

Panel: “Culture and Society in the Ancient World”

Lauren Couture

Title: “Ancient Greek Music”

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I am **Lauren Couture**, a senior who will be graduating this May with my B.A. in English Literature. I plan on going on to receive my M.A. in Comparative Literature and possibly Children’s Literature (both are areas that I am very passionate about). I have two wonderful parents who have supported me throughout my entire life and continue to encourage me to pursue my dreams, whatever they may be. My mother, who is a fantastic music teacher, is the one who inspired me to explore the realm where music and history become inextricable. I hope that this presentation makes her proud.

Abstract

One cannot understand ancient Greek culture without understanding the role of music. Throughout Greece, music, song, and dance were considered a typical part of sacrifices to the gods, cosmology, architecture, and were indicators of a civilized community. Music was not only used for celebration, but also for mourning. It was commonly found during religious festivals in worship of Apollo, the god of music and devotion to Orpheus, who is the symbol of music and the supposed inventor of the lyre. There were even some cults that had specific hymns, invocations, or formulas that they sang around the altar.

Given the tremendous importance of religious ceremony in the daily practices of the ancient Greeks, it is no surprise that music was an equally important element in everyday spiritual life. Religious ceremonies incorporated music, poetry, and dance. During public worship of the gods, choral lyrics composed by Pindar and Bacchylides would be performed. As the meat for a sacrifice was brought out, a piper would play. Solemn Paeon songs meant for contemplation were common. Festivals venerating Dionysus in dithyrambic verse consisted of drinking and merriment. The students of Pythagoras took a scientific approach to studying the structure and the nature of music in conjunction with religious and mystical beliefs.

Pythagoras connected music and numbers with cosmology. He believed that the sun, moon, and the planets all moved around the “central hearth” according to musical ratios. When the planets moved, each movement created a musical sound. This led to his invention of musical ratios: a musical octave, fifth, and fourth. He was the first man to connect music with cosmology, believing that music was the manifestation of harmony in the world.

For both mental and physical ailments, the Greeks believed good health could be achieved through music. Pythagoras averred that string instruments had healing powers. According to the Pythagoreans, conditions such as rage, anger, and sadness could be cured with specific tunes and dances. The ancient Greeks believed that music could alter someone’s disposition, that it had the power to soothe, console, distract, cheer, excite, inflame, and madden.

Architecture, in many ways, was influenced by music. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of this is the *thymele* at Epidauros. The building itself served as space for musical performances. The entire substructure was built to amplify music performed near the *cella*, or inmost room, of the building. The building naturally amplifies sound. It even had *echea*, or giant bronze vessels that amplify sound within the infrastructure of the building. Overall, music is the key to understanding ancient Greek culture. It not only extended from architecture to medicine, it fostered autonomy to an entire civilization.

Bibliographical Note

I sorted out my research according to my argument. I found an article about the *thymele* and how music had influenced a major architectural project, using it to make a strong case for my research paper. I then received a textbook from my mother that she had used when she was completing her undergraduate degree. Although the section from this textbook was small, it was incredibly useful. I then looked for articles that offered information about music upholding civilized Greek community. A book concerning Pythagoras gave me more information than I knew what to do with. I spent a great deal of time deciding what I wanted to extract from the text. I narrowed down all of the research, taking out much of the music theory I had. I realized that unless the reader understands music and has some sort of background in music theory, it would not be understood.

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