

## Theory of a Deadman: Ancient and Classical Modes in Heavy Metal Music

While heavy metal music's connection with the Classics is most obvious in the lyrics of songs about Greek and Roman subjects, a musical genre cannot be defined solely on the basis of its lyrical content. I will show that the music of heavy metal is classical in both senses of the term, namely the ancient sense and in the sense of the term as applied to music of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries), and thus belongs to a longstanding tradition of debate over what music and the way it sounds means. Heavy metal's relationship with these two worlds reflects the complicated nature of any discussion of reception and in any attempt to define something as "classical."

The tradition of Western music and the attempt to codify sounds goes back to the Greeks, and is associated with such notable figures as Pythagoras and Plato. While the former is credited with discovering the basic ratios that form harmonies, the latter stands at the beginning of a long tradition of examining what sounds mean, focusing on the various modes (sequences of notes, or scales) and which are beneficial or harmful (*Republic* 3.398-403). While the ancient modes are not equivalent to modern modes (i.e. what we call the Lydian mode is not what Plato called the Lydian mode), Plato's classifications underlie subsequent musical theory, and paved the way for later developments of modal theory in classical music. It is these later developments (e.g. that 'major' modes are considered more positive while 'minor' modes are considered darker) that constitute the basis for modern approaches to music.

Heavy metal occupies a unique position in this tradition because it is at once one of the most vilified genres of music while simultaneously being the form of modern popular music that most consciously draws on classical modal theory. Heavy metal has a long tradition of being blamed for the behavior of its listeners, from the trial of Judas Priest because some fans

committed suicide to the blaming of Marilyn Manson for the Columbine shootings. These claims are no more or less ridiculous than Plato's claim that the Ionian mode is of no use to those protecting the state (*Rep.* 3.398e-399a). At the same time, however, this often-denigrated, "low" style of music has a closer relationship with the "high" genre of classical music than other contemporary popular genres.

Unlike most forms of rock n roll (broadly defined), heavy metal does not rely only on the blues for its background, but also draws on classical musical theory, as is evident not only from the music itself, but also from the fact that numerous practitioners of the music were classically trained at such prestigious musical schools as Berklee and Julliard. Heavy metal has been defined from the beginning in part through its relationship with classical music theory, perhaps most obviously through frequent use of the so-called *diabolus in musica* or "devil's note," as in the eponymous song of Black Sabbath, one of the first and most influential metal bands.

Heavy metal is also defined by its focus on instrumentation, with many songs containing lengthy, virtuous guitar solos, and many bands recording completely instrumental songs (e.g. both Iron Maiden and Metallica have songs without vocals on their debut albums, and numerous metal bands have recorded versions of classical pieces). This focus on the instrumental aspect of music recalls the virtuosity of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century performers, and—in its highest forms—demands a full command of classical music theory (Walser). Heavy metal is thus in part defined by its self-awareness within a long Western tradition of musical theory and is doubly "classical" in the sense that it draws heavily on material from the ancient world while also showing profound respect for the Western musical canon.

This presentation will include demonstrations (both recorded and live) of the key sounds discussed, in order to show some of what constitutes the nature of heavy metal music and to show its relationship to its Classical—and classical—predecessors.

Works Cited:

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West, M.L. *Ancient Greek Music*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.