and listening to music as an experience that is enjoyable as well. "Confucius said, 'There are three things men find enjoyment in which are advantageous.... To find enjoyment in the discriminating study of ceremonies and music;..." (Confucius, 105) Music is a joyous activity, through which people find enjoyment, which is good in itself, and yet through music's role in teaching propriety and the virtues it is advantageous, making it worthwhile on these two levels.

And yet, Confucius is very firm that the only good music is music that reinforces the virtues. Confucius condemns the music of Wu, while praising the music of Shao. "The Master said of the Shao that it was perfectly beautiful and also perfectly good. He said of the Wu that it was perfectly beautiful but not perfectly good."(Confucius, 16) This is because the music of Shao was excellent in both form and content; it was both beautiful and virtuous. The music of Wu was excellent in form, but not in content; it was beautiful, but it praised the ascension of Emperor Wu through war and conquest. (Wong, 111). Confucius took the stand that music could infuse values and ideas into the audience, thereby spreading confusion, devalue judgment, and even lower ethical standards (Wong, 111).

Plato addresses the experience of music in the context of education, which was the most important of the few viable uses of music in the Republic.

"Musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of the soul, on which they mightily fasten, imparting grace, and making the soul of him who is rightly educated graceful, or of him who is ill-educated
ungraceful; and also because he who has received this true education of the inner being will most shrewdly perceive omissions or faults in art and nature, and with a true taste, while he praises and rejoices over and receives into his soul the good, and becomes noble and good, he will justly blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he is able to know the reason why; and when reason comes he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar." (Plato, 89)

This excerpt is an eloquent description of the way that music influences people, and why, therefore, music should be used for the education of youth in the virtues and little else. There are a few other ways that Plato finds virtue in music, such as the preparation of soldiers for battle. “These two harmonies I ask you to leave; the strain of necessity and the strain of freedom,...the strain of courage, and the strain of temperance; these I say, leave.” (Plato, 86) Plato leaves room in his the Republic for only the kind of music that has utility, enforcing the agenda of the Republic; the music that gives a man courage to fight, and the music that teaches man humility and to yield to the Republic. All other music, that which expresses sorrow, lamentation, relaxation, are “utterly unbecoming the character of our guardians.” (Plato, 86) Confucius sees the nature and role of music similarly, for education in the virtues, but allows for a much wider experience of it.

Confucius writes, “The Master instructing the grand music-master of Lu said, 'How to play music may be known. At the commencement of the piece, all the parts should sound together. As it proceeds, they should be in harmony while severally distinct and owing without break, and thus on to the conclusion.'” (Confucius, 15) When Confucius instructs the grand music-master to reveal how to play music, it is an open invitation for people to learn and play music. It is because for Confucius, as I have already explored, music is how virtue and propriety are developed and understood. This does not mean that any music is to be played, but instead the music that teaches propriety and the virtues. For Confucius, enjoyment of music is an important part of the experience, which is why he
does not limit music to the expression of only a few emotions. "His heart is full who so beats the musical stone." (Confucius, 93) This is the power of music.

Plato and Confucius, while condemning and encouraging musical innovation and creativity respectively, both agree on the basic premise that music is powerful. Music is influential on people, which is why it must be treated with care. Whether cultivated or prohibited, any society in which music is played, and as far as we know all societies make music of some kind, must be aware that music teaches values and communicates ideas. It is with this in mind that I am going to lay out a societal ethic in relation to music.
Applying the Ethical Principles

Now we come to take a closer look at music, something that plays such a large role in the construction of culture. It is something by which people form their identity. It is influenced by the culture in which it arises and grows as new meaning is given to it. Given such a influential role in society, how, then, should one ethically participate in a musical tradition? To answer this question, I am going to base my argument on the principles of Virtue Ethics.

Virtue Ethics tries to answer the ancient question “how should one live?” with a set of positive and negative ways of being: virtues and vices. This differs from other ethical theories in that its focus is on the person, and how he or she should conduct themselves, rather than on actions and their outcomes (Hursthouse, 2013). It is a principle that places value on who a person is over what they do. While I would prefer to avoid an ontological tangent, I believe it is important that this is where we begin because while the distinction between what one does and how he acts is subtle, it is instrumental to understanding virtue ethics. Simply put, one can do good things without embodying the virtues. At the same time, one can live virtuously and still make mistakes. Practicing the virtues set up people to live ethically by making virtuous behavior habitual.

If one lives virtuously, then he is relying on his own judgment and the habits of virtuous living that he has formed. Jean-Paul Sartre takes the stand that each person is free to choose, and that this is what literally defines a person: an embodied consciousness. And since it is this freedom to choose that defines a human being, each person is therefore defined by his choices. If he chooses to live virtuously, then he is a virtuous person. However, Sartre also makes the claim that each person decides for him or herself what is right based on previous choices and the situation that he or she is in.
as a historical being. He must choose what actions to take in the face of any situation.

"The only way to determine the value of...affection is, precisely, to perform an act which confirms and defines it. But, since I require this affection to justify my act, I find myself caught in a vicious cycle... the feeling is formed by the acts one performs; so, I cannot refer to it in order to act upon it. Which means that I can neither seek within myself the true condition which will impel me to act, nor apply to a system of ethics for concepts which will permit me to act." (Sartre, 298)

What Sartre is saying is that there are so many facets to any decision that no ethical system (Virtue Ethics, Deontology, Utilitarianism, etc.) will tell a person exactly what to do, that this person must choose in relation to that of which he is aware. What Virtue ethics will do is give this person a set of priorities that will benefit him and the community in which he lives. While, the virtues don't tell a person what exactly is the right action to take, it instead guides a person to choosing what is best based on socially cohesive values. In Sartre's ontology, practicing the virtues would be to choose ahead of time what priorities one values, so that when he is confronted with choice he has already developed the habits and frame of mind to inform his decision. It develops an awareness of people and systems outside one's self that he would then have to choose in relation to. With this in mind, it follows that the focus of Virtue theory, how one should act, should be the basis of a societal ethic, such as this is.

The aim of Virtue Ethics is to guide people into being good people, because good people make good decisions. What "good" is in this respect, we can refer to Aristotle, who started by saying that what is good is what is good for you (Kraut, 2012). He goes on to set out some loose definitions for what "good for you" means, including the "good to have friends, to experience pleasure, to be healthy, to be honored, and to have such virtues as courage at least to some degree." (Kraut, 2012) The virtues are indicators of these goods, to which people should strive for the betterment of
themselves and society. Furthermore, the virtues are good in themselves, and so there is no necessary justification beyond this to practice the virtues.

Music can be used for a wide variety of purposes—conveying ideas, setting moods, getting people excited, calming them down, social cohesion or distortion, the list goes on. It is because of this that any and all of the virtues are potentially present when engaging in a musical tradition. As I will argue in more detail later on, not only are the virtues present in the musical tradition, rather they are developed by means of striving for excellence in music (and other practices) (MacIntyre, 187). How then, does one practice the virtues while participating in a musical tradition?

My argument is built on the ethical premise that the value of music is relative to its ideal role in society. This ideal role is multifaceted, and I will describe it in three parts.

1. Music should connect to its audience and provide a space for people to connect to each other; music should sound good and be enjoyed.

2. Music should reflect the positive values of a society (not the government’s goals, per se, but the values of the people), while avoiding negative and/or harmful messages.

3. Music should be exposed to the audience in ways that are welcome and culturally appropriate.

Taking these one at a time helps to illuminate the claim that I making.

1. Music should connect to its audience and provide a space for people to connect to each other; music should sound good and be enjoyed.

When I say that music should connect to its audience, I am talking about the very attribute that allows music to be influential and powerful. People need to be able to understand it. Music should be new and innovative (and will be as long as musicians are creating music), but not so much
that it loses connection with the musical tradition in which it originates, otherwise it won’t make sense to the audience. The audience must be able to connect to the music for it to retain cultural significance. And for music, being a shared cultural experience, there is little significance outside of cultural significance.

To provide a space for people to connect to each other is an extension of this idea. Through mutual connection to the music, audience members will share the experience of listening to that music. They might not experience it in the same way (in fact, they probably won’t), but the perception of connecting to the same phenomenal experience creates a connection among the audience members.

This point, on the surface, seems to pertain only to the responsibility of the musicians that write music, when in fact it extends beyond the writing of music into the context of performance. It extends to the group of traveling students that sing together in the bus, to the performer who arranges old folk tunes with electric instruments, or the high school graduation ceremony where songs are played to celebrate the exit of robed teenagers. What is the purpose of singing, playing, or playing a recorded track that does not connect to the audience, that does not make sense within that context, that lacks cultural significance?

Now, one might say that music, and most art forms, are about expressing themselves instead of communicating or connecting with an audience; that self-expression is more important than cultural significance. However, when one takes a closer look at self-expression and what that means, it will become apparent that self-expression only exists within a cultural context. Why does one perform if his goal is not to be appreciated? If his goal is irony, he is still reacting to the socially constructed venue for expressing one’s self. Without the audience, to whom is this musician
expressing himself to? Music is an expression of one's self, and by extension one's culture, to his
culture.

I can rely on my personal experience for an illustration of this point; the importance of the
musician connecting to his audience. A friend of mine knew that I was a musician and was interested
in music, and so he shared with me some folk songs from Tibet, where he grew up. My first instinct
was to try to understand it, but without any background in Asian music (much less Tibetan folk songs)
I could not make any sense of what I heard. It did not fit into any musical tradition that I am a part of,
and so I could not grasp the meaning of any part of the song. At last I gave up and listened to how
beautiful it sounded. What I knew was that it had significance for my friend, that it meant something
to a different culture and a different musical tradition, and that I liked how it sounded. However,
even in this example, it is being presented to me as music that is different from what I am used to
playing. In this context, it made sense to listen to it, and through it I felt more connected to my
friend.

2. Music should reflect the positive values of a society (not the government's goals, per se, but
the values of the people), while avoiding negative and/or harmful messages.

This point is about the moral significance of music. When I say "positive values," this entails
values that contribute to a healthy and well-functioning society. In other words, music should reflect
the virtues. "Negative values" are values that are harmful to individuals or society; these are known
as vices in Virtue Ethics. Since virtue is good in itself, it should be practiced within and without music.
By definition, vice should be avoided in individuals and society. These are the fundamental tenets of
Virtue Ethics, by which people should act. Music and the arts are not exempt from this; in fact,
because of the first facet of music's role, it is more important for music to reflect the virtues. This is the role that Confucius perceives music to play; Music should be virtuous because it opens the mind to the rules of propriety. If music glorifies vice, it fails to serve society by educating people in the rules of propriety. Music that connects to its audience, and by which people connect to each other is influential, and colors that connection with its message.

The virtuousness of music is a responsibility that carries beyond the writers of music, though those that write the melodies, harmonies, and words carry an added responsibility. The context in which music is manifest also informs its meaning. For example, when a hymn that glorifies love and faith is sung at a meeting of the Klu Klux Klan, the meaning is reinterpreted to justify hatred and bigotry. It is in this way that songs written virtuously can fall into vice when played in that context.

It is important to note that the act of performing music in itself reflects the virtues of creativity, hard work, dedication to a task, perseverance, and cooperation. The way that music can be written or used can run counter to the virtues, as I just showed, and these instances should be avoided, but the practice of music is itself virtuous. The process of honing your skills at a craft, whether it be music or carpentry necessarily entails virtue. This virtue is that which is inherent to the development of practices, an idea that I will develop later. It is in this way that music is good in itself, as a constant proponent of the virtues.

3. Music should be exposed to the audience in ways that are welcome and culturally appropriate.

And lastly, this third point about the role of music concerns itself with context, that which is not always in control of the musician. This is the point at which responsibility is focused on the way
music is presented to people. There are innumerable situations in which music can be exposed to people (or imposed, as the case may be) and not all of them are appropriate.

For music to be considered welcome, the audience must be willing to listen. This is not to say that someone should not surprise another person with music, but that if that person does not want to listen, then that action is no longer welcome, and no longer virtuous. It is, at the very least, disrespectful, if not malicious, depending on the situation. If music is unwelcome to an audience, music becomes an imposition, at which point it loses its value as music in that situation. For example, if classical music were played at a rave, the classical music, which has significant cultural value in another context, would not be welcome by the people that were there to dance to a different kind of music. The classical music would defy their expectations of the situation and would be unwelcome, therefore losing its value, in that context.

It is also true that the culturally appropriateness of music has much to do with the situation and the audience. If a song, or kind of music is not appropriate to a situation, it does not make that song bad, and yet the situation deteriorates and music becomes an imposition. For instance, if a punk-rock band began to play in a church, the music itself could be virtuous and formally well-performed, and yet is not the right time for that music to be played. There could even be members of the church that enjoy the song, but since it is not right for the situation it becomes a distraction and imposition. Music being culturally appropriate is contingent on three things: Song, setting, and purpose.

The “Song,” as I speak of it in this context does not actually need to be an established song, I merely refer to the music being played at that time. The setting is the situation in which the song is being played, while the purpose is the reason for that music being played at that time in that place.
These three features of a situation clearly are interconnected, coming together to create that musical experience, placing responsibility for creating that experience with the person (or persons) that control the music. To clarify this point I'd like to set up a classroom setting. There are students sitting in front of a teacher, listening attentively to their lesson. There are a number of ways that music can be introduced to this situation. The teacher could play a song from the stereo that exemplifies a point in the lesson (such as culture or language), which is a constructive and valuable use of music in that setting. However, if a student were to sneak into the principal's office and play a hip-hop song over the intercom, then that classroom would be disrupted and the goals of that lesson would be undermined. The song may even be welcome by the other students, but it remains that it would be an inappropriate use of music.

So it is with these three facets that we can understand the ideal role of music in society. Within this paradigm, music is never fixed as being inherently good or bad—it changes with the culture and the context or situation. A musician can write a beautiful song about love and forgiveness, fulfilling the first two aspects of good music, but if it is used to oppress or humiliate a person or group of people then value is detracted from it. Because music is a historical cultural experience, the meanings of songs are not fixed and can change based on for what it is used. Meanings attributed to songs are not replaced, but are instead augmented by new meanings.

I will illustrate this point with a number of examples. When a disc-jockey plays a song at a dance party, he is enriching the song's cultural significance by using it joyfully, to perpetuate traditions and social engagement and good times. If he then puts on a commercial with music behind it, he is instead cheapening the experience by asserting a personal agenda onto that social engagement, which is more than off-putting (which it is), but manipulative and disrespectful. The
music that is being played with the commercial is now put into a context of intrusion, at which point that new meaning won't dissipate to the people involved. The song cannot be removed from the way in which it was presented; using this song inappropriately and when it is unwelcome makes it less valuable to experience.

When music is used in restaurants to create ambiance it enriches the dining experience, especially with a live band. When music is used in churches to express faith and joy, to join together the churchgoers in a unified musical and religious experience it is wonderful use of music. When music is used in movies to add emotional weight to the characters and scenes it is art complimenting art and both art forms are augmented by the relationship. These are all ways of using music that is welcome by the audience and culturally appropriate. However, if the music chosen in each of these scenarios is unpleasant to listen to or participate in, that factors into the value of that music. If the music is promoting negative values in any of these situations, such as bigotry or violence, it likewise decreases the value of the music. Since its value is determined by both its enjoyment and its virtue, then those that have a level of control over it have an equal level of responsibility for it.

Another example however is when music is used to divide and exclude, like it is in some social groups. In this role, music serves to limit the potential of both the music and the social group to connect with society as a whole. An example of this is the fans of the band, Insane Clown Possey, a band that uses vulgar and violent language and themes, while dressed as demented clowns. The fans are known for their in-group name, Juggalos, and their violent and brutal behavior. Through identification with this band and an adoption of a violent identity, they intentionally alienate themselves from society. It is in this way that music's capacity for identification and group unity can be a double-edged sword. If a person rejects a certain band, or genre of music based on the people
who listen to it, the music's meaning becomes fixed (at least in the mind of this person), and is reduced to meaning those who listen to that band/genre. This meaning that has been given to that music reinforces the negative values of exclusion and discrimination. This identification of self through music is a way in which music is used irresponsibly. Next, I will look at some ways in which music can be used against other people.

An extreme example of an unethical use of music is the US prison in Guantanamo Bay, which has used culturally insensitive songs (either the words or the style) to process and torture its inmates. These songs are played at extremely high volumes and repeated for many hours, and sometimes days while those subjected to it begin to lose grasp of their sanity. This is a clearly unethical action on the part of government towards individuals held in their power. It is reprehensible and repulsive, but is also an injustice towards the songs and the musicians who wrote those songs and the musical traditions in which those songs came to be written. Songs like “Born in the USA” by Bruce Springsteen, songs by heavy metal bands such as Metallica and AC/DC, and even the theme song to children’s show, Barney have been used in this way. This is neither culturally appropriate, nor welcome by the audience, and is lacking in virtue. Furthermore, this music will for ever have been used for torture, which will contribute to its legacy, regardless of the culturally enriching presence they have been throughout the late 20th century. The Barney theme song, which has for years been one of love and acceptance, touching the hearts of young children throughout America, now carries torture on the list of ways that it has impacted this culture. One might say that in this instance, the issue of torture supersedes the musical issue. I do agree with this stance, and am merely using it as an example of a clearly wrong use of music to illustrate my points.

Something I am keen on stressing and arguing against is increased censorship. The only way
that music can play its ideal role is if music is allowed to express the values and opinions of the people making the music. Any censorship would pragmatically have to come from a governing body, whose values and priorities might differ from the positive values of society. It is of the utmost importance that musicians be allowed to express themselves. Hence I am calling for accountability by all involved with the music they are producing or using, and by extension, accountability to society. In other words this could be described as a form of self-censorship, if you will. When I write a song, I should consider what it is I am saying in that song, explicitly and implicitly, to ensure that I am not reinforcing negative values, and am expressing myself virtuously. When I perform that song, I should do so in a place and time that it will be welcome and culturally appropriate. If someone later gets a recording of that song, he should use it in a way that enriches the cultural value of the song by playing for an appropriate audience, at an appropriate time (probably at a reasonable volume as well). And if I come across music that lacks virtue, then I should avoid it; by listening to such music, I am implicitly affirming its value to myself, and therefore, to society.

The distinction in the responsibilities of those who listen to music and those who make music are apparent, but that distinction can, at times, be somewhat ambiguous. In certain situations, music makers can step into the role of the music listener. This is clearly the case every time a musician attends the performance of another musician. Recently, Western society has progressed technologically to the point that it is commonplace for music listeners to step into the role of music maker and make decisions about the music being played. For example, a person putting together a playlist on the internet to play automatically at a party, or a student doing so to play music on his computer while he’s working on a paper.

With the advent of recorded music, more people than ever before have the ability to influence
others with the music to which they have access. Historically, to influence others with the music that you play, for any reason, requires years of dedication towards the art of playing music, or the resources necessary to commission a musician to play for you. Musicians have a deep and special relationship to the music that they make, and understand through extensive experience the effects that their music can have on other people. Furthermore, however musicians influence others, it is through personal self-expression; a connection to the music they are playing because it comes from within themselves. This makes them accountable by the music and to the music. It becomes a different kind of crime to harm someone with music that you play, because it is personal and intimate, than one that merely pushes play on a recording. The person who uses recorded music to manipulate or harm does so without that connection to the music they are playing, hence they feel free of responsibility – they lack that connection to their audience. Of course, there are those that spend years of their time and selves to become intimate with recorded music through mixing and sound engineering, but this still requires putting one’s self into the musical experience. It is most dangerous when the person that controls the music feels separate from it because they are, possibly, not as familiar with the influence music can have, and the music that they control does not represent them as creative artists.

Virtues, those values that are necessary for social cohesion, are developed through the responsible practice of and participation in musical traditions. It is this responsible practice that is crucial because without it music can educate people in such ideas as violence, disrespect, and other destructive values. This is the warning of Confucius and Plato, now the duty of society today. The relationship between music and society is complex. The next and final section will consider this in more detail.
The Social Construction of Music

It is clear that music is very influential in how it is experienced by individuals, and whole societies. What is it about music that makes it so influential? To begin, and as the first section argued, it is the unique formal aspects of music that allow music to easily impose itself on a situation. Music is an auditory art form, meaning that it can engage people actively or passively, affecting people non-consensually, or even subliminally. When music is played in a room full of people, every person is affected in one way or another by the music being played, even if they don't experience a deep connection to the song itself. For example, at a high-energy social gathering (a party, if you will), the host might play a fast tempo, rhythmic music to which people can dance. For the same reason, a happy couple might hire a string quartet to play their favorite songs slowly and expressively to get people in the mood for a happy, yet calm event.
This influence is recognized and implemented often in advertisements and in businesses. There are companies whose product is mood music: an entire genre of sounds produced to manipulate people's demeanor. It's called 'muzak,' after the company that originally commodified mood music. This is because music can influence the way that a situation is presented to a person, it enframes the situation by implementing cliché motifs that signify an expression of a general and basic emotion.

This kind of subtle influence is not foreign to other forms of art. Visual art, for example, is well aware of the influence of color and lines on mood and social interaction. People are often aware of this when deciding on a venue for a social event or activity. And similar to muzak, popular media, advertising, and the industry makes of iconic works but "visual bytes" that, replicated, inundate the visual space. However, while visual art is often something of a static fixture, music is a constantly moving, ever flowing experience with a beginning and an end. Sound can be amplified to the point of interference, which makes it much easier and more intentional to impose music on large audiences.

At the same time, music is something that is engaged actively, though the level of active engagement can vary. Again, one can engage with music only so far as he has experience with the musical tradition, but that is when he is listening and engaging actively. Music is often implemented as background music for the reason that it can be engaged with passively: it is nice to have on without listening to it. It is a common experience to have music playing while one is alternately occupied, and only noticing it when the music is turned off. Music is easy to listen to, and easy to ignore (if the volume isn't so high that it is truly an imposition), but it still has an effect on the way a person perceives the situation he is in. This is why Muzak exists.

Music, as I have mentioned before, is a temporary experience. Time is an essential aspect of
music – rhythm and tempo are necessary for sound to be considered music. But beyond that, the very nature of sound is that it is vibration, which is movement; and so music has the implicit attribute of impermanence. Music, as it has historically been understood, is a performance art. Musicians arrive at a venue and perform their prepared set, each song beginning and ending, and eventually the musicians are done. This is still true when a father brings out his old six-string and plays for the family; it always constitutes a performance on the part of the artist. This was almost universally true until the advent of recorded music. This changed the nature of music for the artist and the listener.

I consider that the split of music took place in two interconnected tracks—live music and recorded music. The distinction is quite self-explanatory: 1. Live music is any music that is created on the spot by a musician/musicians. 2. Recorded music was recorded at one time and is unchanging in its reproduction. This is a loose definition because music as an art form is changing and growing in many ways, one of which being the ability to alter recorded music in various ways, often at performances. Other times, parts of a recorded track can be synthesized into a new record. Most recorded music, however remains unchanged, and these exceptions do not change my argument significantly. Recorded music, while retaining the essential aspects of music, differs from live music in many ways, that I consider both positive and negative. Recorded music is not a performance in and of itself, it becomes instead an exhibition or a display. Music loses a level of authenticity and connection (the artist to the audience) when it is captured and entrenched into homogeneity. It is my experience as a musician that music is most authentic when it is being performed – it is a reflection of that musician playing that song to that audience, with all the intentionality of expression and performance. Each performance is going to be slightly different because the musician will experience the song differently each time he plays it, which directly affects what is being expressed. When a
song is recorded and homogenized, it creates a standard for that piece. Every subsequent performance will be compared to that recording, with how it is “supposed to sound.” This is not the nature of music, and it can create a barrier of expectations between what the audience hears and what they expect to hear.

The ability to replay on a machine a song repeatedly cheapens the experience, making it less special. Take a person who buys a new song and likes it so much that he listens to it over and over. It doesn't take too long before that song, which he enjoyed so much, becomes boring. It may not become meaningless (that varies individually), but the connection that this person made to that song eventually decreases with repetition. The same thing also happens with live music, for example when a person hears a musician practicing the same song repeatedly. However it is a rare experience, and one not often meant to make a connection (like the practicing musician). On the other hand recording music made popular songs available to a much wider range of people, allowing larger groups to participate in culturally significant experiences. For example, people who never got to see the Beatles live still got to participate in “Beatlemania,” and children could connect to their parents by listening to music that it would be impossible to otherwise share. In addition to this, recording music allows people to become familiar with a musician's songs before a performance, paving the way for the musician to connect to his audience. This only becomes a problem when the audience expects the performance to exactly mimic the recording. Recorded music still retains the power to move people and to connect to them in very deep and meaningful ways. Live music, I would argue, is more meaningful as art, and as an expression of the artist. When music is a performance, it is a human experience where a person is making music right there, right then. He cannot play it the precise same way that he recorded the same song, because he is going into a performance with a different
disposition than he would a recording studio, or even another performance. He is going to respond to the energy of the audience with his own energy, adding emphasis to different notes or words than he might have in a separate performance. The musician can improvise, he can react, or influence the audience intentionally, authenticating the experience as a connection between the musician(s) and the audience. This interaction between musician and audience can be a deeply intimate one, but is always set within the boundaries and context of culture.

Before I get any deeper into an analysis of music within culture, I think it will be valuable to lay out a working definition for culture. “Culture can be generally defined as an interrelated set of values, tools, and practices that is shared among a group of people who possess a common social identity. More simply, culture is the sum total of our worldviews or of our ways of living.” (Halloran, 210)

Within these parameters, we can think of culture as an interdependent web of relationships, contemporary and historical, that contextualize practices and traditions. For example, the way a person might dress in Portland, Oregon, is an expression of that person’s idea of how one should visually present herself in that time and place. That idea is constructed by the way that people around her have chosen to present themselves in similar contexts, which she uses as a basis for constructing her own visual presentation. It is through these relationships that norms are established, which can then be recognized and deviated from in a constantly growing cycle of human interaction. This is the same way that music has continued to grow and evolve within and between cultures – through the evolution of cultures.

Music has been an integral part of cultures from all around the world for longer than the written language, varying in ways beyond the contemporary scope of knowledge. Music is an expression of culture – of individuals in a time and a place and their inspiration from the people
around them and the musical tradition that came before them. Music is an aspect of culture that nearly everyone participates in and from which they draw identity. The audience informs the musician just as the musician moves the audience, quite often in physical ways, i.e., dance. Music is used for many different things within cultures, being capable of expressing various factions of that culture, including distinctions of class, race, or ethnic heritage to name a few. In some cases it can be misused, as we saw with the case of Guantanamo. But music can also, and should play enriching roles in the proper contexts. Music is an essential part of many ceremonies throughout the world, whether they be religiously affiliated, or secularly affiliated; music can create an atmosphere of spirituality or of awe, increasing the significance of traditions within cultures. This is evident in even American culture, with such ceremonial standards as “Here Comes the Bride,” “Happy Birthday,” or “The Star-Spangled Banner.” These are songs that have a specific cultural significance, and make sense to sing only at specific times for specific reasons. To play any of these songs out of their determined context, or in a different way (or both), would jar American sensibilities. This is exactly what Jimi Hendrix did at Woodstock in 1969 when he played the national anthem at the historically infamous music festival. The way that he played the tune was so distorted that by the end of the song, it was hardly recognizable as the same tune. Many considered it offensive, and it was interpreted later (possibly then as well) as a musical critique of America’s military involvement in Vietnam. However, for many cultures throughout history, sacred music is not distinguished from the secular; all music is sacred. This adds a layer of ceremony and significance to all occasions.

Across the world, music has been a way to bring people together and to celebrate cultural identity in a shared musical experience. It is because of this that when one faction seeks to oppress another, they often ban certain culturally specific instruments or musical themes to prevent the
continuation of cultural traditions, often replacing these with the songs and styles of the oppressor. To give an example from American history, after the Native tribes were forced off their land many were relocated in reservations. The children from these tribes were made to attend a boarding school in which they were “civilized.” This involved being forbidden to speak their native language (another informer of culture), dress like their parents, or dance. What they were permitted to sing, in fact made to sing, was western music; hymns and the like. It is in this way and others that music can be pernicious, used as a tool of domination and suppression.

Because music evolves within cultures and because people form an identity concurrently with the music, it is not surprising that tensions sometimes rise when music spreads cross culturally. People feel so much apart of the music by growing up in a culture with that music that when people foreign to them begin to play “their” music there is sometimes resentment and accusations of cultural inauthenticity. By authentic I mean true to its nature, which is for something to be what it is (or meant to be) despite external pressures. In this instance, cultural inauthenticity would be for a person to play music that is not true to the culture of which is a part. However, most claims of inauthenticity have been coupled with economic enfranchisement of the “other” group. It seems that resentment at the spread of cultural music tends to stem from the fact that someone outside the culture that produced the genre is making money by playing this music instead of the more “authentic” musicians.

On the other hand, learning to play the music indigenous to a people is also a way to bridge the gap between cultures. It is because of this that music has been called the “universal language.” Through the mixing of musical traditions musicians have been able to transcend racial and cultural boundaries. This is exemplified famously by the history of Jazz in the United States. When jazz music,
which was the legacy and language of a slave culture, became popular among the ruling white race it was appropriated, and white musicians began playing jazz for white audiences. However, white musicians would, after their gigs with their white audiences, go play at black venues with black musicians. Respect and relative egalitarianism was found on a keyboard, the neck of a double bass, and the keys of a saxophone. The first time in America that white musicians and black musicians played together was at a jazz concert, and such combos as Frank Sinatra and Count Basie were wildly popular and helped elevate the status of an oppressed people. Where they being inauthentic?

So whom does music belong to after it is produced? If music is the expression of an individual in a time and a place, then it follows that it belongs to that person. However, once music is expressed to an audience their reception of it adds layers of meaning to the song. Songs can grow and change in how people listen to it, just as the musician is growing and changing past that moment that he recorded a song. Often the music and the musician grow apart, to the point that some musicians no longer feel any ownership over a song after a number of years; the ownership is instead felt by those that connect to it through listening. People form sentimental attachments to songs, a process that adds layers of meaning to the song that perhaps didn't exist in the original conception of the song. This happens to every song that is enjoyed by audiences and made culturally significant, sometimes going so far as to come to represent something completely different than originally intended.

Therefore the music belongs to both the musician and the audience. If the music does belong to both the musician and the audience then both parties have a responsibility to it, to influence the impact of the music in ways that bring people together, rather than to separate them. People have a responsibility to each other when they use a song or even a music genre to enrich the experience of the people involved - not to manipulate, oppress, or cause harm. These responsibilities already exist.
in society as virtues, but music has the added duty to the music itself, as an aspect of culture to keep its meaning consistent with the virtues.

However, perhaps a better way to talk about music is, instead of in terms of ownership, in terms of cultural capital. Chet Bowers talks about this when making his case for a revitalization of the cultural commons. In essence, the things that make up culture, language, music, religion, history, are all part of what he calls the “cultural commons.” These things are identifiers of the culture and are passed down through generations by communities within cultures. (Bowers, 197) As he puts it, “Within different communities the cultural commons include activities, knowledge, skills, and patterns of mutual support that do not rely on a monetized economy.” (Bowers, 196) These things exist in all cultures and are necessary for the culture to sustain intergenerationally. An example in the instance of music in Western culture, children and adults mostly know the same Christmas carols, and sing them together in celebration of the season. This has been partially commodified by a culture of consumption, and yet it is not necessarily so, and quite often is an extra-economic expression of traditions and cultural history. Another example would be sports songs, sung at matches and at bars in the glory of a specific team for the purpose of expressing support and participating in the cultural experience of sporting events. This remains a relatively pure musical expression of support, while many styles and types of music have been commodified and incorporated into the economic system.

So what does this mean for our ethical responsibility regarding music when so much has been commodified and sold to us? Does this make the value of music decrease? I think that's a hard question to answer, and is in many cases situationally dependent. I think that generally, the content of music remains an expression of culture, and that commodification has served to both spread music to a wider audience and reframe it in terms of individual achievement (though that had already
happened among the intellectual elite). What's important to remember is that no song is written without a context, and that it can only make sense within that context — within the growing musical tradition in which it was created. Therefore, while individuals can excel in their skills at conveying emotions and ideas through music, they are expressing the culture that they participate in. In this way it becomes clear that music is a shared cultural experience, involving all participants as either musicians, audience, or both.

To further elucidate, Alasdair MacIntyre wrote about the development of practices within societies, claiming that through these practices provide a space for the development and exhibition of virtues — that through participation and excellence in practices, the core concept of virtues are established. (MacIntyre, 187) His definition of 'a practice' is very specific, however, entailing

"...any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." (MacIntyre, 187)

Within this definition, doing a skit at a campfire is not a practice, but acting is. While doing a skit at a campfire is fun and challenging and develops skills, it is not a practice in this sense because there is no standard of excellence to strive towards and achieve, therefore the goods internal to skit performing are not necessarily realized. Whereas acting, alternately, requires the rigorous development of skills to achieve excellence. Once excellence has been attained, the goods inherent to acting are "systematically extended." (MacIntyre, 187) In this way, practices can entail many things: "arts, sciences, games, politics in the Aristotelian sense, the making and sustaining of family life, all fall under the concept." (MacIntyre, 188)
What is important about these practices is not just the products of them, the external goods as Macintyre would call them: "fame, wealth, social status, even a measure of power and influence at courts upon occasion." (Macintyre, 189) but instead the internal goods that are developed in individuals and societies by means of commitment to a goal and dedication to excellence, or progressing their practice historically. "Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice." (Macintyre, 190-191) The goods internal to an activity to music is the experience of listening to or making music. It is enjoyable, and enjoyable in a way that is unique to music. It is not just that practices serve society, but that society is literally made up of practices. The role of the practice in society is an expression of Li, the virtue through which we learn virtue.

Music is a virtuous activity, through which virtues are learned and expressed. It is when people use music to broadcast ideas or behavior that display or condone vice, or present music in such ways that music can be unethical. And because music is a tool of education as well as enjoyment, it is all the more unethical. The responsibility to music is one to society and one's self.

**Conclusion**

In review, I identified music in its formal aspects, and how it is experienced, then looked at Plato's warning and Confucius' guideline for virtue and used their discussion as a base from which to build my argument about the ethical role of music in society. I then built this role through the application of virtue ethics. Finally, I discussed music in culture. Through this I have shown that music is an important part of society, and that it should reflect the virtues, both in how it is made and how it is used.

Music is a daily occurrence for many people throughout the world, especially in Western
societies. Whether people are listening to their headphones on the bus, attending a concert, eating at a nice restaurant or playing along with their friends, people have special relationships to the music they listen to. I argue for the accountability of those who take music into their hands and play it so that the musical traditions that we engage in can help shape a more harmonious society. Music is for enjoyment, but the role that it plays in culture is precarious, as noted by both Plato and Confucius. Those who participate in the tradition should recognize the role that they play: whether they write music, perform it, or have it played, they are making an ethical choice. Music should be good.
Works Cited


