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The Aristoxenian Theory of Musical Rhythm

'Keeping time', along with artistic accentuation and intelligent phrasing, is essential to successful musical performance. Rhythm alone had rarely been the subject of specialised study until the late nineteenth century, when several books on this topic by Rudolf Westphal were published in Leipzig. Westphal's work inspired Charles Francis Abdy Williams's 1911 book which is reissued here. Williams re-examines the classical and romantic repertoire from Handel to Tchaikovsky in the light of ancient Greek musical theory, focusing particularly on the earliest writings by Artistoxenus of Tarentum (fourth century BCE). In Williams's view, the rhythmic forms used by the Greeks are universally intelligible, and appear in all ages and cultures, unlike melodies or scales, which vary hugely. He provides insights into the micro-structure of works including Bach's oratorios, Beethoven's sonatas and Schubert's songs, which will continue to intrigue musicians, Classicists and mathematicians today.

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THE ARISTOXENIAN THEORY OF MUSICAL RHYTHM

by

C. F. ABDY WILLIAMS, M.A., Mus. Bac.

Author of *The Rhythm of Modern Music*; *The Story of Notation*, &c.

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1911

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PREFACE

THE ability to "keep time" must be possessed by every musician if he is to perform intelligently, and to take part in concerted music. In the early days of counterpoint, ere rhythm was thought of, the singers were obliged to "keep time" in order that the various parts might fit each other properly.

When to "keeping time" is added an artistic accentuation and intelligent phrasing, rhythm results.

Musicians give rhythmical life to what they perform, either instinctively, or through the training received from those who have the rhythmical instinct. As a rule, no special study is made of rhythm by itself, and when I met with Westphal's *Allgemeine Theorie der musikalischen Rhythmik*, it struck me as revealing the rhythm of modern music through ancient theory in such a new and interesting light, that I have for many years wished that my English fellow musicians could share in the pleasure and profit that it has given me.

For an opportunity of bringing this ancient theory before musicians I here express my gratitude to the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press.

While correcting the proofs my attention was called to M. Louis Laloy's remarks on certain forms which have long puzzled investigators, owing to the difficulty of reducing them to musical rhythm as understood by us. His views are novel, and so highly suggestive, that one cannot but think that he has discovered the key to the mystery. I have added an Appendix, giving a short outline of these new views: for the arguments by which they are supported I must refer my readers to M. Laloy's *Aristoxène de Tarente*.

C. F. ABDY WILLIAMS

MILFORD-ON-SEA
October, 1911

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INTRODUCTION

IT is often said that the musical art of the present day is so entirely different from that of the Greeks that, fascinating as the study is to many minds, the musician has nothing whatever to learn from the ancient Hellenic art.

This is true of the "melos," *i.e.* that part of music which has to do with melody, scales, intervals, orchestration, vocalisation. Greek melos, with its refinements of modes, genera, transpositions, and modulations, rose, during the classical age, to a very high degree of development, and, in a lesser degree, appealed to the cultured Attic audience much as the music of a Beethoven or Wagner appeals to an audience of to-day. But no sooner had this remarkable manifestation of art arrived at its zenith, than there began a rapid process of decay, in which its most essential features disappeared one by one.

Music, however, does not consist of melos only. More important from the Greek point of view was rhythmos, which gave strength and form to the melos: and it is with this side of music alone that we propose to deal, and to see whether ancient rhythmical theory, like ancient sculpture and architecture, has any message for modern musicians and lovers of music.

The gradual rise of Christianity gave the final blow to the already moribund system of music as understood and practised in Hellas. The Fathers of the Church disdained music as an art, and only utilised it as the "handmaid of religion." They found that the Psalms and certain other Scriptural writings could be brought home to the congregation more forcibly if they were sung than if they were merely recited; hence the words were put to simple melodies, not with any idea of æsthetic pleasure, but merely as a vehicle for their better comprehension and remembrance.

As for rhythm, the old Attic refinements were forgotten at the period of the advent of Christianity, owing to the loss of the feeling for time-measurement in poetry, and the rise of accent or stress in its

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place. The introduction into the Church of rhythmical hymns in addition to the prose melody of the Psalms was strongly opposed, since the pleasure which the people derived from the musical rhythm did not suit the stern ascetic views of life held by the leaders of the young and still struggling religion, though in the end they were obliged to give way. Instruments were entirely banished, since they were associated with rhythm, and its visible representation in the dance.

In the Eastern branch of Christianity the old modes continued in use, together with the chromatic genus, which is a noticeable feature in the Byzantine music of the present day. It can be heard in the Liturgy of St Basil at the Russian Church in Moscow Road, Bayswater, and in the Greek Uniat Church in the Via Babuino at Rome. The present writer was once privileged to attend a choir practice at the Greek College in Rome. While the language employed was Italian, owing to the singers being of several nationalities, the musical terms were the same as those found in Boethius and in some of the earlier treatises in Gerbert's *Scriptores*. Thus, when the choirmaster required to allude to the modes, he did not speak of Dorian, Phrygian, &c., but of Protos, Deuteros, Tetartos, Plagios. These terms were also used in the Latin Church when it was still under the influence of Greek musical teaching, but in course of time they were latinised, and the whole system was modified to suit western needs. The chromatic genus never entered the Latin Church; it is possible that western ears were not so sensitive as eastern, and could not easily assimilate a succession of semitones.

An easily recognised link between the melos of Greece and that of to-day is to be found in the alphabetical names of our notes. When western musicians began to utilise the Greek scale for teaching purposes, they tried many experiments to find a convenient nomenclature for its different sounds, in place of the Greek terms proslambanomenos, hypate, lichanos, &c. They finally agreed to apply the first seven letters of the Latin alphabet to the seven lowest notes of the Greek scale, and to repeat these letters for each successive octave. This nomenclature has never been altered, in spite of the differences which came in with the general adoption of the major mode; and hence it comes that the alphabetical names of the keys of our pianoforte do not arise from the major or modern minor scale series, but from the ancient Greek scale.

Alongside the practical musical study that was necessary for liturgical purposes, the study of its theory as a branch of mathematics

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under Pythagorean influence never ceased. The Pythagorean and Neopythagorean doctrines of the mysterious mathematical proportions of musical intervals, their imaginary connection with the movements of planets and the harmony of the spheres, formed the subject of many writings which had not the slightest connection with the art of music. It is, indeed, one of the most remarkable results of monasticism that for centuries men should be found to spend their lives in contemplating imaginary musical theories which could have no moral or practical result of any sort[1].

Perhaps, however, their work was not entirely in vain if it served to keep alive, during the general ignorance of the dark ages, some interest in Hellenic learning, and thus to prepare the ground for the reception of the Hellenic culture that was destined to arise at the Renaissance.

Though many Pythagorean and Neopythagorean authors seem to have been studied in mediæval monasteries, the chief authority for the so-called science of music was Boethius. He wrote about 500 A.D. (when all practical knowledge of Greek music was entirely lost), and seems to have misunderstood much of what he learned from ancient sources. Yet his treatise *De musica* was looked upon, even down to comparatively recent times, as an authority about which there could be no difference of opinion.

The foundation of Universities at Bologna and Paris in the twelfth, and at Oxford and Cambridge in the thirteenth centuries, marked the beginning of the revival of learning. These institutions, though not monastic, were under the wing of the Church, and their teaching was much on the lines of that which obtained in the monasteries. The study of Boethius was compulsory for all graduates of Oxford and Cambridge until the sixteenth century, and down to as late as sixty or seventy years ago it was still demanded of candidates for musical degrees.

Yet Boethius' *De musica* has no connection with the art of music: of beauty of sound its author could know nothing, for he cannot have heard any of the music about which he wrote.

The attenuated remnant of Greek music represented by its diatonic scale had such vitality, that it formed the root from which was destined to grow in course of time the art of polyphony; and out of polyphony was to arise yet another kind of music, capable of still greater expansion and power. To what heights harmony, the

[1] The subject has been ably treated by Dr Hermann Abert in *Die Musikanschauung des Mittelalters*, Halle, 1905.

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latest phase of melos, is destined to advance, the present generation can never know. It is quite possible that if we had retained the genera, we should not have arrived at polyphony or harmonic effects: the Byzantine system has not done so, and when harmony is applied to it, it is from western musicians that the art has to be acquired. The limitation of music to one genus of scale seems to have made possible the foundation of modern art. For, during the ninth and tenth centuries, taught by Greek theory to make practical experiments with the consonances of the fourth, fifth, and octave, musicians sang the diatonic Cantus Gregorianus in these intervals, with the result that the art of *organum* arose, and out of *organum* grew counterpoint, which eventually led to the polyphonic school.

We have, then, to thank the Church for the process of elimination which made possible the building up of the art of polyphony. This art arrived at its culmination in connection with the modes during the sixteenth century; and now music was to enter on its new phase, in which counterpoint and the young art of harmony were to be used with the major scale (derived, like the ecclesiastical modes, from the Greek diatonic system), and to be brought under the influence of the rhythm of the dance; while the whole of music was to be permeated with the culture that had been acquired through a study of Greek literature.

Greek philosophy had begun to pervade the west, and to become one of the chief motive forces of our modern civilisation. Music shared in the renaissance of learning. Ancient musical treatises were sought, a few remnants of Graeco-Roman musical compositions were discovered and translated into European notation; the Attic drama was studied, and the efforts to reproduce some kind of musical art that should be as expressive as the music-drama of Athens was said to have been, resulted, as is known, in the invention of recitative, and the founding of opera and oratorio.

But there was not, as yet, sufficient knowledge at hand to enable men to understand the real nature of the rhythm that underlay the æsthetic effects ascribed by the ancients to their music. Rhythm had not been cultivated in ecclesiastical polyphony, and only slightly in the madrigal. Time division of the individual notes was, indeed, necessary to polyphony, in order that the various voices should keep their proper connection with one another. But the value of definite rhythmical divisions and varied accentuation, as a means of expression, was scarcely thought of. The study of the metres of the Attic drama, by which their rhythm might have been elucidated, was still

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under the influence of the rules laid down by the Graeco-Roman grammarians, who knew that there was some occult connection between metre and rhythm, but knew nothing of the melodic rhythms to which the verbal metre had formerly been allied; and their metrical rules could not be made to produce any intelligible musical rhythm. The inventors of recitative thought that they had discovered the ancient Greek idea of dramatic music, but in this they were mistaken. Recitative is an entirely modern art, and seems to have no analogy with anything that was done in the Attic theatre. Its invention is due to a misunderstanding of Greek theory.

Yet, however much the ardent students of Greek in the sixteenth century may have misunderstood the technicalities of Greek rhythm, it is to them that we owe the first attempts to make music express the varying emotions of the drama. Opera and Oratorio, however, quickly became conventionalised in the hands of singers, and it was owing to the study of Greek on the part of Gluck that he attempted certain reforms. In the next century there arose yet another reformer, Richard Wagner, who, making a deeper study of the Greek drama than his predecessors, succeeded in producing the dramatic music that we all know so well.

It can scarcely be said then that we modern musicians owe nothing at all to Greek music: on the contrary, to attempts at its revival we owe our dramatic music, whether under the name of Opera, Oratorio, or Music-drama. Musicians are apt to forget this when, looking merely to the technical details, they say that Greek music has no bearing on the modern art.

During the time that polyphony was developing, there existed alongside it a vast quantity of music, partly sacred, but mostly secular, in which the predominating influence was the rhythm of the dance. From the earliest ages the Church had utilised this element to a certain extent in such parts of its music as were to be sung by the unlearned, while banishing it from the liturgy. Easily grasped dance rhythm was the basis of the litany, the folksong and the ballad, and when instruments began to be used apart from voices, they expressed themselves in this kind of rhythm. The earliest composers of instrumental music emphasised the importance of rhythmical structure by dividing their tablatures into bars, some two centuries before the bar became general in vocal notation; and the verse of poetry laid the foundation of what we now know as the "phrase" of instrumental music. The dance, in fact, had as great an influence on modern music in its early stages as it had on that of

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Athens, but there is this difference, that in Athens rhythm was made visible by the corporeal motions of the performer, as well as audible by the melody, while in our music it is audible only, not visible.

The Church has always looked with disfavour on the actual dance, while often using rhythms appropriate to it; and in banishing the dance from ritual music, it unconsciously performed yet another service to the art of music. For by thus forcing rhythm to make its appeal to the mind through the ear alone, without taking the eye into partnership, it certainly raised music to a higher possibility of imaginative and mystical significance than it had had before. The intelligence that can appreciate musical rhythm without the accessories of bodily movements, or the regular pulse of some non-melodic percussion instrument, is of a higher order than that which requires these aids.

It will be seen, then, that the rhythmical side of music has no direct historical connection with that of ancient Greece, while melody has been under Hellenic influence in respect to the Church modes and our minor scale.

When rhythm again entered into the more highly cultivated kinds of music, it had to make a fresh start from the same basis as did that of Greek music, *i.e.* from those forms that were found in the dance. Working up from this basis, musicians gradually developed, and are still further developing, the rhythmical side of music, on lines similar to those of the ancients. The combination of bars into short phrases, of phrases into periods, the use of certain rhythmical figures to express gaiety, solemnity, and other feelings, all have their counterparts in the dactyls and trochees and other "feet" of the Greek theorists, who entered into the signification of these details with an understanding and minuteness such as no writer of modern times has shown.

The melodic side of music varies according to race, temperament, epoch. The melos of to-day in western Europe is founded on scales that differ from those, for example, of modern Byzantine music, those of China, or Japan, or India, and are less highly developed than the chromatic and enharmonic genera of the ancients. Even amongst ourselves there are differences of scale, and hence of melodic means of expression; for the old Scotch pentatonic scale, still to be heard in certain folksongs, differs from the heptatonic scales of musicians, and the bagpipe scale, though heptatonic, is not tuned like that of the pianoforte.

With rhythm the case is different. All the simple forms that we

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use were used by the Greeks, and are intelligible to other races and other stages of civilisation than ours. The iambuses and trochees, the anapæsts and dactyls of the Greeks reappear in the Hymns of St Ambrose, in the ancient folksongs of Europe, in the litanies of the Roman Church, in the sonatas of Beethoven, in the songs of Schubert, in the modern music-hall ballad, in the music of the South Sea Islanders. While mankind divides its musical scale in ways that are incomprehensible to those who are unfamiliar with them, it divides the time occupied by melody in ways that are comprehensible to all, however they may differ in culture and in race.

The fundamental principles that underlie the art of rhythm, both in the simple forms that appeal to all, and in the more complicated designs that appeal to those of cultivated taste, were investigated by Aristoxenus with a remarkable degree of insight and keenness of perception. Greek musicians developed rhythm in certain directions further than we have done as yet: but there are signs that certain features of their music, such as quintuple measure, the more frequent use of phrases of other than four bars in length, the perception of a thesis and arsis in larger portions of a phrase than the single bar, may, in the future, again take something of the same place as they did in Hellenic music.

The plan of this book is to explain the principles of the Aristoxenian theory, using both ancient and modern examples in illustration of the points to be elucidated, and to apply the theoretical principles thus explained, and the ideas suggested by them, to some of the masterpieces of modern art.

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