

GREEK MUSIC

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Overview For the ancient Greeks, music was a gift of the Muses, as the term *mousike*, 'music,' suggests. According to the Greek poet, Hesiod, the muses themselves were the offspring of the supreme God Zeus, and Mnemosyne, or Memory, 'the mother of the gods.' The muses ([Calliope](#) (epic poetry), [Clio](#) (history), [Euterpe](#) (flutes and lyric poetry), [Thalia](#) (comedy and pastoral poetry), [Melpomene](#) (tragedy), [Terpsichore](#) (dance), [Erato](#) (love poetry), [Polyhymnia](#) (sacred poetry), [Urania](#) (astronomy) were thus offspring of deity, and in a certain sense might be understood as divine wisdom, Zeus', reflected on—that is put through the sieve of--memory. *Mousike*, whose absence you note in the above list, is in use as a general term, to cover the pervasion of the Muses in human culture. And such a pervasion was precisely the dominant feature of music, for the ancient Greeks. There was no dimension of human experience that was not intimately pervaded by music.

Plato and music In a later stage of a culture which by his time (428-348 B.C.E.) had arguably passed through its late, defining, and most creative stages, Plato describes in the *Republic* the traits he would value in an ideal state. We see in Book Three that he was (like theoretically minded fellow Greeks of the time) very sensitive to the modes or tones of different formulaic styles of music. (In music historical terms, the music making of the ancient Greeks was 'pre-harmony,' that is preceded the stage in western musical development when voices or instruments found unique realization in intersecting, weaving together developmental themes; when, to put it positively, unique and unblended modes of music represented and elicited consistent and predictable modes of behavior. Your ethos, or moral sense, was expressed and shaped by the kinds of musical tonality you employed. This could be another way of saying that for the like-minded contemporary of Plato musical experience was directly ethical, expressing and shaping ethical behaviors. As Plato himself put it: 'when fundamental modes of music change, the fundamental mores of the state change with them.' Plato brought that historical observation into his scrutiny of the reasons for the decline of Athens after the Peloponnesian War (404 B.C.E.), a period when instrumental music was overvalued, and the ethos of the unaccompanied human voice fell into desuetude.

Greek mythical thinking and the nature of music For Plato, music was an expression of the soul, and good music was the expression of a good man. Greek myth is without exception open to such an awed view of the transcendent nature of music. A mythological account of the building of Thebes illustrates this kind of thinking: Amphion is said to have been taught music by Hermes, then to have used a golden lyre to move the stones of Thebes into place, solely by his music; his music had the power of magic. Music, virtue, and power belonged together, as Plato assumed. Hermes proves the power of music by using his newly-invented tortoise-shell lyre in order to win his way back into the favor of Apollo, whom he has impudently insulted. Even the god of music cannot resist the eloquence of well tuned strings.

The instruments for making and capturing *mousike* Music as spirit was clearly at the heart of the Greek cultural aesthetic, but what about the instruments that could serve as vehicles for music? By the fifth-century the Greek instrumentation repertoire was full: strings (*lyre*, *kithara*, *barbitos*); winds (*aulos*, *Pan pipes*, the *hydraulis*); and percussion (*tympalum*). Occasions for working with *mousike*, by using these instruments, were as rich and multiple as life in the Greek polis. Musics specific to this or that dynamic sport were finely exercised at the Games—Pythian or Olympic—at which the Greeks most visibly fine tuned the relations of body to spirit. Music, as we know from profuse vase painting evidence, was omnipresent at social entertainments, dance festivals, religious ceremonies and funerals—at each of which kinds of event modes and tonalities were employed that exactly fitted the need of the occasion. We are close to thinking that music associated with the dithyramb in praise of Dionysus lay at the root of the creation of Greek tragedy.

The mystique of music; Pythagoras Of great importance to the Greek view of music, and especially to the Platonic view of the universe, was the musical speculation of the much discussed but little understood Pythagoras (570-495 B.C.E.) This philosopher, mathematician, and cosmic musicologist, who is known to have exercised powerful influence on Plato's metaphysics and theory of mathematics, was the first westerner to identify the fundamental tonal ratio, 3:2, which pervades sequences of musical notation and, at the farthest extension of its unfolding, provides a bridge for understanding the connection between music and 'the structure of the universe.' A bridge joining ethics, mathematics, and the essential characteristics of music was among the thought-structures Pythagoras helped Plato to develop from the perspective of his own philosophy.

Reading

Lord, Albert, *The Singer of Tales*, Cambridge, 1960.

Michaelides, S., *The Music of Ancient Greece: An Encyclopedia*, London, 1978.

Discussion questions

How much indication of musical notation remains to us from Greek music? Did the bards who sang the Homeric epics have any 'notes' to guide them?

Were particular musicians—performers or composers—of especially high regard in the ancient Greek musical tradition?

Were singing and instrumental performance joined in ancient Greek music? Was there anything like 'popular music,' on the Greek musical scene?