

Introduction

Music was everywhere in ancient Rome. Wherever one went in the sprawling city – in houses, on the street, in theatres and amphitheatres, shops and bars, temples and marketplaces – one encountered signs of musical life. Busking musicians, dispersed along busy thoroughfares, competed for the attention of passers-by.¹ Travellers entertained themselves by humming cheerful jingles.² Labourers and shopkeepers sang while they worked.³ At night, taverns came alive with singing and piping, strumming and drumming.⁴ Wealthier patrons meanwhile, were serenaded by bands of musicians as they dined in their homes.⁵ For every occasion, for every season and for every time of day, there was music. And every member of Roman society – whether old or young, male or female, rich or poor – played their part in keeping this vibrant musical culture alive.

But music, to the Romans, was never purely incidental. It had the power to captivate hearts and minds, to educate and enlighten, to forge communities and mould citizens. ‘Music is connected with knowledge of things divine’, writes Quintilian in his *Institutes of Oratory* (composed ca. 95 CE), ‘and no one can doubt that some men famous for wisdom have been devotees of music’.⁶ For centuries, music-making brought the Roman people together in the pursuit of religious and artistic expression. It was through song that the Romans paid tribute to the gods; it was from song that poetry was born. According to Quintilian, music even held the key to Rome’s ascendancy as a military power: ‘What else is the function of

¹ Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 56.4, discussed below in the section ‘Sound, Space and Social Control’. The orator Dio Chrysostom describes a piper busking and holding lessons in a crowded street in Alexandria (*Orat.* 20.9–10).

² Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.15–17; Juv. 10.22; Aus. *Mosella* 165–8. Augustine (*En. In Ps.* 66.5–6) speaks of travellers singing to ward off the terrors of the night, even at the risk of alerting robbers.

³ Varro ap. Non. 56M; Verg. *Georg.* 1.293–4; Tib. 2.1.65–6; Ov. *Trist.* 4.1.5–14; Quint. *Inst.* 1.10.16; Aug. *En. 2 in Ps.* 18.2; Wille 1967: 107–9; Horsfall 2003: 45.

⁴ Ps.-Verg. *Copa* 3–4; Hor. *Ep.* 1.14.25–6; Philostr. VA 4.39, 4.42; Sidon. 8.11.3, ll. 49–54. On tavern music, see Morgan 2017.

⁵ See Bonaria 1983; Jones 1991; Morgan 2019.

⁶ Quint. *Inst.* 1.10.11–12: *musicen cum divinarum etiam rerum cognitione esse coniunctam . . . atqui claros nomine sapientiae viros nemo dubitaverit studiosos musices fuisse.*

trumpets and horns in our legions? The more forceful their sound, the more does Roman military glory prevail over the rest.⁷

And yet, to many Romans – Quintilian included – music also posed a real and present danger to society. In the eyes of Cicero, writing in the middle of the first century BCE, singing in the forum constituted ‘a great perversion’ (*magna perversitas*) of societal norms, an action strongly discordant with civilized behaviour.⁸ It was imperative, therefore, that the right kinds of music were heard in the right places and at the right times. Members of the upper classes, Cicero maintained, should sing only when it was appropriate.⁹ As early as the 180s BCE, a Roman magistrate was publicly reprimanded by a prominent senator for ‘singing whenever he feels like it’ (*cantat ubi collibuit*).¹⁰ Moral strictures of this sort are commonplace in Roman literature. Men and women are accused of enjoying music *too* enthusiastically or playing instruments *too* skilfully. What inspired this rhetoric of contempt? Why did singing and playing instruments generate such intense feelings of anxiety, indignation and shame among generations of Roman citizens? What were the criteria for distinguishing ‘good’ music from ‘bad’? And who was responsible for determining these criteria?

This book examines the role that music played in the political and social landscape of ancient Rome. It does not purport to be a comprehensive history of Roman music as such. Rather, it is intended primarily as a study of how Roman attitudes to music evolved throughout the mid-to-late Republic and early Principate, and how music was used as a political tool by Roman elites during this period. Since the vast majority of the extant written sources from the Roman world were produced by members of the educated upper classes, it is much easier to reconstruct the musical experiences and attitudes of those at the very top of society than those lower down. However, the elite’s interactions with music had far-reaching consequences for the urban populace at large. This book asks not only what Roman leaders thought about music and how they used music, but also how their use of music in turn affected wider social attitudes and practices.

⁷ Quint. *Inst.* 1.10.14–15: *quid autem aliud in nostris legionibus cornua ac tubae faciunt? quorum concentus quanto est vehementior, tantum Romana in bellis gloria ceteris praestat*. On the role of music in the Roman army, see Vincent 2016: 15–117.

⁸ Cic. *Off.* 1.145: *ea, quae multum ab humanitate discrepant, ut si qui in foro cantet, aut si qua est alia magna perversitas, facile apparet*.

⁹ Cf. Cic. *De Orat.* 3.87, discussed below in the section ‘The Status of Musicians’.

¹⁰ Cato fr. 114–15 Malcovati = Macr. *Sat.* 3.14.9.

Approaching Roman Music

Although the centrality of music in the cultural life of the ancient Romans has long been recognised, the intersections between music, politics and society at Rome have not received sufficient attention.¹¹ The study of Roman music, in general, has languished by comparison with the study of Greek music, which has in recent decades blossomed into a vibrant field of scholarship.¹² Indeed, Roman music has traditionally been dismissed as little more than a crude derivative of Greek music – a topic worthy of antiquarian interest, perhaps, but devoid of any real historical or musicological importance. This theory, which has its roots in the intellectual currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is predicated on a long-outdated notion of the moral and aesthetic superiority of Greek culture over Roman.¹³ The Romans, being a pragmatic and bellicose people, are said to have developed a taste for music only through exposure to, and appropriation of, the civilizations of conquered peoples (especially the Greeks and Etruscans). So, in the entry on ‘music’ in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, published in 1949, it is stated that ‘in the whole range of Latin literature we find only the most commonplace and conventional references to music, and . . . nowhere is there any indication that the Romans regarded music as anything more than a tolerable adjunct of civilized life’.¹⁴ John Landels reaches a similar conclusion in his book

¹¹ Notable early treatments of the subject include: Eximeno 1774; Hawkins 1776; Burney 1789; Zell 1829; Rowbotham 1888; Machabey 1936; Antcliffe 1949.

¹² See especially Barker 1984, 1989; West 1992; Mathiesen 1999; Wilson 1999, 2002, 2004; Murray and Wilson 2004; Csapo 2004; Murray and Wilson 2004; Csapo and Wilson 2009; Hagel 2009; Power 2010; D’Angour and Philipps 2018; Weiss 2018; Rocconi and Lynch 2020. Much research has been conducted under the auspices of the MOISA Society for the Study of Ancient Greek and Roman Music, founded by Andrew Barker in 2007. The bibliography listed on the organisation’s website (www.moisasociety.org) displays a striking imbalance in favour of Greek music, as do the articles published in the MOISA-affiliated journal *Greek and Roman Musical Studies*, established in 2013. In Comotti’s book *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*, the chapter on Roman music occupies a mere eight pages (Comotti 1989: 48–55). Creese 2006 and Rocconi 2015 provide helpful overviews of ancient Greek and Roman music, but focus largely on the former.

¹³ See Hawkins 1776: xxvi: ‘Neither [the Romans] religious solemnities, nor their triumphs, their shows or theatrical representations, splendid as they were, contributed in the least to the improvement of music either in theory or practice: to say the truth, they seemed scarcely to have considered it as a subject of speculation.’; Burney 1789: 474: ‘It was long the fate of our own country, like that of the ancient Romans, to admire the polite arts more than cultivate them.’ The influential Belgian musicologist François-Auguste Gevaert argued in his *Histoire et théorie de la musique de l’antiquité* (1875) that the rise of the Roman Empire marked the nadir of music history, separating the apogee of Greece and the revival of Christianity.

¹⁴ Mountford 1949: 585; echoed in Mountford 1964: 198: ‘There is no evidence to suggest that Rome contributed much that was vital to the history of musical development.’ Similar views are

Music in Ancient Greece and Rome (1999): ‘In dealing with the role of music in Roman life, we shall not be looking at the emergence of a new and totally different musical culture. It would be fair to say that the Romans did not attempt to develop a musical identity of their own.’ The reader is even assured that ‘the Romans themselves do not seem to have been troubled or embarrassed by their lack of interest and proficiency in music’!¹⁵

Not all scholars have been so dismissive. In 1967, the German philologist Günther Wille published a weighty monograph entitled *Musica Romana: die Bedeutung der Musik im Leben der Römer*. In the book, Wille sought to challenge the prevailing view of the Romans as an innately unmusical people. His approach was simple yet ambitious: to document every identifiable reference to music in the entire corpus of Latin literature, supplemented by inscriptions and material artefacts. The product of this endeavour is an impressive anthology of more than four thousand texts, laid out over some seven hundred pages. Coincidentally, just two years before the publication of *Musica Romana*, the art historian Günther Fleischhauer published an extensive catalogue of musical images from Rome and Etruria, comprising some eighty illustrations with accompanying descriptions.¹⁶ The two works did much to raise the profile of the subject in the face of continued scholarly efforts to undermine its value. However, while Wille succeeded in demonstrating the pervasiveness of music in Roman culture, his treatment of the evidence was inadequate in several respects. *Musica Romana* provides an object lesson in the privileging of quantity over quality: each page is crammed with copious references to primary source material, and yet the author’s broad thematic deployment of this material allows virtually no scope for analytical discussion. Sensitive issues of philological and historical importance are passed over in silence. Moreover, many of Wille’s arguments in favour of the ‘originality’ of Roman music (such as the theory that Horace’s lyric poems were set to melodies) do not hold up to scrutiny.¹⁷ Above all, then, *Musica Romana* sounded a clarion call for further research in this area.

Only in the last few decades have scholars begun to comb through the vast body of evidence which Wille and Fleischhauer so painstakingly assembled nearly sixty years ago. Classical philologists such as Nevio Zorzetti, Thomas Habinek and Denis Feeney have attempted to trace the

expressed by Celentano 1913: 245; Birt 1928: 380; Friedländer 1936: 347; Sachs 1944: 272; Bonaria 1983: 119–20; Pöhlmann 2010: 31.

¹⁵ Landels 1999: 172. ¹⁶ Fleischhauer 1965.

¹⁷ See the criticisms raised by McKinnon 1968 and Borthwick 1969.

origins of Latin literature back to an archaic Roman song culture, whose existence is first posited by Cato the Elder.¹⁸ Thanks to the pioneering work of Timothy Moore, we now have a much deeper appreciation of the vital contribution of song and dance to the Roman theatre.¹⁹ Studies have also demonstrated how music enhanced Roman audiences' experience of gladiatorial games and chariot races by punctuating moments of tension or climax.²⁰ Jörg Rüpke, Christophe Vendries and others have done much to illustrate the role of the sensorium, and sound especially, in shaping participants' experience of religious rituals in Rome, stressing, for instance, the association of different kinds of music with different sanctuaries and cults.²¹ Nicholas Horsfall has drawn attention to the importance of music in the culture of the Roman *plebs*, emphasising in particular the strong connection between song and memory.²² Finally, the lives of musicians in the Roman world have been the subject of no fewer than four monographs, including, most recently, Alexandre Vincent's *Jouer pour la cité: une histoire sociale et politique des musiciens professionnels de l'Occident romain*.²³

The growing body of scholarship devoted to Roman music attests to the great potential of this subject to enrich our understanding of the ancient world. Nonetheless, it would not be an overstatement to say that we have barely scratched the surface of the evidence. Above all, there remains an urgent need for a systematic analysis of what we might call the 'cultural politics' of Roman music – that is, the attitudes, discourses and ideologies generated by, and in response to, musical practices. Following the model of Wille's *Musica Romana*, scholarly discussions have tended to filter the sources through a synoptic lens. As a consequence, they have promoted a largely homogeneous view of Roman musical culture, with little variation across time and space. However, as I argue in this book, the Roman musical experience was marked by conflict, contradiction and change. It is true that many aspects of Roman music-making, such as the use of certain instruments and the organisation of musical performances, remained constant over several centuries. However, we should not assume that the Romans' attitudes towards and interactions with music were unaffected by broader social, cultural and political developments. On the contrary, as we shall see,

¹⁸ Zorzetti 1991; Habinek 2005; Feeney 2016.

¹⁹ Moore 2012, 2016, 2021. See also Guidobaldi 1992; Piché and Vendries 2001.

²⁰ See Simpson 2000; Fagan 2011: 225–7; Coleman 2018.

²¹ Rüpke 2018: 17–18; Brulé and Vendries 2001; Vendries 2004; Fless and Moede 2007.

²² Horsfall 2003. ²³ Baudot 1973; Bélis 1999; Scoditti 2009; Vincent 2016.

Roman engagements with music are inextricably bound up in complex and evolving discourses on morality, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. By paying closer attention to these discourses, we can gain a more nuanced and more fully contextualised view of music's place in Roman society.

Sources of Evidence

Understanding the musical experience of historical peoples is a task fraught with difficulty. In the case of ancient Rome, the difficulty is compounded by the fact that we know relatively little about the actual melodies that were heard by listeners some two millennia ago. There are, nevertheless, various sources of evidence which help us to understand the role of music in Roman life. Of particular importance for the purposes of this book are literary texts which contain descriptions of musical performances, accounts of the history of music, or reflections on the theoretical, ethical and political significance of music. Passages of this nature crop up in a wide variety of genres, but are chiefly found in speeches, histories, poems and philosophical treatises. Of course, there is much that does not survive. The loss of the treatise on music written by M. Terentius Varro, the great scholar and polymath of the first century BCE, is particularly regrettable. Contained in the seventh book of his *Disciplinae* (Disciplines), the *De Musica* was widely consulted by later musicologists, including Augustine, Martianus Capella and Boethius.²⁴ Varro's contemporary, Cicero, is a more eloquent witness; his views on music have been particularly neglected and will be considered at length in Chapter 2.

There are two additional sources of evidence that contribute to our understanding of Roman musical culture – namely, epigraphy and art. The lives of musicians are documented in hundreds of funerary inscriptions from across the Roman world. These range from simple records of the deceased's name and profession to elaborate verse epitaphs commemorating the individual's attainments. Many musicians belonged to professional associations, known as *collegia*, which set up inscriptions publicly memorialising their participation in civic festivals and religious cults.²⁵ As Vincent shows, this rich body of evidence attests to the integration of many freed or freeborn musicians into Roman society, affording an impression that is in many ways diametrically opposed to that conveyed by the literary

²⁴ See Jacobsson 2017 on Augustine; Heilmann 2007 and Caldwell 1981 on Boethius.

²⁵ See Piché 2001; Vincent 2008; Giovagnoli 2014.



Figure 0.1 Mosaic panel by Dioscurides of Samos showing masked actors playing musical instruments (*tibiae*, *cymbala* and *tympanum*). Based on an episode from Menander's *Theophoroumene*. From the Villa of Cicero, Pompeii; ca. 100 BCE. Photo by DEA Picture Library / De Agostini via Getty Images.

sources.²⁶ Scenes of music-making are also ubiquitous in Roman art.²⁷ For example, portrayals of singers and musicians in Pompeian wall-paintings and mosaics can help us to visualise what a musical performance looked like from the perspective of Roman audiences, supplementing the eye-witness accounts of contemporary authors (see Fig. 0.1). Additionally, the appearance of musical imagery on statues and coins often carries distinct political resonances. The representations of Apollo in Augustan and Neronian iconography are particularly revealing in this respect, as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively.

Although this book is not primarily concerned with uncovering the actual sounds of Roman music, it will be necessary at various points to engage with the practical and technical aspects of Roman song and instrumental performance. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to examine briefly

²⁶ Vincent 2016. ²⁷ See Fleischhauer 1965; Emerit *et al.* 2017; Gétreau 2021.

how one might approach such a topic. There are three main types of evidence which aid in the reconstruction of Roman music: extant examples of ancient Greek musical notation; Roman dramatic texts from the late third and second centuries BCE that were originally set to music; and archaeological remnants of musical instruments. The best insights can be gleaned from examining all three types of evidence together.

Around sixty examples of notated Greek music survive from antiquity. Interestingly, the majority of these examples are preserved on stone or papyrus fragments from the Roman Empire, including several hymns attributed to Mesomedes, the court musician of the emperor Hadrian.²⁸ The interpretation of Greek musical notation is made possible by the survival of a treatise written by the late-antique Egyptian scholar Alypius. Entitled *Introduction to Music (Eisagoge Mousike)*, the treatise lists the correspondence of each symbol to its respective note on the Greek musical scale. This has allowed modern experts to produce accurate renderings of ancient melodies, which, when performed on replica instruments, afford a remarkably realistic impression of ancient Greek music as it would have sounded some two millennia ago. However, if we wish to understand the indigenous musical traditions of Roman Italy, Greek notation can only take us so far. First, the Greek system of musical notation was, as far as we know, never repurposed by composers of Latin songs.²⁹ Second, musical notation does not seem to have been in widespread use in Greco-Roman antiquity, but rather was developed by and for a small number of professional practitioners.³⁰ Third, the fact that Latin and Greek had different systems of accentuation is likely to have resulted in a significant degree of melodic variation: songs set to Latin words are unlikely to have used the same melodies as songs set to Greek words.³¹

For further insights, we can turn to the comedies of Plautus and Terence. The musical complexity of Roman drama has been brilliantly illuminated by Moore in a series of pathbreaking publications, including

²⁸ The extant documents are published in Pöhlmann and West 2001. Yuan 2005 and West 2007 discuss musical fragments discovered subsequently. Johnson 2000a and 2000b deal specifically with two Roman-era fragments. On the hymns of Mesomedes, see Whitmarsh 2004.

²⁹ Päll 2004 discusses a curious graffito from Pompeii, consisting of a string of fifteen letters (RIITOTATOTOTATO), some of which have symbols written above them. The symbols resemble Greek musical notation. However, as Moore (2012: 13 n. 29) points out, 'the letters are not Latin . . . but either onomatopoetic syllables or additional musical symbols'. The graffito evokes parallels with Ennius' onomatopoetic description of the trumpet (*Ann. fr. 451 Skutsch: at tuba terribili sonitu tarantara dixit*), suggesting that the author of the text may have been attempting to capture the sound (and pitch?) of a brass instrument.

³⁰ Pöhlmann and West 2001: 1. ³¹ See Moore 2012: 94–5.

most notably his monograph *Music in Roman Comedy*, published in 2012. We know from various sources that performances of Roman comedy were accompanied by a pipe-player (*tibicen*). The actors, meanwhile, did not simply recite their lines, but also sang and danced. More specific information about the plays' musical accompaniment comes from *didascaliae*, production notes preserved in the manuscripts of Plautus and Terence. For example, the *didascaliae* preceding Terence's *Phormio* state that 'Flaccus, the slave of Claudius, produced the music on unequal pipes (*tibiis inparibus*) through the whole play'.³² The plays themselves also contain valuable clues as to the nature of the musical accompaniment. Analysing the metrical arrangements of the texts allows us to distinguish between verses that were sung (*cantica*) and verses that were recited (*deverbia*).³³ We can therefore determine when the music started and stopped, and on this basis draw inferences about how Plautus and Terence used music to enhance the dramatic effect of their plays (for example, by accentuating certain plotlines or character traits). Additionally, as Moore's recent research has shown, the metres of Roman comedy can provide insights into an audience's musical memories within a play and between different plays, based on their recollections of different musical patterns.³⁴

Dozens of musical instruments from the Roman period have been brought to light in archaeological excavations. Finds have been made throughout Italy and Sicily, and in sites as far removed as Gaul and the Levant.³⁵ At Pompeii alone, archaeologists have discovered fifteen pipes (*tibiae*), five trumpets (*cornua*), and a large number of cymbals (*cymbala*), drums (*tympana*) and rattles (*sistra*) (see Figs. 0.2, 0.3 and 0.4).³⁶ We also have the remains of three water-organs (*hydraulae*), uncovered at Aquincum (modern Budapest), Dion (in northern Greece) and Aventicum (modern Avenches, Switzerland) during the twentieth century.³⁷ Though often extremely fragmentary, these artefacts provide valuable information about what ancient instruments looked like and

³² On the *didascaliae*, see Moore 2012: 8–9.

³³ By Moore's calculation (2012: 16), *cantica* make up over 66 per cent of Plautus' verses and about 52 per cent of Terence's.

³⁴ Moore 2021.

³⁵ For music archaeology in Italy and Sicily, see Castaldo 2012; Bellia 2012. For music archaeology in Gaul, see Homo-Lechner, Pinette and Vendries 1993. Braun 2002 and Waner 2014 examine finds from the Levant.

³⁶ For general discussions of Pompeian instruments, see De Simone 1999; Melini 2012, 2014. On the *tibiae*, see Hagel 2008; on the *cornua*, Vendries 2020.

³⁷ On the Aquincum organ, see Hyde 1938; Kaba 1976. On the Dion organ, see Markovits 2003: 97–8; Beschi 2009: 256–7; Stroux 2009: 267–9. On the Aventicum organ, see Jakob *et al.* 2000.



Figure 0.2 Facsimile of a Roman *cornu* found at Pompeii, produced by the Belgian instrument-maker Victor-Charles Mahillon (1841–1924). © New York Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 0.3 Pair of bronze cymbals linked by a chain; Pompeii, first century CE. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples. Photo by DeAgostini / Getty Images.

how they were made. It has also been possible to manufacture playable replicas based on surviving ancient models, allowing us to ‘hear’ Roman music as it might have originally sounded (see Fig. 0.5).³⁸

³⁸ The Italian group ‘Ludi Scaenici’, founded by Cristina Majnerio and Roberto Stanco, stages performances of ‘reconstructed’ ancient Roman music. The group consists of five musicians, who play a variety of replica instruments, and two dancers. Further information about the