

Before Thought: Music and Pre-Reflective Transformation in Xunzi and Zhuangzi  
Paper #3  
Professor Huaping Lu-Adler  
Classical Chinese Philosophy  
PHIL 2541-01

Philosophical discourses on music often explore two central questions: whether music is intrinsic to human experience, and whether it possesses transformative power for individuals and social structures. This paper affirms both premises and draws upon the philosophies of Xunzi and Zhuangzi to deepen our understanding of them. Although Xunzi and Zhuangzi offer strikingly different metaphysical and ethical frameworks—one grounded in ritual order, the other in natural spontaneity—their accounts of musical transformation share a shared insight with how sound reconfigures experience prior to reflective thought. By foregrounding the phenomenology of musical experience—how music is pre-reflectively heard, felt, and enacted—I suggest that Xunzi and Zhuangzi reveal music’s power to transform consciousness prior to deliberate reflection. Xunzi shows how ritual structure shapes pre-reflective dispositions into spontaneous virtue, while Zhuangzi shows how dissolving form disrupts habitual pre-reflective patterns, opening up new modes of perception. Together, they reveal how music operates beneath the level of deliberate reflection to both instill and unsettle human structures of consciousness.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, examines the structure of first-person experience and consciousness as it is lived (Armstrong, 1). Central to this tradition is the return “to the things themselves” (Husserl, 168), an effort to encounter experience directly, without the interference of intellectual abstraction. Applied to music, phenomenology asks how musical experience arises in consciousness prior to cognitive interpretation. Xunzi’s claim that “people cannot be without music” because “music is joy, an unavoidable human disposition” (Xunzi, 218) aligns with this view: it suggests that music engages us at a pre-reflective, embodied level, giving shape to joy through sound and movement before conscious thought intervenes. When individuals encounter music, they undergo a mix of bodily reactions, emotional shifts, and perceptual changes that precede deliberate thought. Philosopher Jenefer Robinson’s “jazzercise effect” theory offers a useful parallel here, explaining that when music is ‘happy,’ it induces physiological changes that mirror the emotional state of happiness. Robinson suggests, “when we become aware of these physiological changes, we experience the emotion itself” (Robinson, 391). However, in the context of phenomenology, music’s effect on consciousness happens even before this cognitive awareness—where the bodily response to music, and the emotional shift it induces, precedes conscious recognition. Music transforms consciousness through the body before the mind can name what is felt, underlining the pre-reflective nature of musical engagement.

Xunzi’s framework positions music as a necessary structure for articulating joy, which would otherwise remain chaotic. The relationship between music (yuè 樂) and joy (lè 樂) is not only homonymous but also reflects their deep connection within his system. At the pre-reflective level, music organizes emotions, preventing them from remaining disordered. Since Xunzi believes human nature is inherently bad (xing e 性惡) and requires cultivation, music channels these natural tendencies, offering structure that fosters social harmony. Not all music is constructive, however, as certain tunes can make people’s hearts “licentious” or “invigorated”

(Xunzi, 220) because musical patterns are internalized as dispositions that shape character and emotion at a pre-reflective level. Phenomenologically, musical experience in Xunzi operates beneath conscious thought, directly reshaping bodily dispositions and perceptual habits. When Xunzi claims that “intentions gain purity” through music, it reflects how ritual music works beneath conscious thought, shaping our internal states through embodied action. His claim that musical forms “modify customs and alter habits” (Xunzi, 221) shows how ritual music creates embodied patterns, which phenomenologists describe as “bodily knowledge”—a “knowing-how” that precedes intellectual “knowing-that” (Ryle, 213). Knowing-how refers to practical, embodied knowledge, such as knowing how to move in sync with others while dancing, which does not require conscious reflection but emerges through repeated action. In contrast, knowing-that involves propositional, reflective knowledge, which can be consciously articulated. This knowing-how manifests in collective synchronicity, such as when “all the dancers are restrained and orderly, exerting to the utmost the strength of their bones and sinews to match the rhythm of drum and bell sounding together, and no one is out of step” (Xunzi, 218). Here, ritual music transforms individual intention into coordinated action, where physical discipline, emotional resonance, and shared rhythm converge into a lived experience of harmony. This explains Xunzi's observation that “music brings great uniformity to all under Heaven” and remains “something that the dispositions of human beings cannot avoid” (Xunzi, 219). This unavoidability speaks to music's direct access to pre-reflective consciousness, channeling natural dispositions into cultivated virtue. Through ritual music, practitioners experience transformation, where conscious effort dissolves into internalized virtue—not by opposing natural dispositions but by channeling them into structures that allow their fullest expression and social harmony. In this way, music operates beneath the level of deliberate reflection, both instilling and unsettling human structures of consciousness.

While Xunzi's framework focuses on how ritualized music channels and refines human dispositions through structured forms, Zhuangzi similarly explores music's transformative power, but with a focus on dissolving habitual patterns and opening new modes of perception. In Zhuangzi's “Music of Xiánchí” parable, Cheng of Northgate recounts hearing the Yellow Emperor perform in the wilds of Dongting. The music induces a phenomenological progression that destabilizes Cheng's perception—beginning with terror, moving into exhaustion, and culminating in bewilderment, until all familiar distinctions collapse, and he loses his sense of self. This progression aligns with the phenomenological concept of pre-reflective experience, where an individual encounters the world before categorizing or intellectualizing it. As Cheng moves through the stages of terror and exhaustion, his perceptual faculties are overwhelmed, and he enters a state of unknowing—a receptive openness to experience beyond the typical subject-object distinction. Cheng describes feeling “disorientedly in the way opened to all directions” (Zhuangzi, quoted in Park, 6), where ordinary spatial-temporal boundaries break down. The Yellow Emperor himself explains: “Music begins with being terrified... Then I follow it up by making it exhausting... I end it all with confusion, and because of the confusion, there is stupidity. Being stupid, you experience the Way” (Zhuangzi, quoted in Park, 8). Here, “stupidity” does not signify ignorance, but rather a suspension of analytical thought—a dissolution of intellectual categories that allows Cheng to experience the music as pure, unmediated sound. This echoes the phenomenological return to “the things themselves” (Husserl, 168), where the subject encounters the world without the interference of cognitive or conceptual frameworks. In Zhuangzi's view, the dissolution of familiar cognitive categories via music reveals a deeper, embodied connection to the Dao. The music is not being interpreted cognitively, but felt

viscerally, through embodied perception—what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as motor intentionality. In simple terms, motor intentionality refers to how the body “knows” the world through its ability to act within it—how we don’t just think about the world, but how we physically interact with it. This concept helps explain the shift in Cheng’s experience of music in Zhuangzi’s “Music of Xiānchí.” As Cheng listens to the Yellow Emperor’s music, he doesn’t engage with it cognitively or analytically. Instead, the music bypasses his usual intellectual processes and directly alters the way his body feels and perceives. His sensory categories break down, and he enters a state where the world is no longer understood through conventional cognitive frameworks, but rather felt and experienced viscerally. This mirrors Merleau-Ponty’s notion of motor intentionality, where “consciousness is in the first place not a matter of ‘I think that’ but of ‘I can’” (Merleau-Ponty, 137). Cheng’s embodied experience of the music shifts from cognitive analysis to a visceral engagement with sound, where his body becomes the primary site of perception. Rather than processing the music through intellectual categories, Cheng is overwhelmed by it, his bodily perception leading him into a state of openness and transformation, where familiar distinctions—such as subject and object, self and other—collapse. This mirrors Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodied perception, in which the body’s engagement with the world becomes the foundation for meaning, not an intellectual process but an immediate, visceral interaction with the world. Zhuangzi’s music, then, destabilizes not just mental categories, but the bodily schema—the habitual ways in which the body perceives and interacts with the world. The music reorients Cheng’s embodied experience, shifting his relationship to the world and enabling a deeper, non-conceptual form of engagement with the Dao.

Phenomenology provides a shared framework for understanding how music transforms experience in both Xunzi and Zhuangzi, despite their contrasting views on order and spontaneity. In Xunzi, music cultivates bodily knowledge—structured, habituated patterns of action and emotion that are internalized through repeated ritual practice, aligning individuals with social and moral order. Zhuangzi emphasizes motor intentionality—the body’s spontaneous, pre-reflective responsiveness to sound, which disrupts habitual structures and opens perception to the fluid, unstructured immediacy of the Dao. Together, these accounts suggest that music’s transformative power lies not in reflective thought but in the body’s capacity to either absorb or unmake form, shaping consciousness through both ritualized coherence or spontaneous release.

## Bibliography

- Armstrong, Paul B. "Phenomenology." In *Johns Hopkins Guide for Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. Brown University, 2005.  
[https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowski\\_Institute/courses/architecturebodyperformance/1065.html](https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowski_Institute/courses/architecturebodyperformance/1065.html).
- Buckingham, Will. "Music is Joy." *Will Buckingham*, January 23, 2024.  
[https://www.willbuckingham.com/music-joy/#:~:text=The%20Confucian%20philosopher%20Xunzi%20at,%E4%B9%8B%E6%89%80%E5%BF%85%E4%B8%8D%E5%85%8D%E4%B9%9F](https://www.willbuckingham.com/music-joy/#:~:text=The%20Confucian%20philosopher%20Xunzi%20at,%E4%B9%8B%E6%89%80%E5%BF%85%E4%B8%8D%E5%85%8D%E4%B9%9F))).
- Lundberg, Brian J. *Musical and Ritual Therapeutics in the "Xunzi": The Psychophysical Dynamics of Crafting One's Person*. PhD diss., University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, 2000. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304591538>.
- Harold, James. "On the Ancient Idea that Music Shapes Character." *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (September 2016): 341–354.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-016-9515-9>.
- Husserl, Edmund. *Logical Investigations*. Edited by Dermot Moran. 2nd ed. 2 vols. London: Routledge, 2001. First published 1900–1901.
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Individualism in Classical Chinese Thought." Last modified July 2011.  
<https://iep.utm.edu/ind-chin/#:~:text=Free%20from%20the%20radical%20dichotomy,its%20particularity%20within%20a%20whole>.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J., and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. 3rd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2023.
- Robinson, Jenefer. *Deeper Than Reason: Emotion and Its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. Chapter 2, "Knowing How and Knowing That," 213–248. London: Hutchinson, 1949.
- Kim, Hannah H. "A Dual-Process Model of Xunzi's Philosophy of Music." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 2023. <https://philarchive.org/rec/KIMADM-2>.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Park, So Jeong. "On Sound: Reconstructing a Zhuangzian Perspective of Music." *Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2016): 3. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h5010003>.
- Scruton, Roger. (1997). *The Aesthetics of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Xunzi. "Chapter 20: Discourse on Music." In *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, edited and translated by Eric L. Hutton, 218–223. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014.  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400852550-023>.
- Zhuangzi. (2009). *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*. Trans. Brook Ziporyn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

