



Research project

Music in Rome: new research perspectives

Dottoranda: Anna Tsolakis

Tutor: prof. Maurizio Massimo Bianco

Cotutor: prof. Carlo Martino Lucarini

Abstract

Music permeated and influenced the civilisation of the ancient world in a capillary manner. In the Roman world, it experienced a strong push and evolution compared to the Greek world, with which there was a coexistence and continuity of musical theory and practice. The present project proposes to analyse the musical sources and testimonies of the Roman world, primarily literary but also archaeological and epigraphic, attempting to analyse them from a new perspective, one that intersects the studies of antiquity with musicology and ethnomusicology. In particular, the latter field of study will be used as a methodological tool in order to arrive at a more accurate and correct interpretation of the sources examined, which can give us as close an idea as possible of that musical universe.

Project description

Introduction

Music in the ancient world is extremely pervasive in everyone's life, both in the private dimension, as evidenced by pictorial representations of the most varied musical contexts, and in the public dimension, such as in religious processions, theatrical performances and even in contexts of war.

It is an integral part of everyday life, much more so than in our modernity, and has a profound influence on individuals, so much so that Plato went so far as to formulate a theory (the musical ῥῆθῆ) on which genres have a positive influence on man and which have a negative influence and, consequently, which ones to accept and which ones to discard in his ideal republic.

Research in this field of study has mostly focused on the Greek world, often taking the Roman world into marginal consideration. However, music experienced a strong impetus and evolution in the culture and society of ancient Rome, as evidenced by the numerous sources on the subject, both literary, archaeological and epigraphical.

State of the art

The knowledge we have about music in the ancient world is based on various sources: literary, consisting of both specialised treatises on music - i.e. works focusing entirely on music, such as *De Musica* by Aristides Quintilianus, or *De Institutione musica* by Severinus Boethius - and the sources that mention musical topics in greater or lesser depth; among the latter, the most interesting testimonies are those of Cicero, Aulus Gellius, Apuleius; archaeological, such as specimens or fragments of musical instruments, and visual representations such as wall and vase paintings, mosaics, statues or sculptural groups, etc. Finally, we unfortunately have a small number of papyri and epigraphic sources (e.g. the



epitaph of Sicilius) with musical and rhythmic notations.

These sources have been studied and considered in modern times from essentially three perspectives: that of the antiquists, musicologists and ethnomusicologists.

Antiquists (such as West and Pöhlmann, for example) have always had close and direct contact with ancient sources, but their lack of technical musical knowledge has led to misunderstandings within the academic community in the interpretation of literary and visual sources, such as the assumption that the *tibiae* (a Latin word translating the Greek *αὐλοί*) were flutes and basically forerunners of modern transverse flutes, or the belief that the ancient world did not know harmony, i.e. the art of harmoniously superimposing several sounds, but only melody, i.e. the performance of individual sounds in sequence. Such misunderstandings have, however, been very successful and widespread in academia and are still conveyed in these terms today through teaching in both universities and schools.

The second perspective is that of musicologists (such as Sachs and Comotti for example): the latter possess technical musical knowledge, yet language barriers have often led to knowledge of sources not directly, but through translation, and this too has led to inevitable misunderstandings. In addition, musicologists (and also antiquists who have turned to musicology studies) have often not considered the musical system of antiquity, i.e. the modal system, but have attempted to interpret the sources through the tonal system, i.e. the musical system of Western cultivated music - so-called classical music - which began to make its way into musical theory and practice from the late 16th century onwards and was then fine-tuned and perfected during the following century and a half.

Finally, the third perspective is that of the ethnomusicologists¹: they have realised that the way to better study and better understand the music of antiquity is to analyse those musical genres that are based on the modal system and are still alive today, especially in the Mediterranean basin.

However, their studies, often also due to language barriers, have mostly not been intercepted by the first two categories of scholars, also perhaps due to underlying prejudices related to the object of these studies, namely those musical genres that are not part of Western cultured music.

As a result, there is a general lack of systematic studies that consider the topic under discussion across the board from all three perspectives.

Purpose of the research

Although we cannot disregard the analysis of certain literary testimonies and musical treatises of Greek antiquity (such as the fundamental *Elementa armonica* by Aristoxenus of Tarentum), this research has as its primary objective the study of Latin literary and archaeological sources, starting with the rigorous examination of archaic Latin theatre, an indispensable source, rich and still full of surprises on this front, up to late antiquity with Severinus Boethius' *De Institutione musica*.

In this perspective, it is necessary and vital to intercept the metrical sphere, because it is one of the most evident proofs we have of how important music was in ancient theatrical and literary production: metrics are in fact nothing more than the rhythmic skeleton of a performance that included

¹ One scholar who has encapsulated all three perspectives in his studies is Professor Stefan Hagel of the Institute for Ancient Culture Studies of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. He has conducted enlightening studies within the EMAP, European Music Archaeology Project, on Greek music, including a thorough analysis of musical instruments, their historical reconstruction and performance practice, performed by himself.



rhythm and music together.

The second objective is to better and more thoroughly interpret literary evidence, mainly from Latin, through the study of different types of musical sources, which have so far received little or no attention and which nevertheless constitute a fundamental basis for research.

The third objective of the study is to search for the outcomes of that universe and that musical system -proprietary of the ancient world- in the modern era, first of all starting with the examination of medieval Gregorian, the first example of music transmitted to us with certainty by manuscript tradition and the musical genre chronologically closest to the ancient world.

Music played a fundamental role not only in Latin theatrical and literary production, but also in the everyday life of citizens of the Roman world, in the public as well as the private sphere.

Yet, in the general practice of university and school teaching, this fact does not seem to be sufficiently emphasised and its importance is mostly incomprehensibly overlooked, as West himself pointed out at the very beginning of his monograph on music in the ancient world. Therefore, this research proposes to disseminate a more correct, widespread and conscious knowledge and conception of music in the ancient world through refresher courses and interactive techniques for public administration employees and specifically for secondary school teachers.

Methodology

It has often been stated that, despite the studies that can be conducted on the subject, the sounds of music from antiquity are lost forever and that the only object of speculation on which research can be conducted is music theory: yet this statement is partly true.

It is, in fact, the firm starting point of this research project that there is still much that can be said and researched in this field of study, yet a new methodological approach is required. First of all, the field of research must broaden and move towards ethnomusicology: the modal system has by no means disappeared with the introduction of the tonal system in classical music; it has remained the system of composition of most of the genres of traditional music in Europe, especially in the Mediterranean basin (Greek traditional music, southern Italian, Balkan, Portuguese, etc.), the Near East and Maghreb, but also in northern Europe; in fact, it is still the basis of Celtic music, Ireland in primis.

Secondly, a comparative analysis is needed between the data we derive from the ancient sources, (starting of course with the treatises and theoretical works of the ancients), with the manner of composition and the performance practice of the instruments (as well as their intonation and construction) of these musical genres that are still vital and dynamic today.

The aim of this rigorous and comparative analysis cannot, of course, be the exact reconstruction of the sounds of the Roman world, due to the obvious (unfortunately) lack of recordings of the time, but it can be the most accurate and practical interpretation of those sources, to try to arrive at an idea as close as possible to that musical universe.

The research path will be articulated chronologically from the archaic era, starting from the analysis of archaic theatre and especially the work of Plautus, to late antiquity with Severinus Boethius' treatise *De Institutione musica*: the diachronic dimension of the research is necessary and cogent to also evaluate the evolution that music had in the Roman world during the course of its history and to what outcomes it led in modern times. In addition to the ancient treatises, all testimonies in which musical topics appear will be examined. Among these, both the testimonies of poetry, especially Ovid and Horace, and the testimonies of prose are indispensable, especially those of the rhetorical sphere are of



singular importance: Cicero, Quintilian, Seneca, Apuleius.

Finally, the research structured in this way aims to be a useful starting point for integrating the musical knowledge of the Roman world into the teaching of Latin in schools, through refresher courses for secondary school teachers, so that teachers have a more widespread knowledge of how much music influenced the literary production and culture of Roman society.

Expected objectives

At the end of the research pathway, the objectives expected from this study concern the more accurate and practical interpretation of the ancient testimonies through the proposed methodology; the integration of the expected knowledge in the study of the Roman world and in the teaching of its literary production through refresher courses for teachers; and finally, the interception and detection of the points of connection between that musical universe and certain musical genres that are still alive and dynamic today.

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