

A Tortoise Sings: Composing Music for an Ancient Greek Lyre

I hope at CAMWS to present both on my construction of an ancient Greek lyre based on archaeological and literary evidence, and on my composition of pieces for performance on that lyre in manner as authentic as possible. A grant from the Bacca Foundation made the construction of this instrument possible, complete with a tortoise shell resonator, olive wood arms, crossbar, bridge, tailpiece and gut strings. The instrument was constructed over a period of five months and was made by hand and electric shaping tools. Perhaps the most famous description of the instrument comes from the Homeric Hymn to Hermes (25-51), in which Hermes builds the first lyre from a tortoise. This ancient source, along with M.L. West's *Ancient Greek Music* (West, 1992) and an article written by Samuel Holzman (Holzman, 2016) were the most important resources for the shape and materials of the lyre, and most importantly how one would likely have been constructed. The hymn describes in-depth the procedure followed to construct a lyre, though it was condensed into a very short amount of time for the story. The hymn also includes several elements that still puzzle scholars, most notably the use of reeds in the construction of the instrument.

The compositions for the lyre were funded fully by a Davidson Research Initiative fellowship, funded by The Duke Endowment, during the summer of 2017. The objective for this segment of the research into the lyre was to compose works of an authentic nature to accompany selections from six genres of ancient Greek lyric poetry. Research was first conducted on the nature of ancient Greek music using a mixture of ancient sources, including Mesomedes and Aristoxenus, as well as modern sources such as West's *Ancient Greek Music*. Based on this evidence, the enharmonic genus was chosen for the compositions, a genus significantly different from the diatonic genus that dominates western music today. This enharmonic genus makes use

of quarter tones, which reside between natural and sharp or flat notes in the modern scales.

Descriptions of the different modes found in ancient sources, such as Plato's *Republic*, provided guidelines for the character of the different compositions. Each of the modes selected for the various pieces has its own set of descriptors that have survived to us, and for some those included references to their context and/or the poets who used them. After these accompaniments were composed, a table in West's *Ancient Greek Music* was used to translate those letters into an ancient Greek style of entablature using symbols that have been transcribed from inscriptions of ancient musical notation. Finally, recordings were made of the songs themselves accompanied by the lyre.

This research on the lyre is being continued in my senior year in a seminar class in which I am looking at the evolution of the lyre through ancient vase painting. I will be focusing in particular on physical changes that began to appear in different periods, most notably changes the additions of strings, the length of the arms, as well as the settings in which the lyre most often seems to appear.

Bibliography

- Holzman, Samuel. "Tortoise-Shell Lyres from Phrygian Gordion." *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 120, No. 4, 2016, pp. 537-564.
- West, M.L. *Ancient Greek Music*. Oxford [England]: Clarendon Press, 1992.