

Vocal Music Aspects in Ancient Greece

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Abstract: *Considered a mandatory characteristic of the human being, the voice is actually a special gift that helps us communicate throughout our lives. Conscious of this fact, the Greek antiquity gave singing supernatural powers, for religion and art constituted a unity. The ancient Greek tragedy and comedy required a culture of singing and speech, for the acoustic conditions of outdoor scenes required it, so it had to be developed, obviously by means of training. In order to increase the voice performance of the soloist, the voice pedagogy focused on tone, voice intensity, rhythmic flux and subtleties of voice modulation, but also on an appropriate presentation.*

Key-words: *vocal music; Ancient Greece; voice skills; phonasci*

1. Introduction

The essential element that determines the quality of voice soloist is the voice, the sound produced by the vibration of the voice cords and modified in the size and pitch by the resonant cavities. But the human voice still has a particularly precious quality, that of producing vowels and consonants, this gift, which is specific for human being, having a special significance in expressing ideas and feelings. Indeed, this property enriches the power of expression and conviction beyond limits, because the voice, as a means of expressing feelings and emotions, is linked to the performance, to the show, for many people the use of spoken voice or singing voice in public being a profession. Over time, certain requirements or rules have been imposed which have led to its transformation into the most sensitive musical instrument, the language used being a global one, understood by all mankind.

Ancient Greek culture has contributed essentially to the development of the European civilization, the capacity for abstract thinking considered to be the distinctive Greek contribution to the evolution of Western civilization. It is also of particular importance to the development of music, to which supernatural powers,² especially to the vocal one,³ were attached, with the distinct note that ancient Greeks aspire mainly toward harmonic unity and only then appreciating the individual mastering, the virtuoso talent. In the first millennium before Christ, the Greeks already had a rich musical culture,⁴ present in all the manifestations

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² Peter-Michael Fischer. 1998. *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung - Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmbildung*. Stuttgart: verlag J.B. Metzler, p. 18.

³ Singers are mediators between gods and men, they shape events; there is a real sense of the power of performance to move people (...) from the fifth century BCE onwards there are signs of public performances at festivals and competitions; in the theatre there were choruses, boys and men singing in octaves. Clarity and purity were valued, and singing was distinguished from speaking by precise pitching. Notated vocal music survives from the fifth or fourth centuries BCE; the tradition remained an oral one, however, notation seemingly only used for harmonic analysis, pedagogical purposes and as an aid to memory. John Potter, Neil Sorrell. 2012. *A History of Singing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 44.

⁴ Like many Babylonian epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey are literary representations of a world several centuries before writing began. They reveal a culture of song encompassing love songs, praise songs, wedding songs, harvest songs and laments of various sorts. Several famous performers are referred to by name; in the Odyssey the singer

of the community,⁵ its structure revealing a synthesis of elements of the music of Egyptian and Asiro-Babylonian civilizations.⁶

To Euterpes, one of nine muses, the Greek philosophers gave quite a great importance and so, thanks to the works of these beauty loving writers, we received precious information about voice music, because unfortunately almost all the documentary material about Greek music has disappeared. For example, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle (the IVth century BC) paid great attention to the benefactor power of music, considering it as having the force to educate and purify. The most important philosopher who dealt with music is Pythagoras (the Vth century BC), the one who determines the relations between the intervals - the pythagorean scale - as well as a complex musical theory, his studies serving as the basis for the musical theorists of the Middle Ages. Both he and his descendants considered music a form of connection between universal and human harmony, and that was why music education was considered essential.⁷ The disciples, after the training period, were to be able to sing, dance and accompany themselves to an instrument, usually lira and aulos.⁸

2. Methodology, objectives

A historic approach, ment to identify and systematize the basic elements and the evolution of voical music in Ancient Greece. Involving the students in examining historical sources and capitalizing on research, in a perspective of acquiring knowledge, but especially in future historical, stylistic and structural investigations.

3. The singing in Ancient Greece

Information on the practice of singing has existed since the time of the Mycenaean royal families, around 2000 BC, and Homer, in Ilyade, describes nobles and heroes who sing and dance, and in Odysee presents the obligation that the singer-poet, the nomad aedus, to be paid. Lyrical, sensitive songs prevailed with the Athenians, while war, encouraging and rhythmic songs were cultivated among the Spartans.

Demodocus is fêted by King Alcinous, who tells him: It was either the Muse, the child of Zeus, who taught you, or Apollo. You sing the sufferings of the Achaeans extraordinarily well, all that they did and suffered and laboured, almost as though you had been there yourself, or had heard it from a witness. But now you change your theme, and sing the making of the wooden horse... If you can narrate all that in the proper way, I shall not hesitate in saying to all men how generously the god has endowed you with divine song. John Potter, Neil Sorrell, *op.cit.* p. 43-44.

⁵ Η μουσική χαρακτήριζε κάθε έκφανση της ζωής στην αρχαία Ελλάδα. Interview with Professor Armand D'Angour, musician and classicist at Oxford University, news agency Αθηναϊκό-Μακεδονικό Πρακτορείο Ειδήσεων, published Monday, 12.11.2018, time 09:38:26. His research covers a wide range of spheres of ancient Greek culture and has led to publications and recordings that contribute to the knowledge of ancient Greek music. <https://www.amna.gr/ota/article/309261/Armant-Nt-Antzour-I-archaia-elliniki-mousiki-den-echei-chathei>.

⁶ C'est de l'Orient, de l'Asie surtout, que sont sorties, à diverses époques, les hordes qui peuplèrent successivement l'Asie Mineure, la Thrace, toute la Grèce et l'Europe. Or nous avons la preuve que les peuples ariens de l'Inde et de la Perse divisaient leur échelle musicale en petits intervalles moindres que le demi-ton: que ceux de la Perse, en particulier, divisaient l'octave grave de leur système en vingt-quatre quarts de ton, et l'octave supérieure en douze demi-tons. Les colons de l'Asie Mineure ont dû recevoir et transmettre les mêmes traditions. François-Joseph Fétis. 1872. *Histoire générale de la musique, depuis les temps les plus anciens jusqu'à nos jours*, vol III. Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot frères, p. 27-28.

⁷ *Music Education Source Readings from Ancient Greece to Today*, edited by Michael L. Mark. London: Routledge, 2013.

⁸ *ibidem*.

Until Euripides, when several instruments were introduced to accompany, Greek music was purely vocal, then it would be performed by a vocalist usually accompanied by harp or aulos, which supported the song. In time things have reversed and instruments are accompanied, either partially or alternately, by voice.

The main types of voice expression used at the beginning in the Ancient Greece, which had disparate development and flowering periods, were: the Phren, an anthem of pain, according to the funeral rituals, the Pean, a hymn of joy dedicated to Apollo, found in the vocal music from the celebrations of god Apollo (in spring) and the Dithyrambus, a hymn of glory to god Dionysos, practiced at the solemn celebrations and parties. The poems,⁹ among other things, of Sapho,s (the VI'th century BC), were sang in schools or contests, with melodies and rhythms based on poetic measures. The song was associated with all forms of literature and dance, the ode, the dithyrambus (form of artistic expression from which the tragedy developed) and the drama were performed by singers who moved at the pace of the music.

Their development, particularly of the dithyrambus, is the starting point for the Greek ancient theater, with its two genres, the tragedy and the comedy. If at first the voice was present in the group, called choir, in the early 500s BC. besides the choir, the solistic voice is introduced, the dialog between the two protagonists being carried out through the singing.



Fig. 1. A graphical representation of the interpretation of a scene from an ancient tragedy, with accompaniment of the aulos.¹⁰

In Ancient Greece, the interpreters of solistic vocal works were the poets or composers themselves, and they were accompanied by various instruments.¹¹

It is important to note that in Ancient Greece, men were the ones generally singing, whose voices were classified in three categories: netoid voices, high voices, used to execute the noms,

⁹ Ως κλασικιστής με ιδιαίτερο ενδιαφέρον στην αρχαία ελληνική λογοτεχνία, γνωρίζω ότι το μεγαλύτερο μέρος της ποίησης από τον Όμηρο ως τον Ευριπίδη τραγουδιόταν ή συμπεριλάμβανε μουσική συνοδεία. <https://www.amna.gr/ota/article/309261/Armant-Nt-Antzour-I-archaia-elliniki-mousiki-den-echei-chathei>

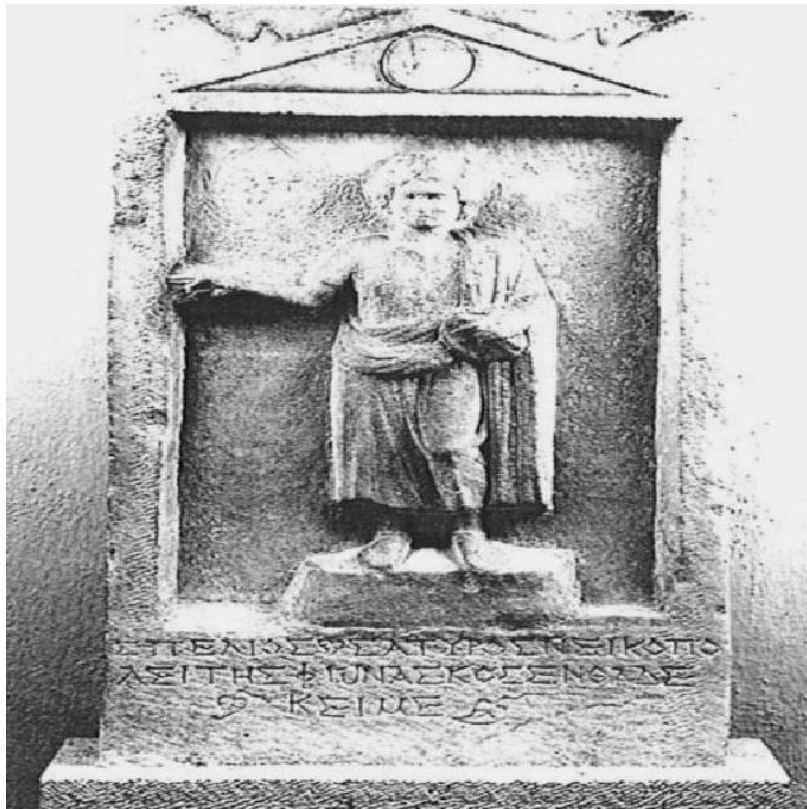
¹⁰ Ernst Haefliger. 2010. *Die Kunst des Gesangs: Geschichte · Technik · Repertoire*. Mainz: Schott music GmbH & Co, p. 17.

¹¹ More detailed aspects at Ioana Ștefănescu. 2018. *A history of universal music*, vol I. Bucharest: Grafotart, pp. 31-43.

and which implied a certain virtuosity on the part of the singer; mesoid voices, mediums, useful in the execution of choir songs and iratoid voices, serious, penetrating voices used in theater, especially in tragedies.¹²

The first known singer who was leading a school of singing at the foot of the Olympus is Tysias, living in the VIth century BC, but we know other singers.¹³ History retained the names of several singers (Stesichorus, Xenocite, Cleomenes) and female singers (Nosside from Locris), outstanding virtuosos and potential composers.

Because it was necessary to have a prior training, in Ancient Greece the existence of the singing master, φωνασκός, who taught those who were willing to become singers, tragediens and orators to declaim, sing and recite, that is, what we could call a vocal coach today.¹⁴



¹² La mélopée, dit-il, est la faculté de composer des chants. De ceux-ci, les uns sont hypatoïdes, d'autres mésoïdes, d'autres enfin, nétoïdes; ce qui signifie que les uns étaient renfermés dans les sons graves, d'autres dans la voix moyenne, et les derniers dans les sons aigus du cinquième tétracorde. S'il fallait prendre ces expressions dans le sens rigoureux, les chants de la première catégorie auraient été bornés aux sons contenus dans le tétracorde des hypâtes, les autres dans ceux de la mèse et des nètes, ce qui ne peut être vrai que des chants appartenant aux époques les plus anciennes, alors que la lyre n'avait que quatre cordes, et seulement à ceux des Doriens; car il n'en était point ainsi, même alors, des mélodies lydiennes et phrygiennes; toutefois il est plus vraisemblable que ces mêmes expressions s'appliquent aux chants destinés aux voix de basse, de ténor, et aux voix de femmes et d'enfants. François-Joseph Fétis, *op.cit.* p. 207.

¹³ The singer Phemius, pleading for his life at the feet of Odysseus, reminds him of the connection between singing and the divine: It will bring harm to you later, if you kill a singer, one who sings for gods and men. I am self-taught, and a god has breathed all kinds of melodies into my mind. I could sing beside you as though to a god. John Potter, Neil Sorrell, *op.cit.* p. 44.

¹⁴ Armin Krumbacher. 1921. *Die Stimmgebung der Redner im Altertum bis auf die Zeit Quintilians*. Paderborn: Rhetorische Studien X, p. 100; apud. Peter-Michael Fischer. 1998. *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung - Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmgebung*. Stuttgart: verlag J.B. Metzler, p. 19.

Fig. 2. *Spelios Satyros from Nicopolis. According to the description, the man was a trainer, φωνασκός.*¹⁵

As for possible methods of technical training, little is known, because even if they had been recorded, they have not been kept or have not yet been discovered. But based on the vocal skills we need: declamation, singing and the so-called parakatalog, an intermediate level between declamation and singing, we conclude that voice training focused on the subtleties of the vocal modulation, for it reached the unarticulated cries of pain, on an enhancement of the sound intensity, on the rhythmic flux of speech, and, last but not least, on the harmony of presentation.

Aristotle (384/383-322 BC.), the famous philosopher whom we mentioned was also preoccupied with music, considered that in *the melos* of the oratory presentation, special attention should be paid to the power, harmony and rhythm of the voice intervention. He was the first to ask for a theoretical presentation of the vocal art, its objective being to establish how the voice could be used to illustrate the effects necessary for the oratory and by extending, for the scenic game, i.e. the sound levels of intensity or height. It was also required to indicate the types of rhythms to be used.¹⁶

Teofrast (372-287 BC.), the successor of Aristotle, demanded that a speaker's presentation be made up in such a way that he himself be excited about the content of the speech and the listener be made aware of this emotional involvement. The means of voice had to be subordinated to this goal and to be in accordance with it. This meant that the voice had to be properly trained, capable of being extensively shaped at the melodic and dynamic level. The vocal masters (φωνασκοί) had, in the flow of breath and in vowels, the principle of the functioning of the human voice.

Dionis from Halalaras (the 1st century BC) appreciated sounds according to their esthetic effect, considering the long vowels, in which breathing could have full flow, as the boldest and most expressive ones. This truth remains for ever, and the development of the harmony of the voice to perfection, through vowels and vocalizations, is still the permanent ambition of the canto pedagogues. By means of the Italian Bel Canto, this aspiration has been maintained up until nowadays.

4. Conclusions

The historical and theoretical dimension of research should not be overlooked, as it is as important as the strictly practical one, and both influence each other. This legacy of the past, more or less distant, can make us, the vocal interpreters, not to mention the completion of our knowledge, to know who we are and where we are going.

Although from a practical perspective the way songs were executed in Ancient Greece still remains a mystery in many respects, as Greek music theorists abstained from clarifying definitions by practical examples or any reference to art practice (had they done it, they would have dispelled doubts about this ancient music), however, the information we have gives us the right to say that vocal music was of prime importance and that the artists who practiced it were admired and valued.

¹⁵ I. Στεφανής. 1988. *Διονυσιακοί Τεχνίται, Ηράκλειον: Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης.* (I. Stefanis. *Dionysiakoi Technitai.* Heraklion, Panepistimiakés Ekdóseis Kritis.

¹⁶ Peter-Michael Fischer. *op.cit.* p. 20: Aristotle writes in rhetoric, 1403 b (according to Krumbacher, idem, p.31): „the presentation is in your voice, how to use it for every affect, for example when you choose a strong, weak or medium voice, how to choose your tone, deep or medium, and what pace to use in each situation. Because there are three things we look at: strength, music harmony and rhythm.”

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Webography

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