

ANCIENT GREECE

Background Information 13:

Music

General Introduction

The Ancient Greeks were music lovers. Music was an important part of almost every aspect of their daily lives. It was valued partly because it could control peoples' moods;

- public gatherings
- private dinner parties
- ceremonies and festivals
- every aspect of worship
- theatre
- sports grounds / games
- schools and education
- warships and battlefields

Instruments

- **kithara** A large wooden, stringed instrument, played with a plectrum. The plectrum was usually made of animal horn, whilst early sound boxes were made of tortoise-shells.
- **aulos** A pair of pipes with vibrating reeds, rather like a modern bassoon's mouthpiece. It was made up of 5 pieces and carried in a long narrow double pouch. Musicians are sometimes seen playing them whilst wearing head gear.
- **lyre** A smaller version of the kithara
- **cymbals**
- **syrinx** A panpipe
- **'trumpet'** Used only as a tool for giving commands on the battlefield – not really a musical instrument

Music in Public

- **Festivals** The two main festivals were the **Panathenaia** and the **Great Dionysia**. The first (NB the Parthenon frieze) included a large procession of musicians. In pottery, their representation is reduced to 2 aulos players and 2 kithara players – on sculpture, to 4. Festivals usually involved formal musical competitions with categories for soloists and choirs etc. The **Pythian games at Delphi** were held in honour of **Apollo**, the divine musician. Competition was fierce. Victory odes for athletic and musical competition winners were composed specially.
- **Sport** Not only was music played at sporting events, but athletes trained to music.
- **War** Music was played on the battlefields, possibly to help soldiers march in time. Commands were given on a war trumpet. On war boats, percussion instruments (usually) were played to keep the oarsmen rowing in time. A *trireme* boat for example, had 170 rowers who needed to keep to a rhythm.
- **Entertainment** Music was vital in **theatre**. Greek playwrights were expected to compose the music, train the singers AND direct the performance of their plays! Large amounts of the story in a Greek play was narrated in song rather than acted. Similarly, the performance of narrative poems was more likely to be said in a sing-song chant – NB –professional performers of Homeric poems were called *rhapsodes*.
- **Education** Athenian youths learnt the lyre as part of their education. The kithara was more difficult and therefore left to professionals.

Music in Private

- **Symposion** A drinking party! Musicians and entertainers were employed for these occasions. Women seen playing instruments at such parties, were high-class prostitutes. The word for them is *auletris* – derived from *aulos-player*.

Song / Poetry Types

- *paian* Most commonly written in honour of Apollo (also Athena). Solemn - in hope of deliverance from peril.
- *prosodion* A processional piece, written to invoke praise.

- ***dithyramb***
Began as just a merry, bawdy song – but became a competitive choral piece. In the Great Dionysia, each of the 10 Athenian tribes had to provide two choirs for a competition.
- ***lyric poetry***
(ignore modern meaning) – a song sung to a lyre's accompaniment.
- ***elegiac poetry***
A verse form derived from metre of epic poetry.

Music

- Only a few fragments of the actual music have survived, but they all seem to have only melodies and no harmonies.

Key Characters

- **Terpsichore** A Muse (a minor deity who looked after the arts).
- **Musaïos** A legendary musician
- **Apollo** Divine musician

"..For Greeks, the sung word was almost as commonly heard and as important as the spoken..."