

History of Western Music

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ANTIQUITY

586 B.C. Sacadas plays aulos at Pythian Games

ca. 500 B.C. Pythagoras determines ratios of musical intervals

ca. 380 B.C. Plato discourses on music in the Republic

ca. 370 B.C. The books of the Old Testament reach their present form

ca. 330 B.C. Aristotle's Politics discusses music education

ca. 320 B.C. Aristoxenus finishes the Harmonics (oldest extant Greek musical treatise)

ca. 130 B.C. Composition of the two "Delphic Hymns"

ca. 30 A.D. Jesus crucified

first century A.D. "Epitaph of Seikolos" composed

second century A.D. "Hymn to Nemesis," "Hymn to the Sun," and "Hymn to the Muse Calliope" composed by Mesomedes of Crete

ca. 200 A.D. Athenaeus's Sophists at Dinner includes dialogue on music

fourth century A.D. Aristides Quintilianus, the last theorist of Greek music

We do not know precisely how or when music began. Perhaps in prehistoric times man used primitive forms of drums and trumpets for signaling. He may have found these sounds pleasing to the ear and began to use them to create music. Another theory is that music developed from the natural urge to accompany human movement with rhythmic sounds, which gradually became musical creations. Song may have also evolved from the spontaneous vocal expression of anger, fear, anguish, and joy.

Relatively little is known about the music of Antiquity (from prehistoric times to about 200 A.D.). We know that music existed in many ancient civilizations, and there is substantial evidence on musical life in ancient Egypt and China. It is likely that some of the musical traditions of Antiquity influenced European musical heritage in important ways. The one about which we know the most and that has most directly influenced the theoretical basis of Western music is that of Ancient Greece.

MUSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Our knowledge of the music of Antiquity is seriously limited by the ephemeral nature of the musical medium, unlike ancient pictorial art, architecture, or literature. Notation is a method for preserving information about sound, but it was not fully developed in Antiquity. The few bits of extant music notated before the birth of Christ are mostly indecipherable.

We have gathered information about ancient music in four ways. (1) Pictorial representations of musical activity, especially those of people playing instruments, tell us something about the music of Antiquity. These images certainly confirm the existence of music making. (2) Several important writers have recorded their ideas about music and noted the rules of its construction. Literary sources constitute our best information about ancient music. (3) A considerable number of instruments have been excavated from the sites of ancient culture. Analysis of them yields conclusions about scales, modes, and social function. (4) Ethnomusicology, the study of non-Western systems of music, provides some insight into ancient practices. For example, by studying mature folk cultures (Indian, Middle Eastern, Persian, etc.) that were directly influenced by the ancient Greeks, scholars have been able to draw conclusions about the music of Antiquity.

Though we possess no definite knowledge of how the music actually sounded, we can make certain generalizations about the practice of music in ancient times.

Dependency

It is unlikely that ancient music was an independent art created solely for the pleasure of casual listening. Rather, it seems to have been an adjunct to other activities, such as dancing and ritual.

Monophony

It is generally believed that the music of Antiquity, like that of many aboriginal cultures today, was monophonic. That is, it was comprised of a single melodic line without accompaniment or harmonic support.

Improvisation

Probably all ancient musical cultures encouraged the musician to improvise. Skill in performance was to some degree a function of the musician's ability to alter, vary, and ornament a melody. This helps explain why so little music was notated.

Powers of Music

Ancient man seems generally to have believed that music had mystic and magical powers capable of affecting his life, character, and well-being. References to this aspect of music are found in abundance in the literature of the ancients.

MUSIC OF ANCIENT CULTURES

Greek

The music of Antiquity about which we know most and that has most profoundly influenced European musical concepts, theories, and aesthetics is that of Greece. The word "music" itself comes from Greece, as do many other musical terms, such as tetra chord, lyric, rhythm, polyphony, and hymn. Present knowledge of Greek music is based on a wealth of extant literature and pictorial evidence, although little music is preserved in notation.

Characteristics

Greek music was largely monophonic. If the melody was sung or played by two performers, most likely the accompanying line sounded simultaneously as an elaborated version of the primary melody. This texture is called heterophony. Most music was improvised and heavily ornamented. The performer's ability to embellish a melody was a critical aspect of skill. Greek music was inseparable from poetry and drama and was important in mythology and in ceremonial rites.

Cults

Two cults dominated musical concepts: (1) the cult of Apollo, which used the kithara (a plucked string instrument), was characterized by clarity and simplicity of form and restraint of emotional expression; and (2) the cult of Dionysus, which used the aulos (a double-pipe reed instrument), was characterized by subjectivity and emotional expression. These two concepts have played varying roles in the subsequent development of Western music.

Doctrine of Ethos

Aristotle and Plato, among others, articulated a doctrine of ethos, in which music was stated to have a direct and profound influence on character. They believed music could imitate two general states of being (peacefulness; excitement and enthusiasm) and inculcate them in the listener. Factors that determined a particular musical ethos were its rhythm, mode, and the instrument employed.