

Ancient Music: The BC Throwbacks

Music is the language of the world, past and present. As an occasional singer, and avid listener, I'm always trying to expose myself to different genres of music to learn more about the people and cultures who created them. Just recently, a Ghanaian friend introduced me to afrobeats. As the new age music of West Africa, afrobeats fuses traditional tribal music with electronic tracks and rapping. As I've started listening to afrobeats, I've begun to notice fascinating cultural aspects of the music. For one, it's very rhythmic; unlike western EDM, which relies heavily on electronic drum beats, afrobeats often uses traditional percussion. For example, in songs by Ghanaian artist Sarkodie, I can hear a layering of congas and pitched drums creating a polyrhythmic beat unique to West African music. Tracing the roots of this particular musical style has got me thinking about the origin of music in general. After all, if afrobeats evolved from traditional West African music, then that music must have evolved out of another style. I want to trace this lineage as far as I possibly can; hence, my quest is to find out how music began.

My first question is the obvious one - How old is the earliest recorded evidence of music? Ancient sheet music, if it existed, probably hasn't made it to the modern day, but I'm interested to see what kinds of early instruments have been unearthed. As a choir boy, I'd like to know what culture began the practice of group singing. What kinds of music did they sing? I want to know whether ancient music was a form of storytelling, and if so, what stories did it tell? Were they legendary break-up stories like Taylor Swift songs, or was there a different topic of interest? Nowadays, music is the great equalizer, but I wonder if it was so in ancient times. Did everyone

have access to music, or was it limited to the privileged elite? Also, I want to know how religion impacted early music. Was certain music allowed and other kinds forbidden, or was all music viewed in a positive light? Lastly, I want to learn more about the origin of Indian classical music - my heritage.

I started my search at the school library. A quick Google search sent me speed-walking to the 780s, the Dewey Decimal section for music. Not sure of what I'd find, I began by perusing each and every book from 780.01 onwards. Sandwiched between two musical dictionaries on the bottom row of the shelf, I found a slim hardcover titled *The Instruments of Music* by Stuart A. Kallen.

Kallen kicked off his book with a fascinating look into the origin of instruments. While acapella music could have existed before instruments did, I figured this would at least provide a baseline for the origin of music. Vibrating percussion instruments known as idiophones have been found dating back as far as 20,000 years ago. According to Mickey Hart, former Grateful Dead drummer, the first record of actual instrument use is the cave painting "The Dancing Sorcerer of Les Trois Freres" painted around 15,000 BC in a cave system located in the southwest of France. The art depicts a dancing animal-skin clad man carrying an idiophone of some sort, likely a concussion stick. It's likely that the earliest instruments had a religious connotation; musical drawings like "The Dancing Sorcerer" were often painted in red ochre, a color reserved for sacred purposes (10).

This element of musical shamanism is linked to many other types of idiophones from that time period. For example, woolly mammoth skulls and bighorn sheep antlers "are believed to

have been pounded to generate good luck before a hunt” (10), while “[g]ourd rattles might have blessed a baby’s birth” (10).

The earliest instruments weren’t specifically designed for music; instead, they served spiritual purposes. Not all modern music is religious, but all music must move the audience. Even the hottest rap and pop songs of the day are only popular because they make us feel a certain way, be it happy, sad, or even lucky! In a way, this makes all music spiritual to some degree; hence, it didn’t surprise me to read that the first instruments were religious artifacts.

I was beginning to realize that I had mistaken ancient music for a niche, unexplored topic, while, in reality, I was diving into an ocean of information. I was overloaded with knowledge, and I needed a break. Before diving back into my research, I decided to kick back and put on some Sarkodie. As I listened to the rhythmic waves of cool electro-funk reach their climactic bass drop, it suddenly clicked. There was one constant between modern music and ancient music - one thing that held them together - the beat!

All music relies on rhythm, usually through percussion. In the modern day, this is achieved through electronic tracks, and in ancient times, it was the spiritual grating, thumping, or rattling of an idiophone. I decided to stay with Kallen, but focus specifically on the usage of drums. It seems that as time progressed, drums gradually grew more refined, however the spiritual basis remained. Modern drums, called membranophones because they have some kind of membranous drumhead, are first seen in Mesopotamian art from around 3000 BC (17). While more sophisticated instruments, they retained their predecessors’ religious connotations: “The drums were often painted red, the color of blood, or sometimes green, the color of vegetation. Throughout the ancient world, these were the primordial colors of life” (18).

Music has always been a mark of life and energy; however, in ancient times, it could also be a sign of leadership. Skilled drummers became the chiefs of their tribes, because they were believed to wield godly power. Through music, they could cure disease, or even cause it. Moreover, ancient religion was based on rituals like rain dances, war councils, and hunting ceremonies. All of these were conducted to the beat of a drum (18).

In ancient times, human society was developing in tandem with music. It's only natural that the two became intertwined. Just like our tribal ancestors, we revere skilled musicians in the modern day as well. A Billboard Top 100 hit is guaranteed to make any musician a celebrity with thousands of adoring fans. They might not have political leadership, but superstar musicians can still influence our clothing, our mannerisms, and even our hairstyles! For example, according to film specialist and Glamour Magazine contributor Natasha McNamara, perms became popular in the 80s due largely to the influence of celebrity artists such as Cher, Bon Jovi and Dolly Parton among others (McNamara 1).

As the mark of a great leader, music was a form of intimidation in ancient battles. According to Kallen's book, in 1287, Marco Polo wrote, "this is a custom of the [Mongols], that before the join battle they all unite in singing and playing... until the great Naccara of the Prince is heard to sound. As soon as that begins to sound the fight also begins on both sides" (Kallen 19). The Naccara were massive kettledrums that stood 5 feet tall (Kallen 19). The Naccara must have struck terror into the hearts of men; after all, hearing it boom across the battlefield meant the start of bloodshed and death. It also fascinated me that soldiers would join in song before battle. This provided some evidence to suggest that music was a unifier in ancient times, just as it is today. In 2015, a joint study conducted by the University of Exeter and the Tokyo University

of Arts analyzed 304 recordings of music from around the world. They found that many of the pieces that they analyzed shared features that allow people to coordinate more effectively. As such, they concluded that “the main function of music is to bring people together and bond social groups - it can be a kind of social glue” (University of Exeter 1). This is seen in church groups, national anthems, and even the synchronized dancing of North Korea (University of Exeter 1). In other words, music is still the great unifier that it was for the Mongol warriors.

I realized while reading about the Mongols that though the scene described took place in 1287, it still rang of the musical shamanism present in truly ancient cultures. A quick Google search for ‘Mongolian shamanism’ confirmed my suspicions. After clicking through several pseudoscience Wordpress blogs, I found the Encyclopedia Britannica page for “shamanism” hiding on the second page of search results.

Shamanism was present in Mongolia well into the 1800s. When the Russians attacked northern Mongolia, shamans were still leading Mongolian troops into battle. The shaman was also often the leader of his clan (Eliade and Diószegi 1). The fact that 1800s Mongols were still upholding the 17,000 year old traditions depicted in “The Dancing Sorcerer” just goes to show that music is immortal. Unlike weapons, which became outdated or archaic, battle drums remained relevant for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Their ability to instill fear never diminished. If music can evoke the same emotions in us today that it could thousands of years ago, on some basic level, we must be the same people that our ancestors were.

I found battle drums absolutely fascinating, so before I moved on from Kallen’s book, I quickly skimmed the rest of it looking specifically for references to battle drums. Sure enough I found that, “[the ancient Hindu drum] was held high in the air and beaten in a loud and terrifying

manner during battles, for the purpose of frightening the enemy” (Kallen 21). This was the exact same strategy used by the Mongols! Interestingly, the Hindus integrated the battle drums with musical shamanism; the drums were lined with bells, whose ringing was believed to “create magic and bring good luck and victory” (21).

So far, I had learned that ancient music held deep spiritual meaning as well as practical uses. However, the music I was reading about in Kallen’s *The Instruments of Music* was all far too old for there to be any record of lyrics or melodies. Moreover, as a writer on instruments, Kallen didn’t say much on these topics. I now wanted to focus on ancient music as a storyteller, so I headed straight to the greatest anthology of hymns and lyrical songs on the planet - the Hindu *Samaveda*.

To gain some baseline knowledge, I skimmed an article titled “The Vedas” by Cristian Violatti on the Ancient History Encyclopedia site. Along with the other Vedas, *Samaveda* was likely written shortly after the Aryans settled the Indus Valley somewhere between 1000 and 500 BC (Violatti 1). According to Ralph T.H. Griffith, an Englishman who translated the *Samaveda* from Sanskrit to English in 1895, the *Samaveda* is the Veda of Holy Songs. The Sanhita, or the lyrics of those songs, are the words which priests would chant while praying to deities (Griffith 1). By its very nature, this book exuded the same spiritual nature that I’d found in the other ancient music I had explored. In the words of Dutch linguist Barend Faddegon’s Studies on the Samaveda, “the [Samavedic] chant is a means not only for pleasing gods but also for imposing upon devils” (Faddegon 15). In order to “impose upon devils”, Hindu priests would sing on a single syllable such as “o” instead of with the lyrics of the piece, and pepper sporadic holy syllables called stobhas throughout the chant. The would prevent demons from discerning the

true meaning of the chant (Faddeggon 15). The idea was that the all-powerful gods could “see through all these mutilations easily, and very likely read immediately in the soul of the chanters” (Faddeggon 15).

At first glance, the idea of purposefully distorting music to such a degree seemed completely removed from the modern day. Then I started thinking about EDM, and electronic dance covers of popular songs. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, EDM covers are designed for nightclubs and raves, loud places where lyrics are hardly important! Because of this, most dance covers will remove the lyrics, amplify the beat, and often add bass drops and other cool techno effects to add to the danceability of the music (Matos 1). Like the raucous partygoers at a nightclub, gods didn’t care about lyrics; while clubbers want a good rhythm, the gods were solely interested in the holiness of the music and the intent behind it. In a way, Vedic priests were simply ancient DJs - editing the music to cater to their audience.

Before concluding my quest, I decided to take a final spin on my question. Where did music, the word itself, originate? I started my search at Etymonline, an online etymological dictionary maintained by Douglas Harper. The earliest known root of ‘music’ is the ancient Greek “mousikē” meaning “(art) of the Muses”. Additionally, the use of letters to denote music notes is also of ancient Greek origin; however, the Greeks would start their scale on C, instead of A. This is likely because their music focused more on minor scales, whereas modern day music tends towards major scales (Harper 1).

On face value, this question seemed to hit a dead-end with a simple factual answer, however, it had uncovered one last strand for me to untangle. Who were the Muses, and what could they tell me about ancient music? The word ‘Muse’ refers to “one of the nine Muses of

classical mythology” (Harper 1). Interestingly, it comes from the Proto-Indo-European root ‘men-’ meaning to think. This is unsurprising; after all, music is a product of the mind!

To learn more about the Muses, I cracked open the Ancient History Encyclopedia site once more, this time heading to an article titled “Muse” by Mark Cartwright. According to Cartwright, the nine Muses were Greek goddesses who embodied the arts such as music, poetry, and dance. While their mother Mnemosyne was the goddess of memory, the Muses themselves were an “aid to forgetfulness” (Cartwright 1) that allowed both the gods and mankind to leave behind their worries. Besides being the “bringers of festivity and joy” (Cartwright 1), the Muses were an intrinsic part of everyday life, including education. Throughout Greece, philosophical schools would hold numerous music competitions and festivals in honor of the Muses. In fact, the Greek word for philosophical school is Mouseia, derived from ‘Muse’. The Muses were often painted on lekythoi, or funeral vases. It was believed that doing so would allow the dead to bring music with them on their journey to the underworld (Cartwright 1).

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica article on Ancient Greece, the Greeks are often regarded as the source of Western culture (Hornblower 1). Because of this, it’s unsurprising that the Muses live on in modern music. For one, we still use music as an “aid to forgetfulness”. According to “Why We Rave”, an article on edm.com written by Noah Little, an expert in music psychology, one of the main reasons people attend EDM raves is “to forget about [their] worries and woes” (Little 1) and “escape their everyday environment” (Little 1). This is quite similar to the music festivals of ancient Greece - a chance to cast off bad memories and live in the moment.

I started this search with the simple goal of tracing the origins of music. What I quickly realized was that music, especially early music, is less notes and lyrics than it is a cultural

phenomenon. In each of my sources, there was something about the music, but also something about the people who created it - their religions, leaders, even their superstitions. Interestingly, in all the time periods and locales that I explored, music had spiritual importance. I believe this is because of the effect music has on us. It can make us sociable. It can strike us with fear. It can even make us forget the worries of the past. Looking back on my initial questions, I feel satisfied with the knowledge that I've accumulated. I haven't checked every box, nor found the specific answers I wanted. Instead, I've explored what music meant to our ancestors. What started as a quest to find out how early humans made music has turned into a quest for why they created it.

After all I've learned about the history of music, I still don't really understand it. There is no way to uncover why humans make music from a solely historical perspective. The only path forward is to understand the people who create, listen to, and enjoy it. My quest to find the origin of music has diverged into two equally important journeys - one, to understand the human psyche behind music creation and appreciation, and, two, to link this psyche into the music of the past and present. At its core, the word 'music' comes from 'men-' meaning mind. Perhaps if I can understand how music affects the human mind, I'll be able to guess how human minds will next affect music. In other words, maybe by tracing music's past, we can predict music's future.

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