

BACKGROUND ON ANCIENT HELLENIC MUSIC

Ancient Greeks believed that music had divine origin. Apollo, the god of light and beauty, was also the god of music. The Muses, protectors of the arts and especially of music were under his attendance and guidance.

There were three categories of ancient Greek musical instruments: the stringed, the wind, and the percussion instruments; much like today. In Homer we find reference to the oldest stringed instrument that was a type of guitar called Phorminx, whose melodic sounds calmed the anger of Achilles, according to the Iliad. The invention of the Lyra or Lyre was attributed to god Hermes who later used it to bribe Apollo into forgiving him for stealing his 50 sacred oxen. It was believed that Apollo's son, Orpheus, could calm with his Lyre wild animals and beasts, and even move stones, trees and rivers. He joined the Argonauts along with Jason and with his Lyre their ship was able to sail through the Symplegades (Clashing Islands), Tantalus forgot his thirst and the Erinyes (Furies) burst into tears. The Avlos (blow pipe) or Flute was the most popular wind instrument. Its invention was attributed to goddess Athena and was used in connection with rituals for god Dionysus and the Bacchae. During the Golden Age of Athens Pericles regularly practiced the flute and one of the Ptolemies in the Hellenistic Period was named Avletes (after avlos). Pythagoras, the great mathematician, philosopher and myst was the first to capture the mathematical origin of musical tones. Using a stretched string on a wooden base he was able to isolate the musical harmonics and develop the first musical scale and rules. According to ancient texts, music was an essential constituent of everyday life, since the Greeks believed that music had a great influence in cultivating the soul and developing a moral character. According to Plato, music and exercise were the two main factors in the upbringing of the youth. In Athens, music teachers were exceptionally valued and in Sparta, even though other arts were undervalued, musical education was obligatory and long lasting. It is most likely that the teaching of music was performed without musical scores or other written guidelines. Instead, learning of musical pieces was accomplished empirically by ear and heart (today's dictée). Protagoras, in the Platonic Dialogues, refers to the importance of music in familiarizing the "children's souls" with rhythms and harmonies of the universe. The Athenian poet and musician Phrynichus attributes the term "student" only to those children that were educated in "grammar" and "music". According to the historian Plutarch, Themistocles was blaming himself for not being sufficiently educated in music.

EXTANT MUSICAL DOCUMENTS

There are currently 50 extant notated musical documents, most of them in fragmentary forms. Five of them, i.e. the Seikilos Song (Seikilos Epitaph); the first Delphic Hymn to Apollo; the hymns to the Sun, to Calliope and to Nemesis, are almost complete and give us a good deal of information about how ancient greek music actually sounded.

The "Seikilos Epitaph" was found engraved on a sepulchral stele at Aidinium, near the ancient city of Tralles. The stele dates back between the 2nd century B.C. and the 1st century A.D. and was comprised of two parts. The first was without musical notes, while the second one was engraved with musical notation. The lyrics prompt happiness for this short life. The stele belonged to the collection of De Jong (Busa), and Laumonier, as a member of the French School in Athens, took photos of it. It was lost after Smyrna was set afire by the Turkish army, in September 1922, but later found and kept today in the National Museum of Kopenhagen.

The first Delphic Hymn to Apollo by Athenaeus (127 B.C) was found engraved in stone, carved on an outer wall of the Athenian treasury at Delphi.

The three hymns, to the Sun, to Muse Calliope and to Nemesis are attributed to Mesomedes of Crete, and date to the 2nd century A.D. There exists a dispute concerning the composer of the hymn to the Muse Calliope; some attribute it to Dionysus the younger, from Alikarnasso, the so called "musician". The hymn to the Sun consists of two parts: a poem without musical notes dedicated to Apollo, and a musical piece dedicated to the Sun. The hymn to Nemesis is dedicated to the goddess who represented divine punishment for the act of hubris.