DON'T UPSET THE RHYTHM

Innovative music is seen as a moral threat

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the following: Johnny Mathis, Perry Como, Jack Jones, the marches of John Philip Sousa or the Star Spangled Banner. In no event shall any music be tolerated that is not of a temperate or "pleasant" nature.' In Pleasantville, when people listen to jazz or Buddy Holly instead of easy-listening music, they start tapping their toes, losing control over their emotions and forgetting how to behave. Before long, the whole social order gets turned on its head.

Though Pleasantville is fictional, we know that these kinds of concerns surface all the time in debates about popular music. Indeed, in the nonfictional 1950s, no less than Frank Sinatra warned Americans that Elvis' "kind of music is deplorable, a rancid smelling aphrodisiac... It fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people." No small irony into the inward places of the soul, many a writer mused, music was powerful stuff that needed to be understood and regulated. Some music soothed, some disturbed; some music was appropriate for celebration and some for mourning. The Spartans, contrary to what the adrenaline-inducing industrial metal soundtrack to the film 300 would lead you to believe, actually played soothing lyre music before battles to calm their warriors and make them better fighters. Socrates, for his part, thought that soothing music was best for sociability, while other music was so powerful and upsetting that special education was needed to protect people against its undue influence. Plato was more categorical than even Big Bob, and famously argued that, in the end, music was just too powerful and that musicians should be banned if you wanted to achieve a well-ordered society.

When describing what music did to people, the Greeks referred to the combination of emotional, spiritual and psychological state that music seemed to alter or upset as ethos, and it was common wisdom that one could understand the ethos of a people by listening to its music. Of course, the rub was exactly what kind of music — or element in music — disturbed the ethos. Aristotle thought that more than any particular element of music, it was really innovative music that was "full of danger and ought to be prohibited," because when you introduced new or unexpected rhythms, harmonies or melodies, there was no telling how people would respond.

We don't use the word ethos today when thinking about the impact of music on society, but the Latin equivalent mores is often evoked when listeners are concerned that its effect might be harmful. For thousands of years, cultures have been arguing about the proper social function of music and about how it should impact social mores. And how they do this, especially how they come to terms with new music that upsets them, is extremely revealing. Not surprisingly, different cultures have different ideas about what kinds of music are good for mores and which are not.

In France, for instance, debates about the proper relationship between music and mores have tended to operate between two poles that are well dramatised by the famous argument between Jean-Philippe Rameau and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the eighteenth century when Italian Opera took the country by storm. Rameau traced his ideas about music back to Pythagorean notions that music should be based on physical and cosmological laws. He thought music was better if it flowed from a trained intellect steeped in those laws. If musicians obeyed the rules of harmony and followed social conventions, as good French composers did, then their well-ordered music was good for the psyche and society. Rousseau, on the other hand, thought that music should be based on passionate melodies and express heartfelt sentiment like Italian opera. Too many rules led to bad music and the best musicians were natural, unschooled and free to express themselves in their own way. Rameau argued that music should 'adoucir les moeurs' — should soften and soothe the social mores; Rousseau wanted music and musicians to stir things up, to unleash people's passions and set them free.

Over the years and even today, one can hear endless variations on these themes being rehearsed in French debates about music, most often when coming to terms with new or foreign music.

These ongoing conversations about music and mores in France also played out in relation to jazz, a very new and very upsetting music that arrived from America sometime during the First World War. By the time the cannons stopped roaring and the smoke cleared, musicians, culture critics, doctors, novelists and filmmakers all had something to say about the impact of jazz on les moeurs. At first, many thought that the desire to listen to jazz and do the shimmy-shake had as much to do with celebrating the peace as it did with the music, but over time anxiety about continuing social disorder started creeping into cultural criticism and people started blaming the jazz. Most often, what commentators had to say about jazz said more about their own values and sense of identity than it did about the music itself. Those who thought that French people should be innate reserve, calm and clear-headed tended to see jazz as dangerous and describe it as a foreign contagion. 'The contagion spreads,' argued one high-culture champion of Debussy and Fauré. 'The number of people choosing dancing over a beautiful musical recital grows day by day.' Many, like the composer Charles Tenner, argued that the remedy for jazz's
nefarious influence was more soothing and authentically French music. ‘It is in contact with healthy music that they will discover quietude and health.’

Yet commentary was not limited to music critics. Psychologists and physicians began to weigh in on the corrosive effect of jazz on mores and describe exactly what it did to them. Many argued that jazz upset people’s constitutions and gave them a taste for ‘primitive vices’. Whereas French culture had evolved into the pinnacle of civilisation, jazz and its ‘sensual tickling’ returned listeners and practitioners to an infantile, uncivilised and unFrench state of mind. Choruses of doctors echoed this opinion about jazz and jazz dancing and even came up with a diagnostic category to talk about the unhealthy effect of jazz on mores as ‘dansomania’ swept the country: they called it ‘tasikinesia’ – the overwhelming need to move. One doctor went so far as to argue in the press that the ‘provocative cadences’ heard in jazz led to a breakdown of the body on a cellular level. Chronic exposure to jazz and jazz dancing led to ‘serious disorders in the peripheral and central nervous system as well as in the psyche’. In men, he argued, exposure to jazz led to insomnia, lack of appetite, circulation troubles, dizziness, migraines, tics, nervous spasms and memory disorders. In women, he claimed, it caused faulty judgment, incoherence in tone and taste, and even impacted fertility and normative heterosexual desire. This constant drone about the unhealthy influence of jazz in the media turned the question of foreign musical influence into a political issue and led the Catholic Church to forbid the music and dances associated with it in 1921. ‘Of these exotic and barbarous dances,’ thundered Cardinal Dubois, the archbishop of Paris, ‘the one is more shocking than the other. There is nothing more proper than banning them all and remaining modest.’

Yet while conservative critics projected all of society’s ills onto the new foreign music, progressive-minded listeners thought that jazz and jazz dancing were good for social mores and were just what France needed to get over the trauma of war. Jean Cocteau for instance, argued that jazz was a kind of shock therapy needed to restore cultural health. It was the perfect antidote, he offered, ‘against a useless beauty’ that dominated a ‘corrupted civilisation’. Surrealist poet Robert Goffin described jazz as a kind of ‘organised madness’ that was a natural reaction to a repressive and aggressive western civilisation. High-culture European music was too restrained, he argued, and was constrained by too much logic and too many rules. Jazz, on the other hand, with its ‘spontaneous brutish sexuality and polyphonic perspiration of animality’ was just what the doctor ordered to restore more balance to the mores of a wounded and impotent civilisation.

Over the years, every time something changed in jazz or some new jazz dance became the rage – whether it be Josephine Baker and the Charleston, Louis Armstrong and ‘Hot’ jazz, or Cab Calloway and the jitterbug – similar heated debates played themselves out in the media like a kind of counterpoint. Yet over time, the complaints about the impact of the music on mores followed a kind of diminuendo, giving way to questions of beauty or preferences in taste. Indeed, as jazz was slowly assimilated into French culture, French jazz criticism moved away from concerns about the influence of the music on mores and focused on evaluating particular songs, albums or artists.
of the music on mores, but the question of mores eventually became less important than determining what kind of music matched people's imaginary sense of what 'true' French culture should be like. To be sure, purists decried jazz as a stain on the imaginary French nation long after most people had stopped worrying about it, but after a while, performing this kind of ritual indignation became a way of announcing one's sense of distinction and political commitments. And after the Vichy regime spin-doctors went all in and committed themselves to their purist identities by denouncing jazz during the occupation, saying that jazz was dangerous for French culture was like saying one was a Nazi — after the liberation, it just was not done. And soon after, rock 'n' roll was the new 'bad influence' on les moeurs that made teens shriek and twist, and caused worried French authorities to shake their anxious fists.

The French case of jazz is part of a more general cultural pattern. Example after example, from rock 'n' roll in America to punk in England, shows that listeners seem to get used to music once thought to have a bad effect on social mores. The music doesn't change, but the structures of understanding and feeling do. One could say that, more than any aspect of music having a particular effect on social mores, it is really culturally learned modes of listening that are at stake when music provokes anxieties in listeners. And so the music of Elvis, or the Beatles or Madonna that, once upon a time, unleashed the ire of parents or critics worried about its dangerous effect on mores, in time gets described as staid, classic or even pleasant.

Yet though this pattern of shock leading to anxiety, gradually giving way to assimilation and even acceptance seems to play itself out as particular cultural variations on a universal theme, we are missing an opportunity to understand something if we dismiss such concerns about the power of music in the moment as petty or misguided. In each case, people who think that music is dangerous to mores feel strongly about new kinds of music because it moves them or their neighbours in unforeseen ways. We do best when we open our ears to what such plaintive cries say about the societies that voice them.