Athenian Choral Institutions and Plato's Ideal Polis

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Cover Page Footnote

Aside from a few scraps of papyrus with fragments of musical notation, ancient Greek music is basically lost to scholars today. However, references to music exist throughout ancient Greek literature, pointing to its significant role in the Greek *polis*, particularly Athens. Music, which encompassed song, dance, and drama, was far more than just a leisure activity — it was foundational to religious ritual and education. Its practice was believed to have ethical implications, and it was a site for political conflict. This is clearer nowhere than in the writings of Plato, who placed music, particularly choral institutions, at the center of his ideal *polis*. Plato believed music played a key role in the formation of individual citizens and the *polis* as a whole, which led him to critique the musical institutions around him and create a detailed vision of ideal musical practice. His attitudes toward choral music and institutions demonstrate aristocratic anxieties that emerged in Athens during the fourth century BC due to conflicts between aristocratic ideals and Athenian musical practice, and his proposals used music as a means of status distinction, social control, and moral formation, restoring aristocratic power while tempering its indulgence of honor with moderation and wisdom.

Choral institutions played a significant role in Athenian life. Beginning around the 490s BC, civic choruses, called *khoroi*, performed in competitions in the genres of dithyramb, tragedy, and comedy at religious festivals.[1] Each *khoros*

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[1] Peter Wilson, *The Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia: *The Chorus, the City, and the Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 19.

was funded and overseen by a rich aristocrat known as the *khoregos*, and the winner, chosen by a lot-selected panel of judges, was allowed to put up a public monument to his achievement.[2] While private individuals funded the *khoroi*, they were civic institutions, and taking on responsibility for a *khoros* was a *leitourgia*, an expensive office which elite citizens were expected to take on at their own expense.[3]

Being a *khoregos* came at a high cost, but it was not merely a required tax. Elites voluntarily undertook the office, and some poor people even borrowed money to get a chance at it.[4] So what exactly were its benefits? For one, the *khoregic* office lent elites prestige which could be converted into political power and used to show civic pride in court defense.[5] It was also a way for elite men to compete with each other, a core aristocratic value.[6] From the perspective of the *demos*, or common people, *leitourgia* like *khoregia* were one way to redistribute wealth and decrease the disparity between the rich and poor. They were a safe outlet for aristocratic expenditure because the prestige they offered came directly from the *demos*.[7] In essence, elites struck a bargain with the *demos*, performing services for them in return for gratitude and recognition. This bargain was

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[2] Josiah Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 244.
[3] Ibid., 199.
[4] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 53.
[5] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 244.
[6] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 147.
[7] Deborah Boedeker and Kurt A. Raaflaub, eds., *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-Century Athens* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 55-6.

certainly not without its tensions, however. Aristocrats distrusted the *demos*, who they believed were unfit to rule as laborers for hire, in contrast to their inherited moral excellence.[8] While they remained a distinct social class during Athenian democracy, aristocrats had to adjust to ever greater demotic involvement, and their opportunities for glory and power, including serving as *khoregia*, always came with the surveillance of democratic bodies.[9]

Additionally, the music embedded in these institutions itself became a point of conflict. During the fifth century BC, innovations like chromaticism, modulation, genre mixing, and technical virtuosity became increasingly common.[10] The so-called "new music" was centered on the *aulos*, a reed wind instrument. *Auletes*, who were usually slaves or foreigners, were the first musicians to develop technical virtuosity, and because they did not specialize in any one style, they were in the best position to transmit musical ideas between genres.[11] Because of these innovations, professional foreign-born *auletes* achieved fame and status from the *demos*, provoking the ire of elites who viewed them as inferior. Proponents of the new music presented it as pluralistic and liberatory, concepts with positive currency in a democracy, but elites cultivated negative meanings for it, including anarchy, revolution, and excess. To them, the new

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[8] Yun Lee Too, ed., *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2001), 135.
[9] Boedeker and Raaflaub, *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts,* 21.
[10] Egon Wellesz ed., *Ancient and Oriental Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), 394.
[11] Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson, eds., *Music and the Muses: The Culture of 'Mousike' in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 211.

music was a symbol of everything wrong with the democratic system.[12] And because Athenians believed music impacted the ethical character of the people who heard it, aristocrats further asserted that these new styles directly undermined moral virtue. They invented a fictional history of ancient elite music which sought the improvement of the soul and was superior to the current musical practice which focused solely on titillating the masses.[13]

Plato fit firmly into the aristocratic tradition. He resented democracy, believing it dispensed equality to people who were fundamentally unequal.[14] In his view, society had begun as a timocracy, governed by aristocrats shaped by the love of honor, which gave way to oligarchy, focused on the love of money at the expense of moral excellence.[15] Democracy in turn replaced oligarchy, dispensing liberty to everyone and leading people to stop obeying the laws, which would culminate in anarchy and tyranny.[16] Plato's ideal *polis*, in contrast, had a clear hierarchy and was ruled by philosophers known as Guardians, who loved honor, as in a timocracy, but were also gentle and moderate.[17] Because he saw music as an extremely important site of moral and social formation, he placed choral performance at the center of the education system which would support this ideal

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[12] Ibid., 230.
[13] Ibid., 246.
[14] Plato, trans. Raymond Larson, *The Republic* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 1979), 266.
[15] Ibid., 259.
[16] Ibid., 272.
[17] Ibid., 64.

society.[18] Plato believed all music was mimetic, imitating specific ethical values, and the styles people heard worked upon their soul, changing their behavior to align with those values. In order to instill virtue in citizens, all music in the *polis* should imitate the good, but instead, people mixed genres, using words suited to one group and rhythms or tuning suited to another, or wrote for instruments without voices. This obscured the character of whatever they imitated, making it impossible to accurately judge the music's ethical quality and appropriateness for citizens.[19] Plato believed the new music was responsible for the decline of aristocratic morality and presented significant danger to the *polis*, and it had no place in his ideal society.

Because Plato was unhappy with Athens' political structure, the choral institutions which reflected it, and the new musical practice it encouraged, he offered critiques and alternatives steeped in a desire to return to aristocratic tradition. However, when Plato responded to the new music, he was not addressing anything new. These supposed innovations were well over fifty years old and deeply entrenched in Athenian music when Plato wrote, and his backward-looking critique demonstrated anxieties about declining aristocratic hegemony.[20] In addition, his proposed return to a music that solely cultivated

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[18] Andrew Barker ed., *Greek Musical Writings*, vol. 1, *The Musician and His Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 141.
[19] Ibid., 154.
[20] Warren D. Anderson, *Music and Musicians in Ancient Greece* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 149.

wisdom and virtue reflected an idealized past that had never really existed.[21] Rather, Plato sought to use music as clarification of status, social control, and moral formation, framed as a return to tradition but in reality moving beyond the overindulgence of honor which he believed had led to the *polis'* devolution toward democracy and was still present in institutions like the *khoregia*.

Existing *khoros* structures already clarified Athenian social status distinctions. *Khoroi* were meant to contain the worthiest representatives of a particular age group of young Athenians, and while members were chosen based on talent, the encouragement and resources necessary to cultivate such talent were mostly available to the upper classes.[22] The *khoros* was subject to the norms and supervision of the *polis*, but elite families also used it to preserve their cultural domination.[23] Like liberal education as a whole, *khoros* participation was a way for aristocrats to distinguish themselves from upwardly mobile citizens, justifying their continued access to prestige and power on a basis beyond wealth or political rights, since they no longer had a monopoly on those things in a democracy.[24]

Choral institutions also reinforced social divisions among the larger community, in part because the theater was a public site where the whole *polis* gathered. Performances were preceded by processions that reflected the status of social groups in Athenian society, and dignitaries and aristocrats had seats of

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[21] Murray and Wilson, *Music and the Muses,* 246.
[22] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 76.
[23] Too, *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity,* 42.
[24] Ibid.,136.

honor in the audience.[25] In addition, wealthy *metics* were excluded from acting as *khoregoi* — indeed, this was foundational to the practice.[26] Thus, choral festivals clearly demarcated the boundaries of Athenian identity, but at the same time, the system laid bare the delicate and unstable balance upholding social boundaries between elites and the *demos*. By allowing elites to take on privileges while keeping concentrated political power out of their hands, the *demos* harnessed aristocratic competition to appropriate elite wealth and power for democracy in an uneasy compromise.[27]

Plato believed democratic procedures forced everyone to conform to a crude ethical standard and made aristocratic Athenians slaves to the multitude: servile, unfree, and unfit to rule because they depended on the *demos* for money, power, or honor.[28] *Khoregic* victory, because it was conferred by the *demos* and made aristocrats bend to the will of the masses, was one important example of this kind of dependence. It muddled the social distinctions which were so precious to aristocrats like Plato and allowed the *demos* to influence them instead of the other way around, which he felt could only lead to problems.

In his ideal *polis*, Plato instead used *khoregic* institutions to clarify social status and cement aristocrats' place at the top of the social hierarchy. This was clearest in his division between citizens and noncitizens. Plato disparaged a

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[25] Murray and Wilson, Music and the Muses, 269.
[26] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 80.
[27] Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens,* 291.
[28] Too, *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity,* 140-141.

number of musical genres, but he allowed most of them a place in his *polis* as described in the *Laws*. Citizens were expected to perform only perfectly regulated harmonies, but deviant genres like comedy or lament, which imitated unacceptable values, were allowed into the *polis* if they were performed by noncitizens.[29] These noncitizens could provide examples of how not to behave, allowing citizens to learn from them without having to imitate and thus be impacted by those inferior values themselves. Plato was willing to sacrifice the ethical well-being of the noncitizen population to benefit citizens, solidifying status distinctions.[30] In some ways, this intensified the existing choral culture, which excluded noncitizens from participating in certain aspects of choral festivals. However, despite being corralled into a specific noncitizen category, professional musicians such as *auletes* were praised and elevated by the *demos* for what Plato believed was morally suspect music, eroding the hierarchy present in these institutions. Plato's ideal choral institutions attempted to reverse this trend and cement status differences.

Divisions persisted further in Plato's *polis* among citizens themselves. Like other critics of democracy, Plato wanted to use choral education to teach citizens to act in ways appropriate to their social position.[31] This meant creating *khoroi* based on social groups and ensuring that each *khoros* sang only particular

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[29] Plato, *The Laws,* ed. and trans. Benjamin Jowett, (Luton, UK: Andrews UK Limited, 2012), 75.
[30] Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi, ed., *Performance and Culture in Plato's Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 353-354.
[31] Too, *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity,* 176.

types of music — for example, music suited to men should not be performed by women, nor music suited to slaves performed by free people.[32] Instead, everyone would perform music that solidified their social status in *khoros* groups made up of people at a similar station.[33] This type of choral participation would form citizens who accepted their place in the aristocrat-controlled social structure. The mixed-genre music favored by the *demos* could only confuse and undermine these distinctions.

Second, Plato sought to use choral institutions to preserve social control and cohesion. Existing choral structures, particularly the *khoregic* office, created fears of social disintegration. From the *demos*' perspective, serving as a *khoregia* was the proper way for a wealthy benefactor to show his civic pride, because while the *khoregos* pursued aristocratic honor, he was forced to do so in service of the democratic *polis*.[34] Still, *leitourgia* like *khoregia* conferred superiority on one person, conjuring the specter of the tyrant, and the *demos* feared elites could construe their victory as a power base to subvert democracy, making it a double-edged sword.[35]

Plato too believed existing choral institutions undermined the cohesion of the *polis*, albeit for different reasons. He felt democracy led people to grant

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[32] Barbara Kowalzig, *Singing for the Gods: Performances of Myth and Ritual in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

[33] Plato, *The Laws*, 30.

[34] Boedeker and Raaflaub, *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts,* 98; Too, *Education in Greek and Roman Antiquity,* 45-46.

[35] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 184.

license to all their unnecessary pleasures, creating citizens obsessed with gratification to excess and ultimately leading to civil strife.[36] When aristocrats "served the city" through competitions like *khoregia*, catering to their desire for honor by pleasing the *demos*, it was actually one such excess which Plato believed paved the way for tyranny.[37] *Khoregia* were so obsessed with their own victory that they were willing to embrace innovations like virtuosity and modulation to gain the favor of their demotic audience. In Plato's view, they abandoned their responsibility to elevate the music of the *polis*, and with no aristocratic safeguards, musicians, especially *auletes*, were incentivized to innovate even further to appeal to the *demos*. This allowed demotic audiences to embrace their own individual aesthetic conceptions based on pleasure instead of moral correctness, leading to a kind of musical lawlessness.[38] In Plato's mind, this created a foothold for lawlessness of all kinds, inevitably culminating in the breakdown of the entire social order.[39] By allowing demotic pleasure to dictate the choral music they funded, *khoregia* drove music and thus society toward decadence, decay, and disorder, undermining social cohesion.

In response, Plato recommended a choral program that avoided changes in musical convention, allowing the *polis* to cultivate a collective identity and civic cohesion based on aristocratic moral and political norms. In Plato's ideal *polis*,

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[36] Plato, *The Republic,* 269.
[37] Ibid., 143.
[38] Peponi, *Performance and Culture in Plato's Laws*, 344.
[39] Plato, *The Laws*, 208.

khoros members would perform regulated, traditional styles, sharing rhythms and harmonies that would instill pleasure, bond performers together, and coordinate citizens into a single body that responded in unison to obey the law.[40] Because musical and civic cohesion had a causal relationship, correct choral performance was a tool that could train citizens to feel pleasure in response to traditional aristocratic authority and obey it.[41] Improper performance, in contrast, had severely damaging impacts that led to discontent with the social order, undermining its very basis, so unchanging, morally sound choral practices were central to maintaining social control in Plato's ideal *polis.*

Finally, because of its ethical implications, Plato saw choral music as a tool for the moral formation of citizens. Music's power to impact the character of the entire *polis* meant it had to be handled with utmost care. Plato was disgusted by current choral practice, especially because judges of *khoregic* competitions were assumed to be swayed by the collective sentiment of the demotic audience.[42] This system inverted Plato's moral hierarchy, and he believed it caused Athens to devolve into a "theatrocracy," where the undisciplined mob was free to reject the good for liberty and pleasure and wise aristocrats were prevented from shaping musical practice.[43] On the surface, this critique was directed at the *demos*, who dared to challenge aristocratic musical and political authority, thus corrupting the

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[40] Peponi, *Performance and Culture in Plato's* Laws, 138 and 160.
[41] Plato, *The Laws*, 174.
[42] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 102.
[43] Plato, *The Laws,* 208.

city. But Plato also disapproved of the aristocrats who participated in these mixed-genre festivals, competing for honor and glory from the *demos*. They too bore responsibility for the system's damaging effects on the moral character of the *polis*. Victorious *khoregia* put up huge monuments of their achievements to symbolize the honor it conferred on them and allowed these monuments to act as indices of their reputation, obscuring actual signs of moral excellence.[44] Like the *demos*, they chased pleasure that came from honor, rather than providing moral education and edification to the *polis*.

In contrast, Plato hoped to create citizens ruled by virtue in his ideal *polis*. This meant choral performance would include only music based on proper texts, supported by matching *harmoniai*, diction, and rhythm, creating ethically sound music fit for use among citizens.[45] All music that used multiple *harmoniai*, crossed genres, or embraced professional virtuosity would be banned.[46] Citizens would only perform music that met aristocratic standards of morality, which would inevitably work upon their soul, harnessing music's mimetic nature to make citizens imitate the good and cyclically improving society.[47] The good citizens formed by this musical curriculum would fit into Plato's ideal social structure, and the masses would accept their education from aristocrats, achieving moral elevation as a result.

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[44] Wilson, *Athenian Institution of the* Khoregia, 203.
[45] Barker, *Greek Musical Writings,* 134.
[46] Ibid., 132.
[47] Plato, *The Laws,* 66.

Plato also hoped to shape the actions of aristocrats, particularly in their capacity as *khoregia.* While Plato saw the aristocratic desire to compete for victory and honor, which manifested itself in part through *khoregia*, as a virtue, he believed it was based in the emotional part of the soul and ranked behind justice, moderation, and wisdom, which resided in the rational part.[48] Too much indulgence in *khoregic* honor signaled a lack of the wisdom and moderation Plato felt were necessary to govern. In fact, Plato believed that competing for honor was the very excess that had led to the fall of timocracy and was responsible for the current devolution of Athenian choral and political practice. Aristocrats must instead be trained in moderation and self-control so they would remain untempted by pleasures such as personal honor. This would be accomplished in part through participation in choral institutions that would cultivate those virtues, and the wise and careful aristocrats they produced would run choral institutions with an eye toward virtue rather than pleasure, acting as "the spectators' teacher, not their pupil."[49] When they faced the distractions from moral excellence that would abound even in an ideal society, these leaders would be able to allow "neither money nor honor, not power, and not even poetry" to entice them away from their task of ruling the city.[50]

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[48] Ibid., 25.
[49] Ibid., 56 and 69.
[50] Plato, *The Republic,* 315.

Plato's ideal choral program was an attempt to restore traditional aristocratic power and morality in response to the rise of democracy, undoing the ethical and political damage which he saw as a result of musical license and innovation with a return to the past. However, Plato also sought to transcend the realities of this past, tempering aristocratic indulgence of honor, which he believed had contributed to the rise of democracy in the first place, with moderation and wisdom. This musical program would serve to recreate the system of status distinctions, social cohesion, and moral formation that Plato believed existed in the elite-controlled past, but it would also provide that system with something it lacked — the mechanisms to preserve and maintain that system across time.

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