# Hitting "Wrong" Notes? – Pindar's Improvisational Abundance and the Convention of Extemporaneous Performance

One of the most baffling features of Pindar's poetry resides in the numerous starts, stops, self-corrections, and directional changes that Pindar makes during the course of a poem. Modern scholarship attempts to explain this as an intentional compositional technique, famously dubbed "oral subterfuge" (Carey 1995) and "fictive spontaneity" (Miller 1993). This theory asserts that the real Pindar, consummate craftsman and professional poet, deliberately constructs a fictional (or quasi-fictional) speaker who appears to compose on the spot. While pseudo-spontaneity provides a useful explanation for how Pindar can include material he also wants to reject (Pelliccia 1992, Miller 1993), it leaves unexplored the question of why an audience should accept this conceit – what might otherwise be considered a botched performance. Why should anyone believe that while the "fictional" speaker "loses his head" (Miller 1993) Pindar himself has not lost his head?

I argue that the key to understanding the numerous digressions and syntactical "errors" in the *epinicia* rests on Pindar's successfully conveying to his audience the image of a seemingly limitless abundance of artistic material available for the poet to summon at any moment in his performance. Successful improvisation and extemporaneous performance hinge – as any jazz musician knows – on the audience's belief that the artist could "riff" endlessly and effortlessly on any theme. This is true whether the artist is spontaneously composing or is instead performing what appears improvised but is in fact pre-composed and pre-rehearsed. In Pindar's case, it is the motif of abundance – highlighted by such terms as *aphthonia* (*N.*3, *O.*11) and

*poikilos* (*O.*3, 6) – that permits what Scodel (1996) and Mackie (1993) identify as the audience's willing participation in the illusion of an improvisatory performance.

I demonstrate how "improvisational abundance" in Pindar's self-representation helps preserve the force of the "fictive spontaneity" theory in the so-called "signature" odes – odes where autobiographical detail threatens to undermine any pretense of a divide between the "fictional" improviser and the "real" Pindar. In *Olympian* 6 for example, the speaker reveals that he hails from Thebes, signaling to the audience an unmistakable connection to the composer. Interwoven in the indicia of self-identification, however, is the telltale *poikilos,* marker of improvisatory abundance, with the poet "weaving abundant song (πλέκων ποικίλον ὕμνον, *Ol.*6.86-87)." *Poikilos* conveys the notion that the "real" Pindar's ode is manifold, possessing the (fictional) capacity to accomplish its encomiastic end through myriad formulations that the audience has the corresponding (fictional) ability to alter.

Furthermore, reading Pindar through a framework of improvisational abundance sheds new light on the function of the noted Pindaric *Abbruchformel* ("break-off formula"). In *Olympian* 2, for example, it is an abundance (πολλά) of "speech-endowed arrows (βέλη. . .φωνάεντα, 2.83-5)" at the speaker's extemporaneous command that allows Pindar to ignore correct syntax, abandoning an unfulfilled protasis of a conditional statement (2.56), and to digress at length in the ode's famous eschatology. The *Abbruchformel* then acts to limit improvisatory abundance and returns Pindar to his primary theme: praise for Theron of Acragas. The poet's skill in executing this digression parallels what lies at the heart of jazz improvisation: the need to build up and then frustrate, but not excessively, a listener's expectations about the predominant theme of the composition. What may sound like "wrong" notes is anything but a mistake.

Finally, improvisational abundance can harmonize the two meanings of *aphthonos* ("without envy" and "plentiful") – a divide exemplified by Bundy's insistence (1962) that ἀφθόνητος δ' αἶνος in *Olympian* 11 should be translated as "abundant praise" rather than "praise beyond envy," as it often is. An over-abundance of praise can certainly result in envy, as Pericles famously recognized (Thuc.2.35). But improvisatory abundance from the poet's skill (ἀφθονίαν . . . μήτιος ἀμᾶς ἄπο, *Nem.*3.7-9), with all of its digressions and break-offs, limits any excess of praise and thereby unites both victor and poet in an abundance (ἀφθονίαν) that is not a source of envy (ἀφθονίας) for their mutual, "ungrudging" public (ἀφθόνων ἀστῶν, *Ol.* 6.7).

## Bibliography


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