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Who’s Really Superior?

The Aztec civilization is remembered mostly by what occurred after the year 1492, which was when Christopher Columbus first introduced the Western and Eastern hemispheres. The subsequent years were filled with the complete destruction of the Aztec culture. Their temples were torn down in order to build Catholic monasteries, they were enslaved for mining and agricultural purposes, and they weren’t allowed to practice their sacred rituals. Before any of this occurred, the Aztecs had a culture that was beautifully complex. They participated in trade with other Latin American civilizations, successfully sustained massive populations for a long period of time, produced extraordinary works of art, practiced astronomy and mathematics, and used natural products—such as feathers, gold, shells, and nuts—as self-ornamentation. One of the most interesting parts of Aztec culture that was also destroyed by the arrival of the Europeans was their music. They used it to praise their gods and everyday life, they had a variety of unique instruments, and there was a distinct relationship between their music and themselves. While the Western world claimed superiority over the Aztecs in every way, the European musical style before they encountered the New World in the Middle Ages was actually far more underdeveloped than the pre-encounter Aztec music, though the musical styles did contain a few similarities.

In the beginning of the Middle Ages, which, in musical terms, began about 400, music only had one purpose in Europe: to communicate with and worship the Christian god. Before this period of time, the clergy was actually opposed to the idea of music because it was associated with pagan culture, so they encouraged Christian believers to shun the use of it (Seay, pg. 73). However, Charlemagne forced these ideas to change by forcing religious rituals to be accepted into the church. These rituals included the use of chanted readings from the bible (Rice et al, pg. 69). As time went on, music became the proper medium in which monks and priests addressed, understood, and praised their god (Seay, 15). Music had become a completely secularized practice. By the 1100’s, however, the first unsecular music was starting to be composed (Rice et al, pg. 72). These songs included a wide range of subjects, from courtly love—where knights pledged their service to noble women (Wilson, pg. 168)—to obscene drinking (Seay, pg. 62). This music style was further desecularized in meaning by the fact that it was written in the vernacular instead of Latin (Rice et al, 72). Although this new branch of music did spread in popularity during the late European Middle Ages, the main use of music was for secular purposes.

The Aztec civilization, similar to the early Middle Age Europeans, used their music for religious reasons only, though their religion extended into everyday life. Music was an extremely important aspect to pre-encounter Aztec rituals and sacrifices. During one type of ceremony, for example, the man chosen to be sacrificed carried around and learned to play a variety of flutes for an entire year. When it came time for the man to die, he broke his flutes and dropped them onto the steps of the temple until he reached the top and was sacrificed to the Aztec gods (Olsen and Edward, pg. 602). Even certain instruments had ritualistic purposes. Rattling sticks, for example, were used in ceremonies that were connected to fertility rites (Chase, pg. 250). Rituals and religions were so important to the Aztec civilization, in fact, that their entire lives were saturated by it. Ritual acts and festival observances, which all included some form of music and dancing, provided a strict framework that life completely revolved around (Martens, pg. 417). When a baby was born, for instance, a chant was sung to the gods to ask for their protection over the child (Martens, pg. 418). The Aztecs also sang about death, battles, and erotic love, but the lyrics always included references to their gods or rituals (Martens, pg. 421, 425, 430). Although both Aztec and Middle Age European music developed with only secular meanings, the Aztec kept the religious purpose of their music while extending it to everyday life, whereas Europeans began to move away from theology in order to spread their music into daily life. This shows that Aztec music was at a further stage in development than Middle Age European music because everyone in the Aztec civilization already accepted, understood, and appreciated the meaning of their music, whereas music in Europe still had to change before more people understood and made use of it.

The use of instruments in Middle Age European and Aztec music is vastly dissimilar. Instruments, like music, were associated with pagans in Europe, but they took a longer time to be accepted into Christian use. The church itself did not acknowledge the use of instruments as a part of music until the tenth century (Seay, pg. 75). Even then, the liturgy only included the organ in their music for special occasions. Other instruments did not come into musical use until non-secular music became more wide-spread. At first, this music was only sung with no musical accompaniment (Rice et al, pg. 72). However, as music outside the church became more popular, travelling musicians began to make use of portative organs, plucked string instruments—such as harps, psalteries, and lutes—and bowed string instruments—such as vielles and rebecs. Brass and percussion were reserved solely for the purpose of identifying nobles. For example, trumpets and timpanis were used to announce royal presence, and knights carried horns made of ivory or gold—called oliphants—to symbolize their status (Seay, pg. 75). Outside of this, instruments were rarely used, especially when it came to the abundant church music.

The Aztecs, on the other hand, used a wide variety of instruments in all of their music. Although the Aztecs did not have any stringed instruments (Chase, pg. 250), they did have numerous amounts of other kinds of instruments, such as idiophones, membranophones, and aerophones (Olsen and Edward, 601). The chief melodic instrument was a small flute made of either bone or clay materials with three to five fingerholes called a huilacapitzle (Chase, pg. 250). The Aztecs also had a drum like instrument called a huitzilipochtli. This instrument was played in the temple during battles to motivate and inspire warriors. If the drummer was killed and the playing stopped, the warriors immediately lost faith in their ability to win (Martens, pg. 425). Two of the Aztec instruments—the huéhuetl and the teponaztli—were considered sacred. They were often paired together and situated at the center of important rituals and events. The huéhuetl was a single-headed drum (Rice et al, pg. 601), and the teponaztli was a log idiophone with a variety of pitches, though they were limited to fewer tones. This drum was elaborately carved to represent either a human or animal, and it was placed on a tripod so it wouldn’t touch the ground (Chase, pg. 250). Other instruments included gourd rattles, rasps, conch trumpets, clay whistles, and tubular duct flutes blown from the end (Rice et al, pg. 601). The citizens of the Aztec civilization even wore a type of bell around their waists and ankles to accompany their singing throughout the day (Martens, pg. 432). The diverse range of instruments used throughout all of Aztec music compared to the limited amount of instruments used in European music at similar periods in time clearly indicates that the Aztec music styles were much more advanced than the European’s.

Furthermore, alongside the European’s narrow use of instruments, they also attracted a restricted group of musicians and audience members. Music in the Middle Ages was taught in either the liturgy or higher-education institutions (Rice et al, pg. 70). Because of this, music also held an essential position in both theology and philosophy (Seay, pg. 15). Both of these aspects of music made it difficult for the poorer, working class of Europe to learn about or thoroughly appreciate music. At first, there were also very few chances to hear any kind of music outside of the church. In the church, the audience wasn’t even allowed to participate in the chants; only the monks and clerics were allowed to sing (Wilson, pg. 11). In the 1100’s, however, southern Frenchmen began to develop the first vernacular songs. These composers, called Troubadours, wrote music about and for the aristocracy, though they themselves weren’t all aristocrats (Wilson, pg. 167). In the north of France, bourgeois composers called Trouvéres began to write music, as well (Wilson, pg. 174). The compositions created by all of the song writers were purposefully intended for sophisticated, aristocratic audiences because these were the people who not only knew how to appreciate music, but who were also able to pay the composers and singers for their performances (Rice et al, pg. 73). As nobles became more prone to accepting musicians as a form of entertainment during their social gatherings, composers began to write their music for the specific purpose of entertaining the aristocrats (Seay, pg. 64). This led to music becoming viewed as a form of fine art instead of liberal art (Seay, pg. 128), which only served to further distance it from the lower classes. In regards to women, very few female composers were given recognition for their work (Rice et al, pg. 70). As the Middle Ages progressed and musical styles began to be altered and embellished, the only element of music that didn’t change in Europe was the higher status of the people who composed music, sung music, and had the opportunity to listen to and appreciate music outside of the church.

Conversely, music was inclusive of the entire population of the Aztec civilization. This began at the level of public education for children, where music was first taught to everyone. Special academies were also made available to anyone in the public who wished to further their music education (Martens, pg. 431). Although all music and education was controlled and regulated by the Aztec priests (Martens, pg. 417), this actually helped to unify the people in their beliefs and customs. Music was also performed at the community level (Olsen and Edward, pg. 602). Musicians were always placed at the center of rituals, festivals, and ceremonies, with the community dancing around them. The closer people danced to the musicians, the higher in status they were. Women and children were also included in these dances (Lucien, pg. 306). Because music held such a prominent role in the life of the Aztecs, musicians did hold prestigious positions in society, but they were earned positions, not given (Olsen and Edward, pg. 602). Everyone in the Aztec civilization had the opportunity to participate in music, and they did so frequently, often singing randomly throughout the day about their activities (Lucien, pg. 305), and they were accompanied by instruments that were played in the temples all day long (Wilson, pg. 432). Allowing the music to be shared throughout the entire community whenever people wish to make use of it gave Aztec music a superior unifying element that Middle Age European music wasn’t able to develop by remaining in use of solely the liturgy and aristocracy.

Despite the fact the Europeans effectively took over and claimed dominance over the Aztecs, there were aspects of the Aztec culture—like music—that were actually more advanced than what the Europeans had developed in that same period of time. While both cultures had music focused mainly on religion, religious Aztec music also included daily life. Middle Age European music, on the other hand, remained as biblical translations for several centuries until it finally started to expand into non-secular elements of life. Their music also contained little to no instrumental accompaniment, whereas the Aztec had a massive array of instruments to choose from, some of which they honored, and some of which they adorned themselves with. The greatest discrepancy between the two musical styles that contributed the most to the superiority of Aztec music, however, was the people who were involved with music. The Middle Age Europeans who most often participated in, were entertained by, and appreciated music was the nobility and religious officials. This limited the spread of music to more areas of Europe, and stunted the uniting effect that music normally has. In the New World, however, the Aztecs used music to unify their communities and the people in them, with marvelous effects. Everyone sang, danced, and participated in the accompanying rituals, allowing music to develop and become widespread. Although Aztec music was much grander than European music at the time the Old and New Worlds collided, the Europeans weren’t quite ready for the new musical styles. Instead, after defeating the Aztecs militarily, the Europeans replaced the Aztec music with their own, as they did with so many other aspects of Aztec culture. However, not too long after, when Europe entered into the Renaissance period filled with new thinkers and extraordinary artists, their music began to slowly develop the elements that had once made Aztec music superior, leaving one to wonder what—or who—really influenced those changes.

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