

## ANCIENT GREEK ART & CULTURE

### MUSIC IN ANCIENT GREECE

Music was an essential part of Greek life in the ancient world, and it was believed to have been a literal gift from the gods. It didn't just include music as we understand it, but also dance, lyrics and poetry; it played an important role in religious festivals, banquets, weddings and funerals. Our knowledge of ancient Greek music comes from actual fragments of musical scores, literary references, and the remains of musical instruments.

The oldest surviving evidence of musical instruments comes from the Neolithic period 12,000 years ago with a flute (*auloi*) made from bone, while in the Cycladic islands and Crete there survives marble figures of musicians playing the harp and frescoes (wall paintings) of monkeys playing the *lyre*.

Music also had a philosophical and ethical role in society. It was thought to have an influence over a person's emotions, soul and behaviour, while followers of the mathematician Pythagoras believed that music was the cosmic order expressed through maths.



Marble figure of a harp player, 2800-2700 BCE.

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### WHO WROTE THE MUSIC?

The composers and lyricists of music in ancient Greece were often the musicians themselves. These *melopoipoi*, or 'makers of songs', would create compositions of words, tune, and rhythms (*melos*).

Professional musicians were male, although exceptions existed for courtesans and *hetairai* who performed at symposiums (drinking parties). Some instruments were also reserved for women or tended to be used by them more frequently, although there are depictions, like the ones in clay from Palaikastro, Crete of lyre players, of female musicians.

*Trieraules* were another class of professional musicians who would set the beat for the rowers of *triremes* (ancient warships). Others included the choral singers who travelled with marching soldiers and the trumpet players.



Illustration of a Greek school from a vase painting.

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### TYPES OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

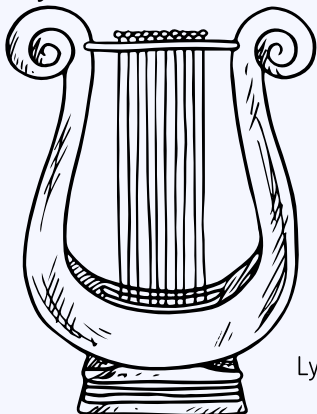
There were three main categories of instruments in ancient Greece, just like there are today. They were:

- String
- Woodwind
- Percussion

#### **String instruments**

String instruments were the most popular musical instruments and could be played either with one's fingers or with a pluck or plectrum, and were favoured as they allowed a musician to sing while playing. The most well-known example from ancient Greece is the lyre, which was associated with the god Apollo, although it was said to have been invented by the god Hermes.

The lyre would have mainly been used for indoor social events as it was not a particularly loud or complicated instrument and would not have been used for competitions or out of doors necessarily. It was known for producing clear and calm sounds, it was the primary instrument used for education and it accompanied the performance of lyrical poetry.



Lyre



Apollo

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#### Wind instruments

Wind instruments were also highly popular and at least one type would be present in all private and public events. The most famous example is the *aulos*, a flute-like instrument with a reed mouthpiece. Its size varied and it could be played in pairs - the double *aulos* was known as the *diaulos*. The *diaulos* would have been worn with a leather strap around the back of the head to help hold it up.

The ancient Greeks also invented an early version of the organ, known as the *Hydraulis*. It was invented in the 3rd century BCE by an engineer called Ktesibios and it worked through a system of air and water pressure.

#### Percussion instruments

Percussion instruments would have been used to set and keep the rhythm and were important in religious events, theatre and wartime marches. The round frame drum, cymbals and clappers were associated with the goddesses Demeter, Persephone, Aphrodite and Artemis. Drums at this time would have resembled tambourines and were played by hand by priests and priestesses. Cymbals (two circle metal pieces joined together) and clappers (similar to a rattle) would have made a higher pitched sound.



Cymbals



Illustration of replica of ancient Greek frame drum. © Nikolaos Brass.



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### MUSIC IN THEATRE

Music was an integral part of ancient Greek theatre. The chorus in Greek plays would sing and speak their lines in unison and also dance to accompany the performance. According to Aristotle, tragic drama apparently came from dithyrambs which were songs sung at festivals and dedicated to the god Dionysos. They would include an *aulos* player and a choir of men and boys.

Playwrights, like Aristophanes, would write *monodies* in their plays - these were lines that were meant to be sung.

The Greeks were also very creative when it came to creating sound effects. One major source of sound effects was the music provided by an *aulos*. Performers would also shake pebbles around in bronze jars to mimick the sound of thunder. This would be an early example of what we call a 'soundtrack' today. A soundtrack is the music and sound effects that accompany the actions in a film or play.



Attic relief of *aulos* player and his family, standing before Dionysos with theatre masks above them.

4th c. BCE