

ANCIENT ROME - Music

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Ancient Roman Music

Overview Eclectic, rather than original, the Romans were in all the arts happy to follow the examples of those Greeks who, in letting themselves be conquered by Rome were at the same time becoming the conquerors of Rome. Thus while music was pervasive in Roman society, as it was in Greek, it did not open those vistas music widened for the Greeks: the profound inquiries of Pythagoras, into the harmonics and ultimately metaphysics of musical chords; Plato's inquiries, in *The Republic*, into the relations between the ethical and the musical life; and the active role of harps and lyres as accompaniments to the great epics of Homer. The pervasiveness of music, in Roman culture, displayed itself in festival, funeral, dinner party, religious sacrifice, and in the speculations of mathematicians, and though that music was not a spearhead of Roman cultural development and in fact only one shard remains to us, of ancient Roman music—nonetheless Roman music was an omnipresent trademark of Roman civilization, and through the Empire that music was everywhere distributed, the Roman spirit and Roman music intertwined. In return, as we would expect, the Romans received are the musics of Asia, Gaul, and North Africa, dependent but vital territories of the Empire.

What we can deduce about the nature of ancient Roman music

Roman, like Greek, musical notation is sketchy and hard to interpret. Whether or not we can interpret Roman notation after the fashion of Greek, we need to assume that in both systems four letters were used to indicate a sequence of four tones, and that rhythm indicators, located above the notes, indicated the notes' duration. Roman music itself appears to have followed the modes of Greek music, sequences initially associated with the qualities of regional musical forms, and given wide currency in the theories found in Plato, for whom ethical character and musical practice were closely related.

What we know about the instruments of Roman music Our knowledge of Roman musical instruments was largely derived from archeological evidence and from vase painting. We can deduce that the evolution of such instruments occurred over centuries, and the fact that we find Roman musical instruments, in parts of the Empire where they cannot have originated, proves that these instruments were regularly circulating through Roman territories, doubtless finding themselves modified and improved as they moved.

The wind instruments. The *cornu* (Latin for *horn*) was a long tubular metal instrument that curved like a capital G around the body of the performer. The *cornu* was used for giving military signals, and for parade operations. Typical, for a wind instrument, the *cornu* plays an essentially public role, in spectacle and military manoeuvre. The *tibia* (Greek *aulos*) was a double reed wind instrument, producing a sound (we think) like that of a low keyed clarinet. The third major wind instrument was the *tuba*, a long (one plus meters) tubular bronze trumpet, without valves—so that the single unvaried overtone note would predominate strongly.

Strings The *lyre* consisted of a tortoise shell sounding-box wired to resonant strings; the instrument was cradled held in one hand, its strings being plucked with a plectrum, by the other hand. In the course of time, during the Empire, the lyre found itself replaced by the *cithara*, a larger sound-box and plectrum instrument, played upright. The *cithara* was to prove the major performance and accompaniment instrument of imperial Rome. Our versatile *guitar*, of today, readily proclaims its ancestry to the *kithara*. The least employed stringed instrument, of Roman times, was the *lute*, kin to the lyre but offering fewer strings, which could produce graduated notes by the 'stopping' of notes. Lutes were already familiar from Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C.E., while the lute we know best, from the Middle Ages, appears to have its origins in the Arabic *oud*.

Organs The hydraulic pipe organ (*hydraulis*) was perhaps the most sensational Roman musical instrument, channeling water pressure into pipes 'sized so as to produce many of the modes known from the Greeks.' This remarkable instrument could be found in private homes, or even in the palace of Nero, who was known to be proficient in playing it. Even at the gladiatorial games the *hydraulis* made its appearance, like the recurrent organ roar at a Cubs' game.

Percussion instruments Drumming, clapping, and rhythmic beating instruments were common in many aspects of Roman life: rhythmic dances, military procedures, even 'for the control of bees in apiaries.' Rattles, bells, castanets, and tambourines were the regular dressing for festive occasions.

Choral or group musical presentations We have mentioned the use of organs for entertainment at the gladiatorial games. The fact is that all of the instruments listed above were regularly enjoyed for private entertainment, public spectacle, or military show. When we reflect on our own interface with the forms of music—especially in an age when digitization has raised the stakes of reproduceable art to a new height--we may want to remember the delight of the ancient Romans at the music which accompanied performances of comedy, such events as a mixed children's choir performed at the Secular Games in 17 B.C.E., or the joy of the *populus* as it devoured the percussive music of public pantomime in the streets of downtown Rome.

Reading

Habinek, Thomas, *The World of Roman Song*, Baltimore, 2005.

Pierce, John, *The Science of Musical Sound*, New York, 1983.

Discussion questions

Who *made* ancient Roman musical instruments? Was this a widespread profession? Where were such instruments sold?

In what way were musicians taught to play? Were there official 'music teachers'? Did middle class kids get lessons during their childhood?

Were there renowned musical performers? Were there teenage idols?