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What do we know of Μουσική in Ancient Greek Tragedy, and how might it have enhanced the dramatic effect?

Before I look closely into the music of Ancient Greek drama, I think it important to clarify the term 'music' itself. Μουσική for the Greeks has slightly different associations from our term 'music'. The term μουσική derives from the Muses, and it is important to regard this in the plural. Different Muses were attached to different genres and disciplines of music, thus implicating that μουσική similarly embraces a variety of elements.<sup>i</sup> In all its various forms of though, μουσική conveys 'delight, pleasure, and enchantment' (τερπικς, ἡδονη, θελιξις) and sounds 'beautiful, pleasing, and sweet' (καλος, ἡδυς γλυκυς)<sup>ii</sup>. There are countless times when μουσική moves listeners to joyful laughter or even tears, for example in the *Homeric Hymn* (to Hermes), Phoebus Apollo is stirred to 'joyful laughter' (γέλασσε γηθήσας) by some beautiful lyre playing.<sup>iii</sup> In fact in Euripides' *Heracles*, the chorus declare 'May I not live if μουσική is absent', so it is clear that song and dance was essential for a pleasant life.<sup>iv</sup> What isn't made clear, however, is what aspects of μουσική provide this pleasure, whether it is merely the aesthetic sounds, or the significance of the sounds in relationship with the text, moral or religious context. The same can be said about all music though even to the present day. Some listeners admire William Byrd's '*Mass for four voices*', for example, because they see it as Byrd expressing himself as a devout Roman Catholic in a strictly protestant 16<sup>th</sup> c. England, but many (probably most) like the piece because of the intricate counterpoint and beautiful sounds, and are completely oblivious to the context in which it was composed. Ancient Greek thinkers who have commented on μουσική tend to focus on the intellectual or contextual significances of it rather than appreciate it aesthetically. In fact there are virtually no commendations or criticisms about the musical qualities of a song, or a performance by a solo instrumentalist so we can safely infer that the words and meanings (λογος) were more strongly identified than the sounds in Classical times.<sup>v</sup>

This is most certainly not to say that music (as we know it today) was not an integral part to ancient song and poetry. After all music principally comprises the element of rhythm

as well as melody and instrumental execution. When people (falsely) state that music from Classical Greece is 'lost', they are invariably referring to melody and harmony. The rhythm of a piece of music, however is just as important, and in many cases it is often more important for the structure of a composition, as I will shortly discuss. Spoken Greek after all naturally had a sort of quantitative rhythm, from the speakers leaning on certain syllables and quickly flowing through others, as well as a basic melodic shape to it. This was indicated by the placing of accents over vowels. These were thought by many to mark out the syllables which should be stressed, but scholarly research has found that they actually indicate a relative fall or rise in pitch from the natural tessitura of the speaker's speaking voice. It would seem that this mistake had already been manifested as early as the days of the Romans; a late ancient grammarian, Diomedes, said that iambic passages in drama should be spoken *μετα μελους* (with melody) which could suggest that even in his time stress was becoming used instead of pitch accent.

It is believed that melodies were composed by using what is known today as the 'modal' system. In simple terms, the modes are ways of tuning notes to different musical scales, such as the C major or D minor for example. Each scale comprises of six tones and two semitones. What defines each mode is the position of the semitone in the scale, as this creates very different sounding scales. The Ionian scale for example sounds (to our ears) to our ears like a normal major scale, but what makes it an Ionian scale is the fact that the two semitones are between the third/fourth note and the seventh/eight note.<sup>vi</sup> As a result of these distinctions, the modes (*τροποι*) were felt to have particular connotations and effects, for example the Dorian and Ionian modes seemed to have ethical effects. Therefore certain modes were also used particularly in certain genres. Ancient tragedy mainly uses the Mixolydian and Dorian, the former in particular because has connotations of mourning. I will later look at melodic writing more specifically with Euripides, as we actually have a small amount of evidence from *Orestes*.

As I previously said, it was quite possibly the rhythm which was most highly regarded to create an enjoyable piece of music, perhaps even more so than the melodic content. This is often the case even in some of today's 'modern' music. For example, in arguably the best known piece of all time, the famed motif of the *Allegro con brio* of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony (First movement) does not feature an especially exciting melody- indeed only

four different pitches are used- but the rhythm, three short quavers and a long minim, becomes the recurring thematic material of the movement. This tune would not have the same effect if the rhythm had not been so memorable. This tactic was noticed by Aristotle (or at least attributed to him) many centuries beforehand in the work *Προβλήματα* (the problems) when it is said that ‘melody in itself is lax and inert, but when combined with rhythm it becomes well-defined and dynamic’.<sup>vii</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus asks if anyone could tolerate music ‘if someone sang or played the most beautiful melody but paid no attention to the rhythm’<sup>viii</sup> It therefore certainly seems like rhythm was more interesting to Classical listeners than the melodic content. There is no written notation of rhythm for percussion or instruments for us to examine, but there is one key piece of evidence that we can study: the text. By undertaking what is known as scansion, verse can be taken apart from words into simple binary rhythms: long or short. To create metre, words were chosen carefully by the writers so that their rhythms form specific patterns. These pattern combinations determine what metre is being used. Poems (and epic), and chunks of drama tend to be written in a consistent metre. Thus, just like modes, different metres were believed to have certain connotations and are associated with specific themes and emotions.

The rhythm of epic, the dactylic hexameter, for example is described by Aristotle as ‘the stateliest and weightiest’ of the verse forms (*Poetics*.1459b.34-35)<sup>ix</sup>. Aristotle was presumably influenced by the fact the Homer’s *Iliad* was written in this metre, being the most famous tale of heroes and gods of its time. In addition to this, the metre was used for hymns and oracles, for example Neoptolemus in Sophocles’ *Philoctetes* (839-842) uses this metre in his oracle-like statement while he contemplates the morals of his actions.<sup>x</sup> Aristides Quintilianus felt that because each foot begins with a long syllable and the final foot (normally) has two long syllables, it gives the metre ‘a greater solemnity than all the other metres’.<sup>xi</sup>

The dactylic hexameter however was also used for less solemn works such as the Homeric hymns, and eventually began to be used as the metre of Latin satire. It seems odd that something associated so strongly with heroic epic began used for very different things, but actually it is somewhat logical. Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is a well-known example of a text which is the subject of much debate. Many argue that it is an epic, partly because it is

written in dactylic hexameter like Homer's epics (and Virgil's *Aeneid*), but actually many of the stories in the collection are satirical and depict some of the gods as careless and certainly flawed. It is therefore an appropriate use of irony to use this metre for the work, so despite being used in a different way, a link with Aristotle's claim is still valid.

I mentioned previously that people assume that music from Classical Greece is 'lost' and we have no evidence of what it sounded like. This is incorrect thanks to some rare fragments of Ancient Greek music inscribed on papyrus and stone, and we have detailed explanations of the notation used on them. Most of the passages of notated texts on stone and marble inscriptions only contain a few notes, but scholars have nonetheless managed to interpret the symbols and recreate the melodies in modern staff notation so we can study these, alongside ancient theoretical and philosophical commentaries and gain more of an understanding of the potential dramatic effects, as well as 'how it sounded'.

Before I look in detail at an excerpt from Euripides' *Orestes*, however, I will try to summarise the musical content of Ancient Tragedy more generally. The scholar Mark Griffith neatly summarised the chorus' role in Greek tragedy by saying 'The basic structure of a Greek tragedy is one of actor's dialogue scenes alternating with choral songs'. The chorus (χορος) represent the majority of the musical content of these tragedies, and the members (known as χορευται) brought the words of the choral passages to life both by singing and dancing. The surviving tragedies we can still read tend to have four or five choral songs, known as odes or 'lyric songs'<sup>xii</sup>, though some have more (e.g. *Antigone* contains six). One of the primary reasons for using the chorus in Tragedy is that they provide a 'liminal' character: viz. they often convey both sides of an argument and justify both opinions in the Strophe and Antistrophe. The strophe might be one side of an argument presented by the chorus, and then the antistrophe the other side of the debate. The whole time they would be singing and dancing around the stage to increase the levels of intensity. They would also be positioned at the front of the stage between the actors and the audience, and the fact that it was made up of regular citizens further engages the audience in the issue at hand and allows them to relate to the dilemma.

Choruses normally remain present for the duration of the performance, and enter at or near the start of the play, singing the 'parodos', which is an entrance song, composed in regular march like rhythms such as ionics (u u --, u u --) or anapests<sup>xiii</sup> (u u -, u u -). In

general the chorus speak in formal metrical rhythms (Sophocles in particular used very complex ones) which differed from the rhythms of dramatic speeches, and thus allow us to identify them as designed to be sung (for there are no markings in the texts which signify this). The strophic structure I mentioned previously results in repetition of rhythm. Although this therefore creates a formal parallel between strophe and antistrophe, given that the two general portray two different sides of an argument, it seems illogical to make them structurally the same. The reason for doing this however may have simply been to make it easier for the singers to memorise their parts, or perhaps also to fit a dance routine more neatly. I find this theory particularly plausible as I have experienced this first hand with Sophocles' 'Ode to Man' from *Antigone*. I attempted to notate a possible choral part to the Ode by using the pitch accents attached to the text to create a melody, aligning it with notes in the Mixolydian modal scale (mentioned previously), and by interpreting the metre into rhythms: long syllables becoming crotchets and shorts quavers.<sup>xiv</sup> By putting the theories I have read into practice, it suddenly became much more apparent that the texts really do fit to music naturally and fluently, but it also showed me that if we had more evidence of instrumental parts, then an even more exciting performance could be created. It was by performing the piece however that I realised that the repetitive rhythms do indeed aid the performers considerably so I can understand why they have been composed in that way.

The Chorus, although the primary, wasn't the sole source of music on stage. Occasionally characters would break into song to add more drama to the text. One particularly important example is in Euripides' *Agamemnon* when the priestess Cassandra bursts into song. Cassandra had the tragic curse of always speaking the truth, but never being believed, and in line 1215 when she foresees her own death (as well as Agamemnon's) she frantically sings, *ιὸὺ ἰοὺ, ὦ ὦ κακὰ* (Ah Ah, Oh the agony!). The frantiness of her song must have alerted the audience to the terrible events that would happen and certainly enhances the dramatic effect of the drama.

By the end of the fifth century, the modal style of composition was becoming old-fashioned, and melodies were more frequently being created with less-subtle semi-tones, known as chromaticism, and diatonic whole-tones. It is thought that the diatonic melodies created a more satisfying and interesting effect for the more musically educated professional performers. Euripides was very much associated with the introduction of

chromaticism into his melodies, and he was very much a leading figure in the rise of the 'New' style of music. He was known to have broken the traditional rule of composing the musical pitch in accordance with the word pitch (from the accents). This inevitably delighted the younger generation who had not become used to the traditional style, and more intellectual audiences saw it as exciting and modern, but it also upset the traditionalists who viewed it as unwelcome and barbaric. We always see the same response in modernist music— Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring* is a more contemporary example of a mixed reception. The avant-garde nature was so shocking to some that there were riots at its premiere and it was considered outrageous, but this, just like the music of Euripidean drama seems to have attracted a great deal of respect and admiration subsequently. The evidence we have for the method of composing melodies in tragedy certainly suggests that not observing the natural pitch-accents of the text was very much an exception rather than the norm. The reason for this is simply that songs composed in this unusual fashion were much more challenging for choruses to perform and memorise since they lack the consistent, repetitive rhythms previously mentioned between Strophe and Antistrophe. In a passage of (probably Pseudo-) Aristotle's *Problemata* (XIX 918b), the author says that 'the antistrophic song is simple; for there is one rhythm and one unit of metre'. What is interesting, however, is that the author mentions rhythm and metre, but not melody. This supports the suggestion that there was a certain amount of lee-way for interpreting pitch accents within the modal scales, provided they follow the natural shape of the text. The fact that there is not necessarily a predetermined specific note for words did sometimes cause problems however. There is an amusing story of a famed actor, Hegelochos, who was playing the protagonist in *Orestes*. He apparently misspoke γαλήν in line 279. The line translates 'After the storm-waves, once again I see calm' (αἴθρις αἴ γαλήν' ὀρῶ), but he spoke γαλήν as γαλῆν (with a circumflex accent) in accordance with the rise and fall on the other three words. His sentence therefor instead meant: 'After the storm-waves, once again I see a weasel': he unfortunately became mocked endlessly by comic poets for this!

The chorus' function did not seem to change between Sophocles' and Euripides' time. By Euripides' time, the tragic chorus had increased in number from twelve to fifteen members, but the dramatic role of the chorus was just as important and they seemed to have received the same proportion of text. It was his style of music, metres and plots that

was so novel to contemporary audiences. He was so intriguing to audiences that Aristophanes regularly parodies and competes with Euripides in his comedies. There is a fascinating passage however in *Frogs* in which the character 'Aeschylus' and 'Euripides' are competing for the seat of 'Best tragic poet'. 'Aeschylus' contrasts his own methods with 'Euripides's': 'This fellow takes his material from all over: whore songs, drinking songs by Meletus, Carian pipe tunes, dirges and dances' and then says that it would be more appropriate to perform Euripides' songs on potsherds rather than a lyre, implying that his music is so tuneless that it is not worth being played on a musical instrument.<sup>xv</sup> 'Aeschylus' parodies him again in lines 1331-1363, and this time mocks the monody of a song sung by the Phrygian slave in *Orestes* (1368-1502), in which she (over)dramatically recalls waking up to discover that her pet cockerel had been stolen. Besides from being two ridiculous, but somewhat comedic scenes however, the texts show some of the Euripides' music's more notorious features. D'Angour finds it particularly interesting to see that Euripides again exceeds the conventional rules and methods of composition by employing what is known as a melisma. A melisma is when several notes are sung in the space of a syllable. The text of both these passages features the word εἰλίσσεται, a word used by Euripides frequently (over 40 times) across his tragedies, which means 'twirl' or 'wind'. The character 'Aeschylus' however augments this word, repeating the opening syllable εἰ as many as seven times.<sup>xvi</sup> A melisma therefore must have been used on this word. Although this would have disrupted the metre of the line, the melisma would have programmatically mimicked the 'twirling' implied by the word, so this is another example of the 'New Musical style' breaking the traditional laws for a new effect.

The parody is also written in an astrophic metre; viz. the words flow without conforming to a particular structure, rather than having a repetitive metrical pattern between verses. This style was a notable feature of the style of the 'New Music', as composers looked to free themselves from constraints to make their songs more dramatic. An interesting contemporary comparison might be Arnold Schoenberg's concept of 'the emancipation of the dissonance', in which he questioned why specific chords should resolve in a certain way. Although this is referring to harmony as oppose to rhythm, harmony and key play a large part in the structure of a piece of music, just like rhythm, so I think that we

can see links between both concepts of breaking free from the constraints of the musical laws.

The melodic shape and structure is a third interesting factor of the parody. Although we cannot extract as much about this than we can of rhythm, there is an account of how Euripidean melody diverged from that of his predecessors.<sup>xvii</sup> The writer says that the music of the early tragedians uses the diatonic and enharmonic methods of melody writing, but no one until Euripides appeared to use chromaticism. The writer also notes that the range of Euripides' melodies was larger than the norm as well, known as 'gapped' by other ancient musicians, and his melodies are generally more varied than his predecessors too.

We do however have a piece of evidence of melodic writing. A papyrus preserves seven lines from the antistrophe of the first stasimon of Euripides' *Orestes*, (lines 338-344) and is accompanied by vocal and instrumental symbols.<sup>xviii</sup> The lines, translated by M.L. West: 'I grieve, I grieve—your mother's blood that drives you wild. Great prosperity among mortals is not lasting: upsetting it like the sail of a swift sloop some higher power swamps it in the rough doom-waves of fearful toils, as of the sea'. Dr D'Angour notes several interesting melodic features: Judging by the layout of the notation, it seems to have been copied from the strophe, so this suggests that it was composed for the strophe and then simply repeated for the antistrophe. This is supported by the fact that the final syllables of ἀναβακχουει (339) are set to 'three strikingly repeated high notes'; this is unusual because one might have expected there to be some variation in the melody since the final three syllables are long, but they in fact seem to correspond to a word already used in the previous strophe: αἵματος (322) – which has a more compact rhythm of long-short-long. D'Angour also comments on some striking ranges of intervals moved. He notes that the range of notes 'falls within the interval of a seventh and clusters around two tonal centres a fifth apart (a and e)'. In general the melody is stepwise (moving up and down a scale) with intervals only up to a minor third and some as small as a microtone, but there is an ascending leap of a fourth at the beginning of line 342 at ἀ(να δε λαιφος), accompanied by a note on the aulos.<sup>xix</sup> This also occurred in the strophe after the repeated καθικετευομαι ('I beg') on line 324, followed by the plea itself. In the final line of the papyrus we have, there seems to be an even larger leap of a fifth on ἐν before returning back to the earlier pitch

boundary on κυμασιν. This leap again corresponds to the equivalent line in the strophe on the second syllable of ὄρεχθεις ('having extended'), so again the programmatic word colouring seems to make more sense in the strophe, with the leap mimicking the extension, rather than the preposition ἐν.

There is further evidence of 'word painting' in the ode too. There is a falling melodic cadence at the end of line 341, with the 'sighing fall' aptly falling at the end of κατολοφυρομαι, which means 'I grieve', and thus potentially denoting tears. Again in the strophe, we have the same cadence on the word καθικετευομαι ('I beseech'). On this occasion the falling musical phrase does suit the mood of the text in both strophe and antistrophe. In a similar way (yet with the opposite effect) the interval on ἀναβακχευει is a fifth higher than the previous note. It is therefore likely that Euripides appropriately placed an ascending leap on the word that literally means 'makes (your heart) leap like a Bacchant'.

This melodic setting does not regularly follow the Greek word accents, although we might expect this of Euripides' writing. Because Euripides was so strongly associated with the 'New' style of music, there are therefore questions as to whether this papyrus only provides evidence of Euripides' own specific style rather than the general practice of melody writing. It was Professor Martin West who argued that the singing of Homer, the earliest sort of melodic singing known, followed the pitch accents of the text, so it is assumed that poets would diverge from them for a number of reasons. The main assumption is that the strophic nature of Odes required the same melodies to be repeated in each verse, and so they would fit the accents of the first strophe, but not necessarily with those of the subsequent verses. Euripides' music is of course an exception to the norm, and we unfortunately do not have the same level of evidence for the melodies of Sophocles' for example, so we cannot just assume that all poets neglected pitch accents.

What is more 'standard' about this ode however is the metre— the ode is in dochmiacs (u – – u–), which is a metre found in almost every choral passage of Greek tragedy. This particular metre was thought to have connotations of passion or agitation – suitable qualities for a tragedy (perhaps due to the irregularity of long and short syllables) – and often precedes horror, for example in the ravings of Cassandra in *Agamemnon* (1114f) she foresees the death of Agamemnon at the hands of his wife, and in *Medea* (1251f) the

chorus' metre changes to dochmiacs to mark the 'desperate climax of the action' (Donald Mastronarde) as Medea goes to kill her own children.

Despite sparse amounts of evidence, it is remarkable that scholars have discovered so much about the musical practice of the Ancient Greek world, and I hope to have given a comprehensive overview firstly of what 'music' was to them— particularly the importance of rhythm and metre possibly above all else— as well as the theories and methods of their melodic composition, and how it developed over time to what we can see in the *Orestes* fragment. Ancient Greek music is certainly not lost; it never has been. It has been right in front of us the whole time in the text.

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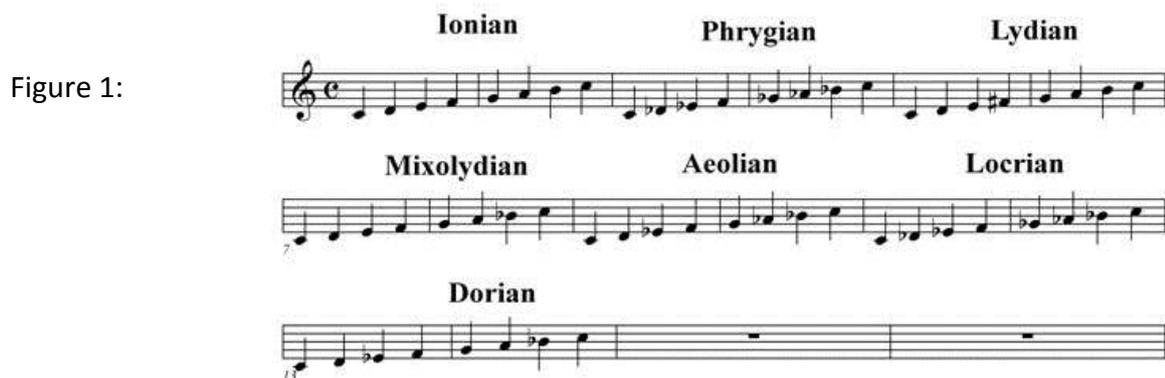


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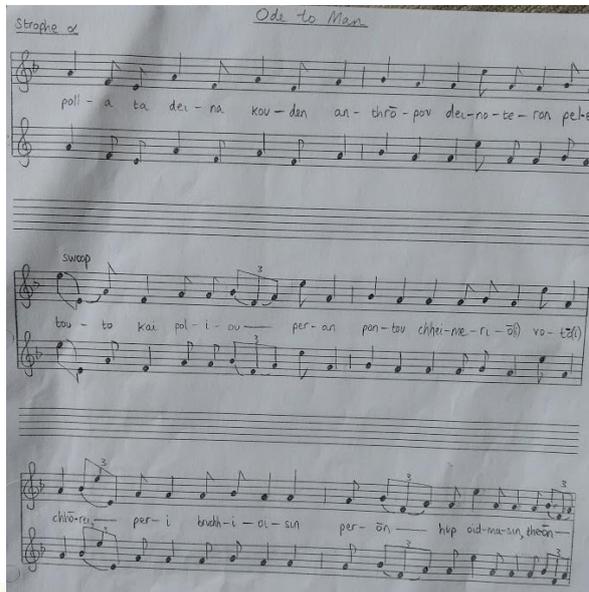


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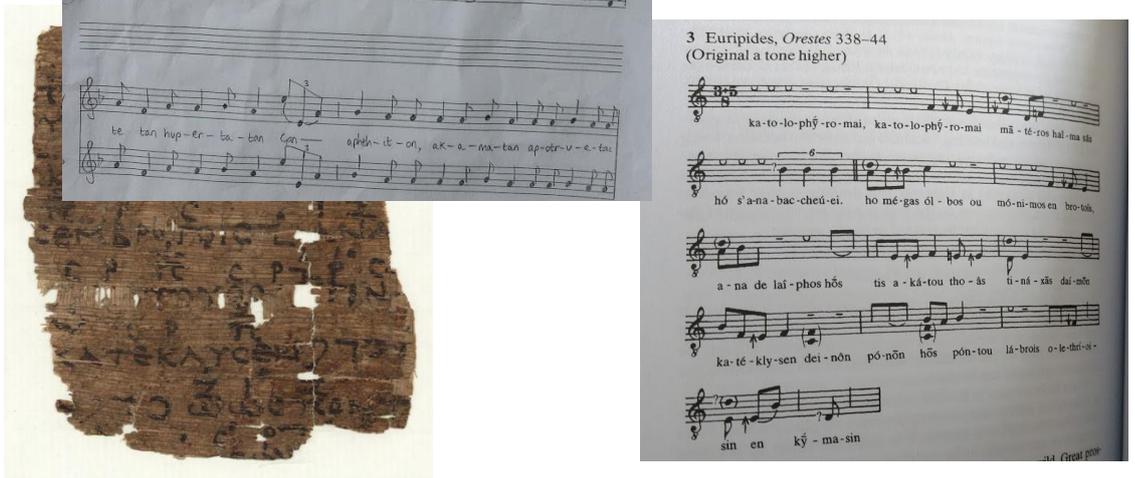


Figure 4:



