

# Elections, Stasis, and Music: Aristotle's Political Incorrectness

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«Aristotle [...] is the oracle of nature and of truth. [...] We cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians, for the great Master does but analyze the thoughts, feelings, views, and opinions of human kind. He has told us the meaning of our own words and ideas before we were born. In many subject-matters, to think correctly is to think like Aristotle, and we are his disciples whether we will or no, though we may not know it»<sup>1</sup>.

## 1. Elections

In his *Politics*, while Aristotle mentions elections often, he mentions election campaigns only on two or three occasions. Moreover, while he regards elections, suitably arranged, as a good and even necessary thing, he regards election campaigns as neither necessary nor good. For the modern mind such a view is puzzling. How can there be proper elections without election campaigns wherein the several candidates go about saying what they stand for and what they will do if elected? So why does Aristotle disagree?

We should start by looking at what he actually says about election campaigns.

*1303a13* Regimes also undergo change without faction, both, as in Heraia, because of vote-getting (for elections were being won by those campaigning for votes and so they had the officials chosen by lot instead).

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<sup>1</sup> J.H. Newman, *Idea of a University* (1852), London, Yale University Press, 1994, Discourse 5, section 5.

1305a28 Democracies also undergo change from the ancestral kind to the newest kind. For where the offices are elected, but not on the basis of property qualifications, and the populace do the electing, those eager for office engage in demagoguery to get elected and set the populace in control even of the laws. A cure to prevent this happening, or to make it less frequent, is to have rulers elected by the tribes and not by the populace en masse.

1305b22 [Oligarchies change through demagoguery in one way] when those in the oligarchy are demagogues to the crowd, as the regime guardians were in Larissa, for instance, because it was the crowd that elected them. The same is true of all oligarchies where those who provide the rulers are not those who elect to office, but the offices are filled from high property qualifications or from political clubs, and those possessed of heavy arms or the populace do the electing (this happened in Abydos).

The first of these quotations is expressly about election campaigns, or a going about among the people soliciting votes (*ambitio*, as the Romans called it); the second and third are implicitly so, because the demagoguery is directed at getting votes in elections. The first quotation also refers to a case of election campaigns causing change in a regime by causing the citizens to put a stop to these elections, because, of all things, those who campaigned were getting elected! But why ever complain or abolish election campaigns if they are actually successful? Perhaps an answer can be gleaned from the other two quotations where the campaigns are not distinguished from demagoguery and where the demagoguery changes an ancestral or moderate democracy into an extreme democracy, or one oligarchy into another oligarchy (an oligarchy made up of a different group of oligarchs). Election campaigns that are just a form of demagoguery and that lead to changes in regime do look like bad things and things that Aristotle and we might wish to avoid.

But, we might next ask: when is an election campaign demagoguery and when is it not, and would or should an election campaign without demagoguery count as a good thing for Aristotle? The correct answer to both these questions is that Aristotle would deny there could be election campaigns without demagoguery, because campaigning for votes is, of its very nature, demagoguery. To win votes by going about asking for votes is like selling wares by going about offering them for sale. If I have the vote and someone asks me to cast it for him, what would induce me to do so? Presumably the same sort of thing that would induce me to buy this merchant's wares and not that one's – because these wares are more what I want than those are. So, likewise, I will cast my vote for this candidate rather than some other because this candidate gives me, or promises to give me when he is in office, more of what I want than the other does.

Where, however, is the wrongness here? I get from him what I want, or a promise of what I want, and he gets my vote. A fair bargain, one would think, and in a free market too. But what do I want? The use of political power to get

me some desired object. What does he want? Political power. So I give him political power and he gives me some use of that power. Again, we might wonder, where is the wrongness? For is not this practice what elected political power is all about: people getting what they want from those they voted for in order to get what they want?

Well, for Aristotle, such is clearly not what political power is about, whether elected or not. As we all know, political power is about running the political community or the city (as we translate the Greek *polis*), and the city, as Aristotle argues at length, is about living the good life and the good life is a life of virtue (*Politics* 3, *passim*). The life of virtue, moreover, is not easy to achieve but requires proper education and habituation at the hands of people who are already virtuous. The virtuous then should rule, in Aristotle's view, because they are virtuous, not because they are voted for or are the victors in an election campaign. The citizens should be educated to virtue whether they want to be or not. At least so it is in the best regime. In other regimes that are not the best, whether they are bad regimes or are merely ones that are less good, various compromises in the demands of virtue and education will have to be made. But the compromises made will be such as to bring the regime as close to virtue as can be managed in the circumstances. Clearly, once a regime has been brought as close to virtue as it can get, one does not want it to be changed – not even by being brought closer to virtue, since *ex hypothesi* it cannot be brought closer to virtue, and the attempt to bring it closer will almost certainly drive it further away. But election campaigns in such a regime will almost necessarily change it and will therefore be bad for a regime that is as close to virtue as possible. The reason is plain: election campaigns work by candidates offering to use political power for what the voters want, and it is hardly likely that, at least in an imperfect regime, some voters will not want things, or that some candidates will not offer things, which, whether either side realizes it or not, amount to changes in the regime.

Election by itself, however, without election campaigns, will not or need not have this result. For no one will be soliciting or giving votes in return for promises about the way political power will be used. How, then, will voters know who to vote for, since they will not know what the candidate will do when in office? And how will the successful candidates know what to do, since they will not know what the voters wanted when they voted for them? The questions are irrelevant, even impertinent. Elections without election campaigns cannot be about policies or promises (for there will be none). They can only be about character and trust. Is this candidate a man who has the family, the wealth, the patriotism, the virtue such that I as a voter can trust him to keep the regime the way it is? Or is he a suspect character, of obscure or shady family and background, and perhaps ambitious or mercenary, who will use power to advance the interests of himself,

and of those like himself, thereby destroying or damaging the regime? Not surprisingly, therefore, Aristotle discusses regimes primarily from the point of view of the character and social class of those who have control in them (*Politics* 3 and 6/4). For it is those of the relevant character and class who will both make the regime to be the way it is and do most to keep it the way it is.

Viewed in this way, Aristotle's judgment of election campaigns as bad things and causes or cases of regime change seems perfectly intelligible. So why do we nowadays disagree? The answer is both simple and profound: simple to state, profound in its implications. We do not believe, as Aristotle does, that politics is properly about happiness. We believe it is about the *means* to happiness. Happiness is whatever we as individuals or members of this or that private group think happiness is, and is not a matter to be decided by political rulers. Their job is to provide the conditions, the basic or primary goods<sup>2</sup> if you will, that we all need to pursue whatever goal or project we personally decide is happiness for us.

The core goods among these primary goods are no doubt unchanging, as food and shelter and clothing and health, but other goods among them will likely change according to time and circumstance and interest. Even the core goods, while they are always the same generically, can always change specifically. Health is an obvious instance, since what amounts to basic health care is relative to advances in medicine and increases in wealth and indeed, and perhaps more importantly, to individual preferences. For does such health care include subsidized Aids medicines or subsidized Chemotherapy or subsidized research into a cure for Alzheimer's or something else? How are we to decide? The obvious answer is to ask the people for whom these goods are to be provided, since it is they, after all, who can alone decide what the happiness is that the goods are to be provided for. But who, then, is to be trusted with providing these goods? The obvious answer again is to ask the people, or those who have to do the trusting. The further answer, of course, is to keep asking the people at periodic intervals whether they still trust those they first trusted and whether they still want what they first wanted. Hence, we need not only elections but election campaigns. For the people need to have assurance (real or apparent) about what those they vote for will do when in office so that they can vote for those who will do what the people want. Otherwise voting is like shooting in the dark.

Are election campaigns, then, cases and causes of regime change? The answer is both yes and no. If there are regimes around then election campaigns are causes of change. If there are no regimes around then election campaigns are not causes of change, for there are no regimes to change. Nowadays, there are no regimes around. Accordingly, elections are not for us causes of regime change.

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<sup>2</sup> J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1971, pp. 92-93.

This claim that today there are no regimes around may seem bizarre, but it is entailed by Aristotle's view of what politics is about. There are no regimes around today because there is no politics around today, at least not in the sense that Aristotle (and ancient thinkers generally) understood by the term. For by politics they understood the management of the city (the *polis* or *civitas*), and the city is a community in living the good life of happiness, which happiness is the same for all (namely a life of virtue). But we do not give that meaning to the term 'city', nor do we, more importantly, give that meaning to the term 'state', which (and not the city) is for us the locus of politics.<sup>3</sup> The state is not a community in living the good life of happiness, that is, of virtue, which is in principle the same for all. It is rather a compact for guaranteeing the basic goods that we all need for pursuing whatever idea of happiness we happen at the time to have. We call these guarantees to basic goods rights, and for us politics is about rights and not about happiness (save insofar as rights are instruments to happiness). So, we might say that for us there is no politics in Aristotle's sense because there is for us no city in Aristotle's sense, and there is for us no city in Aristotle's sense because there is no happiness for us in Aristotle's sense. Happiness is not some definite, determinable thing, the same for all. It is like taste and taste is as variable as the wind. As the Latin tag has it, *de gustibus non est disputandum*.

## 2. Stasis

The like holds of what Aristotle calls *stasis*. For him stasis is a bad thing because it stops the life of the city. Instead of being united in a common life, people are split up between rival parties who are disputing over what the common life should be. Whichever party wins will determine what the common life should be and will fashion the regime and the city accordingly. Those who want a different common life will have to go elsewhere. For us, by contrast, the common life is always the very same thing, namely that state of affairs where we all have, as much as possible, the things that we need to pursue our own idea of happiness. The disputes between us, which can be as fierce in our day as in Aristotle's, do not stop this common life but are the way it is realized. Stasis or party or faction are what give point and reason to elections so that the people have something to choose between, and so something to use their votes for, in order to secure, as best they can, what they want.

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<sup>3</sup> The Latin term "respublica" is perhaps closer to our term "state", at least as regards size, but the *respublica* too was understood to be about living the good life of virtue, as is evident in Cicero's (partially surviving) dialogue of that name.

Are election campaigns, then, a case or cause of stasis? The answer, for both us and Aristotle, is yes. Is stasis good? The answer for Aristotle is no and for us it is yes. Are we and Aristotle then talking about the same thing? Yes in a trivial way, and no in the important way. Stasis is the same thing for both of us, namely dispute between parties or factions about political life. But that fact is trivial. What is important for both of us is not the “what” but the “what sort of”, namely the good. For us stasis makes the political world go round; for Aristotle it brings the political world to a halt. It is the difference, if you like, between the first mover and the first stopper.

But why the difference? Why is Aristotle’s political world the opposite of ours? The answer is happiness or the idea of happiness. If happiness is something definite and knowable and the same for all, then Aristotle is right (and in general the ancients, and also the medievals). If it is whatever each decides for himself and not a determinate knowable the same for all, then we are right. So which is it? Or, put another way, what is happiness?

We are back where we were at the beginning, when differences over happiness and its attainment were argued to be the chief difference between ancient politics and modern. The focus of Aristotle, and of other ancient and medieval thinkers, on happiness as the point of rule, and not the conditions of happiness, is the fundamental difference between him and us and everyone since the beginnings of the modern period (Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke in particular). It marks a fundamental shift in content between them and us, such that what they meant by politics is not what we mean, and what they meant by rule is not what we mean. This revolution, begun first by Machiavelli<sup>4</sup> as it would seem, has radically changed what for us is meant by politics, and so what we think we are doing when we do politics. It is the change from the tyranny, so to say, of politics as a strict moral education to the freedom of no such education, or of a rather different education. We go back to Aristotle (along with Plato and the extensive intellectual offspring of both) to get a sense of politics different from what we have now, except perhaps in some forgotten backwaters.

The attempt, however, to make Aristotle’s views palatable to our political taste and more relevant to our political theory and practice fails and continues to fail at the same point. This point, as always with Aristotle in such matters, is virtue and the status of virtue as the object of pursuit and the highest goal, at least for the noblest men. Those who do not have this virtue cannot share in the best regime, and those who do not have any virtue cannot share in any regime worth the name. Attempts to soften Aristotle more in the direction of our egalitarian

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<sup>4</sup> P.L.P. Simpson, *Autonomous Morality and the Idea of the Noble*, in “Interpretation”, n. 14, 1986, pp. 353-370.

views – “banausics”, or the working class (as we may gloss that Ancient Greek word), and women, not to mention slaves (or the lowest and poorest class), are for us as fit to share rule as the leisured rich – never cease and always fail. Aristotle’s *Politics* is an affront to modern prejudices. But how much of an affront is seldom properly noted.

We pride ourselves on what we call democracy. Aristotle would call it extreme oligarchy. For, among us, the greatest offices, where alone rule is exercised, are elected, not chosen by lot, and from the well-heeled rich (or those who soon will be after getting elected), not indifferently from all. In this respect, oddly, Aristotle is at one with the democrats of his day, who would have said the same and been appalled by what we admire. Democracy requires lottery not elections, especially not elections which can only be contested, let alone won, by the very rich (rich with their own money or that of their sponsors, the latter of whom are thereby also necessarily their masters)<sup>5</sup>.

### 3. Music

Of course, Aristotle is no more in favor of democracy than of oligarchy. The point to keep in mind, though, is that he uses these terms in ways very different from our own. Our democracy is his oligarchy, and his democracy is our ochlocracy or our mob rule. We agree, of course, that ochlocracy or mob rule is not a good thing. In fact, the political change in the US from the original Articles of Confederation to the current Constitution was made precisely by those who considered the Articles to favor mob rule (Shays’ Rebellion, as it is called, in Massachusetts in 1786 was a chief pretext)<sup>6</sup>. The Articles, however, were not so much democratic as decentralizing, since they favored the rights of the States against the then Congress. The US Constitution, by contrast, began the reverse of such decentralizing, the Civil War reversed it further, and the Civil Rights Movement and its legal effects have reversed it further still.

Aristotle himself, to be sure, would have little preference for any such political arrangements. They are mentioned here for purposes of illustration. For Aristotle devolution is essential, because political rule is about the happiness of the citizens. But happiness is a life of virtue, and the city comes to be for the sake of such life, which life is achieved only through the teaching of virtue and training in it. Such training is accomplished first and importantly in the early years, but also throughout life. How then is such training to be achieved if, as Aristotle insists, it

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<sup>5</sup> The matter is discussed at large by Aristotle in *Politics* book 6/4.

<sup>6</sup> P.L.P. Simpson, *Political Illiberalism*, New York-London, Routledge, 2018, ch.8 and p. 56.

is necessary for good life and thereby also for good politics? An immediately obvious way is to teach people in school the truths about virtue and its attainment. But such a way, while it undoubtedly has its place, and was indeed followed by Aristotle himself in his writings on virtue, is not the best, even for Aristotle, and at all events cannot be the first. For teaching instructs the mind and does little in itself to form character, especially in youth when the passions are strong and the mind's power of control still weak and undeveloped. The good or bad forming of the passions, however, as is obvious to all of us and especially to parents and teachers of the young, is what determines good and bad character. The fact is plain to see in the case of the virtues of self-control, courage, generosity, mild temper, as also in the case of their opposed vices. For one is self-controlled if one is disciplined in resisting pleasures and enduring pains, courageous if one is disciplined in facing fear and danger, mild in temper if one is disciplined in bearing slights and privations; and one is intemperate or insensible, cowardly or rash, irascible or spiritless if one lacks discipline in all these respects.

A well-formed and not ill-formed character is what, accordingly, most needs to be achieved, especially in youth. Moreover, since such character cannot be achieved through teaching the mind (if only because successful teaching of the mind presupposes a character already disciplined), then through something that works directly on passion. In fact, it is the teaching of philosophy as also of direct experience that one of the most powerful ways of forming character is music, both the hearing of it and the performing of it. Stately music, for instance, makes for steadiness and decorum, martial music for energy and endurance, lullabies for relaxation and rest, love songs for erotic excitement and attachment. Indeed we instinctively quicken or relax on hearing certain melodies and rhythms. So called pop music, for instance, is an excellent illustration, since the emotional states and motions that such music can cause are evident from pop concerts and discotheques. The same holds of ballroom dancing, where the music and motions are generally of a calmer and more measured and more orderly character. Flamenco music and dancing, while also more ordered and structured, are in addition more sensual. Other such examples of music and its emotive and physical effects could easily be given, as for instance the mesmeric dance of Sufi mystics, or the so-called Whirling Dervishes.

The power of music for right education was expressly thematized by ancient authors, and by Plato and Aristotle in particular, since both included treatments of music within their expressly political writings.

In Plato's *Republic* 3.398ff, for instance, we find the following:

I would have you leave me a harmony which can render the note or accent which a brave man utters in warlike action and in stern resolve; and when his cause is failing, and he is going to wounds or death or is overtaken by disaster in some other form, at every such crisis he meets



the blows of fortune with firm step and a determination to endure; and an opposite kind for times of peace and freedom of action, when there is no pressure of necessity, and he is seeking to persuade God by prayer, or man by instruction and admonition, or when on the other hand he is expressing his willingness to yield to the persuasion or entreaty or admonition of others [...]. 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 justify blame and hate the bad, now in the days of his youth, even before he will recognize and salute the friend with whom his education has made him long familiar<sup>7</sup>.

In Aristotle's work on politics we find similar opinions, as at *Politics* 4/8.5.1340a7ff.

Since [...] virtue consists in rejoicing and loving and hating aright, there is clearly nothing which we are so much concerned to acquire and to cultivate as the power of forming right judgments, and of taking delight in good dispositions and noble actions [...]. The habit of feeling pleasure or pain at mere representations is not far removed from the same feeling about realities; [...] even in mere melodies there is an imitation of character, for the musical modes differ essentially from one another, and those who hear them are differently affected by each. Some of them make men sad and grave, like the so-called Mixolydian, others enfeeble the mind, like the relaxed modes, another, again, produces a moderate and settled temper, which appears to be the peculiar effect of the Dorian; the Phrygian inspires enthusiasm [...]. The same principles apply to rhythms; some have a character of rest, others of motion, and of these latter again, some have a more vulgar, others a nobler movement. Enough has been said to show that music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young [...]. There seems to be in us a sort of affinity to musical modes and rhythms [...]<sup>8</sup>.

Music, it is clear, works directly on the passions, so that if character is a function of passions and if music excites passions, then music must be one of the more effective ways to form character, for better or worse. Accordingly hearing, learning, and singing the right music must be part of right education, especially in youth but also throughout life. To leave music to the hazard of taste and fashion, as we now do universally in East as well as West<sup>9</sup>, is to leave the formation of character to the hazard of taste and fashion, which is a recipe for moral and political decay.

This question of music, then, like all others to do with good life and its promotion, public and private, belongs to politics and ethics and not just to the art of music taken by itself. Here, however, arises a difficult question, for modern Western music, popular or classical, has a peculiar and distinctive feature

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<sup>7</sup> *Republic of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888. See also S. Bourgauf, *Music and Pedagogy in the Platonic City*, in: "Journal of Aesthetic Education", n. 46, 2012.

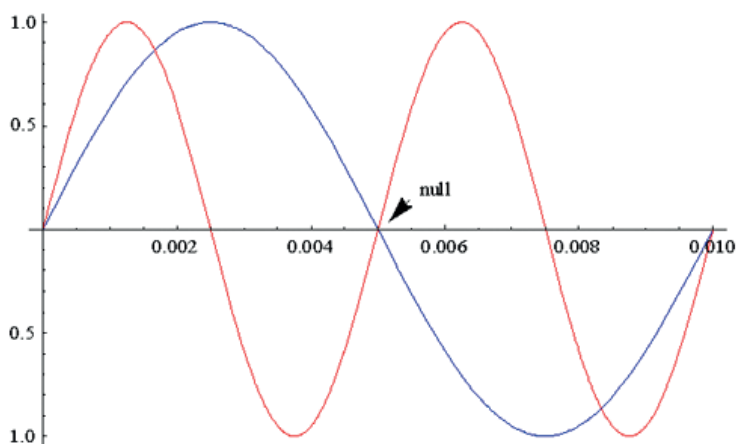
<sup>8</sup> *Politics of Aristotle*, trans. B. Jowett, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1885.

<sup>9</sup> Western style pop music and entertainment are widespread in China, for instance, especially among the youth. The older generation seems still to prefer more traditional Chinese forms.

that generally escapes the notice even of musicians and yet is fraught with moral weight. This feature is the modern equal tempered scale.

Now in such a scale the intervals between each of the octave's twelve notes (the interval of the semitone) are fixed at an equal distance (that of 100 cents, to use the standard modern way of measuring musical intervals). Thus, the interval of a fourth (as from C to F) is measured at 500 cents (or five semitones), and that of a fifth (as from C to G) is measured at 700 cents (or seven semitones), and the difference between these two intervals (from F to G) is measured at 200 cents (or two semitones). If, however, these intervals were to be measured accurately or according to purity of musical consonance, the intervals would be rather different.

By purity of consonance is meant purity of ratio between the notes constituting the interval. For instance, the notes constituting the interval of an octave sound at the ratio of 2:1, as in the following diagram:

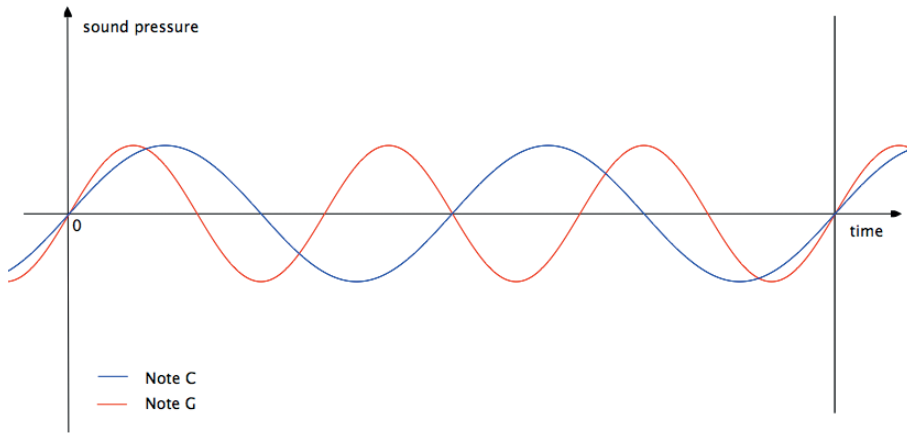


*Note that the faster frequency intersects the slower at every one of its three “null” points. It is because of this intersecting that we hear the two sounds as concordant<sup>10</sup>.*

The higher note here is resonating twice as fast as the lower one, so that there is a systematic relationship or coincidence between every oscillation of sound of the lower note (blue in the diagram) and every two oscillations of sound of the higher note (red in the diagram). The ear accordingly hears the octave as harmonious.

The like holds of the interval of a fifth where the notes constituting the interval sound at the ration of 3:2, again as in the following diagram:

<sup>10</sup> Taken from [http://www.goodsound.com/features/2007\\_04\\_01.htm](http://www.goodsound.com/features/2007_04_01.htm)



*The notes C and G (perfect fifth) have the lengths of sound waves differing by 1.5 times, where the sound of the note C makes two oscillations and the sound of the note G makes three oscillations<sup>11</sup>.*

The higher note here is oscillating three times to the lower note's two times, so that again there is a systematic relationship or coincidence between the oscillations. The ear thus hears the fifth as harmonious, if in lesser way. The same pattern again, compressed now to three oscillations of the lower note and four of the higher note, holds of the interval of the fourth, or the ratio of 4:3.

The octave, fifth, and fourth are the most readily hearable harmonies (closely followed by the major and minor third, which have ratios of 5:4 and 6:5 respectively), for they constitute the coincidence of the natural phenomenon of sounds most readily discernable by the human ear. However, it so turns out that, when translated into cents, these intervals do not constitute a tempered scale. The natural interval of the fourth, for instance, is 498 cents (or near enough) and not 500, of the fifth 702 cents and not 700, and of the interval between them 204 cents and not 200. These discrepancies are, to be sure, too small to be noticeable to the human ear, but other discrepancies do become noticeable as with the natural intervals of minor and major thirds, which are 315 and 386 cents as opposed to the tempered scale's 300 and 400 cents. This problem is made worse if, having set up a scale, one tries starting one's octave on a different note within it. So while the intervals between D and F# and between C and E are the same in the tempered scale, namely 400 cents, in a natural scale formed on C the interval is 386 cents between C and E, but 378 cents between D and F# and 435 cents between F# and A#. The only way to keep quantitatively similar, as well as tolerable, harmonies among intervals across all scales (without having laboriously to retune one's

<sup>11</sup> Taken from: <https://wavepalette.com/about>

instrument each time one changes key) is to fudge or temper the notes so that they are slightly out of tune with respect to each other, but not so out of tune as to sound harsh to the ear. In this way one can move freely from one key to another without losing too much harmony in the process. This fudging is what produces the modern equal tempered scale.

The following diagram highlights the effects on consonance of equal temperament. It compares the Pythagorean scale (whose intervals rely on ratios with multiples up to 3) and the Ptolemaic scale (whose intervals rely on ratios with multiples up to 5) against the modern equal tempered scale. Notice that the equal tempered scale has no intervals expressible in whole number ratios save for the octave<sup>12</sup>. Notice too that the Ptolemaic has more intervals expressible in small whole number ratios than does the Pythagorean, for it does not determine its intervals, as does the Pythagorean, by means only of a series of fourths and fifths.

SCALES IN RATIOS AND CENTS						
Scale Notes	Ptolemaic		Pythagorean		Equal Tempered	
	Ratio	Cents	Ratio	Cents	Ratio	Cents
C	1:1	0.000	1:1	0.000	1:1	0.000
C#	16:15	111.731	256:243	90.225	100.000	
D	9:8	203.910	9:8	203.910	200.000	
D#	6:5	315.641	32:27	294.135	300.000	
E	5:4	386.314	81:64	407.820	400.000	
F	4:3	498.045	4:3	498.045	500.000	
F#	7:5	582.512	729:512	611.730	600.000	
G	3:2	701.955	3:2	701.9555	700.000	
G#	8:5	813.686	6561:4096	815.640	800.000	
A	5:3	884.359	27:16	905.865	900.000	
A#	9:5	1017.596	59040:32768	1019.550	1000.000	
B	15:8	1088.269	243:128	1109.775	1100.000	
C	2:1	1200.000	2:1	1200.000	2:1	1200.000

In addition to the lack of any natural harmonies (aside from the octave), there are other features of modern music, related to that of temperament, which need noting and which are equally part of its peculiarity. For one might wonder why there should be so much interest in having an equal tempered scale if music before modern times had managed, for so many centuries, to get by pretty much without it. Partly, or perhaps mainly, it is because of the desire to have a multiplicity and a variety of notes all sounding together. For a feature of modern music is the piling up of notes to produce chords and chordal progressions of multiple intervals. But because of what has just been explained above, it is hard or impos-

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NII4No3s0M> for a visual and audible demonstration of the difference between natural and tempered harmonies.

sible to have much piling up of notes or chordal progressions without a tempered scale. The purer one's notes, in other words, the more one is forced to play in one key (as here the key of C), or with few notes (especially in the Pythagorean scale) instead of with many notes in several scales (as on the modern piano).

Yet the multiplying of notes and scales in modern Western music is not just a matter of having many variations coming from one and the same instrument, but also of having many variations coming from many instruments. For another feature of Western music is the large orchestra. But how is one to get many instruments playing many notes all at the same time and preserve some sort of musical harmony? The solution is to make all instruments conform to some common measure or standard, so that, despite differences of quality and timbre, they all do play the same notes or notes conforming to the same intervals. Now it is a feature of most instruments that they have few if any fixed intervals. Most stringed and wind instruments, for instance, have the potential to sound an infinite number of notes at an infinite variety of intervals. A violin string can be stopped at any point and notes can be played, not only a tone or a semitone apart, but also a quarter tone or an eighth tone apart. Indeed even these intervals themselves can be varied infinitely, and a given tone can be played now higher and now lower, or now sharper and now flatter, entirely as one wills. But since such instruments have this capability, getting them all to keep sounding tolerably in tune when played together requires fixing on them all a common set of notes and intervals. This requirement is typically met by having an instrument with fixed notes at fixed intervals from which all other instruments are made to take their cue, as it were. Here enters the keyboard, or more particularly the piano. For the very idea of a keyboard is fixed notes at fixed intervals (the guitar, of course, has the same character because of its frets, and the guitar has, interestingly enough, achieved a like dominance in what we nowadays call pop music as the piano has in what we nowadays call classical music). Hence the dominance of the piano, and also the guitar, in Western music has come hand in hand with the dominance of the equal tempered scale. Both are inseparable from the desire to have a multiplicity and a variety of notes from a multiplicity and variety of instruments sounding all at once.

The dominance of the piano in Western music is not just evident from the fact that all musicians, whatever other instrument they may play, are required to be at least minimally familiar with how to play the piano, but above all and much more from the fact that all music is taught and all music composed using a system of notation that fits, and is designed to fit, the tempered keyboard. The reference here is to the standard five bar staff which we use to write music. For this five bar staff allows one to write only twelve notes to an octave and only at evenly fixed intervals (unless extra devices are introduced to finesse it). Systems

of notation designed for instruments and music played with potentially infinite notes and intervals (such as in non-Western and non-modern musics) do and must look rather different.

These features of modern Western music, namely the well-tempered scale and the dominance of the keyboard, seem all related to the desire for number and variety of instruments sounding together. But one might well be puzzled or intrigued by this desire itself. For it manifests itself also in Western music in another way, namely in the love of novelty and the desire for ever different sorts and styles of music. What is desired is not just variety of sounds within a musical piece, but novelty of pieces too, and this love of novelty, once let loose, knows few bounds. Accordingly, Western Music presents us with a rapid succession of periods and styles of music that have come and gone since the days of Bach (1675-1750). For from Bach's period of the Baroque we pass in a matter of decades to the Classical and thereafter to the Romantic, ending in what we now call the period of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century music, or Modern and post-Modern music (for lack of other names). This latter period is marked by such a dizzying succession of novelties that they defy a definite single characterization. The passion for novelty means, indeed, that each new generation of composers has to do something different from its predecessor to gain attention and have its music played or recorded. All the better, therefore, if the novelty is not only new but even goes out of its way to shock. For what shocks gets more attention. Hence the fact that the development of Western Music has been marked by shocks (as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*) which, however, after a while cease to be shocking because the novelty wears off. Hence too the premium placed on greater sophistication in instruments and compositions, and on highly developed technical skill among players.

The effect of this sort of music on the passions and emotions seems evident. These latter will tend toward the new, the shocking, the violent; they will not tend toward the traditional, the restful, the moderated. But since moral character or virtue is so much a function of the emotions and how we are disposed with respect to them, the fact that our music favors the new and shocking, and not the settled and tried, must tend to generate characters and behaviors that are similar. Certainly, a human community that cares, as it should, for moral character and for its growth, especially among the young, cannot be indifferent to or cavalier about the sort of music that proliferates within it. Some sort of discipline and control over music and musicians, to make both serve moral virtue and not the opposite, are needed. Indeed, since music has power to make character good or bad, to let it alone is almost inevitably to let it be exploited by the bad or the perverse, so that through its morally destructive effects they can take advantage of others for their own gain. Slavish characters in particular, those subject to passion rather than to control of passion, are dear to tyrants and lovers of tyranny,

because they can be used to shore up tyranny as well as to commit crimes in its service.

The chances, however, of reversing the parlous effects of temperament in modern music, are virtually nil in the West. They are greater perhaps in the East, as perhaps especially in India, where the old traditions still flourish. If one compares and contrasts the traditional music of India, as for instance the *ragas* as they are called, one will find it has virtually all the opposite features to Western music. It does not use the tempered scale; it is not based on or tied to the keyboard; it is not marked by a multitude of notes or by chords and chordal progressions; it is relatively spare and unadorned; compared with other *ragas* it will seem, at least initially, very similar and lacking in novelty and variety. But what it thus lacks in its obvious or immediate impression, it makes up for in its depth and penetration.

These features of Indian *ragas* are hard or impossible to reduplicate in modern Western music, and largely if not wholly because of the tempered scale. Doubtless, the subtleties of non-modern and non-Western music need to be discovered by much study and meditation and are not open to immediate view. Doubtless, their ethical power too is hard to appreciate. Indeed, even proponents of these musics themselves declared that not everyone could appreciate every music, but that some music was fit for the wise and the virtuous, while other music was fit for the vulgar, the crude, and the uneducated<sup>13</sup>.

We are dealing here with things that defy and even affront modern Western prejudices. But there is no reason to ignore or dismiss them. For suppose such music does have the powers attributed to it. Suppose indeed that all music, including Western music, has some such power, more or less. Suppose, in other words, that the lives we lead, the cosmos we live in, are affected, for better or worse, by the kind of music we enjoy and give ourselves to. Could we then remain so complacent in our preference for Western music?

Music is an art of life applied to sounds and is likely to reflect what we are doing with the rest of our life generally and to express the same attitudes and embody the same expectations and drives. A certain kind of fevered pursuit of pleasures, of fairly obvious and common pleasures, seems to characterize the life we make for ourselves within Western culture – and this pursuit of pleasure seems not unrelated to our Enlightenment love of science, for science provides us with the tools for satisfying many obvious and common pleasures. Western music, as described above, has much of the same character, for the love of many and varied sounds all present together is a love of obvious and common pleasures. The subtler and purer pleasures of non-Western musics require time and meditation

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<sup>13</sup> C. Sachs, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World*, Dover, Dover Publications, 1943, pp. 105-106; Aristotle, *Politics* 5 (8), 7.

to appreciate. Of course, there is a place for common and obvious pleasures as for subtle ones. But we in the West would seem to have an abundance of the first and a dearth of the second. We would do well to sit at the feet of other cultures for a while and learn some of their art and ethical sense to restore some balance to our own. The human striving for the comprehensive good, which is the mark too of all authentic human community, since it requires passions that serve sound thought and good character and do not disrupt or distort either, requires too the moral virtues that modern Western music seems capable only of marginalizing or weakening and not of generating or enhancing.

For there are dimensions to music that our modern Western music tends to obscure, or at any rate to deemphasize, but which in other musics come fully to the fore. I mean, in particular, the cosmic, the psychic, and the ethical dimensions of music. These dimensions of music are not entirely unknown to the modern Western consciousness, as witness in particular Schopenhauer (one of the few modern philosophers to treat music with the philosophical seriousness it has been given in other places and times): «music expresses in a perfectly universal language, in a homogeneous material, mere tones, and with the greatest determinateness and truth, the inner nature, the in-itself of the world»<sup>14</sup>.

But what Schopenhauer tried to recapture for music among us has been a commonplace in other traditions of music. One recalls the old idea, going back to the Pythagoreans, of the harmony of the spheres, that as the spheres revolved according to perfect ratios, so they sounded in perfect intervals, and thus gave voice to the inner order of the cosmos. One recalls how Orpheus is said to have tamed animals and made the trees and rocks move at the sound of his singing. But similar ideas are found in the Bible and among the Indians of the subcontinent and among the Chinese too and probably at an earlier date. For instance, in China «the four seasons were separated from one another, not only by definite amounts of time but also by musical intervals: there was a fifth from autumn to spring, a fourth back to winter and a fifth to summer». And again: «in music man took the heavy responsibility for either strengthening or imperiling the equilibrium of the world. And his responsibility included the world's truest images, the dynasty and the country; the welfare of the empire depended on the correctness of pitches and scales. As a consequence, the readjustment of music was one of the new emperor's first acts; for would the preceding dynasty have been eliminated unless its music was out of harmony with the universe?»<sup>15</sup>. Plato expressed the same idea about the decline of Athens, that it was because of a failure to keep to

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<sup>14</sup> A. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, book 3, sect. 52, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1883-1886.

<sup>15</sup> C. Sachs, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-112.



the older and purer music<sup>16</sup>. In India the different ragas, or melodic patterns and modes, worked on and belonged to certain hours of the day and seasons of the year, and the story is told (fanciful perhaps, but expressing real convictions) of a certain musician who sang one of the night ragas at midday: «the powers of his music were such that it instantly became night, and the darkness extended in a circle round the palace as far as the sound of his voice could be heard»<sup>17</sup>. Similar stories expressing similar sentiments could be given from other parts of the globe. But the message in each case is the same: music has great cosmic, psychic, ethical, and political power, and one can effect changes, for good or ill, in each of these spheres by the prevalent music. We are inclined to dismiss such ideas as mere myth and legend, symptomatic of the ignorance of primitive and superstitious ages. But perhaps it is we who are ignorant and primitive or at least superficial. For it is hard to believe that ideas which are so universal and run so deep in human life could be wholly lacking in truth.

Probably both sides are right, because they are speaking of different sorts of music. Modern Western music, because of its many impurities and multiple additions of sound on sound from many instruments, is likely deficient in cosmic, psychic, and ethical harmony, while other musics, because they are purer and less overlaid, are as rich in that harmony as they are rich in their inner musical life. In such music «each note is an entity in itself, calculated to evoke in the mind of the hearer a special reaction [...]. The impression made by one note is followed by another, still another. There is thus a compelling, inevitable suggestion of a mood, an atmosphere [...]»<sup>18</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

If we combine what has just been said about our modern music with what was said earlier about our modern politics, we will find between them a sort of perverse concordance. Our politics of tyranny supports and is supported by our music of discordance, in the many senses of discordance (in musical notes, in moral habits, in deliberate and instinctive behavior). This concord of discordance, if we may so speak, disrupts not only moderate music (classical as well as popular), it also disrupts, by necessary concert, moderate politics, both at home and abroad. But since music is so natural to us, and so intimately connected, by way of both effect and cause, to the formation of behavior and habits in public and private,

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<sup>16</sup> Plato, *Laws* 3, 700-701.

<sup>17</sup> C. Sachs, *op. cit.*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 108-109.

no attempt to understand, let alone to halt, the progress of tyrannical governance and action in our world is likely to succeed unless the analysis of politics (such as given at the beginning of this paper) is fully cognizant of and united with the analysis of music in our world. Not for nothing did Plato and Aristotle in their political writings link the forms and development of politics to the forms and development of music. That nowadays we do not expressly link the character of our politics to the character of our music is a mark not only of our ignorance, or even of our moral corruption, but also of the tyrannical passions that dominate among our political elites and their propagandized supporters. Bad music corrupts, and absolutely bad music corrupts absolutely, to coin a phrase.

So if contemporary events give us a chance for a “great reset”, let us not follow Klaus Schwab and company (who seem only to understand propaganda and tyranny), but Greek cities or Roman Empires. Here, Aristotle and Plato are not irrelevant but a challenge, a challenge that can hardly be accepted and followed, in our large countries, save by wise kingship or its equivalent. Such kingship could provide unity of practical life over large tracts of country where small groups or groupings determine all ordinary political matters and leave larger things to those who know these larger things. Such is the ideal of the medieval settlement, of its cities, leagues, aristocratic demesnes, kings, and an elected emperor and pope. The image is of Charlemagne and the Holy Roman Empire, and earlier of the Greek Ptolemies and the Roman Augusti – as well as the American Articles of Confederation, the first constitution of the United States and the saner and more moderate constitution, because of its greater devolution of government and manners of life.