

Problems in Musical Notation

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I have written elsewhere on this site on Ancient Greek music and the problems of its reconstruction, so I will not repeat that here, but Ancient Greece is not alone in this.

We have the same problem in biblical cantillation. Hebrew is written in consonants alone. Around 1000 CE the Masoretes, as well as establishing an accepted text for the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh), codified a system of vowel symbols (nikkud) and also a system of cantillation signs (te'amim) that also indicated the punctuation in that commas, semicolons and full stops each have their own melodic phrase.

The signs used for the te'amim are today accepted more or less universally (as are the nikkud). What results is quite another matter. The pronunciation of the vowels varies in different communities, though more and more often today the standard pronunciation used in modern Hebrew has become accepted save in the more strictly Orthodox communities (Haredim). Cantillation, however, varies far more considerably. What one would hear in different countries, even in different cities within those countries, and even in different synagogues in each city, can be musically quite different even though the text is always the same.

A further complication is that the musical interpretation of each sign in Torah (the Pentateuch) is different in Haftarah (the readings from the Prophetic books), and differs again in the five Megillot, those separate books such as Esther and Ruth, each of which is allocated to a different Holy Day, despite the fact that the signs themselves are the same in all those books. As for the poetical books such as the Psalms, there is no agreement at all for the interpretation of those signs.

Each tradition would of course claim that its musical interpretation is correct and goes back to the Masoretes in the tenth century CE – several traditions even

claim that their interpretation goes back to Temple times before 91 CE. However, there is little or no evidence to support such claims. A number of scholars have claimed that they have been able to reconstruct the musical traditions of the singing in the Temple. However, just as with Ancient Greek music, each reconstruction differs from each other, and none carries more conviction than any other.

Cantillation or chanting differs from singing in musical style. For one thing, cantillation, at least in the Hebrew context, is individual, whereas singing may be choral as well as individual. We know from the two books of Chronicles that there were groups of singers, both male and female though the latter would not be permitted in Orthodox communities today. So what did they sing and what notation or melodies did they use? We have no idea. We have no records, no indications for any melodic music at all. The te'amim apply only to cantillation and not to singing. What little Ancient Greek music we have seems to have been applied to odes and thus may well have been for singing. There is nothing whatsoever comparable for Hebrew singing. As a result, any attempted reconstruction of Jewish choral music in the Temple can only be purely hypothetical.

We have similar problems with early Christian church music, where the notation, a series of squiggles (a term that can also be applied to the te'amim) is known as neumes in the days before square notation came in. Unlike the te'amim, which are still used for biblical notation today, the neumes are no longer used. They were supplanted by square notation on a staff and eventually by the musical notation that we use today, though this is not to say that there is any general agreement on the interpretation even of some elements of square notation. While few people would sing from neumes today, any texts notated in that way do have to be realised as written music if they are to be brought back to musical life, and here there is almost as much variation among early mediaeval scholars as there is in local variants of the interpretation of the te'amim. And even once the music is transcribed from neumes or from square notation, there is still variation of the musical results in performance, even though that of Solesmes seems to predominate today.

I am ignorant of the notation for Koranic chant or Islamic prayer. Here there is a separate problem in that music is often frowned upon in Koranic and later texts.

As a result, Muslims would deny that cantillation, including the call to prayer from the minarets, is music. Cantillation is approved of but music is haram, forbidden. As I have said, I do not have any detailed knowledge of Muslim cantillation, although I have heard some, but I would suspect that there are as wide differences of interpretation of chant between different communities as there are in the Jewish practice.

I am even more ignorant of Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Confucian and other Oriental practices in chant, though I do know that chant of some sort is universally used in prayer and in the equivalents of biblical rendition.

I know a little more about instrumental practices in these different traditions. Going back to the Hebrew, the only traditional instrument that survives from biblical times is the shofar, the ram's horn. That is still used ritually in the synagogue today, and it has three named traditional calls. These go back to Talmudic times, before the end of the sixth century CE. They are t'qi'ah (a blast), sh'varim (a triple call), and t'ru'ah (an alarm). I have heard many shofar blowers, and no two have blown exactly the same calls. Yes, all blow the same named calls, but each differs in musical pitches and in phrasing. For those interested, there is more detail on this in my book *The Shofar*. Yet again there is no way to know precisely what was blown in Talmudic times, and of course we can know even less what was blown in the Temple several centuries earlier.

I have seen notation for conch blowing in Tibetan Buddhist ritual, but I have seen no transcription of this in our notation, but I have heard differing results for what appeared to have been in the same contexts. The use of the conch in their and in Hindu ritual appears to go back earlier even than the times of the Buddha, for Hinduism is presumed to be earlier than Buddhism, and even allowing for the limitations of what can be blown on a shell (and this of course applies to the shofar as well), the likelihood of the precise musical results being the same as in pre-Buddhist times is minimal.

There is musical notation surviving from Confucian times in China for some instruments, but to what extent the interpretation of that notation today resembles that of Confucian times, it is impossible to say. Players may say that it does, for the notation is more explicit than our notation, with added signs for fingering and

phrasing, and is thus much more precise than, for example, our Elizabethan lute tablature.

We do know, from Laurence Picken's studies and those of his students, that Japanese music of the sixth century CE is radically different from the modern versions of gagaku. For one thing, the speed of the music is some four to eight times slower than it originally was, so that there has been much musical in-filling.

Even with these few examples from around the world, even for voices, and even for music that is still played on the same instruments that it was in many centuries in the past, it is clear that there is no possibility ever of truly reconstructing the music of earlier times.

Much of this applies to what we might call lost notations. A great deal of it applies also to our own modern system of notation. Yes we have the eleven-line staff, treble and bass with middle C on its own leger line between them, and with further leger lines above and below. We have some, often controversial, phrasing, joining note to note. We have many ornamentation indications, often varying in their meaning from one composer and one period to another. But we have no real idea how music was performed before the days of gramophone recordings (and we cannot always be certain of that due to the four-and-a-half minutes constraint of a 10- or 12-inch 78 rpm disc). We have the dots, but beyond that we no idea of how any earlier composer played their own music, and even less of how other contemporary performers in a different city or country played that same music.

And our grandchildren will have little idea of how we played the music of our own time.

Musical performance is fiction come to life.

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