

## Inscribing Musical Epitaphs in Virgil's *Eclogue V* and the Roman Empire

In Virgil's Fifth *Eclogue*, after rejecting Menalcas' choices of amoebic *topoi*, Mopsus announces his intention to try out (*experiar*, 5.15) a lament for Daphnis which he had recently composed and inscribed on the bark of a beech-tree: "in uiridi nuper quae cortice fagi / carmina descripsi et modulans alterna notauit" (5.13-14). While the textual significance of *carmina descripsi* is quite clear, and elicited extensive imitation in later Latin pastoral, the precise connotation of the final half of line 14, *modulans alterna notauit*, remains elusive. In this paper, I argue that Mopsus is, in fact, also inscribing the musical notation for his Daphnis elegy, and in particular for the epitaph (described as a *carmen* at *Ecl.* 5.42) with which his poem concludes.

Although such an interpretation is not new – Clausen alludes to the possibility in his commentary at 5.13 – the evidence for such an assertion has not been systematically worked out. The majority of commentators interpret the passage as a reference to musical interludes alternating with the text of Mopsus' Daphnis poem (e.g., both Coleman and Clausen on 5.14, Breed 2006(a): 58), interpreting *modulans alterna* in terms of an amoebic exchange. I contend, however, that Virgil's language matches the actual process for writing musical notation as it is understood from the surviving musical papyri (Pernigotti 2009: 304-305). Quintilian refers to musical notation explicitly as *notae* at *Institutes* 1.12.14, from the same root as the verb employed by Virgil to describe the additional inscription undertaken by Mopsus.

In several studies, Brian W. Breed has discussed this passage from *Eclogue V* in terms of the larger issues of orality and textuality within Virgil's pastoral poetics. He concludes, for example, that "the confrontation between textuality and orality" displayed through Mopsus' inscription and elsewhere "in Virgil's pastoral thus shows that writing—through its temporal scope encompassing both a generic past and future reception in reading—is capable of something

speech cannot do” (2006(b): 100). Although Raymond Kania has recently called attention to the circularity of focusing on such self-conscious “textualism” in the *Eclogues* (10), neither author has explored the idea that Virgil’s gesture towards his own artistic medium, that of carefully-crafted written poetry, also includes a parallel reference to embodied musical textuality. This reluctance to attribute even the awareness of technical musical knowledge to Virgil is doubly surprising, since he routinely emphasizes the musical aspects of the bucolic/pastoral genre in other significant passages (e.g., Breed 2000 and Paraskeviotis). Moreover, the introduction to *Eclogue V* explicitly foregrounds Mopsus’ musical talent on the pan-pipe (*calamos*), in contrast to the poetic abilities (*versus*) of Menalcas (2).

I conclude with a broader examination of the concept of musical epitaphs, such as Mopsus may have created for Daphnis in *Eclogue V*, through a discussion to two Imperial period inscriptions. First, I examine the epitaph of a gladiatorial *tibicen* named Justus from Venafrum (*CIL* 10.4915 = Courtney no. 117). This text preserves, as Courtney has noted, remarkably similar language to the Virgilian passage, “*tibicinis cantu modulans alterna,*” in precisely the context of a professional musician who might be expected to have a working familiarity with the Greek musical notation systems. Finally, I discuss the Seikilos epitaph (*DAGM* no. 23), which provides a tantalizing glimpse of the form Mopsus’ inscription may have taken. Seikilos’ epitaph includes a poetic introduction in the form of an elegiac distich, followed by a short song for which the musical notation has been provided.

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