

# HYMNING THE GODS

## Music in the public life of the ancient Greeks

‘Celebrating a festival means performing dances and hymns.’ Music and dance are inextricable elements of ritual and are detected in the successive stages of a festival, from the procession of devotees to the temple to the sacrifice and the events which surround this.

The procession, that is the group of participants in a festival who proceed towards the altar or the temple, following a preordained sacred course, frequently performed musical-poetic works and dances, written specially for this phase of the rite. The musical genre *par excellence* that is associated with the procession is the *prosodion*, a choral song to the development of which great poets such as Alkman, Simonides, Pindar and Bacchylides contributed. It is possible that other genres of song as well, such as the paeon and the *partheneion*, were linked closely with the *prosodion* and were performed in the same context. An example is the II Delphic Hymn, which consists of a paeon (1-32) and a *prosodion* (33-40), written in Aeolian metre and Lydian mode (cat. no. 77).

PROCESSION

During the course of the procession, which in some cases covered a distance of kilometres, as in the Eleusinia or the City Dionysia, it is possible that halts were made for the performance of difficult hymns and dances. In Miletos there was an association of men in honour of Apollo Delphinios, the Molpoi (from the verb *melpo* = to sing and dance), who performed paeans at predetermined stopping places along the route from the Delphinion of Miletos to the sanctuary of Apollo at Didyma. In the Theban Daphnephoria festival, choruses of virgin maidens who held branches in their hands sang the *daphnephorika*, a kind of processional *partheneia*. Especially rich in songs and dances was the procession of the City Dionysia in Athens, during which hymns and dances were performed at various altars and in particular at the altar of the Twelve Gods in the Agora. As part of a phallus-bearing procession during the same festival, a komos sang ribald songs, a usual practice at other festivals of Dionysos too. Indeed, Aristotle associates the birth of comedy with the phallic songs.

The aulos was the main musical instrument that usually accompanied the prosodia and the procession in general, without ruling out kitharas too, as for example was the case in the procession of the Panathenaia.

Sacrifices – the epicentre of every religious event in ancient Greece – were accompanied almost invariably by music and frequently by dancing too (cat. nos 96, 97). The presence of music and especially of the aulos at the sacrifice was so taken for granted in Greek religion that Herodotus expressed surprise at its absence from the sacrifices of the Persians (1.132). Music acts on multiple levels in the sacrifice: it eases the animal’s anxious course to the altar, it prepares and influences the faithful enhancing the intensity of the divine presence at the moment of sacrifice, it creates a climate of piety and it thanks the gods making the mortals’ offering to them more welcome. Hymns and paeans, prayers (*kateuches*) and loud cries (*ololygai*), songs to dances (*hyporchemata*), hymns sung at the altar (*parabomia*) and libation songs (*spondeia*) are some of the musico-poetic genres that accompanied the various phases of the sacrificial rite. Some of these, such as the hymn and the *hyporchema*,

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the first entrance of the chorus or express tense emotional situations, e.g. in the *kommoi*, and 3) the various lyric metres of the choral songs.

The entire history of dramatic music and the changes it underwent in the 5th century BC is vividly and uniquely portrayed in Aristophanes' *Frogs*. According to the plot of the play, Dionysos descends to Hades in order to find a poet to fill the artistic void in Athens, left by the death of Euripides. The comic poet puts the two prodigies of the art of tragedy, Aeschylus and Euripides, to take part in a kind of contest in the Underworld, which to a great degree concerns issues of music (manner of composing *mele* = tunes, rhythm, ethos); in this unique way, that is by staging a contest of tragedy within a comedy in the context of a Dionysiac festival with competitive elements, Aristophanes presents the successive changes undergone by music from the time of Phrynichos to the time of Euripides and the composers of the new music. Although in the play Dionysos brings Aeschylus up to the earthly world, the balance scale on which the music of tragedy was weighed had already tilted in the opposite direction by 405 BC, when *Frogs* was premiered. During the ensuing centuries the plays of Euripides, faithful follower of new trends, were those preferred in re-performances of the Classical works, and to this is perhaps due the fact that through musical notation only their echo – albeit very fragmented – reached to our days.

Reisch 1885. Latte 1913. Webster 1956. Pickard-Cambridge 1962. Browning 1963. Haldane 1966. Sifakis 1967. Webster 1967. Pickard-Cambridge 1968. Webster 1970. Sifakis 1971. Trendall – Webster 1971. Burkert 1977. Calame 1977. Neubecker 1977. Webster 1978. Scott 1984. Herington 1985. Τιβέριος 1989. Kotsidou 1991. Taplin 1991. Nordquist 1992. Shapiro 1992. West 1992. Lonsdale 1993. Taplin 1993. Anderson 1994. Green 1994. Scott 1996. Naerebout 1997. Parker 1997. Χουρμουζιάδης 1998. Bélis 1999. Goldhill – Osborne 1999. Matthiesen 1999. Brand 2000. Πέλλαν 2000. Brulé – Vendries 2001. Moretti 2001. Zschätzsch 2002. Παπαδοπούλου 2003.

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are such wide concepts that from Late Hellenistic times and after they are confused and mutually overlap.

Professional musicians, mainly aulos-players, who were very often permanent personnel not only in sanctuaries but also of political bodies (ekklesia of the deme), undertook the musical accompaniment of the sacrifices. Choral groups such as the Molpoi at Miletos, the paeonists in Athens, the Deliades on Delos, the *aoidoi* and the *epispondorchestai* in the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros, the *hymnodoi* and the *ololyktriai* in Asia Minor had musical duties associated with cult.

An important part of the festivals were the cultic dances, which were frequently performed by young members of the community and were associated with *rites de passage*. Ancient Greek literature abounds with references to groups of girls who danced in honour of Artemis and of boys in honour of Apollo. The gods themselves, who are the divine archetype of these dances, participated in choral groups either as members of the chorus or as musicians and leaders. In the Peloponnese, at the festivals of Artemis Karyatis and Limnatis, dances of girls marked the transition to adulthood, while there were also dances of orgiastic character in honour of other hypostases of the goddess (Dereatis, Korythalia, Kordax). In the context of the Arkteia, in the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron and Mounichia in Attica, group dances of young girls were part of an at once educational and cultic process aimed at the inclusion of the members of the dance in the community. At festivals of Apollo, choral dances had an equally important place. Dances of virgins and of young boys are mentioned on Delos (such as the *geranos*; cf. cat. no. 98, from the Delion on Paros), and Delphi (dances of youths around the tripod which invoked the divine epiphany), while important musical and dance events are included in the festivals of the god in Sparta. Characteristic is the description by Polykrates (Athenaeus 4.139d-f) of the Hyakinthia, a three-day festival with a host of musical and dance elements: children's choruses performed hymns to the accompaniment of kithara and aulos, choruses of youths sang local songs and performed dances to songs, accompanied by aulos-music, and so on (cf. cat. no. 99). Cultic dances are also mentioned in festivals of Athena (nocturnal vigils – with dances of youths and *ololygai* at the Panathenaia), of Demeter (Eleusinia, Thesmophoria), of Hera (at Argos and Olympia). The dances in Dionysiac cult made up a special group, especially the dances of the Meanads and Satyrs, which, by temporarily overturning established order and social values – always within the context of the ritual, of course – achieve their even firmer consolidation (cat. no. 100).

#### CULTIC DANCES

Contest is a characteristic element and motive force of ancient Greek civilization. Contests were usually a product of a particular political praxis, which aimed at promoting to the utmost the organizing authority. Consequence of such a praxis was that the various musical-poetic or choral works which were offered initially to the cult part of a festival, as *ex-votos* to the gods, shed their exclusively cultic character and took the form of contests between individuals or groups of performers, so acquiring discreet and distinctive formal characteristics. That is why, moreover, the term 'music contest' had a wider meaning in Antiquity than it has today and included not only the purely musical and poetic specialities but also various genres of choral compositions and performances (dithyramb, pyrrhiche etc.), as well as the most sophisticated of the musical-poetic genres, drama. There were two types of contests, depending on the kind of prizes: *stephanites*, which were considered

#### MUSIC CONTESTS

sacred and in which the victors received as main prize a wreath (*stephane*), and *chrematites* or *thematikoi*, in which the victors were rewarded with precious objects or money (*chremata*).

The programme of the contests varied according to the time and place. Already from the Geometric period there are testimonies of feasts at which contests were held, in which poets/musicians and performers competed for prizes (*Odyssey* viii, 259-381; cf. cat. no. 101). Hesiod himself mentions that he took part in contests in Chalkis and won a tripod as a prize (*Works and Days* 654-659). The results of these contests must have been highly significant, since they are recorded in the official archives of the sanctuary or the city which organized them. The earliest records of music contests concern the Karneia of Sparta, which were founded between 676 and 673 BC. Among those who distinguished themselves in these contests was Terpander from Lesbos, father of music for the ancient Greeks, who gathered and systematized the local musical idioms, transforming them into musical 'laws' (*nomoi*) of panhellenic application. In the 7th century BC there were also music contests at Argos, in Arcadia and even earlier on Delos, in Messene and on Paros. In 586 BC the quinquennial Pythia were founded at Delphi, which included important music contests, the programme of which underwent several differentiations over time. The oldest contest was of singing and accompanying oneself on the kithara (*kitharodia*), which derived from the contests between musicians/poets who sang the hymn to the god. In 586 BC the aulos-player Sakadas established the contest of aulos-playing (*auletike*), performing the 'Pythian nome', which re-enacted with music of the aulos the battle between Apollo and Python (see *Μουσών δώρα* 2003, cat. no. 116). In 558 BC the kithara-playing contest (*kitharistike*) was introduced, in imitation of the aulos contest and with analogous content. The contest of aulos-playing and singing (*aulodia*) was abolished very early on, as particularly mournful. The other two great panhellenic festivals with music contests, the Isthmia (582 BC) and the Nemea (572 BC), were founded in the same period.

To the 6th century BC date also the music contests in various festivals of Attica and especially of Athens, which from about the middle of this century became the unrivalled cultural centre in Greece, attracting the most notable poets/composers of the age. Music held a dominant place in the two major Athenian festivals, the Great Panathenaia and the Great or City Dionysia. Apart from the contests for rhapsodes, contests of singing to one's own accompaniment on the kithara (*kitharodia*), kithara-playing (*kitharestike*), aulos-playing (*auletike*) and singing to the accompaniment of the aulos (*aulodia*) were held, as well as contest in the *pyrrhiche* dance. Some of the music contests were distinguished into two categories: of men and of boys. According to surviving epigraphic testimonia, the *aulodoi* received the lowest remuneration, while the men kitharodes were awarded the biggest prizes, five in all: a wreath and money for the outright victor, just money for the four runners up.

The contests included in the second major Athenian festival, the Great Dionysia, that is choral contests of dithyramb (a choral genre associated *in principio* with the worship of Dionysos) and drama contests, had a very important educational role for the Athenians, since at each annual festival of the Dionysia 500 boys and as many men took part in the dithyrambic choruses (choruses of 50 members for each of the 10 tribes), as well as at least 36 men in the tragic choruses, all free citizens. It is telling that some of the thousands of Athenians who were taken captive after the catastrophe at Syracuse in 413 BC were set free because they were able to sing the choruses of Euripides. Dithyramb contests are attested

not only at Dionysiac but also Apollonian festivals, such as the Athenian Thargelia and the Delian Apollonia. Practice in dance and song was a principal means of educating young men and the main way of perpetuating the institutions of the community.

In Hellenistic times a significant increase in the festivals with all manner of contests is observed virtually throughout Greece. In addition to the gods of the Olympian pantheon, foreign gods such as Sarapis, as well as kings, very often deified, were now honoured in the festivals. One consequence of the spectacular increase in festivals was the proliferation of professional artists, who from the beginning of the 3rd century BC were organized in guilds which were called *Koina* or 'Synodoi of artists (*technitai*) around Dionysos'. The members of these guilds, among them musicians, actors, poets and so on, participated both in the purely cultic part of the festivals (see cat. no. 77) and in the contests, and frequently gave free performances, not connected with contests. The artists around Dionysos, who came from various parts of the Hellenic world, were for centuries the most important bearers of cultural influence and communication, achieving that which the successors to Alexander the Great were unable to bring about, namely the breaking down of distances and borders throughout the entire Eastern Mediterranean.

Music and dance had a very important place in the three genres of ancient drama, tragedy, comedy and the satyr play, component element of which is the choral song. Concerning the origins of the dramatic genres, Aristotle mentions in his *Poetics* that both tragedy and comedy were in their beginnings improvised and that the first derived from leaders of the dithyramb and the second from the *phallika*, that is the phallic komoi, which still existed in the days of the philosopher from Stageira.

In all three dramatic genres the element of music is expressed mainly through the chorus. According to Aristotle's quantitative division of tragedy, its choric parts are the *parodos* and the *stasimon*, while there are also some songs that are not included in all tragedies, the *kommoi* and the *apo skenes asmata* ('stage songs'). The *parodos* is the 'first word' of the chorus, as Aristotle says; it is a kind of rhythmical song with which the chorus enters the orchestra, with march beat, anapaests or trochees. The *stasimon* is the antistrophic song of the chorus when it has taken up position in the orchestra. The *kommoi* are the reciprocal songs between chorus and one or two actors, and took their name from the breast-beating of death lamentations. The number of members of the tragic choruses was twelve in Aeschylus and fifteen in Sophocles and Euripides. In contrast to the dithyrambic chorus which was circular, the tragic chorus was parallelogram in scheme.

The songs of the chorus had strophic structure, but from the late 5th century BC a tendency to dissolve this articulation and to adopt freer forms of composition is ascertained. The changes were due to the influence of the new music, which with its elaborated and intensely virtuoso character, differentiated considerably the role of the chorus, reinforcing the importance of the actors and the leader. The chorus's participation in the action was reduced considerably, especially when Agathon established the practice of writing independent choric parts (*embolima* = interludes) which could be transferred from one play to another.

The chorus also had a very important place in comedy until the end of the 5th century BC. Examination of the structure of the plays by Aristophanes reveals that the central point was the *parabasis*, that is the choric in which the chorus addressed the audience. Characteristic of the *parabasis*, which has a traditional and strictly symmetrical structure, is the diverse metres in its different parts, in which song alternates with a kind of rhythmical recitation.

MUSIC  
IN ANCIENT DRAMA

Gradually, however, from the late 5th century BC, the choral sections decreased in comedy too, and the chorus was confined to singing interludes between the dialogues. The reduction in the role of the chorus is reflected in the number of its members too: whereas in the 5th century BC it comprised twenty-four persons, by the late 3rd century BC just seven sufficed for comic performances presented at Delphi and later even fewer.

There were three genres of dramatic dances: the modest and harmonious *emmeleia* of tragedy, the lewd *kordax* of comedy and the *sikinnis* of the satyr play, which was considered to be devoid of ethos because it had no fluctuations (no slow movements). The significance of dance in drama, and especially in its early forms, is apparent also from testimonies that the early tragic poets (Thespis, Pratinas, Phrynichos, Kratinos, Aeschylus) were called *orchestai*, that is 'they taught dances not only for their own plays but also for whoever desired it' (Athenaeus 1.22a). The mimetic character of dramatic dances was emphasized through the *schemata*, the poses in which each movement ended. The *schemata* of the dramatic dances, which are mentioned by the ancient authors, are codified and named but we do not know which were used by the chorus and which by the actors. Some derive from ritual, such as the *kallabides* or the *kalathiskos*, others refer to body or leg movements, such as the *kybistesis* and the *dipodismos*, as well as to facial expressions, such as the *skopeuma*. A significant element of dramatic mimes was gesture (*cheironomia*), which was one of the most effective methods of expression.

The major dramatic poets not only choreographed the dances but also composed their own music. Unfortunately, this music has not survived. The first written versions of choral music postdate their composition and first performance by at least two centuries. Moreover, it is not certain whether later sources which preserve information on the musical modes of drama refer to contemporary works or to the reality of Classical times. What is certain is that a significant differentiation took place in music in the 5th century BC, with the adoption of new genera and modes, the use of many tones (*polychordia* – use of many strings), free astrophic structure and particularly complicated melodic and rhythmic *schemata*.

The main musical instrument of ancient drama, with deep roots in ritual, closely bound with the worship of Dionysos and supreme in its ability for mimesis, was the aulos. Moreover, as Pseudo-Aristotle notes, it was the instrument that was most appropriate to the human voice, because it hid its imperfections, therefore it was suitable for non-professionals, such as the citizens who made up – in the early days at least – the members of the dramatic choruses. As emerges from the pictorial representations, in all three dramatic genres the aulos-player wears the opulent garment of the actors, but for obvious reasons does not wear a mask. The use of the lyre or the kithara began most probably with Sophocles, but it was very limited (mainly to accompany the monodies). As far as the presence of other musical instruments in drama is concerned, there is only scant information. Aristophanes, however, parodying Euripides' play *Hypsipyle* in his *Frogs*, mentions that the heroine accompanies her child's song with clappers – perhaps in this case a kind of rattle. It seems that purely instrumental music was unusual, except in certain cases, particularly in comedy, as in Aristophanes' *Birds*, in which the aulos imitates the song of the nightingale. These instrumental parts are known from the *Scholia*, by the names *diaulion* and *mesaulion*.

The metrical form of the tragedies was crystallized into three genera of metres: 1) the metre of speech, the iambic trimetre and the trochaic tetrametre catalectic, 2) the metres of recitations to instrumental accompaniment, such as the anapaests which accompany