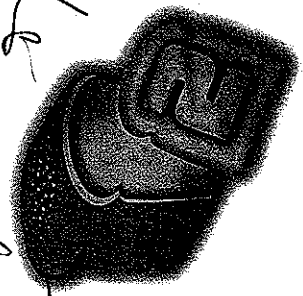


The Hunger Games and Philosophy  
A Critique of Pure Reason



## "SOMEWHERE BETWEEN HAIR RIBBONS AND RAINBOWS"

How Even the Shortest Song Can  
Change the World

Anne Torkelson

In apocalyptic, totalitarian Panem, Katniss Everdeen is so busy contending with the powers of force and guile that she overlooks another great power at work all around her: the power of music. When Katniss gets to know Rue in the arena, she learns that "of all things," Rue's favorite thing in the world is music. Katniss, in contrast, places music "somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness": decorative, maybe even beautiful, but with no practical significance.<sup>1</sup> Over time, though, she comes to realize that music does have an important role to play in her life. She learns that it's more than mere entertainment; it has the power to shape her character and inspire the revolution that overthrows the Capitol.

Whether you compose, perform, or just listen to music, you know that it influences your emotions. We turn to music when

we're sad, when we celebrate, and when we want to motivate ourselves to exercise or study. We join bands, go to concerts, and sing in the shower. We use music to express ourselves. We know how music affects us as individuals, but can it change a whole society? Could it even be dangerous to political stability? Could it be powerful enough to incite a revolution and bring down a regime as powerful as the Capitol? As new and surprising as these questions might seem to us, they were addressed millennia ago in ancient Greece by Plato (428–348 BCE), one of the most influential philosophers of all time.

### Can Music Be Dangerous?

Plato is credited with having written the first works of moral and political philosophy in the Western world, a collection of several dozen philosophical dialogues, most of which feature Socrates (469–399 BCE), Plato's mentor, as their main character. Since Plato never appeared as a character in his own dialogues, many assume that he used Socrates as a mouthpiece for his own views. The inquisitive, lively, and often ironic Socrates is the central figure in Plato's best-known work, the *Republic*, in which he leads a discussion about the nature of justice.

To better understand what justice is, Socrates and his companions try to envision a perfectly just and good society, which we'll call the ideal society, ruled by guardians called philosopher-kings who govern not in their own interests but for the good of the people. The guardians undergo a special education to mold their natures, imbuing them with strength, spirit, gentleness, and intellectual curiosity.<sup>2</sup> These philosopher-kings are the opposite of a tyrant like President Snow. A tyrant is the most unjust type of ruler, according to Socrates: "inevitably envious, untrustworthy, unjust, friendless, impious, host and nurse to every kind of vice."<sup>3</sup>

Imagine for a moment your notion of an ideal society. What would such a society look like? Would there be education

and jobs for everyone? Equal rights? Freedom of expression? You may be surprised at what Socrates does and doesn't want in his ideal society. Readers of the *Republic* are often confused and alarmed at some of Socrates's proposals. One of the most upsetting is his call for outlawing many types of music and musical instruments. Our discomfort with that proposal stems from the same reflex that causes us to balk at the fact that the Capitol forbids certain songs.

"Wait a minute!" our freedom-loving selves cry out. "That's not right!" As citizens of modern liberal democracies, we don't like anyone dictating what we can or can't do, say, read, write, or pipe into our ears. How can Socrates, who's supposed to be seeking justice, advocate what seems so obviously unjust? To understand the reasons behind his proposals, we must first explore why he believes that music is so powerful that it's potentially dangerous. The danger comes from its power to shape our moral character and beliefs, which in turn have the power to transform society and even destroy political institutions. For Socrates—and for Katniss, as we'll see—music is much more than a harmless amusement.

### The Character of Music and the Music of Character

What does music have to do with character and morals? Socrates believes that good music can shape our souls, making them more noble and just. Bad music does just the opposite. Bear in mind, though, that when Socrates speaks of music, he's talking about what the Greeks called *mousikē*, the entire realm of the Muses, which encompasses not only what we call music but also stories, drama, poetry, and even the visual arts, like painting and sculpture. Just as Katniss attended music assembly in school, the (male) youth of ancient Greece studied *mousikē* as a vital part of their education. Schooling in ancient Greece revolved around *mousikē* and *gymnastikē*: music to

train the soul and gymnastics to train the body. Both worked together to create good, strong citizens.

If you educate people in the wrong kind of *mousikē*, they might lack the strength, courage, and moral goodness needed by citizens of the ideal society. Bad music leads the soul down the wrong path, promoting vices such as a lack of self-control. But what determines whether music is good or bad? Socrates explains that bad music may be graceless, have poor rhythm, lack harmony, or convey false or bad stories. In short, bad music resembles a bad character. But good music imitates a good character, and repeated exposure to it positively affects our souls. Since music trains us to love or hate certain ideas and behaviors, we should allow only music that represents positive virtues such as moderation and courage. Socrates asks, "Shall we carelessly allow the children to hear any old stories, told by just anyone, and to take beliefs into their souls that are for the most part opposite to the ones we think they should hold when they are grown up?"<sup>4</sup> Shouldn't we be cautious about what stories we expose our children to?

As much as Socrates enjoyed great epics like Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, he refuses to believe that the popular entertainment of ancient Greece was harmless, since it might not always convey the right message. In Plato and Socrates's time, the Greeks learned about morality through stories of the gods, the goddesses, and heroes like Heracles and Odysseus. Yet as Socrates explains, many of the stories poorly represented these role models, giving young people bad examples to imitate and sending the wrong message about being a just person.

Consider the poet Hesiod's story of the gods Ouranos, Cronos, and Zeus, for example; it involved nothing less than patricide, castration, cannibalism, deceit, and deposition. What a tale to tell the kids! Even if the story is true, Socrates believes that it shouldn't be told in the ideal society, for a young person shouldn't "hear it said that in committing the worst crimes he's doing nothing out of the ordinary, or that if he

inflicts every kind of punishment on an unjust father, he's only doing the same as the first and greatest of the gods."<sup>5</sup>

Hearing stories of divine beings and heroes fighting, murdering, and acting in other immoral ways will only encourage young people to do the same and feel justified in their bad behavior, since they're following such renowned examples. "Everyone will be ready to excuse himself when he's bad," Socrates warns, "if he is persuaded that similar things both are being done now and have been done in the past [by gods and heroes]."<sup>6</sup> We see grounds for this concern in another of Plato's dialogues, called the *Euthyphro*. In that dialogue, a foolish young man appeals to the myth of Ouranos, Cronos, and Zeus to justify his prosecution of his own father.<sup>7</sup>

Even today, many people share Socrates's concerns about the influence of music and art, including popular works of fiction like the Hunger Games trilogy on young minds. On the one hand, we admire Katniss's courage and Peeta Mellark's compassion. In those respects, most of us agree that they're good models to imitate. Socrates would have agreed, too. On the other hand, some people worry about how other aspects of the story might affect its readers' souls. Could all the brutal killings traumatize young readers or desensitize them to violence? Should we be disturbed that one of the story's heroes, Haymitch Abernathy, is a raging alcoholic? It was because of similar concerns that Socrates proposed that the rulers of his ideal society should closely monitor the types of *mousikē* available to young people and weigh the potentially beneficial or harmful effects.

We still haven't explored *how* these effects happen. Music expresses—the Greeks would have said "imitates" or "represents"—the emotions of life in its melodies, harmonies, and rhythms.<sup>8</sup> Think of a film soundtrack. When we watch the movie *The Hunger Games*, the suspenseful musical score tells us when something climactic or terrifying is about to happen. We might hear drums beating like a pounding heart while the

tributes fight in the arena, soaring violins to signify Peeta's soaring heart as he gazes at Katniss, or a slow and sad lullaby to express Katniss's sorrow as Rue dies. In the ideal society, Socrates wants only music that imitates the emotions of people with strong character, such as a soldier fearless in battle, a person facing misfortune with courage and self-control, or someone acting with understanding instead of arrogance.<sup>9</sup> This is because when we listen to music, we partake of the emotions it represents, and over time they take up permanent residence in our souls.<sup>10</sup>

Socrates explains that this soul-shaping and character-forming effect doesn't happen overnight—one bad song on your iPod shuffle won't ruin you—but occurs subtly and slowly, beginning in childhood. People who are properly educated in the types of music best suited for the ideal society will have their emotions trained to sense the goodness and badness of things even before they're able to understand how or why. They will naturally begin to reject whatever is shameful, immoderate, or cowardly and to be pleased by whatever is good. Goodness will take root in their souls, and they will become good themselves.

Even if we accept Socrates's belief that music can shape our souls and characters, we might still wonder how it could be dangerous to a government or a society. To explore that idea, let's leave Socrates behind in ancient Greece and check in with Katniss in future Panem.

### The Renewal of Hope: "The Meadow Song"

Rue's favorite thing in the whole world is music, so she asks Katniss to sing to her as she dies. Rue's request illustrates on a simple level how music influences our emotions. The *Laws*, another of Plato's dialogues, explains how rocking and singing lullabies to babies calms them and puts them to sleep; the outside influence of the motion and rhythm gets the better of the

babies' inner influence of fear or discontent.<sup>11</sup> One emotion, a peaceful one, replaces the other, a violent one. Katniss chooses to sing an old Appalachian lullaby to Rue. We'll call it "The Meadow Song." The simple and soothing words dispel Rue's fear, replacing it with a feeling of comfort and a promise that "tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today":

Deep in the meadow, under the willow  
A bed of grass, a soft green pillow  
Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes  
And when again they open, the sun will rise.<sup>12</sup>

Rue's death and the song's hope for the future remind Katniss of what Peeta said about showing the Capitol that he is "more than just a piece in their Games."<sup>13</sup> She covers Rue's body with wildflowers, reminiscent of the "daisies that guard you from every harm" and the "cloak of leaves" mentioned in other verses of "The Meadow Song." With this musically inspired act, Katniss shows her love for Rue and her defiance of the Capitol's attempt to turn the districts' tributes into mortal enemies.

If Katniss had simply recited the song's words, it might not have had as powerful an impact. The words might have come across as nothing but platitudes. But the combination of lyrics, melody, and rhythm allows music to be a vehicle not only of ideas but also, more importantly, of emotions. As Socrates notes, emotions have something in common with fire: they're *catching*. He meant that the listeners involuntarily imitate or reproduce within themselves the emotions represented in the music. Soothing music soothes us; hopeful music makes us feel hopeful. That's one reason he advises keeping the lamentations found in drama and poetry out of the ideal society: in times of sorrow, people might imitate the laments they've heard rather than facing troubles with courage and moderation, as they should.<sup>14</sup> "The Meadow Song" works on Katniss's emotions,

replacing her own fear and sorrow with its hopefulness and vision for a better future.

"The Meadow Song" also illustrates one of the qualities that Socrates believes makes a piece of music good. According to Socrates, the harmony and rhythm of a song should follow its lyrics.<sup>15</sup> We can only imagine what "The Meadow Song" sounds like when we read *The Hunger Games*, but judging from the fan-created versions of "The Meadow Song" found on YouTube, many fans seem to agree with Socrates's take on music. Most versions resemble a slow ballad or a lullaby. A heavy-metal or rollicking country version wouldn't fit the song's subject. Also, many of the YouTube versions are sung a cappella or feature only a piano accompaniment, exhibiting the simplicity that is another hallmark of Socrates's definition of good music. Complex music that incorporates varieties of harmony, Socrates says, doesn't belong in the ideal society.<sup>16</sup> Simple music is better, for it encourages moderation in the soul.<sup>17</sup>

### A Fate Worse Than Death: "The Hanging Tree"

The second song that touches Katniss's soul is "The Hanging Tree" in *Mockingjay*, a folk song that her father used to sing. Whereas "The Meadow Song" gave Katniss hope and inspired an act of rebellion, "The Hanging Tree" makes her reconsider whether life is worth living in Panem. It's a song told from the point of view of an alleged murderer who despairs of life in his society and calls on his lover to join him in death. As such, it doesn't seem like a very uplifting tune.

Socrates wants to banish from his ideal society certain types of music that he thought could have a harmful effect on moral character, including dirges and lamentations. He would probably put "depressing and subversive Appalachian ballads" on his list as well. But had he been a resident of Panem, Socrates might have defended this song, because it encourages

fearlessness in the face of death and questions the value of life under conditions of injustice.

Katniss and her sister, Prim, sang "The Hanging Tree" when they were little. They liked the song because of its simple melody, which lent itself to easy harmonizing. So far, so good, Socrates would say. But the words of the song are a problem. Katniss's mother banned "The Hanging Tree"—something about crafting rope nooses didn't strike her as a great playtime activity for her young daughters—and Katniss's references to the song as "forbidden" suggest that the Capitol outlawed it as well. But why would the Capitol outlaw a simple folk song? As Katniss grows older and starts to fight back against the Capitol, she begins to appreciate the song's subversive subtext. Its words take on a new meaning that leads her to question the established order.

"The Hanging Tree" has four stanzas, each with six lines:

Are you, are you  
 Coming to the tree  
 Where they strung up a man they say murdered three.  
 Strange things did happen here  
 No stranger would it be  
 If we met up at midnight in the hanging tree.

The six lines repeat in each verse, except for the third line, which is as follows:

Verse one: Where they strung up a man they say murdered three.  
 Verse two: Where the dead man called out for his love to flee.  
 Verse three: Where I told you to run so we'd both be free.  
 Verse four: Wear a necklace of rope, side by side with me.

Katniss begins to realize that the hanged man calls to his lover because "he thought the place he was leaving her was really

worse than death."<sup>18</sup> Socrates too acknowledged that there are fates worse than death: in particular, living a life that's unjust. The song tells us that "they say" the man was a murderer, hinting that his punishment was probably unjust. Socrates was also unjustly executed, having been falsely accused of corrupting the youth of his city when in fact he was only encouraging them to think critically about their society. Hanging was a common method of execution in District 12, so perhaps the man in "The Hanging Tree" lived under a totalitarian government. Maybe he was even a rebel like Socrates.

The lyrics of "The Hanging Tree" raise a philosophical question that coincides with a question Socrates asked in Plato's *Republic* and other dialogues: What kind of a life is worth living? Socrates believed that the only good life is a just life. So is it worthwhile to continue living in an unjust society? Might it be better to risk death if that's the price of salvation or freedom? These questions slip into the listeners' psyches (*psyché* is the Greek word for "soul") in the slow, stealthy way that Socrates says music affects us. Music gives us pleasure and so at first seems harmless, but then the spirit of a song slowly seeps into our thoughts and behaviors, for better or worse.

The ideas and emotions of "The Hanging Tree" start to take hold of Katniss and influence her actions. When Katniss sings "The Hanging Tree" to Pollux, an Avox, during the filming of the promo team's *We Remember* series, she hasn't yet given much thought to the meaning of the song. It's only when faced with the possibility that Peeta, Gale, or she herself might fall into the hands of the Capitol that she really starts considering the story behind "The Hanging Tree." The song plays in her head whenever she imagines Peeta or Gale getting captured, because she has realized that "Wear a necklace of rope, side by side with me" means that "the man wants his lover dead rather than have her face the evil that awaits her in the world."<sup>19</sup>

Though rejecting Peeta's plea for the Star Squad to kill him before he becomes more dangerous, Katniss nonetheless begins to question whether life under President Snow's rule is worth living. Consider her thoughts when she and Gale urge Peeta to stay behind during the attack on the presidential mansion. Gale gives Peeta his nightlock tablet (a name perhaps inspired by the poisonous *nightshade* plant and the deadly herb *hemlock*, which was used in Socrates's execution drink). Gale won't need it, he assures Peeta. He and Katniss have made a pact that each will kill the other before letting him or her be captured by the Capitol.

As Katniss imagines Peacekeepers dragging Gale away, "The Hanging Tree" starts playing in her head. Like the man in the song calling to his lover to flee an intolerable life, she presses the nightlock into Peeta's hand, reminding him, "No one will be there to help you."<sup>20</sup> Better to die than to fall into the clutches of the Capitol again.

Socrates had the chance to escape from jail through bribery, but he chose to face his death instead.<sup>21</sup> Like Socrates, who preferred to accept his death sentence rather than commit an injustice, Katniss, Gale, and Peeta all believe in a fate worse than death. Katniss may not be able to bring herself to carry out her promise to Gale when the moment comes, but the question posed by "The Hanging Tree" has lodged itself deep in her soul, altering how she thinks about and responds to her society, her government, and her life—in short, prompting her to engage in the sort of critical reflection that Socrates encouraged.

When Katniss is captured, she realizes that the Capitol might keep her alive to use and manipulate her further. Without any nightlock handy, she resolves to carry out one last defiant act: death by starvation or morphling. We might wonder whether this heroically defiant act would have been possible for her without the gradual shaping of her thoughts and her character by "The Hanging Tree."

## Dangerous Music: Rue's Four Notes and the Mockingjay's Song

If you were interviewing for a job in Socrates's ideal society, you probably wouldn't want to list *innovative* as one of the five words that describes you best—at least, not if you were a musician. More than anything else, says Socrates, educators in the ideal society must guard against innovation in music, for "the musical modes are never changed without change in the most important of a city's laws."<sup>22</sup> Of course, if we're talking about the laws of a perfectly just society, it makes sense that Socrates doesn't want anything to change; change would be a fall away from perfection.

Plato also warned against innovation in his *Laws*. He wrote that everyone believes that no harm can come from changes made to young people's games, because, after all, they're just games. But what people don't consider is that youth who incorporate innovations into their games then grow up to be different from the children of earlier generations. Being different, "they seek a different way of life, and in seeking it they desire different practices and laws."<sup>23</sup> This applies to music as well, since people who create and listen to new kinds of music may desire new ways of life and thus changes to the society.

Socrates's belief that new forms of music can threaten the entire social system may still sound extreme, but that's just what happens in Panem with Rue's four notes and Katniss's transformation to the Mockingjay.

In District 11, Rue's four-note song seems harmless enough. She sings the run, which the mockingjays pass throughout the orchard to signal the end of the day to the fieldworkers. In the Games, however, the song becomes an act of defiance. The danger of Rue's song is not that it's a new form of music but that it has a new purpose. Rue teaches the melody to Katniss so they can use it to communicate with each other. Telling Katniss about the song at all, let alone using it with her, is a defiant act, since the Capitol works to keep the districts



ignorant of one another. This simple four-note song becomes a signal between two confederates in the arena, a sign of the solidarity between their two districts, and a snub to President Snow.

The new meaning of the four notes doesn't go unnoticed by the people of Panem. Just as Rue adapted her song for a new purpose in the arena, the people of District 11 find their own use for it, adopting it as a sign of respect for Katniss and Rue, a call for unity against the Capitol, and an act of rebellion. In *Catching Fire*, Katniss's thanks to Rue's family during the Victory Tour prompts an old man in the crowd to whistle the four notes, signaling the crowd to publicly salute "the girl who defied the Capitol."<sup>24</sup> This marks a major turning point in the rebel movement. Armed only with four notes of music, Katniss and Rue fuel the emerging revolution and lead an entire district to defy their rulers as they never would have before. Any doubts we may have about the power of the song are put to rest by the immediate execution of the whistler.

The real symbol of the resistance, however, is the mockingjay, a bird famous for innovation. Mockingjays are songbirds known for their beautiful music and their ability to riff on any tune, picking up other birds' songs and changing them into something new. As the Mockingjay, the visual representation and voice of the revolution, Katniss uses this skill to rally the rebels. Just as mockingjays pass songs to one another throughout entire forests, Katniss spreads her song of rebellion throughout the districts of Panem, inspiring the people to challenge and overthrow their government. Katniss's propo team writes speeches for her, but they soon realize that she's most convincing when she innovates, improvising on the scripts and speaking directly from her heart. Often throwing the script aside, she delivers the first anti-Capitol statements televised in her lifetime.

Katniss never wanted to be the Mockingjay. But throughout the Hunger Games trilogy, she slowly comes to recognize the power of music to influence individuals and groups

and communicate ideas and emotions that can transform her society. Music works first on her own emotions and character, shaping her into someone prepared to risk her own life to defy the Capitol. Later, she becomes the songbird symbol of the resistance, spreading the song of the rebellion throughout Panem and galvanizing the people into action.

Music no longer occupies the same plane as hair ribbons. Instead, it is a powerful force that can make everyone—even the birds—fall silent and listen, that can inspire Peeta's father to fall in love with Katniss's mother, bring Katniss to Peeta's attention, unite tributes across districts, motivate the rebels to fight against the Capitol, grant Katniss courage and resolve during her captivity, and, in the end, provide a glimmer of hope for Katniss's children and the future of Panem.

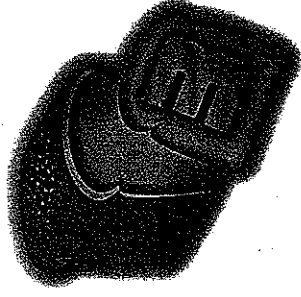
### The Power of Music: From Plato to Panem

Thousands of years ago, Plato recognized two important truths about the power of music. First, music not only affects our emotions but also shapes our characters and souls. Second, music can be more than mere entertainment; it can also influence social change. Looking at the future society of Panem can help us to explore these ideas, but looking to our own past can also help us to see the connections among music, politics, and social movements. In just the last century, we've witnessed people banding together through the protest music of the labor movement, expressing their dissent through anti-war songs, fighting for civil rights by singing and marching to freedom songs, embracing a more open expression of sexuality with the help of rock and roll, voicing antiestablishment or antiracist messages in new musical genres like punk rock and hip-hop, and advocating for women's rights through music during the second and third waves of feminism. Throughout history, music has affected our individual emotions, touched our souls, shaped our characters, influenced our actions, and

brought people together. The world has undergone enormous changes since the time of Socrates, but one thing remains constant: the power of music.

## NOTES

1. Suzanne Collins, *The Hunger Games* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2008), 211.
2. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992), 50 (375b-375c).
3. *Ibid.*, 250, (580a).
4. *Ibid.*, 52 (377b).
5. *Ibid.*, 52-53 (378b).
6. *Ibid.*, 68, (391e).
7. John M. Cooper, ed., *The Trial and Death of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, and Death Scene from Phaedo*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2000), 6, (6a).
8. Thomas L. Pangle, ed., *The Laws of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1980), 49-50, (668a-668c).
9. Plato, *Republic*, 75, (399a-399c).
10. For more discussion of art as mimetic, or imitative, see chapter 1, "The Final Word on Entertainment": Mimetic and Monstrous Art in the Hunger Games Trilogy."
11. Pangle, *The Laws of Plato*, 177-179 (790-791).
12. Collins, *The Hunger Games*, 234.
13. *Ibid.*, 236.
14. Plato, *Republic*, 63, (388a).
15. *Ibid.*, 74, (398d).
16. *Ibid.*, 75-76, (399c-399d).
17. *Ibid.*, 81, (404e).
18. Suzanne Collins, *Mockingjay* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2010), 126.
19. *Ibid.*, 291.
20. *Ibid.*, 336.
21. Cooper, *The Trial and Death of Socrates*, 39 (37c-38), 40 (38c-39b), 43-54 (43-54).
22. Plato, *Republic*, 99, (424b-c).
23. Pangle, *The Laws of Plato*, 186-187, (798c-d).
24. Suzanne Collins, *Catching Fire* (New York: Scholastic Press, 2009), 61.



## "I WILL BE YOUR MOCKINGJAY"

### The Power and Paradox of Metaphor in the Hunger Games Trilogy

Julie Olthoff

In the arena that the Capitol created for the 74th Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen faces a host of deadly threats. First there are the unnatural disasters that the Gamemakers have created in their grisly enclosure: fires, thunderstorms, poisonous fruits, and savage beasts. Then there are the twenty-three other tributes, teenagers from each of the districts of Panem, sent to battle one another until all but one are dead. For the other tributes, Katniss's death would just be one more step on the way to their own salvation. To fend off these dangers, Katniss has obvious strengths, such as being an adept hunter with a bow and arrow. However, her archery skill may not be her greatest strength. Rather, her survival, and ultimately the survival of all of the people of Panem, rides on the power of a simple turn of phrase: a metaphor.