



COMMENT ON “AROUSSED BY THE ODES, ESTABLISHED BY THE RULES OF PROPRIETY, PERFECTED BY MUSIC: INTEGRATING AESTHETIC EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY MUSIC EDUCATION THROUGH CONFUCIAN AESTHETIC PHILOSOPHY”


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As Yang (2024) shows, the beauty of harmony lies at the heart of Confucian musical aesthetics and serves as a central theme in the author’s discussion. Confucianism asserts that the essence of music is found in “harmony.” The creation of music, the development of musical aesthetic activities, and the formation of musical aesthetic views all revolve around this principle.

The *Record of Music (Yue Ji)* states, “By nature, a human being is tranquil at birth.” Without external influences, human nature exists in a state of self-sufficiency and tranquility. However, humans inevitably encounter external influences that give rise to desires, which, if left unchecked, can lead to disorder within individuals and across society. Consequently, the ancient kings instituted propriety and music to regulate human behavior. As the fifth chapter of *Record of Music (Yue Xiang)* articulates, “Virtue is the source of human nature, and music is the expression of virtue”. (Wang, 2011, p. 112).

From Confucius to Mencius and Xunzi, and continuing through the *Record of Music*, Confucian thinkers recognized the multifaceted nature of humanity. Consistent with Mencius, the *Record of Music* posits that “virtue” is the foundation of human nature, aligning

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closely with Mencius' concept of "goodness." According to the first chapter of the *Record of Music (Yue Ben)*, individuals should "correct behaviors or ideas that contradict humanity and restore true justice and morality," which emphasizes the need to reclaim this inherent "goodness" rooted in the Confucian ideal of familial love. Confucianism asserts that moral goodness in human relationships constitutes the essence of humanity, distinguishing humans from animals. The nobility of human nature resides in possessing this innate goodness, often referred to as "heavenly conscience"—a moral sense bestowed by Heaven. To return to this original nature encapsulates the essence of what it means to be human.

Humanity possesses good elements and the imperative to nurture and develop the goodness inherent in human nature. Therefore, Confucianism has outlined a path for cultural development, positing that only when all humanistic expressions, including music, are committed to evolving towards human goodness can they achieve harmony and enduring peace. The Confucian theory of human nature provides a philosophical foundation for the aesthetic of "peace" and establishes a core standard for evaluating the aesthetics of Confucian music. The concept of "the goodness of man" serves as a point of convergence and a medium through which Confucianism connects individuals, morality, and society. This goodness of human nature is bestowed by Heaven, linking individuals, society, and the universe. Thus, Confucianism aligns the belief that "human nature is good" with the moral attributes of "Heaven." In other words, Confucianism begins with humanity, aligns human nature with the natural world, and ultimately aspires to achieve "harmony between man and nature."

In Confucianism, "virtue" is often synonymous with "goodness," and beauty frequently exhibits an interchangeable relationship with goodness; thus, discussing goodness can also imply a discussion of beauty. In the *Annotated Collection on the Songs of Chu*, the Song Dynasty Confucian scholar Zhu Xi expresses similar ideas, noting that "beauty can be understood as goodness" and "good and evil can be understood as beauty and ugliness". (Zhu and Huang, 2022, p. 69).

From the perspective of individual moral cultivation, the concepts of goodness and beauty are unified. The aesthetic perspective of harmony is intrinsically linked to goodness, as goodness serves as a necessary condition for achieving harmony. Zhu Xi interpreted the essence of heaven through the concepts of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. He illustrated these principles by stating that the father-son and brotherly relationships exemplify benevolence, while the monarch-minister distinctions and the bonds of friendship exemplify righteousness. According to Zhu Xi, the principles governing all things in the world stem from these four cardinal virtues. The "harmonious" disposition represented by benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom embodies the interplay between heavenly nature and human desires, ultimately tending to revert to the essence of heaven. "Achieving harmony" refers to a balanced state and a return to the inherent nature of humanity. This

process is realized through the moral principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom. Thus, cultivating virtues internally and externally is essential for fostering the subject's harmonious aesthetic in an ethical society. In daily life, demonstrating respect and sincerity is a means of self-cultivation. Sincerity and respect are essential attitudes that the aesthetic subject should maintain. Achieving harmony necessitates that the aesthetic subject embodies unwavering respect, sincerity, and neutrality at all times.

Zhu Xi posited that the essence of Taoism resides in harmony, representing the unity of past and future states as well as the perfect balance between inner essence and outer manifestation. In his perspective, beauty emerges from the interplay of external form and inner significance, whereby the beauty of external sounds and appearances manifests deeper, intrinsic meaning. Zhu Xi asserted that the goodness inherent in reason, Taoism, and ethics constitute the inner components of beauty. He distinguishes between the spiritual pleasure experienced by the subject and the sensual pleasure, as well as the goodness reflected in ethics and morality. However, within his concept, these two dimensions are unified; sensual pleasure is an expression of the inner meaning of beauty. “By actively practicing good deeds, when they reach a state of abundance, inner beauty will naturally manifest without relying on external factors”. (Zhu, 2008, p. 122). This type of inner beauty is self-sufficient and does not require external validation. Once it emerges, it can radiate a sublime brilliance. Zhu Xi's understanding of harmony and his conception of beauty are entirely unified. Harmony embodies the principles of both freedom and adherence to the Tao, representing the ultimate reconciliation between the inner and outer realms – the highest manifestation of beauty. This principle precedes all things and is transcendental and a priori in nature. Consequently, harmony serves as the ontology of transcendental beauty, forming the foundation of Zhu Xi's aesthetic ontology rooted in the theory of principle.

Considering individuals as aesthetic subjects, Zhu Xi explored how the beauty of harmony is reflected in human nature. He posited that the beauty of harmony is manifested through the nature of heaven; however, since the nature of heaven is inexpressible, the beauty of harmony cannot be directly articulated through it. Nonetheless, the beauty of harmony is not only a reflection of nature but also a fundamental aspect of humanity. As a confluence of the spiritual energies of heaven and earth, individuals are inherently endowed with the nature of heaven, though this nature is often obscured by acquired desires, leading to variations in temperament and personality. Only the sages can fully embody this nature, act following it, and naturally align themselves with the essence of heaven. Zhu Xi emphasized that the nature of “harmony” is static, a quality not generated by individuals but arranged by heaven. Although “nature” itself is indescribable, it can be reflected through “emotion.” Philosophically, Zhu Xi's concept of “harmony” is grounded like heaven, with the specific development of its connotation stemming from human experiences. The tension between nature and human desires has resulted in a separation of “the nature of heaven” and “the

emotions of temperament.” While “nature” can only be described, “emotion” may be regarded as a form of neutralization. Thus, achieving harmony involves relinquishing human desires and returning to one’s inherent nature.

As the founder of Confucian music theory, Confucius placed significant emphasis on the educational function of music. He employed “harmony” as the standard for evaluating “elegant music” and advocated for the idea of “joy without lewdness and sorrow without sadness.” He underscored the importance of harmony not only in the melody itself but also in the moderation of emotions expressed through music, ensuring they adhere to the principles of propriety. This approach has profoundly influenced subsequent schools of thought, including the Si Meng School, as well as later figures such as Zhu Xi and Wang Yangming. Confucian music theory has shaped China’s musical aesthetics, philosophy, and literary theory for over two thousand years. Its significance and influence remain substantial. To this day, the connections between music and politics, the emotional functions of music, and the multifaceted roles of music in education – as articulated in Confucian music theory – continue to inform our understanding of music and educational practices.

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