



THE MUSIC OF ANCIENT GREECE

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The past comes to us fragmented and silent. We seek to reconstitute it in many ways – through collections in museums, through the uncovering of artifacts, through the preservation of manuscripts, and through individual curiosity and interest.

This is the grand ritual of history – to get beyond the inherent muteness of yesterday and of millennia – we the living must give voice to the dead that they might speak again, though briefly, though in faded whispers.

Lost is the noise of antiquity – the cadence and exuberance of conversation, the scurry and skitter of trade and industry, the jangle and din of ceremonies.

History truly is the great leveler, as Guiderius and Arviragus sing in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*:

Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust...
The sceptre, learning, physic must
All follow this and come to dust.

And yet an echo of this ancient noise can still be heard in the fragments of music that have survived from Greece of long ago. They are snatches of melodies that once soothed the spirit and delighted the ear.

[Similar shreds of music](#) remain also from the ancient Near, Middle and Far East; but by far the largest selection comes from [Greece](#). We have sixty-one melodic pieces, and [new ones continue to be found](#).

These are but remnants of a once grand musical tradition that pervaded much of the civilized world.

Understanding ancient Greek music is important, since so much of our own musical vocabulary and traditions stem from this antique period.

Essential words, such as, "music," "rhythm," "tone," "melody," "chord," "scale," "harmony," and many technical ones ("chromatic," "diatonic," "enharmonic") are all derived from Greek – as are our scale and tuning classifications, our consonance and dissonance structure, and our use of the octave modal scale.

The Greeks were great [theorizers of music](#). They saw its obvious link to mathematics, and extended this connection to explain ideas of perfection, of morality and even of healing.

In fact, [our notions of "musical therapy"](#) are nothing than the rediscovery of their system of modes (or melodic behavior), each of which was seen to positively affect the emotional and spiritual make-up of a person.

There were fifteen such modes. For the ancient Greeks, sound was not something inert which we might

receive or ignore without consequence – rather, sound was an active principle – even an entity – that entered our body and altered our interaction with reality.

Music for the Greeks was far more than entertainment (or worse, “relaxing” – an odious way to describe music) – it was a moral force – a process of civilization – a structure for goodness – an ideal of perfection.

The story of the recovery and then the decipherment and the ultimate performance of ancient Greek music is a fascinating one.

But how did it survive, and how are we able to read it? The [sixty-one pieces](#), mentioned earlier, are found on two types of material – stone and papyrus, with papyrus comprising the majority.

But since this ancient form of paper is very fragile, all we really possess are torn bits and pieces on which are transcribed scores that we can work out as parts of melodies – only parts because the whole is lost.

Most of these shreds of papyrus come from Egypt, which is only fitting since the city of Alexandria once housed the famed library, in which the entire learning of the ancient world was said to be contained.

Sadly, the Arabs [destroyed this library](#) when they conquered Egypt in the seventh century AD. An eye witness account tells us that it took six months to burn all the books.

The fragments that we possess are those that escaped this conflagration because they had either been thrown onto garbage heaps, or even used as “stuffing” for mummies in the [Ptolemaic Kingdom](#).

The most famous piece of music on papyrus is the [Stasimon Chorus](#) from Euripides' play, *Orestes*. It's a haunting melody, in the chromatic scale, of a chorus sung just after Orestes has killed his mother. This piece of music survives on a [papyrus fragment](#) that dates from about 200 BC.

These musical papyri are rustling whispers from an antique age.

Three pieces of music are also preserved in stone. There are [two hymns to the god Apollo](#), inscribed onto a piece of the wall of the Athenian Treasury at the temple in Delphi. They were discovered in 1892 by the French archaeologist, Théophile Homolle. These hymns, though fragmented, preserve a substantial [portion of the melodies](#), and they date from the second century BC.

The third piece is the [Seikilos Epitaph](#), which is chiseled onto a marble gravestone. It's a [touching song of dedication](#) by a man named Seikilos to his dead wife named, Euterpe.

The gravestone was discovered in 1883 by William Ramsay during excavation at the ancient city of Tralles (modern-day Aydin, in western Turkey). It's now housed in the National Museum of Denmark in

Copenhagen. All three are elegant echoes in stone.

We are able to read this ancient music because we know the notational system that the Greeks used – they had one set of symbols for voice and an entirely different one for instruments. We have gained this knowledge because we possess two remarkable documents.

One is a small fragment on which all two sets of symbols are inscribed and also explained. This is the [Table of Alypius](#), a musician who lived in Alexandria, in the fourth century AD. We can rely on his information because he had access to the vast library in his city.

The other work is more extensive – it's an entire book on Greek musical theory and practice written by [Aristides Quintilianus](#), who lived in the second century AD. We have also fragments of a work by the fourth century BC philosopher [Aristoxenus of Tarentum](#). These valuable documents have allowed us to return a little sound to antiquity.

The reason why we have these three valuable sources in the first is because of the efforts of one man (whose son would become both notorious in his time and later famous).

His name was [Vincenzo Galilei](#) (1520–1591) – the father of Galileo Galilei. Vincenzo was a renowned musician and intellectual of his time, and he was a member of the [Florentine Camerata](#), which was a group of thinkers, philosophers, musicians and writers who met regularly at the house of their founder and patron, [Giovanni de' Bardi](#).

These men sought to veer music back to its classical roots, which they believed had been abandoned in their day. The result was the creation of musical drama, or what we now call, “opera.”

In 1581 Vincenzo published a few scores of ancient Greek music that he had deciphered. The scores consisted of three hymns to the Muses, to Nemesis, and to Helios (the sun god), which had been composed by [Mesomedes of Crete](#) (who lived sometime in the second century AD and who was the court musician of the [Emperor Hadrian](#) – he of the Wall in England)).

Vincenzo was the first to decode ancient Greek music by using the information given by Alypius, Aristides and Aristoxenus.

Vincenzo also effectively launched the field of study that now is known as “[archaeomusicology](#)” – or the study and reconstruction of ancient musical traditions.

A few decades later, [Giovanni Battista Doni](#) designed instruments that might properly play the music of Classical Greece. And in 1652, there appeared the extensive study of such music by the Danish historian [Marcus Meibomius](#).

On the strength of this study, Meibomius was invited to the court of [Queen Christina](#) where he gave a

concert of this music.

The concert ended badly, however, because in the middle of it, Meibomius struck [Pierre Bourdelot](#), the Queen's physician and favorite (who famously healed the Queen's melancholia by making her laugh by reading [Pietro Aretino](#)'s satires and sonnets). Bourdelot was scoffing at what was being played and sung.

Meibomius beat a hasty retreat from the royal court and before long found gainful employment in Denmark.

In the Baroque era there appeared, in 1721, a study of ancient Greek melodies authored by [Jean-Pierre Burette](#), physician, book-collector, and a man of great erudition.

Like Vincenzo Galilei, Burette again transcribed the three hymns by Mesomedes, to give them greater currency; and he even organized a concert in Paris for these three ancient pieces.

In the nineteenth century, musicians such as, [Claude Debussy](#), [Erik Satie](#) and [Camille Saint-Saëns](#), were involved in reviving ancient Greek music. Their interest was given impetus by the discovery in 1892 of the three Delphic Hymns, mentioned above.

These hymns were studied and transcribed by the polymath [Théodore Reinach](#) (who built the [Villa Kerylos](#) on the French Riviera) along with two other scholars (the classicists, [Henri Weil](#) and [Otto Crusius](#)).

Reinach also asked [Gabriel Fauré](#) to compose an accompaniment to one of the hymns; and this hymn and accompaniment were performed to much public acclaim in France, England, and the United States.

This hymn was also played at the very first meeting of the [International Olympic Congress](#) in June of 1894 (held at the Sorbonne in Paris). It's said that upon hearing this ancient music the delegates at the Congress were filled with enthusiasm to create the modern Olympic Games.

This four hundred year old tradition of studying, decoding and playing ancient Greek tradition continued in the twentieth century with recordings by [J. Murray Barbour](#), [Fritz Kuttner](#), and [Annie Bélis](#).

But what did this music sound like? To answer this question, let's first take a look at the instruments that were popular in ancient Greece, and then we can move on to the pieces of music themselves.

There was the [lyre](#), a version of the harp that consisted of seven strings. It was made of a wooden soundbox, two curving arms, and a crossbar. The strings were made either of gut or linen and were fixed to the crossbar by moveable pegs. It tended to be an instrument for amateur performance.

The larger version of the lyre was the *kithara*, from which our word, “guitar” ultimately descends. It had a larger soundbox, two sideboards and a crossbar. Seven gut strings were stretched over a bridge and wound on pegs fixed to the crossbar. The *kithara* was much louder than the lyre and was used as an accompaniment in public performance by professional singers.

The *aulos* was the main woodwind instrument of the Greek world and was made-up of two pipes (usually reed stems; later bronze). Each pipe had a double-reed that produced the sound.

Usually the *aulos* was tied to the mouth of the player by a leather strap tied at the back of the head (see painting above). This assisted in keeping the flow of air constant. Although it's often called a “double-flute,” it really was much louder than the modern flute and sounded more like the chanter of the bagpipes. The *aulos* accompanied processions and dances.

There were also other instruments as well, such as, the *syrinx* (panpipes), the *krotala* (castanets), rattles, drums, and cymbals. The Greeks also invented the water-organ (the *hydraulis*).

Written records tell us that music was frequently heard not only at formal and informal dinner parties (like the *symposia*, where philosophers like *Socrates* worked out their ideas), but it was also an essential component in civic ceremonies, in religious worship, marriages and funerals.

And we have records of musical competitions in which prizes were awarded. We also know the pay-scales for professional musicians who belonged to guilds; and there were also choirs and choral competitions.

Concert halls were found in most cities, such as the *Odeion* built in Athens by Pericles in the fifth century BC. We have also found a few monuments erected to honor musicians.

The Greeks also invented drama; and this art form heavily relied on music (the members of Florentine Camarata based the structure of the opera on Greek drama).

We know also that all men in ancient Greece were educated in music and could play one or more instrument; and they were also taught to sing and dance.

On the philosophical level, music was regarded as the highest expression of individual, civic, and cosmic harmony – it was *Pythagoras* (he of the theorem) who first described the overtone series, for in it he found harmony and perfection, which he called beautiful.

Music, therefore, was beautiful – because it could only be expressed perfectly. One has only to fumble through a tune on an instrument to understand this. Music can only work when each note is perfectly played or sung.

The nature of the music that has survived tells us that the Greeks used the diatonic scale which has five

whole notes and two half-tones in an octave, which together give seven pitches.

This led to the two octave scale, or the [Greater Perfect System](#). And when the Greeks wrote their music and the writing of music expressed intervals on the Greater Perfect System.

The tradition started by Vincenzo Galilei continues in our day with great recordings of ancient Greek music being made by groups, such as, the [Madrid Atrium Musicae](#), [Ensemble Melpomen](#), the [Ensemble De Organographia](#), and the marvelous [Ensemble Kérylos](#) (named after the magnificent villa built by Reinach mentioned above), which is led by erudite and imaginative Annie Bélis.

Some years back, Dr. [Jay Kennedy](#), a professor of philosophy at the University of Manchester, suggested in an intriguing study that Plato, the famed philosopher, embedded musical forms in his work by following the structure of the twelve-note scale.

This wonderfully connects with Plato's notion that music is the experience of the soul, because music alone can cure the soul – and music then is the gift of the soul.

The more we study ancient Greek music, the more we learn and understand that we have forgotten so much. Music is always a mystery and a revelation.

The ancient Spartan poet, [Alkman](#), says, "right against the steel is the sweet playing of the lyre." This is a very concise view of ancient Greek music – music is life itself.

The [photo](#) shows, "The Vintage Festival," painted in 1871, by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

