The Power of Music in the Ancient World

By Carmela Mercuri

Music has power. The power to move us to the heroic as in battle, to comfort in grief, to communicate with children too young for words, and to reach out in almost every religion to that which is sacred in us. This power was once in our history recognized and explored. In the ancient worlds of China, India, Egypt, Sumer and Greece before the Common Era, it was called Music which governed the heavenly bodies, it was called Music which brought creation into being, it was called Music which healed, it was called Music which formed the character. Ancient Man lived in a Musical Garden of Eden.



History was chanted in myth and poetry. We can translate most ancient languages but much of the feeling and meaning of what the chants conveyed are hidden from us. The emotional impact of hearing Gilgamesh sung could help reveal the mythological mind set behind it. Possibly it takes a Jung in the field of psychology or Joseph Campbell talking about myth to begin to open our minds to the questions of meaning. Or could we simply, like the imaginative enthusiast Schliemann, read Homer as fact and actually discover Troy?

Music was related to government and society. One of the first duties of a new emperor in ancient China was to discover the sound which permeated the world. This pitch became the fundamental to which all other notes were tuned. Even the weights and measurements of his reign were adjusted to correspond to the appropriate musical sounds. On this depended the prosperity of his reign and the contentment of his people. Music was viewed as the regulating factor between heaven and earth.



Music was intrinsic to religious belief – in ancient India it was said to be of divine origin. *Before the creation of the world an all-pervading sound*

rang through space. For the ancient Chinese, the laws of music were part of the cosmic order and so affected the universe. And Plato states that "…In Egypt they have a tradition that their ancient chants which have been preserved for so many ages are the composition of the goddess Isis…" (*Laws).* Many of the gods and goddesses of antiquity played musical instruments. Hermes was credited with inventing the lyre, the instrument Apollo played.

Music relates to education "…Enough has been said to show that music has a power of forming the character, and should therefore be introduced into the education of the young…" from Aristotle, *Politics.*

Music relates to mathematics and the cosmic order of the universe. In China, India, Egypt, Sumer/Babylon and Greece, the exact tuning of musical intervals was of prime importance. The proportions for finding these intervals are well documented.

Pythagorean Comma

$$\left(\frac{3}{2}\right)^{12} \Big/ 2^7 = \frac{3^{12}}{2^{19}} = \frac{531441}{524288} = 1.01364326477050781 25$$

The mathematical correspondence of musical proportions to the cosmos has intrigued great thinkers throughout the centuries. Johannes Kepler in his *Harmonies of the World* presents melodies representing the Earth, Moon, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter Venus and Mercury. More recently Einstein, in this same tradition, claimed that his discoveries came through music.

We could go on and on with other aspects of ancient life directly related to music but this paper is too short and history too long to do so. How far we've come from those values that placed the department of music in the royal palace in China.

But there is a wakeup call to a different evaluation of music today. Amazing scientific research is demonstrating how sound actually affects different states of consciousness. Many organizations sponsor studies on music's effects on the brain. This research has certainly come to the aid of music educators in the past decade. We see Music Therapy as a profession of growing importance. People who suffer from many ailments including

dementia are being helped through music. Patients who have lost all memory can sing songs with lyrics intact. I am reminded of the place of the bard in antiquity, existing in parts of Asia and Africa to the present day. These incredible raconteurs memorized, with the aid of song and chant, stories and legends that fill our library shelves. Thanks to these story tellers we have the Vedas, the Mahabharata, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Iliad and the Odyssey. We have no names for these bards except one: Homer.

Stories from Iamblichus, Cicero, Plutarch, Quintilian and others relate how Pythagoras cured mind and body through music. Luckily for us, there are people willing to investigate how this could be possible. The late Dr. Alfred Tomatis helped open the way to healing with the power of sound. In his book *The Conscious Ear*, he tells of how he helped to cure the monks in a Benedictine monastery. The order had decided to revamp their entire daily routine to make it more in tune with the modern world. One of the things they discarded was daily chanting. Soon the monks became ill, some very seriously so. Dr. Tomatis was asked to come to the monastery to find out what was wrong. After studying the situation he reinstated the practice of chanting, and the monks regained their health.

One of the more wonderful phenomena popping up today is drumming circles. People from all walks of our high tech life are coming together to drum. There is an amusing side to this based on the common misconception about music in the timeframe of the history we are discussing – that ancients stood around in circles banging on drums, sticks and rocks to make music.



We've been speaking about new ideas and professions. But these views are very close to really ancient concepts. In some respects we are closer to ancient world views than we are to many ideas of a more recent past.

I believe that kids should be told that many of their ancestors were knowledgeable about the how and why's of music and that their discoveries are part of a rich musical past. It's important that children feel that they are the heirs to a great treasure of knowledge and that this treasure is waiting for them to discover it.

Historically music had a vital part to play in education. Education could take a giant leap forward if the first concern was a balanced curriculum rather than a balanced budget.

Whether music is the art of sounding mathematics, whose laws on a grand scale mirror the harmony of the cosmos; or in a microcosmic view, reflect and influence the laws of society and the individual, is up for investigation. However, that music has the power to touch us is real and that reality was known a long time ago.



Carmela Mercuri graduated from Boston University and did graduate work at the University of Durham, England. She has taught music in middle and secondary schools, published songs, choral works, musicals based on classic fairy tales and music theory books. Her latest book is World In Tune, Music of the Ancient World.
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