



## Research Article

# Music therapy in antiquity: a Sino-Hellenic comparison

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### Article Info

**Received:** 12 April 2024

**Accepted:** 24 June 2024

**Online:** 30 June 2024

### Keywords

Ancient Greek music

Chinese music

Music therapy

Sino-Hellenic comparison

### Abstract

Among various written sources across regions, music was linked with magic, “shamanism”, and superpower etc. In Ancient Greece, Orpheus’ lyre was considered sacred and had healing powers; the four-fold domain and the allegorical relation of Apollo and Asclepius hence linked music and medicine. Then, Chinese considered music (樂) was heavily linked with medicine (藥): the five musical notes symbolized five basic elements, five celestial bodies as well as human’s five viscera and five emotions, etc. This, overall, constructed a systematic theory of music and human health according to the rule of heaven. In addition, both thoughts were highly influential: Orpheus’ lyre was often compared with David’s harp in Biblical tradition; the idea of music therapy was inherited and improved by the Arabs; the Chinese system was adapted by medieval Japanese, which further related musical modes and human moralities with the abovementioned Chinese system. However, both traditions are also different: the music and superpower connection mostly occur in Greek mythologies, the strict sense of “music therapy” was mostly a fringe medicine in the Hellenic world. The Chinese, however, quite systematically theorized music’s medical functions, makes it become a significant part of the Chinese medical science. Moreover, the tight connection of music and proto-shamanism in the Chinese tradition gradually emphasized the crucial usage of music in rites (禮) and divination, but such feature was never found in the Hellenic counterpart. My essay will start with a review and source compilation of music therapy in both Greek and Chinese tradition, followed by a comparison of their similarities and differences. In conclusion, I will summarize my findings of this study: to compare the most important similarities and differences of these two cultures in order to assess music as a way into the values of different ancient societies.

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### To cite this article

Huang, P. (2024). Music therapy in antiquity: a Sino-Hellenic comparison. *Journal of Music Theory and Transcultural Music Studies*, 2(1), 1-6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12748584>

## Introduction

It is fascinating that music bears a lot of social significance across cultures, and in many cases, is also considered to bear healing power and can be applied as medicine. Thus, “music therapy” as a concept existed since many centuries ago, and the study of it requires interdisciplinary approaches including musicology, acoustics, medical science, cognitive science and beyond. On the other hand, although the history of music therapy is sometimes noticed by scholars, the comparative approach is not yet a popular field and awaits further exploration. Hence, my current study aims to focus on Ancient Greek and Early Chinese tradition of music and medicine, as both traditions had significantly influenced the two sides of the Eurasia.

My study adopted the methodology from musicology, history, and comparative literature, in order to better collect, analyse and summarise various primary sources from Ancient Greek and Early Chinese texts. The comparison is based on searching their similar and different features to find out whether they are homologous, pseudo-homologous (no

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connection but appeared similar), one influenced another, or comparable based on similar mechanism or substratum underneath.

### The origin of music therapy

There was no evidence about exactly when and how music was first regarded as medicine. However, it is generally believed that such therapeutic means were already practiced in prehistoric period, based on these several observations:

- Music, poetry, and dance are considered homologous across culture, and they frequently co-appeared according to the earliest found record<sup>2</sup>.
- The social practice of music in various means was already found in prehistoric period<sup>3</sup>.
- The belief of supernatural being widely existed, and music was long used as a mean to perform such ritual practice.
- The concept of synaesthesia is a common human nature, hence it is reasonable that different cultures associated music with other seemingly “irrelevant” fields<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, the correlation between music and healing effects was built upon a “shamanistic” epistemology. Such feature is especially obvious in the Chinese tradition: for the use of Chinese character “*yī* (醫)”<sup>5</sup>, which means “medicine” or “curing”. An alternative form, “*shì*”, used the character “*wū* (巫)”, i.e. “witchcraft”, “sorcery” that draws a connection of curing patients with shamanistic ritual and superpower<sup>6</sup>. In some early etymological treatises, *yī* was once considered identical to *wū*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the character “*yùe* (樂)” means “music”, but the same character has another pronunciation *lè*, means “happy” and “joy”. When adding a character means “herb (艸)” on top of *yùe*, it becomes “*yào* (藥)”, i.e. “(medical) drugs”. These overall suggest that, the early Chinese thinking has a general relation in those different concepts; or at least, the relations of characters inspired later interpretations and further validated such thoughts within the Chinese culture<sup>8</sup>.

In the Hellenic world, the relations can be mainly found from mythological sources: Apollo, one of the most important deities that the Greeks worshipped, is believed to be the god of harmony, and his power comprises a four-fold realm of music (μουσική), archery (τοξική), divination (μαντική), and healing (ιατρική)<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, from the genealogy of Hellenic deities, Apollo, the god of music symbolised by his divine lyre, is also the father of Asclepius, the god of medicine and the Muses, deities of various arts<sup>10</sup>. This, eventually builds up a metaphorical mean of music and medicine and allows later authors explaining this relation further. This mythology-based relations will be discussed in the next chapter.

### On Various Greek Myths and Legends

The Apollo’s tradition is so famous, that the tradition of μουσική is named after the muse (μοῦσα). Since then, there are various interpretations about music as medicine, but they are mostly rooted from the belief of music’s supernatural power. A clear example indicating such superpower is Amphion, who was said to build the Thebes city by the power of his seven-string kithara<sup>11</sup>. Regarding musical aspects, the Pythagoreans believe that medicine can purify the body, while music can purify the soul, and furthermore their relationship can reflect the unity of a higher universal order<sup>12</sup>; since Pythagorean scholars are also famous for associate musical interval with numerical ratios, medicine was also described in

<sup>2</sup> There are various studies about this topic; for the approach on comparative literature, see Zhu (1987: 13-18).

<sup>3</sup> Despite by definition, prehistoric means no written source, this can be accessed by various archaeological findings. For instance, see the description and figures provided by Lawergren (2008: 110-117).

<sup>4</sup> See Zhang (2009: 130-134).

<sup>5</sup> Due to the feature that Chinese characters is not phonogram, the pronunciation of ancient Chinese was lost, and in here we use modern pronunciation to label it, which makes no difference in our analysis here.

<sup>6</sup> For more descriptions on the relevant Chinese characters, see Yang & Lu (2014: 799-802).

<sup>7</sup> In ancient Chinese dictionary *Guangya* (廣雅): “醫，巫也。”, see Li (2012: 1290).

<sup>8</sup> For more information, see Xu (2006: 20-24).

<sup>9</sup> For further explanation and a list of Ancient Greek sources, see Franklin (2002: 2)

<sup>10</sup> For the “sister disciplines” of music and medicine with the focus of mythology, see Gouk (2000: 171-196).

<sup>11</sup> See Franklin (2002: 104).

<sup>12</sup> See Tornese (2015: 118-120).

terms of numbers and forms a three-fold correlation<sup>13</sup>. A hybrid of both would be the case of Orpheus, a legendary musician, and also a prophet, priest and healer. Orpheus' music and voice was said to stir humans, animals, trees, inanimate objects and even the gods; in Greek tragedies, this musical talent helped him to bring up his dead wife from the underworld<sup>14</sup>. This shared feature strongly shaped the Greek's early musical practice.

Hence, from the Greek musical tradition, we can trace out how musical practice echoed those religious thoughts. Some early practices stressed with the power of words, in the form of incantations, along with the music performed. The healing incantations are already recorded in the Homeric epic of *Odyssey*<sup>15</sup>. Another typical instance is the *paean* (παιών), a style of song-dance in honour of Apollo, which etymologically means "who heals illnesses through magic"<sup>16</sup> and hence the topic of healing power frequently applied. A typical example reads as following<sup>17</sup>:

Ἵπν' ὀδύνας ἀδαής, Ἵπνε δ' ἀλγέων,  
εὐαἶς ἡμῖν ἔλθοις, εὐαίων,  
εὐαίων, ὦναξ· ὁμμασι δ' ἀντίσχοις  
τάνδ' αἴγλαν, ἃ τέταται τανῦν.  
ἴθι ἴθι μοι, παιών.

[Sleep, unversed in pain, unversed in anguish, may you come to us blowing fair, you of the good life, good life, lord. May you continue to hold up to his eyes this light of healing, which now extends before him. Come, come to me, healer.]

It is worth noticing that paean was one of the main music forms in Classical Greece, usually opposed to *dithyramb* which worships Dionysus; obviously, such music-healing thoughts are commonly known and accepted by the Hellenes. However, despite there are abundant records on musical practice with healing functions rooted from mythological belief, they are mainly described in various poetry and literature texts – there are words and music that are said to have healing functions, those are only common believes, and mainly focused on the healing power of deities, in other words, without mentioning any "real" medical practice specified to the patients. Also, none of them are described, verified and theorised by "professional" medical treatises. Instead, the Greek medical writings about music therapy are far different, which will be explained in later chapter.

### The Chinese Medical Theory

The Chinese followed a seemingly different path: in the *Huángdì Nèijīng* (黃帝內經, lit. "Yellow Emperor's Inner Sutra"), the earliest and the most important medical treatise that constructed the foundation of traditional Chinese medical science, theorised the concept of music therapy by associated five musical notes with human's five viscera (*Wúzàng* 五臟), as well as other concepts. This text is extremely vital, and therefore is quoted in full here:

[Huang] Di: "The five depots correspond to the four seasons. Do all of them have [something specific] that they collect and receive?"

Qi Bo: "Yes, they do.

The East; green-blue color. Having entered it communicates with the liver; it opens an orifice in the eyes. It stores essence in the liver. The disease it brings forth is shock. Its flavor: sour; its class: herbs and trees; its domestic animal: chicken; its grain: wheat. Its correspondence with the four seasons, above it is Jupiter. [Hence the qi of spring is in the head.] Its tone: jue; its number: eight. [Hence one knows that [its] diseases are located in the sinews.] Its odor: fetid.

The South; red color. Having entered it communicates with the heart; it opens an orifice in the ears. It stores essence in the heart. Hence the disease [it brings forth] is in the five depots. Its flavor: bitter; its class: fire; its domestic animal: sheep. Its grain: glutinous millet. Its correspondence with the four seasons, above it is Mars. [Hence one knows that its diseases are located in the vessels.] Its tone: zhi; its number: seven. Its odor: burned.

The center; yellow color. Having entered it communicates with the spleen. It opens an orifice in the mouth. It stores essence in the spleen. Hence the disease [it brings forth] is at the base of the tongue. Its flavor: sweet; its class: soil. Its domestic animal: ox; its grain: panicked millet. Its correspondence with the four seasons, above it is Saturn. [Hence one knows that its diseases are in the flesh.] Its tone: gong. Its number: five. Its odor: aromatic.

<sup>13</sup> According to Aristides Quintilianus. See Barker (1989: 506).

<sup>14</sup> See Uždavinys (2011: 61-63).

<sup>15</sup> See West (2000: 54-55).

<sup>16</sup> See Beekes (2009: 1142).

<sup>17</sup> For more description, see Rutherford (1994: 113-129).

*The West; white color. Having entered it communicates with the lung. It opens an orifice in the nose. It stores essence in the lung. Hence the disease [it brings forth] is in the back. Its flavor: acrid, its class: metal. Its domestic animal: horse; its grain: rice. Its correspondence with the four seasons, above it is Venus. [Hence one knows that its diseases are in the skin and body hair.] Its tone: shang; its number: nine. Its odor: fishy.*

*The North; black color. Having entered it communicates with the kidneys. It opens an orifice in the two yin [sites]. It stores essence in the kidneys. Hence the disease [it brings forth] is in the ravines. Its flavor: salty; its class: water; its domestic animal: the swine. Its grain: the bean. Its correspondence with the four seasons, above it is Mercury. [Hence one knows that its diseases are in the bones.] Its tone: yu; its number: six. Its odor: foul. Hence, those who are experts in the [examination of the] vessels, they carefully investigate the five depots and the six palaces, whether [a movement] runs contrary to or follows [its regular course]. The arrangements of yin and yang, exterior and interior, female and male: they store them in their bosom, and they link the heart with the essence. If it is not this kind of a person, do not teach him. If it is not this kind of truth, do not confer it. This is called achieving the Way.”<sup>18</sup>*

Despite this is the key passage that establishes the foundation of Chinese music therapy, besides five musical notes and five human viscera, several other features are included in this comparison. This general correlation can actually be found in some other Chinese treatises, such as *Huainánzǐ* (淮南子)<sup>19</sup>. The difference is, *Huainánzǐ* does mention the same number, musical notes, planets, with additional feature of ancient sages and sacred beasts etc., but not the human viscera, taste and odor as noted by *Huángdì Nèijīng*. This actually provides us an important hint that, *Huángdì Nèijīng* talks about the musical note-viscera correlation in length is because of its medical feature, and such correlation is based on and serves as a fraction of a grand panorama, that is, a Chinese version of the universal harmony based on the principle of five elements (*Wǔxíng* 五行). Not only Chinese music therapy, but also the whole traditional Chinese medical system, was built upon this general understanding that the human body echoes the universal order.

Besides this systematisation, there are also other writings that describes about music's healing effect, such as in *Shǐjì* (史記, lit. The Record of History):

*Sounds and music are what stir and move the arteries and veins, what pass through and through the vital spirits and what give harmony and correction to the heart; thus, the note gong moves the spleen and (puts man) in harmony with perfect holiness; the note shang moves the lung and (puts man) in harmony with perfect righteousness; the note jue moves the liver and (puts man) in harmony with perfect goodness; the note zhi moves the heart and (puts man) in harmony with perfect rites; the note yu moves the kidneys and (puts man) in harmony with perfect wisdom. Music, then, is that which within supports the heart that has become perfect, and that which without establishes the distinctions between the noble and the vile. Above, it is used for sacrifices in the ancestral temple; below, it is used to transform the multitude of the people.”<sup>20</sup>*

Hence, again, the concept of music as medicine can also be placed within another large framework that, since the “good” music is a mean of universal harmony, it has positive effects not only on human body, but also in building a better and harmonious society. Hence, the Confucianist treatise *Xiàojīng* (孝經, lit. *The Classic of Filial Piety*) famously wrote: “For changing their manners and altering their customs, there is nothing better than music.”<sup>21</sup>

### Practical Examples in Ancient Greece and Early China

In the Greek world, there are a few cases that were described with medical cases, such as Xenocrates applied instrumental music to cure hysterics; Ismenias was reputed to apply his aulos music on curing sciatica. Bolus of Mendes mentioned

<sup>18</sup> This is not a good translation, but it is the only available English translation so far and its meaning is at least accurate. See Unschuld & Tessenow (2011: 91-94). The corresponding Chinese text is: “帝曰：五藏應四時，各有收受乎，岐伯曰：有。東方青色，入通於肝，開竅於目，藏精於肝，其病發驚駭，其味酸，其類草木，其畜雞，其穀麥，其應四時，上為歲星，是以春氣在頭也，其音角，其數八，是以知病之在筋也，其臭臊。南方赤色，入通於心，開竅於耳，藏精於心，故病在五藏，其味苦，其類火，其畜羊，其穀黍，其應四時，上為熒惑星，是以知病之在脈也，其音徵，其數七，其臭焦。中央黃色，入通於脾，開竅於口，藏精於脾，故病在舌本，其味甘，其類土，其畜牛，其穀稷，其應四時，上為鎮星，是以知病之在肉也，其音宮，其數五，其臭香。西方白色，入通於肺，開竅於鼻，藏精於肺，故病在背，其味辛，其類金，其畜馬，其穀稻，其應四時，上為太白星，是以知病之在皮毛也，其音商，其數九，其臭腥。北方黑色，入通於腎，開竅於二陰，藏精於腎，故病在谿，其味鹹，其類水，其畜彘，其穀豆，其應四時，上為辰星，是以知病之在骨也，其音羽，其數六，其臭腐。故善為脈者，謹察五藏六府，一逆一從，陰陽表裏，雌雄之紀，藏之心意，合心於精，非其人勿教，非其真勿授，是謂得道。”

<sup>19</sup> See Major et al. (2010: 118). The text is omitted here.

<sup>20</sup> Translated after Chavannes (1898: 291-292). In Chinese: “故音樂者，所以動蕩血脈，通流精神而和正心也。故宮動脾而和正聖，商動肺而和正義，角動肝而和正仁，徵動心而和正禮，羽動腎而和正智。故樂所以內輔正心而外異貴賤也；上以事宗廟，下以變化黎庶也。”

<sup>21</sup> In Chinese: “移風易俗，莫善於樂。”; see Legge (1879: 481-482).

that snakebites can be cured by aulos-playing, and aulos music was also considered helpful for pain relief, etc.<sup>22</sup> Those are all scholarly writings, with most of them stressed upon the improving of mental status, which are in fact closer to music's pedagogical function on maintaining better *ethos* (ἦθος). A few cases are recorded by famous medical doctors, such as Celsus and Rufus of Ephesus, but the quantity is unproportionally little compared to the vast amount of medical writing. Instead, writings mentioned music therapy did not seem to find it important. As Martin West observed, “Mainstream medicine relied on diet, exercise, baths, drugs, or, if necessary, surgery. Music therapy was fringe medicine, even if one or two regular doctors are recorded as having made some use of it ... Interest in the idea was sustained not so much by medical literature as by philosophical and musicological literature.”<sup>23</sup>

In the Chinese tradition, despite there was systematic theory attempting to correlate musical notes and human body, the real cases of music therapy are even more “fringer”: the only example was found in a literati's sarcastic writing (七發, lit. “Seven Stimuli”), based on a probably fabricated story that listening to plenty of music across regions will have better effect on human body with bad living behaviour<sup>24</sup>. For all the secondary literatures I have searched, the examples about Chinese music therapy are highly far-fetched – many only talks about obtaining a better mood by listening to “good” music. Those writings are closer to music criticism (on its effect of good politics) or music pedagogy. Such distinction may suggest that the theory and practice of music therapy in Chinese tradition are more detached<sup>25</sup> even compared to the Greeks.

### Later Influences: A Quick Note

Despite both Greek and Chinese tradition of music therapy developed far differently, their heritage strongly influenced later cultures: the Chinese version of *musica universalis* was transmitted to Japan, which hybrid with Buddhist thoughts on five moral features etc. and hence constituted an even larger framework<sup>26</sup>.

The Greeks also shared their legacy on music therapy: mythologically, the story of Orpheus' lyre is highly comparable to David's harp in Biblical tradition, which may share a tie of their connections<sup>27</sup>. In addition, despite the theory of four humours already existed in Greek medical traditions, this idea was inherited by the Arabs and then correlated them with musical features: this is first proposed by Al-Kindi, who related the four-stringed Arabic oud (عود) with four human humours and four elements<sup>28</sup>. Despite hypothetical, such difference may reflect that there existed a broader “East-West dichotomy” of musical universe, at least in the thoughts of music therapy.

### Conclusion

This essay briefly compares the tradition of music as medicine in both Ancient Greece and Early Chinese thoughts. They share several similarities: both are originated from prehistoric period, tightly associated with primitive ritual and divination, and both gained their focus in literary and philosophical texts far more than actual medical writings. Both believed that the power of music is more effective on human mind than human body, which frequently overlapped with traditional pedagogical thinkings. The Greek theory of music therapy was more mythological-influenced than the Chinese – despite Huángdì is a legendary figure here, the music-therapeutic relation in Chinese thoughts is merely a subset of a larger universal order. So, we cannot understand the Chinese mindset of music therapy from a purely medical perspective, but instead, this has to be placed under a grand cosmological view, i.e. the Chinese *musica universalis*, to appropriately access its function and influence within the context of culture.

On the other hand, both traditions are not the ideal pair for addressing comparison because, despite both shared many similarities, they like two apparently similar fruits but are grown on different roots. In the Hellenic world, the key

<sup>22</sup> Those various examples are summarised by West (2000: 59-62).

<sup>23</sup> Quoted from West (2000: 63).

<sup>24</sup> See Knechtges & Swanson (1970: 99-116).

<sup>25</sup> Actually this is not a single case: the Chinese music art and the technical tunings in music system are also detached – the theory of tuning is highly sophisticated, but this is rather symbolic and used in astronomy, calendar etc., and does not effectively converted to any “real” practice.

<sup>26</sup> This is first described in *Kangen Ongi* (管弦音義), a medieval Japanese treatise attributed to a Buddhist monk. This writing is not well-known in the English academia; for a brief explanation, see Bialock (2012: 176-177).

<sup>27</sup> See Provenza (2015: 298-338).

<sup>28</sup> See Abdoun (2011: 46).

idea was music as purifier of the soul, developed by Pythagoreans and Platonists, and it is more pedagogical and philosophical rather than medical. The Chinese counterpart is, instead, more cosmological. Therefore, the “medical” feature as we observe are rather superficial in this sense; the more “ontological” part of both Greek and Chinese culture will be more valuable to compare with.

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