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978-1-108-00371-1 - The History of Music (Art and Science): From the Earliest Records to the Fall of the Roman Empire

William Chappell

Excerpt

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THE HISTORY OF MUSIC.

CHAPTER I.

The first firm footing for history.—The new field opened by recent discoveries.—Why Greek music has been found a difficult subject.—The Romans adopted but one portion of it in its oldest form.—The latest Roman writers.—The Mediæval system.—Examples of misapplied Greek terms.—Greek love of Octave harmony.—Church Tones not Greek music.—New difficulties prepared for German readers.—No evidence of any ancient Standard Pitch.—The Greek system of music both intelligible and explicable.

THE most convenient basis for a history of ancient music seems to be the early Greek system, for we are here removed from the land of myths, and have the foundation upon which the superstructure of modern art has been raised. The discoveries that have been made in Egypt and in Babylon, within the century that has now passed, since Sir John Hawkins and Dr. Burney wrote their Histories of Music, have revealed an advanced state of the art in most ancient times, which was before unknown and unsuspected. There is no longer room to doubt that the entire Greek system was mainly derived from Egypt, Phœnicia, Babylon, or other countries of more ancient civilization than Greece. The musical

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instruments of the Greeks may be traced in Egypt, even to the hitherto unobserved *Magadis*, or Octave playing instrument, of Anacreon, and to the little wailing “span-long” pipe used for lamentations on the death of Adonis. From that pipe must the modern hautboy claim its descent. The total number of notes in the combined Greek scales agrees precisely with the enumeration of the Egyptian system, as revealed to us by Greek writers. The worship of Athena, or Minerva, who corresponds to the Egyptian goddess Nēth, was attended by the peculiar custom of having musical instruments to play in Octaves in the temples of both countries. The same system of music must have prevailed in the two, because they had, at least in one case, the same song, and it was a song that, according to Herodotus, was in general use.

Moreover, a further discovery may be noted through Egyptian monuments, that, at the time of the building of the Pyramids, and before the invasion of the Hyksos, or Shepherd Kings, had made “every shepherd an abomination to the Egyptians,” those Egyptians had bands that played with harps and pipes in concert—not in unison, as might have been supposed, but in harmony. This is made manifest by at least one of the representations on the tombs of the fourth dynasty of Egypt. Three pipers have a conductor beating time for them, and their pipes are of such different lengths, that it is mathematically impossible they could have been playing in unison. Further, it may be proved to demonstration, that the ordinary Egyptian lute had then a compass of two Octaves. The hieroglyphic for “good” makes this evident. It is a lute with

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RECENT DISCOVERIES.

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a neck, which is from two to three times the length of the body. Again, this lute being provided with not less than two strings, shows a provision for playing double notes (to make harmony), because one string having a compass of two Octaves, would have been all-sufficient for melody. A single string, with a neck against which it may be pressed, makes a scale for itself.

Another point worthy of observation is the practical agreement and general identity between the musical instruments of Egypt and those of Nineveh and of Babylon. This is largely exhibited in ancient sculptures, and may be observed by any visitor to the British Museum. If we couple with this resemblance the incidental notice of the Chaldæan division of the Octave, by Plutarch, and that of the reputed *Diatessarōn*, or musical interval of a Fourth, in the Babylonian planetary system, by Dion Cassius, they should suffice to establish the identity of the musical systems of Assyria and Egypt.

When examined by this new light, the musical acquirements of the Greeks will appear but as one branch of the transfer of learning from Asia to Europe; for the Egyptians were admittedly of Asiatic origin. It will also raise doubts as to many of the inventions that were posthumously attributed to Terpander, to Pythagoras, and to other Greeks.

Lastly, perhaps the most interesting feature of all will be to establish, that the notes of the scale in "this dark backward and abysm of time," differed in no other way from modern notes of the minor scale (as on the long keys of a pianoforte, beginning on A), than in the manner of tuning the intervals called Thirds, (as from A to C and C to E,) so that,

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although falling short of being consonant, as ours are, they would pass for Thirds in melody, and not every ear would perhaps then detect the difference, since it was but the eighty-first part of a string. If, after this, the ancient technicalities can but be successfully cleared away, the reader may have the whole subject of this most ancient music before his mind's eye. This will be here attempted.

Boeckh has remarked, in his *Metres of Pindar*, that "the music of the ancients is not merely neglected by the students of antiquity, but is buried in oblivion."^a It is now quite time that it should be disinterred. It has indeed been allowed to remain an unravelled puzzle for many ages, and its complexities have seemed rather to increase than to decrease with the onward progress of time. The reasons for this have been various.

First, it presented a difficulty to the Romans because they had adopted but one portion of the Greek system, and did not trouble themselves overmuch about the remainder. Cicero thought that Aristoxenus had devoted his energies too exclusively to music;^b and, when touching upon the art in his own writings, Cicero translated from Aristotle, and then Quintilian copied from Cicero. Vitruvius had to travel beyond the boundary of the Roman musical system when he wrote about the metal vases that were constructed within theatres to echo sound, and so to give resonance to the voices of the actors. He then described Greek musical literature as "an obscure and difficult subject," and one that could not

^a "Veterum musica non modo negligitur ab antiquitatis studiosis, sed oblivione sepulta est."—(*De Metris Pindari*, lib. iii., c. 7, p. 204.)

^b "Quantum Aristoxeni ingenium consumptum videmus in musicis."—(*De Finibus*, lib. v. 19.)

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be explained without resorting to Greek words, for which there were no Latin equivalents. Although he endeavoured to understand and to explain the writings of Aristoxenus, he did not always succeed in giving correct interpretations of his author.^a

Many such imperfect renderings might be cited from Roman authors, but it will now suffice to pass on to two of the latest writers under the old empire. Their works exercised the greatest influence upon the music of the middle ages. These were Cassiodorus and Boethius, who were cotemporaries in the sixth century, in the reign of Theodoric, the Ostro-Goth.

Cassiodorus was a Christian who wrote upon the liberal arts generally, and devoted but a part of his treatise to music. He included only the branch of Greek music that had been adopted by the Romans, viz., the ordinary Diatonic scale of tones and semitones, like our own, but in its early Pythagorean, or unimproved, state. His treatise is, so far, a good and brief summary, and it includes the ratios of the simple consonances, such as the Fourth, the Fifth, and the Octave. But when he touches upon compound intervals, it is not good. For instance, he says, or has been made to say, that an Eleventh, (*i.e.*, a Fourth added to an Octave,) is a consonance,

^a For example, in describing the fixed sounds of the Greek system, he forgot that the lowest note of every scale (*the proslambanomenos*) did not form part of any one of their tetrachords, or Fourths, and he omitted two of the variable notes in his enumeration, viz., the *paranētēs* of the *synemmenōn* and *hyperbolēōn* tetrachords. Of the difficulties of Greek music, he says: --“*Harmonica*

autem est musica litteratura obscura et difficilis; maxime quidem quibus græcæ litteræ non sunt notæ: quam si volumus explicare, necesse est etiam græcis verbis uti, quod nonnulla eorum latinas non habent appellationes. Itaque, ut potero, quam apertissime ex Aristoxeni scripturis interpretabor.”—(Lib v., cap. 4, *Leipzig*, 8vo. 1807, p. 121.)

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and that it is in the ratio of 24 to 8³ (which would be as 3 to 1), whereas it is not a consonance, and is not in the ratio of 24 to 8, but of 8 to 3. To treat an Eleventh as a consonance was a common error, for which he had respectable authority, but not for mistaking its ratio.

The work of Boethius (*De Institutione Musica*) is the most elaborate of the Roman treatises, and one devoted exclusively to music. It is divided into five books, each subdivided into some twenty or thirty heads, or chapters. The last book exists only in an imperfect state. Boethius seems to have intended it to consist of thirty chapters, of which but eighteen are extant. The index of contents shows that the last twelve were to have been devoted to a summary of the suggestions and improvements of the later Greek writers, and especially to those of Claudius Ptolemy. But the summary was to have been historical only, because he had already formed his calculations of musical intervals upon the antiquated system of the Pythagorean scale. That was the adopted scale of the Romans, and his calculations upon it had been embodied in the preceding books of his treatise.

Boethius, in contrast to Cassiodorus, seems to have paid more attention to the science than to the art of music. He was an able arithmetician, but fell short of the attainments necessary for a great writer upon the theory of music. Yet he exalted theory greatly above practice.^b His acquaintance with the

^a "Quarta, Diapason simul et Diatessaron, symphonia est, quæ constat ex ratione quam habet xxiv numerus ad octo numerum: fit autem ex sonitibus undecim." — (Cassiodori

Institut. Musicæ, apud Gerberti *Scriptores Eccles. de Mus.*, i. 17.)

^b "Quanto igitur præclarior est scientia musicæ in cognitione rationis quam in opere efficiendi, atque actu!"

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practical branch of his subject was evidently slight; indeed, so slight that he seems not to have known the correct names for the strings of the lyre. He applied the title of *lichanos*, or fore-finger string, to two that have not that name in the work of any extant Greek author, and they were strings which the Greeks intended for the plectrum. The Romans had Latin designations for the strings long before the time of Boethius, which may account for his imperfect acquaintance with the Greek nomenclature.^a

Boethius should be ranked rather as a man of general learning than as a remarkable musician. He adopted Claudius Ptolemy's theory, that the combination of an Octave with a Fourth above it, is a consonance,^b against which the Pythagoreans had systematically, and (as will be hereafter clearly proved) had rightly contended. But still he had only read Claudius Ptolemy's works superficially, or else he would not have given currency to the popular story of Pythagoras and the hammers—that Pythagoras discovered the law of musical consonances through passing a blacksmith's shop, and weighing the hammers that were striking Fourths, Fifths, and Octaves upon an anvil. Ptolemy denies the possibility of such consonances from one anvil (in his third chapter of Book I.), and even a little reflection might have taught Boethius that the tone of a bell cannot

And again: — “Multo enim est majus atque auctius scire quod quisque faciat quam ipsum efficere quod sciat; etenim artificium corporale quasi serviens famulatur, ratio vero, quasi domina, imperat.” —(*Inst. Mus.*, i. 34, under “Quid sit Musicus.”)

^a In *Inst. Mus.*, i. 22, he writes of

lichanos synemmenōn, and of *lichanos diezeugmenōn*, which are both in the treble of the lyre, above the key note, and were to be played by the plectrum. Therefore the Greeks called them *paranētēs*, instead of *lichanoses*. *Lichanos* is the “licking” finger, or fore-finger.

^b *Inst. Mus.*, i. 12.

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be altered in pitch by changing the weight of its clapper.

Boethius did not adopt the improvements either of Didymus or of Ptolemy in the musical scale, but retained the old Pythagorean system of major tones only, instead of alternating major and minor tones. Hence all his intervals of Thirds (whether major or minor Thirds) were discords instead of concords. Yet Didymus had shown the way to produce true consonant major and minor Thirds, five hundred years before the date at which Boethius was writing. Claudius Ptolemy had again demonstrated it, by inverting the succession of tones, about a century after Didymus, so that if Boethius had been a sound theorist or a practical musician, he could not have failed to discover, in the one case by the Pythagorean law of consonances, and, in the other, by his ears, how great was the improvement of turning those discords into concords, and, at the same time, improving the proportions of the so-called semitone.

Again, if Boethius had been well versed in the history of Greek music, he would not have handed down a series of stories that this man, and that man, added a new string to the lyre—as if it were to be understood in a literal sense. He would have discovered the chronological (as well as other) contradictions which such claims involved, and that “adding a new string to the lyre” could but be an ancient idiom for having introduced some approved novelty into the arts of poetry and music.

For these various reasons Boethius does not merit so high a rank among ancient writers on music as has been conceded to him in England, by making his treatise the text-book in our Universities.

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ROMAN SYSTEM INFERIOR TO GREEK. 9

No Roman of antiquity is known to have made, or even to have attempted, any improvement in the science of music. The Romans received the Diatonic Scale, of tones and semitones, from the Greeks at a time when it existed only in its primitive and imperfect form. Nevertheless they were content to retain it so, and did not follow the Greeks in any subsequent improvement. It is for that reason Greek music cannot be effectually learnt from Roman writers.

The treatise of Boethius having been the most complete that had been written in the Latin language, and being supposed to teach the best system, was unfortunately adopted as the text-book in the middle ages. It had a very retrograde effect upon music; one of the evils being, that it kept up the use of an antiquated and ill-divided scale to the time of Guido d'Arezzo, who taught and revived it in the eleventh century.

In after ages Boethius, in some way, gained the repute of having been a Christian philosopher. This may have been, because his system of music had been adopted in the Church. It is possible, also, that he may have been mistaken for another person of that not uncommon name, for no one could have written upon music less in the manner of a Christian than the author of the *Institutio Musica*.

In a treatise on music of early date, a man could but with difficulty avoid giving an indication of his religious creed, and a Christian especially would almost surely make some sign of his belief, unless he had a direct interest in avoiding it. There was no motive like that of a general persecution to induce concealment at the time Boethius wrote, so that, if

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any one should now be curious as to the religion of that able writer, he may perhaps satisfy himself that there is not a symptom of Christianity about his writings on music. The contrast of style will be apparent on comparing a few of the corresponding pages in the treatises of the two cotemporaries, Cassiodorus the Christian, and Boethius the philosopher of questionable creed.

A second element of confusion to the student of Greek music arose from the employment of Greek words in ecclesiastical music, where they were applied in senses sometimes opposite, and at other times differing materially from classical Greek.^a As one instance, the alternate singing of verses of psalms by a choir divided into two parts, was introduced from Antioch in the fourth century. One half of the choir sang one verse, or part of a verse, and the other half responded, either with the next verse, or with a burden, such as, "For His mercy endureth for ever," in Psalm No. 136; much like the present practice in our cathedrals. It was a Syrian and a Jewish manner of responsive singing. The Song of Triumph of Deborah and Barak (Judges, chap. v.), and Psalms, such as Nos. 103 and 104, were evidently designed for it;^b but it was not before practised by the Greeks, or else it would not have been a novelty. Yet a Greek term was soon appropriated for it, but in quite a new sense. It was called "antiphonal"

^a "Quippe medio ævo qui artem excoluerunt, quum et instrumenta plurima extincta essent, et ars ipsa pridem conticuisset, nominibus ex arte relictis ita sunt abusi, ut novis inventis accommodarent nulla ratione prioris significationis habitu; ex quo factum est ut non solum

immutaretur vis vocabuli cujusque, sed etiam prorsus inverteretur."—(*De Musicis Græcis Commentatio*, Joannes Franzius, Ph. D. Berlin. 4to. 1840.)

^b Philo Judæus, who was born about twenty years before Christ, refers to the double chorus, and the