Music, the Performing Arts and the Emergence of Western Philosophical and Educational Thought

Abstract

The performing arts are a vehicle for historical continuity and memory. They carry with them traces of social and artistic change and the conceptual frameworks within which these arts were developed and transformed—ways that both reflect and shape society. The world of classical Greece deserves close attention in relation to the performing arts because of the extraordinary power of political, educational and philosophical thought that emerged at the height of the period and which has continued to transform our thinking over the past two and a half millennia. This paper takes classical Greece as its starting point and sets out to connect the thinking that helped define this period with subsequent forms of artistic expression.

Opening scenario

Imagine you are sitting in an open air, semicircular theatre on the slopes of the Acropolis, sometime in the fifth century BC, one of over ten thousand spectators. Below you there is a large circular dancing floor called the orchestra occupying half the circumference of the area; behind this, a wooden stage which is the actors’ changing room. In performance actors changed masks as well as costumes, adopting a range of characters, many of which are naturalistic representations, including ‘bearded king’, ‘old man’, ‘young girl’. In such a large venue facial expression is ineffective. Instead, the performers rely on sumptuous costumes, gesture and the spoken word. In addition to the actors and the spectators there is another group, the chorus—a group of dancers and singers. In the Greek tragedies the chorus sang and also danced. Greek Tragedy has its origins in the chorus and serves as the barrier between the real, empirical world and the tragic action taking place on the stage.

Greek Tragedy

Greek drama, as we know it, was created when an Athenian named Thespis added an actor’s speech to the dance and song of the chorus. Aeschylus added a second actor and later both he and Sophocles brought in a third. The three actors gradually came to dominate the setting where earlier they had been somewhat overwhelmed by the chorus. An important series of theatrical contests took place during the spring festival that celebrated the god of green, fertility and (later) wine—Dionysus—a popular, religious figure. Theatre was not only associated with religious festivals, it was also an important aspect of the city’s political life and would celebrate or commemorate battles won or lost. Theatre (music, dance, drama) was not merely an entertainment. The fifth-century BC Athenian was a responsible and active citizen interested in the affairs of the city (Knox, 1994). Aeschylus himself fought as a citizen-soldier in the battle of Marathon during the Persian Wars in 490 BC.
As we sit in the large amphitheatre we are witnessing the development of Greek Tragedy as it is influenced by the duality of both the Dionysian and Apollonian. In Greek drama the Apollonian and Dionysian gods each informed different aspects—Apollonian dream or Dionysian intoxication—and these were combined in Greek Tragedy. The German philosopher Nietzsche (2000) attempted to reveal this process when he argued that the Greeks had moved beyond being an artist in creating their gods, to becoming a work of art or ‘artists of life’. The performing arts, even at their most Dionysiac, possess form and, for artistic purposes, often falsify the subject matter. The individual characters in drama, such as the tragic hero or heroine turned victim, help to perform this falsification.

We can regard the Apollonian and Dionysian as being in competition with each other and as complementary impulses in Greek culture. Apollo is associated with visible form, comprehensible knowledge and moderation. Dionysus is linked with “formless flux, mystical intuition and excess” (Pearson, 2005, p. 10). While the Apollonian names a world of distinct individuals, the Dionysian names a world where “separate individual identities have been dissolved and human beings find themselves reconciled with the elemental forces and energies of nature” (p. 11). For example, in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles the audience sees in the chorus its own reflection raised to the heights of suffering and transfiguration (the Dionysiac). According to Nietzsche, the chorus represents the Dionysian state and its insight that life remains indestructible and pleasurable in the face of the suffering and anguish that characterizes our individual existence.

I take this point in history to be the definitive moment when the performing arts became embedded as artistic and political commentary within social life. The performing arts had moved beyond localised indigenous perceptions and representations of specific cultural beliefs and ways of being. In what follows, I seek to demonstrate how the origins of the performing arts as a collective in Greek Tragedy continue to influence how the performing arts are realized in the present day. This influence is at its most obvious in the duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian, and the related tensions and dissonances between self-restraint and self-expression. Nietzsche (2000) holds that music, poetry, the Greek chorus and Greek Tragedy are the Dionysian expression of the capacity of people, while painting and sculpture are, in the main, close representations of the world and are therefore Apollonian.

**The Dionysian**

Dionysus was born of a liaison between Zeus and a mortal woman, Semele, daughter of the King of Thebes. Originally Dionysus was worshipped as the god of fertility, but he also represented suffering and sometimes a tragic figure, struggling to be reborn as a god—the passion of Dionysus. Through Dionysus men might be restored, not by escaping their nature, but by embracing it. Dionysus gradually became the god of the senses and the sensual. These two aspects represented a primordial oneness with nature and the suffering of a boy after being torn to pieces by the Titans; and Dionysus stands for the obliteration and reconstruction of the self.

In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche (2000) suggests that ‘becoming’ means a Dionysian world of continual and never-ending creation and destruction, of conflict and contradiction. In contrast, the Apollonian world values classic beauty to alleviate the pain of becoming. Nietzsche refers to the dancers who have light feet and an exuberance which characterizes
their activity. He believes that the ‘true self’ is the creative body, wise and powerful. Nietzsche identified closely with Dionysus.

The Dionysiac is aligned with spontaneity, expression or improvisation as a first indication of its natural affinity with intoxication—a way in which the principle of individuation is felt to be overcome through the loss of clarity and the merging of individualities. The experience of both music and Greek Tragedy are typical examples. Dionysus relates closely to man, to the excitement of group emotion, an escape from reason, a move back to the simple joys of a mind and body surrendered to a unity with Nature and the spirit of life. Those who follow this god sing and dance, are ecstatic and even disorderly—they are spontaneous.

In his nineteenth-century philosophical analyses Nietzsche stresses the value of a natural kind of freedom, the freedom of being in touch with our animal instincts and drives, no matter how noble we feel ourselves to be (Nietzsche, 1989). The noble person may cover up these drives with social graces in their ‘will to power’, while revering the power in themselves and the ‘bare life’ of the Dionysian simmering beneath the veneer. While the moral codes and reason of the Apollonian might advocate a kind of freedom, Nietzsche sees these as a tyranny against human nature.

The Apollonian

Apollo is a god of self-restraint, opposed to self determination (at least for the playwright Aeschylus), and serves the good of the group. He embodies youthful but mature male beauty and moral excellence. He is associated especially with the beneficial aspects of civilization, giving to Greek culture its ideal of the beautiful, athletic, virtuous and cultivated young man. For Apollo there should be nothing in excess. “Know thyself” was the motto and the ‘will’, or willpower, the creed. Olympian as an athlete, metaphorical and representing the dream image or dreaming, Apollo stands for the control of the self, for reason (ratio); he is rational. His association with music, poetry and philosophy derives from his educational aspect; he is Musagetes, ‘leader of the Muses’. His own song, the paean, is understood in these classical times as a healing song, and he is regarded as a healing god (Howatson, 2011, p. 55).

The Apollonian relates to the art of appearance and can even be regarded as appearance. At its clearest it gives hard edges to what it depicts. Exemplifying the principle of individuation, that which concerns the world in terms of separate objects, including persons, and the plastic arts, sculpture, art and the epic are typical. Apollo is the rational and civilized side, the side that gives a community (such as the city-state) stability. He is conventional, law-abiding and organized.

Note that music in general has a substantially mathematical ratio (as Apollonian reason), but it often has a need to burst out in free, Dionysian, expression. The Greeks related music to universal order or the general knowledge of order. Heidegger (2012) reminds us that in classical Greece “mathematics contemplates the principles not because it is mathematics, but rather because Greek mathematics, in an exceptional sense, remains in accord with the being and character of thinking” (p.147). Heidegger’s concern for the present time is that “mathematics is newly developed into an authoritative form of thinking … [as] the key to all creatures” (p.148).
Apollo and Dionysus are the two gods most basic to man’s present condition and they feature strongly in Greek myths, which themselves deal with the “story of man in his cosmos—his origin, his fall, and the consequent yearnings of the impassioned spirit” (Whone, 1984, p. 17). In the story of Orpheus and his lyre, “Orpheus is man himself, son of Apollo’s reason and yet the possessor of Dionysian energy” (ibid, p. 26).

Care of the Self

The near-perfect figure of Apollo featured in countless statues from the classical Greek period reflecting the Greeks’ infatuation with their bodies, for the men at least. The Greeks of rank and status paid particular attention to their bodies through exercise and diet and this is reflected in the Socratic theme of ‘care of the self’ (epimeleia heautou)—self mastery—which combined knowledge (epistême) and exercise (meletê). Such attention was intended as a complement to ambitious behaviours such as pursuit of wealth or bodily strength through the improvement of mind, which had supervisory power (Foucault, 1990, p. 111).

In Book IX of The Republic Plato has Socrates comment that the physical regimen ought to accord with the principle of a general aesthetics of existence in which the equilibrium of the body is one of the conditions of the proper hierarchy of the soul. In fact “he will cultivate harmony in his body for the sake of consonance in his soul” (Plato, 1977a, p. 656)—which will enable him to conduct himself like a true musician (mousikos). For Foucault, physical regimen must not, therefore, be too intensely cultivated for its own sake (1990, p. 104). “The practices of the self thus take the form of an art of the self, relatively independent of any moral legislation” (Foucault, 1989, p. 299). Socrates, like most Athenian citizens, had been a soldier, a hoplite, or heavily armed infantryman. When the Athenian army was routed by the Spartans in 424 BC Socrates apparently displayed calm and courage, as Plato reports in the Symposium: “He strutted along with his head in the air, casting sidelong glances, gazing calmly on both friends and enemies.” How one carries oneself in defeat, means “men hesitate to lay hands on those who show such a countenance” (Plato, 1977b, p. 182). How the performers in the theatre comported themselves was also deeply embedded in the projection and care of the self.

Euripides and Socrates

In the Attic comedies Euripides, writing in the late fifth century BC, brought the spectator up on stage, so to speak. Leaving the tradition of Tragedy behind, the spectators at a comedy by Euripides now saw their doubles on stage, and not heroes or gods, for even gods were represented in everyday actions. The people were also influenced by Euripides in how to speak about ordinary things, his language was that pervasive. We can see in Euripides an interest in individuals, in psychology, and the beneficial effects of rationality—the Apolline. We can also see this in Plato’s image of Socrates and the maxim that virtue is knowledge, that sins arise from ignorance, and the virtuous person is a happy person. And so the rationalism and optimism of western philosophy was born.

The philosopher Socrates was a peer of Euripides and was his supporter. He did not attend the old tragedies. In fact, he expressed contempt for the old arts because they did not ‘speak the truth’. Plato, Socrates’ pupil, held similar beliefs in that he saw the old arts as an imitation or an illusion, and he believed they belonged to a lower empirical level. We now see that the western philosophical tradition was also born out of contempt for the imagination, dreams,
and the magical. Logic and dialectic principles prevailed and the arts were a “necessary correlative of, and supplement for science” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 93) but as a form of wisdom they were subsumed under philosophic reason.

Such was the influence of Socrates and Euripides that visitors to the oracle at Delphi were given pronouncements on the wisdom of these two men. Nietzsche suggests that Euripides believed everything must be conscious in order for it to be beautiful (2000, p. 87), echoing the philosophy of Socrates, who claimed that everything must be conscious in order for it to be good. Here we can see the beginnings of the aesthetic principles that have lasted for two and a half millennia.

**Key concepts in Plato and Aristotle**

The key philosophical concepts that emerged from the early forms of theatre are some important ways of describing matters of musical and artistic importance. The depiction of the experience of *aletheia* by Plato is of self-disclosure or showing itself, and this can be seen to relate to the emergence of a work of art such as music. The term also represents a kind of truth and enlightenment, the kind that Plato associated with his tale of the cave dwellers who saw only shadows and of the one who took the chance to ascend to the light while those who remained retained their unchanging ideas. The German philosopher Heidegger sought to clarify the difference between knowing and making, seeing *technê*, which the Greeks used to define both art and craft, as denoting a mode of knowing, meaning “to have seen” in the widest sense (Heidegger, 2001, p. 55).

The classical Greeks saw *aletheia*, the bringing forth out of concealment, as the act of making, whereas *technê* never signifies the act of making. Heidegger extended *aletheia* to represent the way in which the clay that made the Greek statues was brought from the earth, meaning the statues were brought out of their concealment in the clay.

When speaking of the act of creating, the Greeks used the term *poiesis* for a letting come forth, not only as a craftsman or creator, but also as a concept of democracy. While Pericles and Plato might have viewed democracy as the government of the Athenians by the aristocracy, the government by the best with the approval of the many, there is little doubt that both the Athenians and many continental philosophers today, describe the concept of democracy as the “aesthetics of politics” (Rancière, 2010, p. 45).

Plato appears to have been the first to subject the arts to a rigorous philosophical investigation to assess their value. While he includes music and painting to a limited extent, his main focus is on poetry and its association with rhetoric in that poets and rhetors claim to have knowledge and aim to produce conviction in the minds of their audience. In Plato’s time, the Greeks assumed that in addition to giving pleasure the function of poetry was to teach (Howatson, 2011, p. 17).

Plato was very aware of the power of music and in *The Republic* (Book III) he notes how evil rhythm and disharmony are akin to evil speaking and the evil temper. He points out that:

musical training is a more potent instrument than any other, because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward places of 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 in art and nature. (Plato, 1977a, p. 402)

Plato defines the effect of different modes, for example, associating the Lydian mode with expressions of sorrow, and the Ionian as “the soft or drinking harmonies”. The Ionian and Lydian are termed “relaxed”, and the Dorian and Phrygian are implied to be of “military use” (Plato, 1977a, pp. 399–400). For Plato, therefore, the arts have the power to arouse the emotions, the non-rational (Dionysian) part of a person, and so are damaging to rationality (the Apollonian) and must be subject to censorship.

Following Plato, the philosopher Aristotle (384–322BC) maintains in Poetics I—possibly the first philosophical work of aesthetic theory—that the projection of the poetic is not the result of a vague flailing about in a void, because possibilities will have been explored that gradually disclose the truth of the work’s being. Poetics is a study of productive activity, such as how to write a tragedy, but also aesthetic theory because it asks questions such as: What is poetry? What kind of poetry is tragedy? What are the essential constituents of tragedy? The work is a response to Plato’s conclusion that poetry (and some of the arts) should be banned in the city-state (Howatson, 2011, p. 17). Poetry, in Aristotle’s work, is closely aligned with the story content of Greek theatre, but note that the concept of beauty has no role to play in Aristotle’s discussion of poetry. Aristotle was born fifteen years after the death of Socrates and at seventeen he became a pupil of Plato. Later Philip of Macedonia invited him to tutor his teenage son, the boy who became known as Alexander the Great. After tutoring the young Alexander, Aristotle returned to Greece where he founded his own academy, the Lykeios (origin of Lyceum and lycée).

Aristotle’s concept of representation is especially obvious when he claims that the poet must aim to bring about the pleasure that comes from pity and terror by means of representation (Poetics I, 1987, p. xvii). In tragedy, the cathartic process works by representing pitiable, terrifying and other painful events, so that tragedy arouses pity, terror and other painful emotions in the audience, for each according to their own emotional capacity, bringing them nearer to the mean in their emotional responses and so nearer to virtue in their characters; and with this relief comes pleasure. Comedy works on the pleasant emotions in the same way (p. xx). Note that catharsis refers to the emotional relief given by the arts, tragedy and so on. In Poetics I, Aristotle tells us that “Tragedy may reasonably be thought to have [a kind of] song of its own, as it represents the songs of the oboe” (p. 57).

Aristotle’s poetic theory, his concept of representation, compares the way in which different media, objects and manner achieve their effect.

Some people use colours and forms for representations, making images of many objects (some by art, and some by practice), and others do so with sound; so too do all the arts we mentioned produce a representation using rhythm, speech and melody, but use these either separately or mixed. E.g., the art of [playing] the oboe or lyre, and any other arts that have the same potential (e.g. that of [playing] the pan pipes), use melody and rhythm alone, but the art of dancers [uses] rhythm by itself without melody; for they too can represent characters, sufferings and actions, by means of rhythm’s given form. (1987, p. 1 [1.1])

In his consideration of music as a form of truth, Aristotle (fragments from Politics VIII) states:
Since music happens to belong among pleasant things, and virtue is concerned with feeling delight correctly and loving and hating [correctly], clearly one should learn, and become habituated to, nothing so much as judging [correctly], that is, feeling delight indecent characters and fine actions. Rhythms and songs contain especially close likenesses of the true natures of anger and mildness, bravery, temperance and all their opposites, and of the other [traits of] character: this is clear from the facts—we are moved in our soul when we listen to such things. Habituation to feeling pain and delight in things that are like [the truth] is close to being in the same state regarding truth itself. [For example], if someone delights in looking at the image of something for no other reason than because of its shape, it must necessarily be pleasant for him to look at the thing in itself, the image of what he is looking at. (1987, p. 58, square brackets inserted by translator)

Aristoxenus, pupil of the Pythagoreans and Aristotle, noted the difference between rational and affective thought. Aristoxenus writes that “the geometrician makes no use of his faculty of sense-perception. He does not in any degree train his sight to discriminate the straight line, the circle, or any other figure …. But for the student of musical science, accuracy of sense-perception is a fundamental requirement” (Strunk, 1965, p. 27).

The arts affect us emotionally and appear to have some form of meaning. All our senses are involved in some form of judgement, whether hearing, sight, taste, smell, or touch, and they often work in conjunction with each other. The Greeks identified a useful concept for this judgement when they examined the things perceptible by sensations which achieved unity in the senses and these they classified as aistheton. We can see here the beginnings of the term aesthetics (which was later developed by Baumgarten in the first part of the eighteenth century as he strove to understand how readers were affected by poetry), but because so many people take the term aesthetics to mean only beauty and taste, this powerful frame has come to be seen as elitist and even old-fashioned.

**Attitudes to music and the performing arts in medieval Europe**

Attitudes to the world, knowledge and life in general changed during the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The Crusades to the Holy Land opened European eyes to the power and beliefs of Islam, and explorers such as Marco Polo ‘discovered’ what we now know as China—a parallel world that no one conceived of, with its own philosophies, arts, politics, religions, sciences, languages and ways of knowing. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, troubadours, the poet/musicians attached to the courts (in southern France, north eastern Spain and northern Italy especially), managed, through their performance art, to change the long-standing focus on Woman as responsible for the original sin. They completely reversed former beliefs by placing Woman on a pedestal and making them the subject of courtly love. Troubadours believed that poetry was inextricably linked with music.

Women also composed music and there is even evidence of women troubadours. In this period the Bible played a large part in the spread of reading literacy, although for the first fifteen hundred years of its existence the Bible was the preserve of a select few. Many parish priests could not read the book and were reliant on instructions from a higher order; trust, therefore, was central elements in belief. Women were certainly omitted from access, for example, the Anchorite Hildegard of Bingen—twelfth-century writer, poet, composer and philosopher—as a woman, was prevented from knowing Latin and so her compositions and poetry had to go through the mediation of a male scholar.
Medieval drama was also dominated by the Christian faith and most themes were of a religious or moral nature. Genres included liturgical drama, mystery plays, morality plays, farces, and masques. Women also had a place in its creation, and Hrosvitha (c935-973), an aristocratic canoness and historian in northern Germany, wrote at least six plays modeled on comedies but using religious subjects. She “prefaced her collection by stating that her moral purpose [was] to save Christians from the guilt they must feel when reading Classical literature” (“Medieval Theatre”). Thus it appears that she assumed a Latin-literate audience.

By the late fifteenth century most forms of schooling placed an emphasis on oratory and rhetoric and every educated man was a skilled rhetorician. This development had a profound impact on the composition of music, from attitudes to text-bound works to the development of new musical styles and forms, such as madrigals and opera, and also impacted on the forms of meaning that might be drawn from a musical work. Music (harmony), since antiquity, had belonged, along with arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, to the Quadrivium—representing the philosophical and theological disciplines of the Seven Liberal Arts—the place where the four ways meet. Rhetoric began to generate new theoretical values, particularly during the Baroque period (1600–1750), and this developed from the Trivium—the three reading and writing disciplines remaining in the Seven Liberal Arts. The Trivium, the place where the three ways meet, comprised grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Note that at this time Scholasticism, the dominant theological and philosophical school of thought in medieval western Europe, was based on the works of Aristotle and of the major philosophers of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries such as Aquinas, Scotus, and Ockham.

Opera, a mix of music, drama, and dance, emerged in Florence in the late sixteenth century—in the Renaissance period. Opera was loosely influenced by the mystery plays of the medieval period, but more significantly, the early composers (collectively known as the Camerata) were determined to revive the glories of ancient Greece.

The Baroque and Classical periods

The literary turn, which occurred towards the end of the medieval period, promoted rhetoric. The presence of rhetoric and its perception, what Ong calls the “paradigm of all verbal expression” (2000, p. 110), extended from classical Greece through to nineteenth-century literary styles. As a means of defending an argument against implied adversaries, rhetoric was a highly-valued political and cultural tool, reminding us that the communicative modes of orality and aurality were not eclipsed by the written language forms.

Baroque music aimed for a musical expression of words comparable with rhetorical principles and this eventually gave shape to progressive elements. In 1739, in Der Vollkommene Capellmeister, Mattheson laid out his rational plan for musical thought based on the principles of rhetoric concerned with finding and presenting arguments. These were: inventio (invention of an idea), dispositio (arrangement of the idea into the parts of an oration), decoratio or elaboratio or elocutio (the elaboration or decoration of the idea), and pronuntiatio (the performance or delivery of the ideas). These concepts were not rigidly applied to every piece of music but they had a profound impact on all compositions. Just as an orator had to invent an idea, so too did a composer have to invent an idea suitable for construction, deconstruction, and development. The command of rules and techniques common to oratory was applied to music as the embellishment of ideas with rhetorical imagery and the infusion of passion, particularly to text. Common figures applied in
rhetorical ways were melodic repetition, figures based on fugal imitation, dissonance, melodic figures, figures formed by silence, and ideas to illustrate the pictorial nature of words, sometimes referred to as word painting (Buelow, 1980, pp. 793–803). The Baroque composer planned the affective content of each work with the devices of their craft and they expected the response of their audience to be based on an equally rational insight into the meaning or implication of the music. Apollonian reason (as ratio) had extended through to these times.

The period in music history categorized as Classical followed the Baroque and spanned approximately 1750 to 1830. It used classical Greek ideals as its model, for example, clarity of thought and structure. German idealism, a philosophy movement promoted by Fichte and Hegel, held sway at the start of the nineteenth century and traced its roots back the Greek philosophy, and Parmenides in particular. One of the movement’s legacies is the notion of dialectical argument, which in classical Greece was a form of reasoning that moved through question and response. By the Middle Ages the term meant logic, but the philosopher Kant (1724–1804) then applied it to arguments that showed that principles of science have contradictory aspects. Hegel (1770–1831) thought logic (and world history) followed a dialectical path in which contradictions were transcended, but which then gave rise to new contradictions which then also required resolution.

This kind of thought began to influence the arts and I believe it shows itself most clearly in the concept of sonata form which arose during this period. This musical form established two seemingly opposing themes in different keys, often described as masculine and feminine, but generally one exerts a rational strength while the other is generally more lyrical. Even though there were many works written at the time that utilized two differing themes, in the early sonatas the first theme tended to be more assertive and clear cut (Apollonian), while the second theme was more lascivious (Dionysian). These themes are interwoven in the development section of the work as they seek transcendence over their original form, and then are re-established in agreement (often the same key) as they recapitulate. I am not suggesting that composers at the time deliberately set out to express themselves in dialectic form in order to be philosophical, but simply that they captured the mood of the times.

**Greek influences on thought in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries**

As the nineteenth century entered its late phase the influence of Greek thought was still apparent. The tragedies of Wagnerian opera were influenced by Greek Tragedy and the philosophy of Nietzsche, which was inspired by the myths of Apollo and Dionysus. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (written 1870–1871) Nietzsche makes a dedication to Wagner in his preface. In the text he later demonstrates that the conflict is not yet over between the two gods when he writes:

And now let us imagine how in this world, constructed on illusion and moderation and restrained by art, the ecstatic sound of the Dionysian celebration rang out all around with a constantly tempting magic, how in such celebrations the entire excess of nature sang out loudly in joy, suffering, and knowledge, even in the most piercing scream. Let us imagine what the psalm-chanting Apollonian artist, with his ghostly harp music could offer in comparison to this daemonic popular singing. The muses of the art of “illusion” withered away in the face of an art which spoke truth in its intoxicated state: the wisdom of Silenus cried out “Woe! Woe!” against the serene Olympian. Individualism, with all its limits and
moderation, was destroyed in the self-forgetfulness of the Dionysian condition and forgot its Apollonian principles. (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 17)

Heidegger, in his 1944 lectures on Nietzsche, reflects on Dionysus in Nietzsche’s philosophical world and affirms the importance of the Dionysian:

Dionysus [is] the unconventional yes to the being of beings; that in the totality of beings, everything redeems and affirms itself; nothing is forbidden any longer—except for weakness; strength’s urge to action. This yes—the Dionysian. Dionysus—as the name of the faith in the yes to the will to will. (2011, p. 59)

In the first half of the twentieth century the American philosopher John Dewey adopted a neo-Aristotelian approach to practical knowledge, acknowledging that phronesis is the intelligent use of practical reason and its concern is with worldly action, or praxis. For Dewey, all reason is practical reason and, as with Aristotle, intentionality distinguishes intelligent action from mere behaviour. Thinking makes explicit the intelligent element in our experience and makes it possible to act with an end in view, while interpretation exposes the possibilities for some consequence. Dewey sees deliberation as a part of practical reason, a sort of rehearsal in the imagination, which clears the way to a naturalistic freedom constrained by context. Deliberation requires experimentation through which reason will unconceal a desired value that we then assert into action.

Dewey’s perspective on the arts in education is not aimed at the gifted, or necessarily the artists of the future, but is framed in simple democratic terms through which all children’s musical abilities can be developed so they can make cultural use of their leisure time. Note the similarities to democracy in Greek times and the role of Greek theatre in reinforcing political beliefs. Dewey gave much consideration to modern democratic education. The following quote, written in 1934, stresses the importance of keeping the arts in touch with society.

When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals. Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement. (Dewey, 2005, p. 2)

**Summing up**

Key philosophical concepts that I have outlined in this paper include aletheia, or bringing into the light of a creative idea; technē, which defines the revealed idea as a mode of knowing belonging to craft or art; poiesis, which applies to letting the creative idea come forth to be developed and giving it the freedom to grow; phronesis, which is the intelligent use of practical reason in the development of the idea, and praxis as reflecting upon the action and putting the ideas into place, perhaps through a performance. Perceptions and sensations are defined by aesthesis.

In their later writings both Nietzsche and Heidegger turned to poetry to represent their philosophical thinking. Heidegger, in particular, promotes poets as thinkers, as had Aristotle over two thousand years earlier. Heidegger holds Aristotle in high esteem, and he also makes
extensive use of earlier Greek philosophers such as Parmenides who, in the fragments that survive, also conceived philosophical propositions in poetic form.

In promoting the centrality of meditation/contemplation in thinking, Heidegger (2011) considers the similarity between meditation and poetizing and decides that “what is peculiar to the thinker and the poet is they receive their meditation from the word” (p. 5). Here we need to consider what is the essence of thinking, and what is the essence of poetry. Contemplation appears as central for this is the beginning of questioning (p. 55).

Heidegger (1996) later emphasizes how poetry is the ground of thinking. By poetry and the poetic, Heidegger also implicates the arts. He stresses the importance of hearing and seeing, believing hearing and seeing are more than the registering of sensations:

Because our hearing and seeing is never a mere sensible registering, it is therefore off the mark to insist that thinking as listening and bringing-into-view are only meant as a transposition of meaning, namely as transposing the supposedly sensible into the non-sensible. (Heidegger, 1996, p. 48)

At the outset of this paper I initiated an exploration of the origins of western performance arts through a description of Greek Tragedy and the subsequent changes to Greek drama by later writers, backed by philosophers such as Sophocles, Plato and Aristotle. In my discussion of the two approaches to engaging in the arts, the Apollonian—rational and reserved, the Dionysian—natural and uninhibited, I have hinted at how these approaches are generally present in the arts and how they might be utilized pedagogically. In our thinking in music, and the ways in which the arts are framed in our lives, we can see that we owe a great deal to the performers and philosophers of classical Greece. Central to my argument has been the part played by the performing arts in the early development of western philosophy, as well as the role played by philosophy in our contemplation of the arts.

What this essay also demonstrates is that history and tradition are not merely things lost in the past. They remain vital forces in the present. Heidegger (2011) says humans think in the present—that which is—but this means they have thought what has been and what will come. Gadamer, a former student of Heidegger, reminds us of the responsibilities we each must take when we encounter history and tradition. He believes we need to see tradition as something that causes us to think of the grounding of our past and to question how this might inform out future. In the digital age it is too easy to either dismiss tradition completely or to see it as merely tit-bits of information. Gadamer (2004) stresses that tradition, or “what is handed down from the past”, is not merely what is behind us as what we take over, more or less automatically. Tradition confronts us as a task, “an effort of understanding. It precludes complacency, passivity and self-satisfaction with what we securely possess, instead it requires active questioning and self-questioning” (p. xvi)—a questioning and self-questioning that the performing arts undertake as a thought-full matter of course.

The materials and techniques of the performing arts are the tools of knowledge; they contribute to the making of the idea itself. The performing arts might be thought of as the ‘arts of time’, because their basic mode of communication shapes time in different ways. Humans may shape the arts, but the arts in turn shape us as humans in the ‘art of being’.

References


**Biography**

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