

Ancient Greek Music Revived

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This article was inspired by a performance on Facebook led by Professor Armand D'Angour of the University of Oxford on a video from Aeon.

We have the instruments, not only the aulos, whose physical form and sound is revealed without doubt, but also ample iconographic evidence for the three types of lyre, the kithara and the barbiton, and both physical and iconographic evidence for the lyra. There is some, but much more doubtful, evidence for other instruments also, especially the salpinx, but for that we have only one, clearly atypical, example since it differs in several respects from all the iconography, but for which we do also have physical examples of much shorter examples in pottery from the Cypro-Archaic period which do otherwise conform to the iconography.

The lyra was the small tortoise-shell lyre with wooden arms and yoke and a skin belly. We have the remains of one in the British Museum. We know that this was the basic instrument of its type, that children were taught to play it, and that it was the common instrument for after-dinner sing-songs, just as the cittern was for the Elizabethans.

We know much less about the use and form of the barbiton, save that it had much longer arms though still with a skin-bellied tortoise-shell body.

We know that the kithara was the professional's instrument, cognate with the Elizabethan lute or the modern concert grand. We still do not know what was the function of the discs at the each external ends of the yoke – were they merely ornamental or were they, improbable as it may seem, a way to turn the yoke and thus change the whole pitch of the instrument. What in particular we do not know was the function of what appears to be some form of mechanism in the corners between the internal ends of the yoke and the wooden arms. We

know that kitharist normally used a plectrum to pluck the strings, quite a stiff one since it was of wood or ivory, rather than the later quill of the lutenist or the fairly flexible plastic plectrum of the modern mandolinist or guitarist. But we do not know what the kitharist did with the left hand – was the player autoharping, stopping the unwanted strings from sounding, or were they also plucking the strings, or using, as would seem likely, doing either as most suited to the type and style of the music they were playing?

We do know, partly from existing ethnographic examples in East Africa, the mechanics of how the strings were tuned. With the lyra, strings were twisted with other components around the yoke and that the resulting ‘bundle’ for each string could be turned on the yoke to sharpen or flatten the pitch. With the kithara, each string was twisted round both the yoke and a lever, and that by pressure on that lever, the string could be tightened or slackened.

And we do know, without doubt, that the Greek poetry was not merely read or recited, but that it was sung to the accompaniment of whichever of these three types of lyre was suitable to the occasion, and that choruses were sung also to the accompaniment of the aulos.

What we do not know was the notes, nor the scales, nor the intervals of the music.

We have these very few sources of musical notation, of texts with interlinear marks which appear to be notation indications, presumably above each line of the text, but possibly below them. The interpretations of these marks is hypothetical at best and controversial for every attempt at reconstruction.

We know that the Ancient Greek theoretical scale was heptatonic with tones and semitones, but we do not know whether this was translated heptatonically or penta- etc into musical practice. We do know of the harmonic scale, using major tones, minor tones, and semitones, based on the intervals of the natural harmonic series; we do know that the Greeks were aware of the problem that a succession of fifths can never lead to an octave; we do know that there were many attempts to create scales with varying temperaments and varying sizes of interval; and we do seem to accept that Pythagoras may have been responsible

for the temperament that is still known by his name, with an equality of whole tones and, as a result, of two very small semitones (and a grossly out-of-tune interval of a third).

Because of these problems, we do not know how auloi were tuned, except with limited results from the very few extant survivals, and even with these we do not know to what extent their tuning, governed by the placement, sizes, and under-cutting of the fingerholes, may have been modified in use by cross-fingering, half-holing, reed-pressuring, etc. And certainly we do not know to what pitches and intervals the strings of the lyres were tuned.

So what we do not know is what Ancient Greek music actually sounded like – ‘in tune’ to our ears, or ‘out of tune’.

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