



aeiforum

## Music in ancient Greece

In ancient Greece, the art of music, represented by the Muse Euterpi, thrived.

Plato, Aristotle and downstream philosophers believed that music played a vital role in the formation of personality. Because of that, musical education was considered to be an essential element of children education.

The Ancient Greek placed music in a prominent position, viewed it as equal to the other arts and therefore attributed special significance to it. Its role was important in all aspects of life: religious celebrations, weddings, funerals, sporting events, war and daily activities. The ancient Greek society ensured that music was among the main courses of children education. Because of that, the development of this art was the main purpose of ancient time philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras and others. The Greeks were familiar with the idea that music comforts, rejoices, shapes ethos and heals. In the 7th century when Sparta was in a state of turmoil, there was an important oracle which encouraged Spartans to summon the famous citharoede Terpandros from Lesbos, so as to restore order in the city using his music and songs. (*Pan. Stefos from the magazine. "Music tone" in December 2002, Ed. Phillip Nakas*).

In his book "History of Music", Evangelos Kokoris, Music Teacher in the "Philip Nakas" Music School, states:

*"Music in ancient Greece was a combination of three elements: diction, melody and movement. Also, music was present in all daily life activities and was the subject of deep reflection in philosophical schools. The influence of music on the human soul and its close relationship to the laws of the universe was obvious to the Greeks. For Pythagoras and his academy, music was well above mathematical science, in fact it was the image of heavenly harmony. As Plato says, astronomy and music are equal sciences. This passion for music and the pursuit of eternal laws led the Greeks to produce a number of theoretical studies, which have reached us through written tradition".*

The musical instruments used in ancient Greece fell into the three well-known categories: string, brass and percussion instruments. According to Evangelos Kokoris, "the study of musical instruments in ancient Greece contributed to a better understanding of them, either in the form of descriptions in ancient literature texts or of depictions on vases and statues or of the discoveries



*brought to light by archaeological excavations". More specifically: "There were a large number of string instruments such as the lyre and the guitar -the most popular, the forminx (a lyre without sound box), the chelis (type of lyre), the barbitos, the triangle (dulcimer), the piktis and the magadis, all of them called multi-stringed instruments by Plato. The various types of tube or wing instruments (diavlos, efthyaflos, and flageolet), the syrinx of Pan and, finally, the percussion instruments (sieves, cymbals, gongs) were the main instruments of the ancient Greek". At this point, it is interesting to mention (according to the same source) that stringed instruments were associated to the "lyrical language" of Apollo, while the tubes referred to the language of "passion", closely connected to the spirit of Dionysus.*

The study of theoretical texts provides us with a lot of information about the ancient Greek music system. The oldest sample of music text with symbols is an inscription on clay, "epinetron", a container used in weaving from Eleusis, depicting an Amazon trumpeting. The inscription, dating to the late 6th or early 5th century BC, consisted of the syllables (symbols) TO, TH, TO, TO, TE, seemingly recording the purpose of the Amazon's fanfare. The musical system of the Greeks was originally with five glottal stop. In the 7th century BC, Terpandros transformed the system using seven glottal stop, while in the 6th century Pythagoras used eight. Initially the teaching of music was based on oral tradition. Around 470 BC, however, the ancient Greeks invented musical notation, the first ever musical composition recording system in the world, using the letters of the ancient Greek alphabet and punctuation marks as symbols. They used tones, apostrophes, side letters, correctly, double, half or elliptical and created about 1600 points. They recorded music using these points and this resulted in its safe dissemination. It is of great importance to mention some evidence about the musical notation system. In that period of time there were two schools or academies of music composers and theorists, that of Pythagoras and the one of Aristoxenos, the latter being a student of Aristotle. However, despite the abundant evidence about the instruments and the musical system of the ancient Greek, we know very little about the musical works of this period and the composing melodies. Of course there are excerpts of musical texts. These are (according to "History of Music"):

- Two Delphic Hymns to Apollo, dating in the 2nd century BC, whose composer is unknown.
- Three Hymns to Helios (Phoebus Apollo), to the muse Calliope and to Nemesis, attributed to the Cretan musician Mesomidis of the 2nd century B.C.
- A small choral excerpt from Euripides' tragedy "Orestes".
- The first Pythionikos by Pindar.
- The Epitaph of Seikilos which was found engraved on a tombstone in Tralee, Asia Minor
- Excerpts on the Papyri of Vienna, of Berlin, of Oslo and of Oxyrhynchus.

Concerning the music of ancient Greece, it is important to mention the song, one of its integral elements. It is known that "*the song in ancient Greece expressed either grief, connected with sorrow*



*and death (elegy), or triumph and thanksgiving (paean). People, also, sang bucolic songs and eulogies".*

Melody came along with the recitation of the poems. Thus, in the 8th century BC when epic poetry was developed, the rhapsode or rhapsodist recited epic verses using the forminx. In the next century, Lyric Poetry appeared recounting more personal, inner situations accompanied by the lyre or the guitar. In the 6th century BC a new type of song appeared, the **dithyramb**. It is a choral song in honor of the god Dionysus. It is believed that the dithyramb generated tragedy, which boomed in the 5th century, and began to decline during the Greco-Roman times.

Thus, we can conclude that music in ancient Greek society had a prominent position. Also, Plato and Pythagoras believed that music was a discipline much like mathematics and astronomy and an important issue in philosophical discussions. Particular importance was given to the moral, therapeutic, and comforting nature of music which dealt with all aspects of ancient Greek daily life. Unfortunately, only few fragments of musical composition have survived. We cannot help but wonder what kind of music could have accompanied a text like that of "Antigone"...

### Bibliography

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