

## *Transcultural Aspects of Music:*

# What Did Confucius Say?

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***“All sound comes from within man’s heart.”***

—Yueh Chi 37:3

Over the past quarter of a century, many music teachers in America have had occasion to notice and praise the accomplishments of a significant number of Asian and Asian-American students, who are often children of recent immigrants.

What accounts for the enthusiastic quality of “Eastern” participation in Western classical music, which seems to treat harmony and rhythm so differently from traditional Asian music? Private music studios in America have integrated Caucasian and Asian children over many years. Particularly on the West Coast, college music programs often recruit Asian-American music majors to fulfill enrollment projections. It is time for music educators in the United States to ponder the common threads running between Western and Eastern music traditions, as well as learning to appreciate how Asian value systems have encouraged cultural affinities with Western classical music.

Howard Gardner, Harvard University professor of education and MacArthur Fellow, has commented on the remarkable commitment to arts education in the People’s Republic of China:

*The importance attributed to the arts in China reminds me of the emphasis conferred upon sports in this country.... There is also a widely shared feeling that arts education will aid children in becoming good citizens and perhaps even in competing successfully for educational and professional rewards.<sup>1</sup>*

What accounts for this educational involvement in the arts and, by extension, music? Answers may be found by tracing cultural roots—in China's case, by reviewing the Confucian Classics, which also pertain to Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam.

### Holistic Benefits

The ancient Chinese believed music played an integral part in educating scholars and future rulers to understand those same organizational principles controlling music, the motion of the stars and planets, physical bodily functions and the relationships between various levels and offices of the state. Music's role was to create a harmonious union between heaven and earth, and perfection in music ensured peace and morality:

*One has to know the melodies in order to comprehend music, and music in order to discern and guide the nature of government.... He who understands music will know the rules and secrets of ceremony. He who understands ceremony and music can be called virtuous. Virtue manifests the realization of the perfect in one's self.<sup>2</sup>*

This concept of music's holistic benefits finds a counterpart in the West with classical Greek ideas about music education. Pythagoras (sixth century BCE) taught music to his students for moral improvement and physical health benefits:

*Conceiving, however, that the first attention which should be paid to men is that which takes place through the senses, as when someone perceives beautiful figures and forms or hears beautiful rhythms and melodies, he established that to be the first erudition which subsists through music, and also through certain melodies and rhythms, from which the remedies of human manners and passions are obtained, together with those harmonies of the powers of the soul which it possessed from the first.... For Pythagoras was of the opinion that music contributed greatly to health, if it was used in an appropriate manner...and he called the medicine which is obtained through music by the name of purification.<sup>3</sup>*

Pythagoras proposed that a teacher must first pay attention to sensory learning, which focuses on developing an aesthetic appreciation of the transfiguring power of beauty. Furthermore, he approached music education as a curative procedure, instilling a sense of proportion and mental balance and countering the irrational tendency toward passion and ill-minded behavior.

### Essential to Education

How essential is music in the educational process? Reverence for music is expressed in the Confucian Classics, primarily composed of the "Five Ching" and the "Four Shu," works traditionally believed to represent ancient Chinese philosophy and thought, and compiled, edited and modified by Pythagoras's contemporary and China's spiritual paragon, Confucius (551–479 BCE). These records clearly define music's role in the education of scholars and future rulers:

*Those who are aware of sound but do not know the tones are animals. Those who know the tones but not the actual music are ignorant. Only the noble and distinguished person comprehends music.... One has to know the melodies in order to comprehend music, and music in order to discern and guide the nature of government.<sup>4</sup>*

Cross-cultural agreement is found in classical Greek philosophy, which held that music was indispensable for cultivating a thoughtful intelligence. Plato sounded a warning against individuals cultivating physical prowess at the expense of developing their musical intelligence:

*The reverse of a great student of music and philosophy...does not even that intelligence which there may be in him, having no taste of any sort of learning or enquiry or thought or culture, grow feeble and dull and blind, his mind never waking up or receiving nourishment.... He is like a wild beast, all violence and fierceness, and knows no other way of dealing; and he lives in all ignorance and evil conditions and has no sense of propriety and grace.<sup>5</sup>*

Chinese musical tradition has been traced to the Shang Dynasty, dating back to fourteenth century BCE. From earliest recorded times, the minister of music held a high position in Chinese royal courts. The minister was responsible for maintaining the appropriate ritual music for proper ceremonial functions and was additionally charged to supervise the education of putative heirs to the throne:

The emperor (Shun) spoke: "I command you, K'uei, to be now my director of music. You will instruct our sons (in such a manner) that they become straightforward, yet gentle, big-hearted, yet circumspect, robust, yet not domineering and ardent, yet not arrogant."<sup>6</sup>

This directly relates to music's therapeutic and transforming quality in education, which Pythagoras is said to have proffered to his disciples:

*{He} arranged and adapted for his disciples what are called apparatus and contractions, divinely contriving mixtures of certain diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic melodies, through which he easily transferred and circularly led the passions of the soul into a contrary direction when they had recently and in an irrational and clandestine manner had been formed; such as sorrow, rage, pity, appetites, pride, supineness and vehemence. For he corrected each of these by the rule of virtue, tempering them through appropriate melodies, as through certain salutary medicines.<sup>7</sup>*

### Moral Power

To understand this classical Greek concept of music's moral power, a review of the "doctrine of ethos" is in order. This imputed specific emotional qualities to different modes and characteristic pitch patterns, affecting people's wills. Such modes as the Dorian were considered socially useful because of their martial, morale-building effect; others, like the Lydian, were considered corrupting because of their sensuous, motivation-sapping influence. The ancient Chinese held similar views of the moral power of music. The power of music transcended entertainment, for it complemented the laws of etiquette. It was believed that if a ruler diverged from the proper rules of music, the result would be licentiousness and perversion among his subjects. The traditional Confucian perspective holds that music is not just a reflection of society—it helps determine the state of society:

*Music reflects the harmony between heaven and earth.... All things receive their existence and orderly distinctions from harmony. Heaven is the origin of music; earth brings into being ceremony. If there are too many*

*forms, chaos would appear; if there is too much invention in music, violence would prevail.*<sup>8</sup>

This concept of the deleterious quality of improper music finds a counterpoint in Plato's injunction against untrustworthy musicians who assert:

*Music has no truth, and whether good or bad, can only be judged of rightly by the pleasure of the hearer. And by composing such licentious works, and adding to them words as licentious... they have inspired the multitude with lawlessness and boldness....*<sup>9</sup>

*Novelties are always being introduced in dancing and in music, generally not under the authority of any law, but at the instigation of lawless pleasure.*<sup>10</sup>

A Chinese echo of Plato's concerns comes from the remarks of Lu Pu-we, author of the "Spring and Fall" poems, who disparaged the vulgar, noisy music of the tyrants of Hsia and Yin:

*They deemed the loud sounds of big drums, bells, stones, pipes and flutes beautiful and thought that mass effects were worthwhile. They aimed at new and strange timbres, at never-heard-of tones, at plays never seen before. They tried to outdo one another and overstepped the limits.*<sup>11</sup>

The high decibel levels and exhibitionism characteristic of much contemporary Western popular music conflict with traditional Asian musical aesthetics. It is a function of traditional Asian culture that certain highly prized works either exemplify or deviate only moderately from certain classic forms. Participation in Western classical music offers opportunities to memorize details of model compositions through disciplined practice and intense concentration. Development of these skills by means of close contact with a private teacher coincides very well with Confucian scholarly tradition, which values music study as an indispensable way to train the mind. The apprentice style of learning art and music in China has a long pedigree. Many Asian cultures take a rigorous approach to skill acquisition, which leads to vigorous parental reinforcement of a regular practice schedule.

Some argue that the Confucian concept of virtue, attained by creating a harmonious order through application of discipline, affects Asian musical aesthetics. Performing beautiful sounds on an instrument is believed to reflect personal virtue; developing artistic skill and sensibility is essential to becoming an ethical human being. It is important to keep in mind that Yue (music) and lo (serenity) originally shared the same ancient calligraphic symbol. This relationship is illuminated by the Chinese concept of "proper" music:

*The noble-minded man's music is mild and delicate, keeps a uniform mood, enlivens and moves. Such a man does not harbor pain or mourn in his heart; violent and daring movements are foreign to him.*<sup>12</sup>

## Harmonious Cosmos

Music's profound role in negotiating the relationship between man and the universe led each Chinese ruler to devise his own special musical system, focusing on the proper scale tuning, as one of his first acts of state. After all, why would the earlier dynasties have fallen unless their music had been out of harmony

with the universe? Correctness in music was not simply a musical concern. When a ruler officially sanctioned the scales of his court music, he accepted the responsibility for either sustaining or imperiling the equilibrium of the cosmos. The welfare of the empire depended on the correctness of pitches and scales. Confucius held music to be essential to ritual ceremonies, which brought desirable balanced order to a civil government and its relationship with people. Social bonds were strengthened with proper music, which created a sense of unity and harmony. Music was regarded as indispensable to government as laws and punishment:

*The purpose of music, ceremony, punishment and laws of conduct is one and the same: All are used to unify the minds of the people and to create proper order in the land.*<sup>13</sup>

*To unite and harmonize is the objective of music; variance and discernment are the objectives of the ceremony. People experience mutual endearment (which arises) from harmony. From discernment comes mutual esteem.... The purpose of music and ceremony is to harmonize the feelings of people and to create balanced propriety to their outward expressions.*<sup>14</sup>

Moving from the terrestrial concerns to the celestial, Pythagoras and the ancient Chinese shared an attentiveness to astral harmonies. For the Pythagoreans, the mathematics of celerities, magnitudes and intervals was music made visible—and the most divine music was that caused by the universal harmony and consonance of the heavenly spheres and the stars as they moved with reference to each other in a musical ratio. Interestingly, in China, the calculation of scalar pitches according to strict mathematical principles was invented by astronomers, specialists in the art of numbers. The mandatory search for an absolute pitch, or a standard length of measuring sound, led to the annexation of the Imperial Office of Music as a department of the Office of Weights and Measurements. In Confucius's Yueh Chi, an analogous concept to Pythagoras's music of the movement of celestial bodies is expressed:

*At the Grand Beginning (of the world) music emerged and ceremony enhanced the completion of things. The unfolding of ceaseless motion manifests heaven; that of motionless stillness manifests earth. All things between heaven and earth spring from the change between movement and stillness.*<sup>15</sup>

*Music reflects the harmony between heaven and earth.... The harmony between heaven and earth is reflected in the best of the ceremony. Harmony is the reason why things do not lose their meaning and effect. Regulated order distinguishes between sacrifices to heaven and earth. In the visible world (there rule) music and ceremony. In the invisible world (rule) the spiritual and divine powers.*<sup>16</sup>

## East Meets West

How is a familiarity with ancient Confucian precepts about music relevant to modern American music teachers, as they interact with Asian-American students? Cultural exchange must not be unidirectional—it is only fitting for Western music



teachers to try to learn how Asian cultural heritage can inform student approaches to music. Understanding common links between Eastern and Western musical philosophies may help both teachers and students develop a mutual appreciation of music's integral role in diverse cultures. Western classical music has been marginalized by contemporary commercialism to become a status symbol for a privileged few. Music students, some with Asian cultural backgrounds, will be entrusted to mount future, effective resistance to this trend by maintaining Western art music as a living art form. Have we abandoned the moral and ethical power attributed to music by the ancients, when well-meaning music advocates attempt to justify music study as a way to enhance intellectual capacities in other subjects? Should music be advertised as a means to an end—as has been done with the “Mozart effect”?

It may be a welcome paradox that investigating ancient Chinese attitudes toward music may help regenerate pride of purpose in Western music educators. We need not surrender to the commonly held stereotype of classical musicians as antiquarians bent on preserving outdated music. When we ask ourselves why we continue to encourage students to make imperfect performances in an age of perfect digital recordings, the answer must be a viable aesthetic philosophy, which draws from the ancients, both East and West. Unlike the material arts, music does not look back at something that is fixed and finished. It is by its nature a transitory art, coming alive only at the moment of performance. Requiring active participation in the here and now, music is not simply a culturally determined product of its composer, but is recreated every time it is interpreted and performed.

“Music is a living thing, not a fixed medium—it is subject to how performers interpret it.” This sentiment is not only a familiar homily of Western classical musicians; it is a principle of Chinese traditional music as expressed by Shi Tan, professor of the *erhu*, the two-stringed Chinese violin, at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. He faces the same problems of reinvigorating and renewing a venerable musical tradition, with works dating back a thousand years. Here West and East do meet, for classical music of any culture exists as a reminder and a reproach that new music is not necessarily the best or most relevant to contemporary times—it is merely the most recent form. European and Asian art musics share the status of lovingly cherished cultural traditions that have been kept alive only through the most exacting standards of professional training and artistic commitment. If we as musicians contain the promise of music, what better way to keep that promise than to reinterpret the classics? Classical musicians' creativity remains integral to the health of society:

*Music and ceremony reach up to the high heaven and embrace the deep of the earth. They are effective in the dark and the bright and are linked with the worlds of spirits and gods. Their height may be called the highest, their extent the greatest distance, their depth the deepest and their breadth the widest.*<sup>17</sup>

These claims—to timeless beauty and inspiration and to emotional and spiritual meaning of the most profound kind—constitute an affinity between Confucian musical aesthetics and Western classical music.

Such an investigation must go beyond a simple assimilationist perspective, holding that Asian and Asian-American performers of Western art music are engaging in an exercise to help them join the cultural mainstream. Given the current equivocal status of Western classical music, there are easier and less time-consuming ways to integrate into American cultural practices. On the other hand, post-colonial cultural theories of the colonized internalizing and mimicking the cultural systems of the colonizer both essentialize and diminish contributions to the art form made by classical musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma, Midori, Sarah Chang, Kyung-wha Chung, Frederic Chiu and Kent Nagano, to name a few. Certainly, it is important to differentiate between various Asian cultures since Confucian doctrine influences Chinese, Koreans, Japanese and Vietnamese in different ways. And yet, cultural distinctions aside, true commitment to learning how to make music comes from the individual. The trans-cultural power of Western classical music is felt by many Asians and Asian-Americans who have become passionately devoted to an art form that is far removed in time and place from the “authentic” musics defined with their traditional family cultures.

A traditional story is told about Confucius; he was once so moved by an old song that “for three months he did not know the taste of meat”—a significant sacrifice in a nation devoted to the pleasures of the table. Furthermore, it is said that when Confucius played the *ch'ing*, a man who passed his house exclaimed, “This heart is full that so beats the sounding stone.”<sup>18</sup> By cherishing the talents of their students, music teachers get in touch with what is most special in themselves—aesthetic and spiritual enrichment. Let us listen carefully to the sounds within a human being's heart, which blossom into music.

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#### NOTES

1. Howard Gardner, *To Open Minds* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), p. 220.
2. Walter Kaufmann, *Musical References in the Chinese Classics* (Detroit, Michigan: Detroit Monographs in Musicology No. 5, Information Coordinators, Inc., 1976), p. 33.
3. Dane Rudhyar, *The Magic of Tone and the Art of Music* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala Publications, Inc., 1982), p. 167.
4. Kaufmann, p. 33.
5. *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, two volumes (1920; reprint, New York: Random House, 1937), 1:675–676.
6. Kaufmann, p. 23.
7. Rudhyar, pp. 167–168.
8. Kaufmann, p. 35.
9. *The Dialogues of Plato*, 2:474–475.
10. *Ibid.*, 2:437–438.
11. Curt Sachs, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1943), p. 106.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 106.
13. Kaufmann, p. 32.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
18. Sachs, p. 107.