

Storie interrotte

Riconoscere e valorizzare il patrimonio dimenticato

a cura di
Veronica Gallo, Marta Previti, Clelia Sbroli,
Gabriele Taschetti, Luca Zamparo



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The conceptual layers of *mousikē*: a trivial social practice or the divine representation of *kosmos*?

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Abstract

The fundamental part in the analysis of the role of music in Antiquity is based not on the musical notation, but primarily on the textual treatises which describe under which circumstances and for what reason it was employed in such a great variety of religious, social, or political practices. In this article we would suggest that a great number of perplexities that arise on the ideological level, depend on the different meanings being attributed to the musical terms and on the very contextualised usage of language, which is our main source when approaching the conceptualisation of various phenomena from the distant past. Such considerations are especially relevant for the discussions of music of Antiquity, where *mousikē* itself was considered to be an umbrella term, comprising poetry, instrumental music, and body movement under its name. Discussing a period, when the philosophical and musical terminology is still forming, we risk facing anachronisms, homonymy, or polysemy, which leads to the diverse and even opposing views on the matter. As the examples of the ambiguous (or multi-layered) descriptions in the primary sources we would discuss the textual excerpts from the philosophical writings of Classical Greece, primarily by Plato and Aristotle, and demonstrate how the musical practices are attributed with the completely different value. Next to its artistic definition, *mousikē* encompasses other notions, such as the cosmic or political music, though the great variety of different conceptual layers is almost never analysed together. In such a research, the conceptual level becomes the most viable link towards a reasonable discussion of the music reception in Antiquity. We propose to reconsider the approach towards musical thinking and literary texts by distinguishing several conceptual layers which would allow to discuss *mousikē* in a more clearly defined way.

In this article we are going to highlight several problematic lines in the current research on Ancient Greek music as well as present the issues arising from what has now become self-evident discourse on analysing music in the Ancient Greek cultural framework. For the illustrative purposes, we shall start with an article from *The Musical Times*, year 1863, published under the rubric of “Essays on Music”. It presented the reader with an excerpt from the *Penny Cyclopaedia* (Knight C. 1840, s.v. *Music*), and this time the essay was dedicated to the subject of the Ancient Greek music. It reads as follows:

The music of the Greeks has engaged the notice of so many searching antiquaries and patient mathematicians – such profound learning and unwearied labour have been bestowed on it – it has provoked so much controversy and the dispute has proved so barren, that we enter on the subject reluctantly, if not fearfully; and though bound to give it as much attention as a matter of some importance is entitled to, yet we do not deem it expedient or feel inclined to afford it more than is rigorously its due. Dr. Bur-

ney, who had devoted months, if not years, to the inquiry, declared to a friend, a few months before his decease, that ‘he never understood the Greek music, or found any one that did understand it.’ (*The Musical Times* 1863, pp. 81-82).

In the 19th century, when the culture of Antiquity is so appreciated, we notice a real confusion with regard to the questions of music, a remark that it is very difficult to speak about it, that many scholars have tried, but they were not too successful, and we are presented with the example of Burney, who devoted years of research and confessed that he neither understood nor could find anyone who did understand the subject of Ancient Greek music – the example which is indeed very illustrative.

There are two reasons for quoting such an old and, from the first look, irrelevant article that dates back to the year of 1840. One of them is to see how much we have already learned of how to deal with the material. And the second is to show how the same problems that denied the profound understanding of the subject in 1840, are still relevant for us today.

The article continues for barely two pages and points the readers to some fundamental methodological issues in exploring such a subject as the Ancient Greek music. It states that most of the misunderstandings of why the moderns have fallen into the error, is because the scholars have mistreated the term *mousikē*. They immediately understood it as melody or sounds, while for the ancient Greeks it was also poetry, which was comprised under the same name. “Greeks never separated poetry from melody” (“*The Musical Times*” 1863, pp. 81-82) – this is one of the theses that the article presents.

At our age, anyone who begins to investigate the subject of music in Antiquity, knows that for the Ancient Greeks, the term *mousikē* involved music, poetry and body movement, not only the sounds (Murray, Wilson 2004). The article quoted above was written prior to the excavations of the Delphic hymns, so all that they had from the strictly musical sources, were the not transcribed examples by Vincenzo Galilei (Eske 1998; Martinelli 2020). They also had the textual treatises, such as the codices from Medieval times, but at some point, the ancient notion of music was forgotten, and it was started to be discussed as if it was only an instrumental art. Now we know much more on the subject, we have much more archaeological data, there are constant and innovative articles on the musical thought in Antiquity, a society of MOISA¹, which actively and continually organises the events dedicated to this subject, and the journal it publishes (*Greek and Roman Musical Studies*, 2013-present). Therefore, compared to what Burney and his contemporaries had, we have much more data and a steady scholarly discourse.

The small excerpt from the presented article serves us the following purpose: it points directly to the cause of the misunderstanding of the subject in their own times. That is – confusing the contemporary and the ancient contexts and reading the words out of their terminological framework.

Our interrupted story, which has to do with the ancient Greek music, begins here. It does not emerge from something “new” that the scholars have discovered, but from something that is always present, that is, music, and it is

connected to the reception of the concept which changed many times during the centuries and changed in a significant way.

The ancient conceptualisation of *mousikē* is very far from our contemporary understanding. Although nowadays it is usually discussed as poetry, music and body movement altogether, so the issue of Burney is not present anymore, there are other notions of music, which could be categorised under the labels of cosmic, political, ethical, or philosophical musics. These too are comprised under the same term *mousikē* or defined in a musical way. Regrettably, all of these notions are almost never discussed together, which leads us to more than several issues.

For instance, for Plato all the imitative arts, to which music also belongs to, are conceived as the shadows of the shadows (Plat. R. 373b, 522b, 598a-599e). The reality is an imperfect imitation of the ideal world, and the arts can only imitate this already-imperfect reality. Even when they try to achieve this goal, and this, according to the author, is not always the case, the imitative arts are destined to fail, because they cannot do it in a sufficient way. In this sense, music as an artistic practice does not have much value at all. However, while reading other passages, we come to the following description: “People should beware of change to new forms of music, for they are risking change in the whole constitution and fabric of the state.” (Plat. R. 424d). This means that music is of the highest importance, because it can have a political effect. To give the very general and simplified idea of how this might happen – music influences a person’s soul, his ethical dispositions. It can lead a person towards virtue or vice, and, therefore, it can balance or disbalance the whole life of a polis by making people act ethically or unethically (Rocconi 2007, 2015; Schoen-Nazzaro 1978). And in this way, music, that we deemed to be insignificant a few lines above, becomes so important that it even needs to be regulated by the law.

A similar controversy can be noticed when reading Aristotle: he dedicates the whole 8th book of his *Politics* to the question of music, he agrees that music can have a direct influence on a person’s soul. A person can become more virtuous if he listens to the right kind of music and can become morally corrupt if he listens to the wrong musical tunes. This is a common *topos*, not an invention of Aristotle, though he clearly agrees with the ethical power of music. And yet we can also read that “the poets never describe Zeus as singing or playing the *kithara*: rather, we say that such practitioners are vulgar artisans and that what they do is not for real men, unless they are drunk or joking.” (Arist. Pol. 1339b; cf. DL 10.121b).

Similar issues can be noted in the scholarly discourse on the Ancient Greek music – judging from some passages in the philosophical treatises, music can be claimed to be an art of secondary or third importance, but it might also be described as the axis of the Greek culture. All of this depends on our starting point and what content we do attribute to the term *mousikē*.

To our defence, it seems that the subject of music was never very clear and that it was not defined in a very strict and unanimous way. We may see that even for the ancient Greeks it was not always easy to understand how to approach this subject. For instance, Aristotle in his *Politics* writes as follows: “For

it is not easy to identify precisely the power that music has, nor the reasons why one ought to engage in it. Is it for the sake of play and relaxation, like sleep and drinking? These things are not seriously worth while in themselves, but they are enjoyable.” (Arist. Pol. 1339a). Similarly, Plato in *Laws* claims that it is extremely difficult to understand what is intended by the wordless instrumental music: “[...] the composers tear rhythm and posture away from melody, putting bare words into metres, setting melody and rhythm without words, and using the *kithara* and the *aulos* without the voice, a practice in which it is extremely difficult – since rhythm and *harmonia* occur with no words – to understand what is intended, and what worthwhile representation is like.” (Plat. Lg. 669d-e).

This happens due to the fact that there are many layers of this term, many possibilities of analysing the attitude of the ancients, and a great variety of starting points that a modern scholar can take to conduct his research. It is beyond the limits of this paper to discuss them here at length, though I would like to shortly present some of the examples from Plato’s works of what can be meant by “music” in the Ancient Greek tradition. Similar usage of terminology is not limited to one author and has correspondence in many of the musical treatises from Antiquity, except the very technical works. The main discussion of the concept of music would fall under these labels: 1) Instrumental music vs. *mousikē* in the broad sense as a union of music, poetry and body movement; 2) Cosmic music. The reality of cosmos is conceived as musical and is described in the musical terms (e.g., Plat. R. 617b-c, Tim. 32c-36d). *Demiurgos*, the harmonising god in Plato’s *Timaeus*, works by establishing the harmony from the different elements of the Cosmos to create a concordant (*súmphōnos*) order; 3) Music of the soul (Plat. R. 431e-432b, 443d-e.). A self-mastery and a beautiful order from the different parts of the soul, to create a unified concordant, *sumphonised* self and, additionally, to harmonise one’s soul according to the soul of the cosmos (Plat. Tim. 47 c-d); 4) Political music (e.g., Plat. R. 424c-d), which works in a similar way: the beautiful order from the various citizens of various occupations, who create a well ordered, unified and well-functioning political community; 5) Music as philosophy (Plat. Phd. 60e-61a). For instance, we encounter a passage, where Socrates speaks about his dream and names philosophy to be the greatest music: “[...] so the dream was encouraging me to do what I was doing, that is, to make music, because philosophy was the greatest kind of music and I was working at that.” (Plat. Phd. 60e-61a).

The before-mentioned passages have been interpreted in a variety of different ways, emphasising the changes that took place in the historical, philosophical, or poetical traditions. They are all right in their own way, though it is also necessary to focus on the concept itself. The very fact that they are called music or are described in the musical terms, is very significant. All of these different meanings, which are referred to by using musical terms, already highlight the complexity of the concept and demonstrate how broad was the concept of music in Antiquity. The current scholarship almost never discusses all these meanings together and focuses only on one or several notions instead; for instance, cosmic music *or* political music *or* musical practices of the poets and musicians.

Therefore, in our discussions of music in Antiquity, we are still falling into the same trap as Burney did – we are limiting the concept to one notion, which is usually the artistic music and the musical practices. We can now notice that the discussions of ancient music are full of discrepancies. For instance, in the term itself: sonic music vs. music together with poetry and physical movement; in the value of music – from the insignificant to the divine practice; in the cultural usage: from the sacred rites to every-day activities or the drinking parties. Such ambiguities, a few of which we have just indicated, mostly arise due to the particular contexts in which the textual passages are being discussed.

Considering the list of the different notions of music that we indicated before, there would be two possibilities to explain it: either we have different concepts, but they are indicated by the same name of *mousikē*. Something that could be described as music no. 1, music no. 2, music no. 3, etc., or there is some connecting element that would allow us to transcend those particular contexts and look at the bigger picture – to ask how the cosmic music, political music, human music, and acoustic music are all interconnected.

Some scholars claim this to be only metaphors or analogies, but some, including me, do not believe that to be the case. This requires a separate detailed discussion, in which we will engage elsewhere, though I believe there is a connection among all of these different notions of music, and this is numeric ratios in particular. It is not within the limits of this paper to discuss it at length, though my hypothesis is that all of these layers present a single coherent thinking about music in Ancient Greece.

There is a right and wrong harmony already in the world and objectively right and wrong intervals, which can be repeated in the musical piece. Therefore, an artist does not create harmony by himself, but only looks for the harmonious intervals in the cosmic world and arranges the sounds accordingly. In some cases, either by choice or because of ignorance, the artist includes the objectively wrong, unvirtuous arrangements, which is possible, because the music of the men does not always conform to the music of the Muses (Plat. Lg. 669c–670d; Plat. Ion). Therefore, there is something in common for all of these different notions of music – from acoustic to ethical, to astronomical or philosophical. This something is the numeric ratios, which only proves the necessity to notice the whole complexity of the term instead of dwelling into the particularities or the human musical practices.

We shall now come back to our list of where we indicated several different notions of music. Some of these conceptions have nothing to do with the sounds or being heard by the people, and yet they are still called music or described in the musical terms. When we analyse music nowadays, we tend to put ourselves in the centre as the recipient of music and the subject in the musical discussion. But for the ancients, music was an ontological entity, which was not always hearable and not necessarily dependent on the human practices. Being musical meant being proportionate, coherent and well ordered.

Therefore, all of these different layers present a very complex understanding on how music functioned in Antiquity. Music can be perceptible to our senses (audible music), yet there can also be intelligible (inaudible) music. As an acous-

tic phenomenon or a phenomenon that creates pleasure, it was not understood as having a great significance. Though because it is based on the cosmic proportions (the same ones as in the universe), it can represent the divine harmony in the right or in the wrong way, and this right or wrong harmony consequently influences people – it can balance or disbalance one’s character or even the life of a whole polis.

Nowadays it seems to be assumed that we all understand the fundamentals of researching the terms and the phenomenon of music in Antiquity, yet after some explorations these fundamentals are the ones which are the most puzzling. The more reasonable explorations of musical thinking must involve the discussion of at least three different layers, namely: 1) the conceptual layer, involving the astronomic and philosophical notions of music, 2) the ethical layer, involving the discussions of music of the soul and the political music, 3) the technical layer, which discusses the social practices, instruments, musical theory.

The perplexities which arise have little to do with the various opinions of different philosophers. Even the same authors use the term *mousikē* in a great variety of, from the first sight, contradictive contexts. The problems arise from the different traditions which coexist at the same time, and from the different layers through which we analyse this phenomenon.

Our interrupted story is such because of interrupted continuity in linguistics. In many cases, the problem is not the different views held by the opposing authors, but the different kind of language, which is always contextual and does not immediately show us the whole extent of the concept. Therefore, when there is a polemic about musical questions in Antiquity, it is rather common that the foundation for it is not that somebody thinks differently, but that he means different things by using the word music. It becomes a linguistic instead of ideological polemic. This is still relevant for us today, and it shows how the musical matters of Antiquity could become the research object for philologists and historians instead of musicologists alone.

As we have seen, music was never an easy topic to understand – not for the people of Antiquity, not for Vincenzo Galilei, not for Burney, and especially not for us, who are picking out the details of the concept and still discuss the term in the more or less modern way – as an artistic or social practice. This is why we should emphasise the necessity to analyse the concept in its entirety. It is true that if we introduce limitations, we can make important specific contributions. Such specific contributions allow us to answer, for example, “What is music with regard to education in Plato’s works?”, or “What is music with regard to religious practices in some specific textual treatise?”. What it does not sufficiently do, however, is it does not answer our initial question and the question from the article we started – what was music in Antiquity? Because the answer would be that it was all the things that we mentioned, and even more, while we tend to focus only on one of them. The interrupted story of the explorations of music begins from the scholarly discourse which emphasises particularities, while it is only the links among these particularities that could lead us towards the more profound understanding of the phenomenon of music.

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Note

- ¹ MOISA: The International Society for the Study of Greek and Roman Music and its Cultural Heritage.

Il presente volume accoglie i contributi di dottorande e dottorandi europei che hanno affrontato un tema di indiscussa centralità e diffusamente presente nella ricerca per la valorizzazione dei beni culturali: il vuoto documentario, la discontinuità della narrazione di "storie interrotte".

I venticinque casi di studio qui presentati declinano tale aspetto dalla prospettiva di diverse aree disciplinari: archeologia, musica e storia dell'arte. Con l'obiettivo di portare all'attenzione problemi teorici e metodologie di ricerca, questa miscellanea è l'esito di un'iniziativa organizzata dal Corso di Dottorato in Storia, Critica e Conservazione dei Beni Culturali dell'Università degli Studi di Padova.

The volume includes contributions from European PhD students who have approached a topic of undisputed centrality that is broadly found in research regarding the valorisation of cultural heritage: the documentary void, the discontinuity of the narration of "interrupted stories".

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