INTRODUCTION

The Topic and the Sources

Over the past fifty years, classicists have undertaken a systematic study of the Greek symposion (after-supper wine party), expanding the scope of their inquiry to include social dining generally in Greek and Roman antiquity. Meanwhile, scholars of ancient Judaism and early Christianity have explored the Greco-Roman banquet as a framework for interpreting the common meals of early Jews and Christians. Music is sometimes discussed in these studies, usually in narrowly focused explorations and most notably in treatments of poetry at the archaic-classical Greek symposion. The present book is a much broader examination of the musical aspect. Beginning with the archaic period and concluding with the age of Augustine, it traces out music’s contributions to the pleasures and the purposes of social dining in the ancient world.

Poets occasionally limned enticing pictures of music’s place among the delights of dining. “There is no fulfillment that brings greater happiness,” declares Homer’s Odysseus, “than when joy holds sway completely among the people: the guests arranged in orderly fashion . . . listen to the bard; the tables are filled with bread and meat; and the steward, drawing from the mixing bowl, carries the wine around and pours it into the goblets.”¹ In a much later era, Philo Judaeus asks rhetorically, “Who does not know that holidays and festivities engender joyful merriment and glad feelings?”² Everyone knew. Whatever the occasions for social meals, their chief attraction for most people was the pleasure of food, wine, and music in the company of friends or family. These produced the “good cheer” of the banquet,³ one of those fine things that made life worth living. Therefore,

¹ Od. 9.2–10. On the sense of τέλος χαριστερον, see Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 12.
² Philo, Congr. 161.
³ Note εὐφροσύνη (good cheer, glad-heartedness) in Odysseus’ praise of the banquet of Alcinous (Od. 9.6). The word was so closely connected with the pleasure of the social meal that it was sometimes used as a term for a feast. See, for example, Herodianus Exc. 5.6.5 (ἐορτάζειν παντοδαπᾶς τε
the Greek poets treated recreational music as a symbol of the precious delights of the living that were denied to the dead:

Then he will lie in the deep-rooted earth without a share in the symposion, the lyre, and the sweet cry of pipes.\(^4\)

A voice from the ancient Judaic tradition pictured national doom in similar terms:

The wine dries up, the vine languishes, all the merry-hearted sigh. The mirth of the drums is stilled, the noise of the jubilant has ceased, the mirth of the lyre is stilled. No longer do they drink wine with singing; Strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.\(^5\)

Here, the joys of wine and song are recalled in their absence. But the Greek poetic technique of deictic self-reference let singing diners talk about their sympotic activities while they were engaged in them, and occasionally the deictic language of a sympotic song portrayed its own happy here and now so compellingly as to “constitute present reality or at least shape the audience’s experience of it.”\(^6\)

Indeed, deictic vividness could make a party seem everything it was supposed to be—or better—as the following song by the Greek poet Xenophanes illustrates:

Now the floor is clean and everyone’s hands and the cups too; someone distributes woven garlands, and another offers sweet-smelling perfume in a dish; a krater stands full of merriment; other wine stands ready, which promises never to run out, gentle in jugs, smelling of flowers. In the middle, frankincense wafts a holy scent, and the water is cool and sweet and pure; golden breads are at hand and a lordly table heaving with cheese and thick honey; an altar in the middle is entirely covered with flowers; and song and festivity pervade the room.\(^7\)

Xenophanes gives the singing diner the word “now,” along with present-tense verbs and even a reference to the very poem that the singer is now in

\(^4\) \textit{Apud} Plutarch, \textit{Mor.} 1104e (PMG 1009).
\(^5\) Isa. 24:7–9 NRSV (with a slight change: drums instead of “timbrels”). \(^6\) Hobden 2013: 27.
\(^7\) Xenophanes of Colophon (ca. 570–480) fr. 1.1–12 (Athenaeus 11.7 (462d–e) = B1 IEG 2) as translated by Hobden 2013: 26.
the midst of performing, the ode of the moment when song and festivity fill the room.

Song and festivity filling the room were the essence of banquet joy. Worldly troubles were shut outside, for the drinking and dancing god Dionysus was ever busy "putting an end to cares." A good deal of the present book is devoted to describing this sort of recreation and its various counterparts across a broad range of social settings. Yet other interests and dynamics besides recreation were at work in social music. For it was not all blissful forgetting when song and festivity filled the banquet hall. Hosts and guests used music with self-awareness and purpose as a medium of significant social interaction. These uses, too, are central to my study, and it may be helpful to preview some of them.

At aristocratic symposia in the sixth century, men engaged in a variety of group games designed to forge bonds between them, to cultivate a class image, and to give the individual diner opportunities to display his paideia (educational formation). Musical activities were chief among these rituals. Guests sang elegy and lyric poetry to the pipe and lyre, performing by turns for each other. Sometimes they shared a poem, passing it around. Upper-class men developed these distinctive song customs in an era when many of them were still adjusting to the social reality of a rising and increasingly powerful middling class. The elite drinking party provided an important setting for elites to strengthen their personal ties, assure themselves of their own superiority, and assert that superiority to the rest of society. Their music-making served all three purposes. By performing well, a man proved his cultural mettle to members of his own class; and by playing the musical games well, the group cemented relationships and proved its collective quality as kalokagathoi, the fine-and-good, who deserved to rule and be honored by the lower classes.

Aristocrats wanted the lower classes to know about their elegant parties, and nonelites did know. Black- and red-figure vases, viewable in shops and perhaps even affordable to better-off members of the middling class, depicted various moments of elite dining, including musical activities. Moreover, the middling folk who admired this earthenware knew how to interpret the images (how to distinguish the more-or-less realistic from the fanciful), thanks to reports about upper-class symposia from lesser guests, such as parasites, and especially from servants and other members of the lower classes whose social connections or duties brought them into elite men’s dining rooms. When these social inferiors passed in and out of

8 The chorus in Euripides, Bacch. 381.

Introduction: The Topic and the Sources
upper-class symposia, they witnessed aristocrats engaged in an array of excellences, displaying their superior speech and deportment, their wisdom, and their intellectual range; in sum, the school-formed and family-bred *paideia* that upper-class men performed with great pleasure in each other’s company. The artful music-making at these dinner parties must have struck nonelites as especially elegant, for lyre-competence became a synecdoche for aristocratic *paideia* generally. Moreover, one can assume that household staffs of wealthy men bragged about the parties they witnessed, since they were proud of their connections to this lofty world. Their testimonies and the gossip of others enhanced the public reputations of aristocrats as men of a finer sort, along with whatever mixtures of admiration and resentment that inspired.

Viewed from the standpoint of the history of music at social meals, the musical culture of the aristocratic symposium in the late-archaic and classical periods was quite anomalous. During no other era of antiquity did the musical wherewithal of a particular social group function as a mark of class superiority. The anomaly flourished for quite some time, from at least the late sixth century through the fifth, with perhaps diminishing prevalence in the fourth. During much of this history, the festival stage was friendly to the interests of aristocrats as a source of poetry for the dining couch. In the late fifth century, however, the stage became a significant force in the decline of gentlemanly lyrody.\(^9\) The social cachet of elite musical culture diminished as the trendier contest music performed by professional musicians grew in the esteem of a public who found the so-called “New Music” technically more impressive and musically more appealing than anything the average aristocrat was able to display with a lyre at a dinner party. Unable to compete with the professionals, upper-class traditionalists described the New Music in terms that suggested violence and disorder, insinuating that chaos, which they regarded as an ever-present threat of democratic rule, was the leading trait of the new popular music. It was a futile reaction and only revealed the anxieties of elites about their own place in the order of things.

The sympotic style of recreation was not the province of elites alone. A significant number of economically middling men had the means and leisure to enjoy sympotic recreation, and they did. Just what went on at

\(^9\) Aelius Aristides treats κιθαροδία, λυροδία, and αὐλοδία as parallel terms (*Or. 37.14.21–2*), as does Julius Pollux, *On.* 4.48. Although λυροδία, which I have anglicized to “lyrody,” may refer to a *song* to the lyre in some places, the parallel with the other two terms shows that it was also used for the activity or art of singing to the lyre, like citharody (“singing to the cithara”), and “aulody” (“singing to the pipe”).
Introduction: The Topic and the Sources

demotic symposia in fifth-century Athens is difficult to reconstruct, but it is likely that nonelites divided their recreation between a meal and a drinking party, reclined on couches, and sang certain “scolia” (such as the patriotic Harmodius song) to accompaniment by a hired piper. They did not sing to their own lyre playing, however, or exhibit what counted as mousikē in the eyes of elites.

As I have said, the old forms of upper-class music-making survived for a time, but eventually faded, having lost their “cultural capital.” Moreover, no comparable style of elite music-making established itself in a later period as a defining trait of elites and an emblem of their superior status and rights. Yet the musical gentleman left a lasting impression. His kind of music-making reappeared in sympotic memory and literature for centuries to come. The Roman-era vogue of investigating and discussing old Attic song customs was possible only because curious and admiring intellectuals of the Hellenistic era had interested themselves in the lyre-picking gentleman and his sympotic habitat. In the archives of literate cultural memory, Hellenistic scholars stored small dossiers of the doings of archaic and classical aristocrats at drinking parties. These included accounts of the Attic scolia, of lyre-competence and song-passing, as well as information about the song repertoire of classical gentlemen. These things were so familiar to intellectuals that Polybius, writing in the second century BCE about then-current music customs in his homeland, could say that it was “well-known and familiar to everyone” that the Arcadians were almost the only ones who maintained the old musical traditions, including singing by turns at drinking parties. His pride in this Arcadian exceptionalism is scarcely concealed. Two hundred years later, when the so-called Second Sophistic got underway and Greek intellectuals began mining Hellenistic sources for information about ancient sympotic poetry, writers associated with that movement, or informed by it, occasionally commented on sympotic singing in the old style. Athenaeus pictured it. Plutarch called for it. And Clement of Alexandria wrote of Christians at their wine parties singing by turns like ancient Greeks, some of them even playing the lyre. Moreover, already during the Roman republic, the Roman encounter with Greek poetry caused...

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10 The “democratization” of the symposion in the sixth and fifth centuries (see Chapter 1, n. 2) does not mean that men of middling status replicated aristocratic symposia. At the same time, under Athenian democracy, some small number of middling men who ascended socially by means of wealth and political influence were probably admitted to upper-class symposia.

11 This is Peter Wilson's felicitous expression for what gentleman’s lyrody signified (P. Wilson 2004: 292). See Chapter 2 with n. 65.

12 Polybius 4.20.8–10.
cultural envy, inspiring claims, probably fictional, about Latin men of yore singing by turns over their wine no less finely than ancient Greeks had done.

I have described gentlemanly lyrody as a form of social display that served an aristocrat’s personal desire for status and regard among his peers and that projected a class image of the men who cultivated the art. Another musical vehicle for these interests was the victory ode or epinician, a song type that flourished during the classical era. Composed by professional poets for a fee, the epinician celebrated individual achievement; specifically, a victory in the public games by a tyrant, an upper-class man, or sometimes a youth whose family wished to tout their son and his noble lineage. If the hopes of the poet and the commissioners of a victory ode were realized, the song was debuted in a public setting and subsequently entered the circuit of elite symposia. This sympotic circulation spread the victor’s fame, enhancing his image among his peers and a wider public.

Poets composed victory odes for rulers, among other elites, but certain rulers used singing poets in other ways as well. The Macedonian kings Philip II and Alexander the Great relied on singing poets to curb the influence of the powerful men who gathered at royal drinking parties. In addition to singing royal praise poetry, the poets performed mocking songs, as the king deemed necessary, to undermine, divide, or otherwise influence the leading men of the court in a sympotic environment where power relations were continually being negotiated.

During the early Hellenistic period, cities began commissioning praise poetry for monarchs. This practice, too, produced poetry for public consumption and, in one case at least, for private sympotic use as well. In 291 a hymn was composed for the Macedonian king Demetrius Poliorcetes. The poem appealed for military aid and cast Demetrius as a god or godlike man and consort of Demeter. It was performed publicly by an ithyphallic chorus as part of the Athenian reception of Demetrius, and afterward people sang the hymn at their home drinking parties.

Banquet music served sovereigns in other ways as well. Rulers collected professional musicians as ornaments for their feasts, with one royal house trying to outdo another in competitive dining. No monarchs engaged in such displays on a grander scale than Philip and Alexander. They made music festivals and their associated banquets serve as exhibits of royal splendor, and Alexander kept up this dining style even on the march, bringing large numbers of musicians on his military campaigns. His army’s trek across Carminia took on the appearance of a moving Dionysiac feast,
with wagons carrying wine-drinking men accompanied by singing and dancing entertainers on foot.

During the Hellenistic period, public benefaction by both wealthy individuals and rulers combined banquets with shows. The evidence, which first appears in inscriptions from the late Hellenistic period, implies the aim of the benefactor: to serve the public and be honored for it, the inscriptions themselves being one form of homage. Perhaps the same benefactive practices with banquets and shows had also been conducted in earlier times, but without leaving any surviving testimony. In any case, the Hellenistic benefactor funded public games, both musical and athletic, and provided amenities, such as wine, occasionally giving public banquets before or after the shows, even in the same venue. Similar forms of benefaction were performed in the Roman imperial period by wealthy private citizens and emperors. The most notable example on record is a public banquet given by Domitian in the Roman Colosseum. In addition to various entertainments, including music and dance, the emperor supplied food and wine to the spectators in their seats. His motive was to curry good public favor, a political interest, and he managed it so grandly that the poet Statius memorialized the whole thing in verse.

Personal image projection was also a design of lesser affairs. Wealthy men of the Roman era who hired professional entertainers for their parties were acutely aware of how tastes in dinner-party entertainments reflected on a host. The reputations of those who attended parties were also implicated. The correspondence of the Younger Pliny gives us a revealing impression. Pliny’s accounts of his own careful choices in dinner-party music, his remarks to like-minded friends about his fine musical tastes, and his disparaging references to the unbecoming preferences of others seem calculated to insinuate a certain persona, partly actuelle but also literary, a self-portrait that Pliny shaped not only for his friends and correspondents but also for a wider reading public, even posterity, since he wrote with the intention of publishing his letters. The detailed discussion of dinner-party entertainments in Plutarch’s *Sympotic Questions* can also be read as a literary display of discriminating tastes. At the other end of the social spectrum, it was probably not merely because a slaves’ club in Ptolemaic Egypt took pleasure in the sight and sound of pipers and erotic dancers that they used their very limited funds to hire a pair of these entertainers instead of renting a dining room (they met in a storeroom) or expanding their meager banquet menu. By providing themselves with professional entertainments similar to those of the better-funded clubs, they elevated their
little feasts, enhancing their self-image in their own eyes and in the eyes of their peers.

Positive intragroup self-image and a good reputation with outsiders were of special concern to Jews and Christians as minority groups in the Greek and Roman worlds. Sometimes this concern showed up in the ways they wrote about their music-making. When Clement of Alexandria noted that the Christian practice of singing by turns was similar to the symptic customs of Greeks of old, “passing their toasts of song,” as he puts it, his comparison appropriated the fineness of an old Attic tradition to enhance the image of the church. This was no mere analogy for Clement. He claimed that the ancient Israelites, whom Christians regarded as their religious ancestors, were the inventors of the ritual of song-passing and that the Greeks had learned song-passing from the Jews. A similar image-enhancing comparison is found in Philo’s portrait of a Jewish community’s music-making at its festal banquet. The “Therapeutae,” as he calls them, displayed not only the finest musical traditions of Israel but were the cultural equals of Greeks, for they composed music in many meters, he claims, and did so in the familiar Greek genres: epic, trimeter, the prosodion, the libation hymn, the altar hymn, and the choral stasimon. The Therapeutae sang some of these song forms individually at their community suppers; others, in particular the choral prosodion and stasimon, they performed at an annual festal banquet. Most Hellenized elites respected, even revered, the musico-poetic culture of the Greeks, and to discover or at least posit the existence of a comparable music in one’s own heritage mattered to the upper-class Jew, whose cultural identity was often under threat in the Diaspora from people who were unsympathetic or even hostile to Jews and Jewish ways.

The preceding paragraphs give just a sketch of ways in which combinations of music and dining served purposes ancillary to the basic pleasures of “a share in the symposion, the lyre, and the sweet cry of pipes.” The chapters to follow aim to give a thick description of both these pleasures and their collateral purposes, as far as the sources allow.

The Literary Sources

Most of the information about music at banquets comes from ancient literature penned by elites. The genres include poems, plays, orations, histories, biographies, scholia, philosophical writings, literary symposia, letters, novels, sermons, and commentaries. The availability of information is limited by survival, as well as by authorial scope and interest. The
recreational activities of elites come into view much more often than those of ordinary people. Moreover, when authors mention social meals, they often have no cause to say anything about music, taking for granted that their readers can imagine the singing or other entertainment, just as they can picture the food, wine, couches, and tables.

Even when music and musicians are the purported topic, the modern music historian is sometimes frustrated. The writer who says the most about music at meals is Athenaeus, the author of a mammoth literary symposium in which well-educated diners discuss many topics (cups, foods, ships, kings, and more) and quote ancient literature voluminously while supping in Rome at the house of a wealthy man named Larensius during the reign of Severus. Yet in mentioning the subject of music, Athenaeus often has nonmusical interests in mind. For example, he rehearses many anecdotes about Stratonicus the citharist, just to showcase the man’s wit. Likewise, he gives information about Dorion the piper because Dorion, in addition to performing for Philip II of Macedon, made humorous remarks about fish. Athenaeus’ information is especially disappointing to musicologists. When it comes to technical musical matters, “there seems to be no recognizable facet of the subject which any of Athenaeus’ groups of quotations could plausibly be construed as addressing, let alone illuminating in any significant way.” Moreover, whatever one makes of the quotations themselves, one has to be cautious about accepting Athenaeus’ own framing of them through his symposiasts’ comments.

Technical musicological interests aside, Athenaeus’ many excerpts about musical entertainment at banquets in antiquity make him a valuable source of information on the subject. Moreover, although he did not always reproduce his sources verbatim, occasionally manipulated them to serve his purposes, and did not possess critical editions in the modern sense, there is good reason to think that he was usually a reliable excerpter of the many writings he combed from the classical and Hellenistic eras. With respect to his own time, however, the late second century C.E., he is somewhat opaque. The literary narrative that contains all the quoting is a fictional framework, and a thin one at that. Athenaeus was under no literary obligation to avoid anachronism in depicting his diners, especially

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93 Athenaeus 1.1 (1a) (Rome as the setting). On the time of composition, the reign of Severus (193–211 C.E.), see Olson 2006a: vii.
95 Athenaeus 8.18–19 (337b–338b).
since he could count on his sophisticated readers to know when a description was tongue in cheek.

One has to be on the alert for anachronism in Plutarch, too. His *Sympotic Questions* (or *Table Talk*), another literary symposium, purports to describe wine parties attended by the author and his cultured friends, during various periods of his life and in sundry locales. No doubt there is a good deal of verisimilitude when Plutarch has his symposiasts discuss contemporary musical trends. But when he pictures them engaging in obsolete sympotic customs, it is hard to judge whether his social set had revived the old rituals in actual fact or only in Plutarch’s own literary imagination.

The reception of the symposium as a literary form in the Roman era reflected the interest of well-educated Greeks in a revered Attic past during a time when elite Romans also acquired Greek educations, often from Greek teachers. Since upper-class men shaped by Greek educations and steeped in Greek literature are the sources of so much of our knowledge about musical recreation from the archaic period through the Roman era, the sources tend to have a Hellenic slant and focus. Moreover, after the conquests of Alexander the Great, all the peoples of the ancient Mediterranean world were touched by Hellenic culture, music and dining being among the most influential Greek cultural exports. Persons of every social class and ethnicity attended the theaters and music halls, which were Greek institutions, and this stage music found its way into the social meals of elites and nonelites alike. Yet indigenous people did not give up their traditional music but kept on singing and dancing in the old ways while absorbing the new. Without doubt, there were creative interactions between Greek music and local musics, and some of those interactions preceded Alexander’s imperial conquests: Many Greeks had migrated out of Attica long before Alexander’s time, just as many non-Greeks had migrated in. But the sources provide little direct information about recreational music outside of Greek settings, and the Greek writers who comment on “foreign” music are not always well informed and operate with the typical cultural and political biases of their social class and culture.10

There are only a few pieces of information from the banquet music of Israelites prior to Hellenization. These appear in prophetic oracles by the eighth-century prophets Amos and Isaiah. As for the recreational music of other non-Greek peoples, Athenaeus happens to preserve two pre-Hellenistic anecdotes about song at Median and Persian banquets. One,

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