

Vocal music in Ancient Rome

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Abstract: *This work aims to address the issue of voice, sung or spoken in Roman Antiquity, both from a musical perspective and from other related fields. This started from the premise that the History of vocal music, among other things, aims to highlight theoretical or practical aspects with perennial validity related to the art of singing, but especially to reveal the path of the instrument called voice and its development in successive historical eras. The paper reviews current knowledge of the art of singing in ancient Rome, with the emphasis on several aspects of vocal pedagogy, the theoretical notions being presented in close connection with their practical applicability, in connection with both improving the phonation mode and maintaining the health of the vocal apparatus, essential for performance voices, there are also presented some rules of vocal hygiene, which besides preventing vocal disorders contribute to increasing resistance and flexibility.*

Keywords: *voice; vocal music; ancient Rome; voice instruction;*

● Introduction

From the little that is known about vocal music in ancient Rome, it can be found that it originated from the Greek music, at first being mainly of a military nature, very quickly becoming plurivalent. In Roman Antiquity the art of vocal interpretation, which included song, text and movement, is found, as well as in the Greek one, in the religious experience, but especially as a form of cultivation of the spirit in general. Consequently, becoming a popular means of entertainment, which no longer had to necessarily convey ethical values, but above all to entertain the public, the theatre finds a suitable launching pad in Rome, where it grows more and more. We witness true Roman performances in *ludi* (religious festivities in honor of a god), *pompa triumphalis* (a religious and civic parade, on the occasion of the entrance of *vir triumphalis* into the city) or in *pompa funebris* (in honor of a high-ranking deceased person). In addition to tragedy and comedy, new forms of theatre, mime and pantomime appear in ancient Rome, which will gradually replace the public's preferences for Greek dramas adapted by the Romans.

● Voice, Song, Singer, Vocal pedagogy in Ancient Rome

Pentru For the Romans, as for the Greeks, the human voice was the first of the instruments, the professional singer being obliged to constantly concern himself with its development, through daily exercises, through a proper regime and discipline of life. Knowledge of physiological processes in phonation was quite unclear in Antiquity. If the Greeks' knowledge of the voice were scarce, the Romans accumulate enough knowledge to ensure some progress. Seneca (4 BC to 65 AD) observed that "Vox nihil aliud est quam ictus aeris", and Quintilian compared the process of sound formation in humans with that in a flute. The production of serious and high tones was explained by the prolongation and

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shortening of the airways, as well as by the widening and narrowing of the larynx, an explanation that dates back to the time of Aristotel.² Claudius Galenus (cca. 130 – 200 AD), famous physician of Antiquity, native from Greece, who lays the foundations of laryngology, describes for the first time the vocal cords, the opening of vocal folds calling it *glottis*. It will pass over a millennium until the writings of Galenus, which enjoyed great esteem, were continued and registered further progress in voice research.

In Roman culture, vocal music accompanied all public manifestations, virtuoso singers enjoying the praise of the audience obtain a recognition coveted by many, an eloquent example being the fascination demonstrated by Emperor Nero,³ who liked to present himself as a singer and who is said to have died with the words *quaris artifex pereo!* (Suetonium, *Vita Caesarum XII*).⁴

Unlike the Greek tradition, the Roman poets did not compose their own songs, leaving it to professional composers.

The education of the voice, the principal means of expression of the singer, is a complex process, characterized by progressive accumulation in the field of theoretical and practical foundation. The role of the teacher in the education of the voice is indisputable and was also known by Greco-Roman antiquity, here being registered the existence of the vocal master, φωνασκός, who taught those who were willing to become singers, tragedians and orators to declaim, sing and recite, that is what we could call a vocal coach today. Most interesting for our exigency is also that the discipline of *fonaskia* for singers was not thought to be part of the specific training, because the coach did not need a theoretical musical training, being especially concerned with the aspects of the maintenance of the vocal apparatus.⁵

Although there are researchers who identify a certain type of vocal training (οι φωνασκοντες) in Greek singers and actors as early as the IVth century BC, we can only speak about a real vocal training in the late Hellenistic and Roman era, in writings on rhetoric or medicine, where we find the term *phonascus*,⁶ which is in fact the person who practices this profession. Musicologist Annie Bélis describes it this way: „He was the one who, as a specialist, maintained, trained, developed and cared for the voice as an instrument whose performance had to be enhanced in a certain discipline. As Quintilian, who wrote in Rome in the first century, makes clear, the voice teacher will not indiscriminately give the same advice to all those he oversees: while some are common to the four vocal disciplines in question, others are specific. of the one to whom it refers - singer, actor or speaker. For the voice of a herald, actor or speaker, phonaskos will be applied primarily for the development of articulation, strength and endurance. As for the singer, exercises will be applied to develop the flexibility of his voice,

² Quintilianus, *Istitutio oratoria*, XI, 3, 20: „Praeterea ut sint fauces integrae, id est molles ac leves, quarum vitio et frangitur et obscuratur et exasperatur et scinditur vox. Nam ut tibiae eodem spiritu accepto alium clausis apertis foraminibus alium non satis purgatae alium quassae sonum reddunt: Ita fauces tumentes stragulant vocem, obtusae obscurant, vasae exasperant, convulsae fractis sunt organis similes.” Also, the neck should be healthy, that is, silky and smooth. If it is imperfect, the voice becomes broken, impure, harsh, irritating. For as the flute, which gives with the same breath a certain tone with the holes closed, another with the holes open, another when it is not cleaned properly, or another if it is cracked, so the voice is choked by congestion, or sounds muffled by numbness, or rough from the hoarseness of the neck; if it trembles, the voice becomes like a broken instrument. apud. Fischer, Peter-Michael. 1998. *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung - Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmbildung*. Stuttgart: Metzler Musik. p. 24.

³ „Besides this, kitharodic soloists (*citharoedi*) and histrionic singers of tragic songs (*tragoedi*) gained outstanding popularity among the masses, as the fascination of the emperor Nero (called *princeps citharoedus* by the poet Juvenal, *Satires* 8.198) for musical exhibitions clearly shows (Power 2010, 3ff.)” Power, Timothy. 2010. *The Culture of Kitharōidia*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. apud. Destrée, Pierre and Murray, Penelope. 2015. *A Companion to Ancient Aesthetics*, Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell. chapter 5: Rocconi, Eleonora. *Music and Dance in Greece and Rome*. p. 90.

⁴ Haefliger. Ernst. 2010. *Die Kunst des Gesangs: Geschichte-Technik-Repertoire*. Mainz: Schott Music GmbH & Co. p. 19.

⁵ Bélis, Annie. 1999. *Les musiciens dans l'Antiquité*. Paris: Hachette Littératures. p. 187.

⁶ More about this issue in Bélis, Annie. 1999. *Les musiciens dans l'Antiquité*. Paris: Hachette Littératures. p. 186-187.

the nuances from pianissimo to fortissimo, which would be totally inappropriate for the speaker.”⁷

The texts analyzed show that the concern for voice health was expressed by orators, singers, and people interested in their own health in general, with the mention that the vocal instructors of the rethors and those who treated their various diseases insisted that their techniques be clearly differentiated from those specific to the training of the singers, which both the orators and the doctors disdained. Interestingly, this very situation has helped to preserve some information about the training of singers, much of which comes from the writings of the rethors and doctors, in passages explaining how the practices they recommend differ from those of the vocal specialists. Generally speaking, speakers and doctors describe a singer’s vocal training as highly demanding, but not providing the skills needed to prepare for possible physical exertion or to protect from possible illnesses.

Like the Greeks, the Romans also made efforts in the field of vocal progress, among others, the most famous Latin orator, Marcus Tullius Cicero (106 - 43 BC), elaborating some rules of use. Noticing that each voice has a specific medium interval, he proposed a series of exercises that had to be carried out with this central tone as a starting point, and from here the voice would slowly rise to the culminating points of the speech. It was also important not to speak too quickly or too slowly.⁸ He vehemently opposed the way in which a lecture was held, in which the singing tone, theatrical presentation, or excessive vocal effort were used. Referring to the speakers, Cicero points out that there is nothing more important to a rethor than the voice, but its “gradual awakening” does not take place like that of singers, „who sit for many years practising delivery, and every day, before they begin to speak, gradually arouse their voices while lying in bed; and when they have done that they sit up and make their voices run down from the highest to the lowest level, in some way joining the highest and the lowest together. If we orators decided to do that, the people whose causes we have taken on will have been condemned before we have finished reciting a paean or a hymn as many times as is prescribed. (*De oratore* 1, 251)”.⁹

The best known of all the ancient references to vocal training is that of Suetonius *De vita Caesarum*, the chapter concerning Emperor Nero, for he, wishing to become a singer, „neglected some of the things which devotees of this kind of discipline did over and over again either to preserve the voice or to strengthen it; these included lying on his back supporting a sheet of lead on his chest, purging himself with enemas and vomiting, and abstaining from harmful fruits and drinks”.¹⁰

Another speaker, already mentioned, who relied on Cicero's rhetorical theories, Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, in the *Instituto oratoria*, also recommended naturalness in the

⁷ „C’était lui qui, en spécialiste, entretenait, entraînait, développait et soignait la voix en tant qu’instrument dont il fallait accroître les performances dans une discipline donnée. Comme l’indique bien Quintilien, qui écrit à Rome au I-er siècle, le professeur de voix ne prodiguera pas indistinctement les memes conseils à tous ceux qu’il supervise: si certains sont communs aux quatre disciplines vocales concernées, d’autres sont au contraire spécifiques, selon qu’elles concernent un chanteur, un acteur, un orateur. Pour la voix d’un héraut, d’un acteur ou d’un orateur, le phonaskos s’appliquera à développer principalement l’articulation, la puissance et l’endurance; au chanteur, il fera pratiquer des exercices qui développeront la souplesse de la voix, les nuances du pianissimo au fortissimo, qui seraient totalement inappropriées à l’orateur.” Bélis, Annie. 1999. *Les musiciens dans l’Antiquité*. Paris: Hachette Littératures. p. 187.

⁸ Krumbacher, Armin. 1920. *Die Stimmbildung der Redner im Altertum bis auf die Zeit Quintilians*. Paderborn: F. Schöningh. p. 44-46. apud. Fischer, Peter-Michael. 1998. *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung - Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmbildung*. Stuttgart: Metzler Musik. p. 21.

⁹ apud. Rocconi, Eleonora. 2008. *La musica nell’impero romano: testimonianze teoriche e scoperte archeologiche*. atti del secondo Convegno annuale di Moisa: Cremona, Aula magna, Facoltà di musicologia, Università degli studi di Pavia, 30-31 ottobre 2008. Pavia: Pavia University Press. Barker, Andrew. *Phōnaskia for singers and orators. The care and training of the voice in the Roman empire*. p. 16.

¹⁰ apud. op.cit. p. 13.

discourse and was against the adorned and artificial way. He argued that, as far as the voice is concerned, the greatest contribution is given by nature, without this prerequisite no study will be able to make progress. He is the first to distinguish the voice according to quantity (intensity and ambitus) and quality (timbre and flexibility) and he mentioned a set of requirements for voice training: forming a voice in such a way that it's easy, big, happy, flexible, firm, beautiful, strong, clear, pure, which cuts the air and penetrates the ears.¹¹ In his opinion, above all, to maintain the voice contribute to the strengthening of the body, this being achieved through walks, medicines, abstinence in love, in a word, temperance. There are other passages that describe the diet specially designed for singers. Quintilian, though not detailed, says lyrical artists and orators need different diets. He also notes that the former have a much more comfortable life than the rhetorical, for the latter have a much more severe program, exemplifying in the fact that the orators, who need above all a strong and resilient voice, they need to be prepared to use it throughout the day, while singers, who need a flexible and refined voice, playing only at certain times, have the possibility of a much more flexible schedule. Quintilian also states that sexual abstinence is essential for both singers and speakers to maintain their physical health.¹²

Some ancient texts mention that lyrical artists always performed warm-up exercises before singing, and that, like today's singers, they vocalized on successive sounds, ascending and descending, from the deepest to the most acute, seeking that every sound be made as correctly as possible.

Although doctors did not consider the singers' training to be useful to body health in general, they included some exercises in therapy that seem to correspond quite closely to those performed by the singers: „A person who is about to ἀναφωνεῖν should relax the hollow channels and rub them lightly, especially the lower parts, and sponge or wash his face gently while making quiet preliminary murmurings, extending them moderately; and it is better if he also begins by walking about. Then he can proceed to ἀναφώνησις. If he has some education, let him utter (ἃ ἀναφωνεῖτω) things he can remember, both those that he thinks elegant and those that involve many transitions between smoothness and roughness. If he has no knowledge of epic, let him perform iambics; let elegiacs have the third place and lyric poetry the fourth. It is better for the person uttering (τὸν ἀναφωνοῦντα) to recite from memory than to read. He should begin to utter (ἀναφωνεῖν) from the lowest notes, relaxing the voice as much as possible, and then proceed up to the highest; and then, without spending long at high pitch he should turn back down again, lowering the voice gradually, until we reach the lowest pitch, from which we began. The measure must be taken from the individual's capacity and his degree of enthusiasm and experience. (Orbasius, *Collectiones medicae* 6, 9, 1-6).”¹³

What is missing from the accounts of ancient Roman writers is the detailed exercises for singers, and this is because the musicians in the vast majority were concerned almost exclusively with the harmonic theory and not with vocal practice, and the others, naturally, having entirely different concerns, they only say what is necessary to distinguish it from theirs. For the Roman singer, the formation of the voice played an important role from the beginning, but if the Greeks aspired in vocal art to harmonic unity, the Romans preferred individual

¹¹ Quintilianus, *Institutio oratoria*, XI, 3, 40. apud. Fischer, Peter-Michael. 1998. *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung - Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmbildung*. Stuttgart: Metzler Musik. p. 21.

¹² Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, XI, 3, 20. More about this issue in Béliis, Annie. 1999. *Les musiciens dans l'Antiquité*. Paris: Hachette Littératures. p. 189-190.

¹³ apud. Rocconi, Eleonora. 2008. *La musica nell'impero romano: testimonianze teoriche e scoperte archeologiche*. atti del secondo Convegno annuale di Moisa: Cremona, Aula magna, Facoltà di musicologia, Università degli studi di Pavia, 30-31 ottobre 2008. Pavia: Pavia University Press. Barker, Andrew. *Phōnaskia for singers and orators. The care and training of the voice in the Roman empire*. p. 17.

mastery, the talent of the virtuoso. The soloist's rise can also be motivated by the fact that in the Roman tragedies the singing parts were performed by a singer, the so-called *cantor*. The actor took over the spoken scenes, and when the singer sang, he mimically played the text of the songs interpreted by him.¹⁴ The appearance of specialists such as the cantor in the Roman tragedy or the mime in the dramatic folk poetry justified the appearance of the soloist as a distinct entity. This trend marks the starting point in becoming today's highly regarded virtuoso singer. With the decline of Greco-Roman Antiquity, although the vocal art of these civilizations is replaced by the Christian one, at the end of the XVIth century and especially at the beginning of the XVIIth century, by the appearance of the opera, we are witnessing a real regeneration of quite a number of conceptions and norms of this period.

● Conclusions

As I have said before, the historical dimension of vocal art research should not be neglected, as it is as important as the practical one. In Rome, as in ancient Greece, singers have been a constant presence in public life, participating in religious ceremonies or various social-political events, their position in society being quite high, some of them being treated like stars, richly paid and highly admired.¹⁵ Following the work of authors who have devoted much of their lives to the research of ancient Greek and Latin texts, it is obvious that in the ancient Roman world the efforts of a professional singer or one who aspired to this status required earnest and lasting work, clearly distinguished from other activities, even musical ones, that he practiced physical exercises, used medical prescriptions, and even all sorts of objects, such as Emperor Nero's lead sheet, for the strengthening and control of the respiratory apparatus, that his vocal exercises were far more elaborate and specialized than those recommended to speakers, and that he treated his voice with such care that he was met with disdain from those who used the spoken voice. It should be noted, although no detailed testimonies have been found so far, that the training program to which the singer was subjected at that time was at least as demanding and technically specific as that supported by the modern lyrical artist.

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¹⁴ Biehle, Herbert. 1931. *Die Stimmkunst*. Leipzig: Fr. Kistner & C.F.W. Siegel. p. 12. apud. Peter-Michael. 1998. *Die Stimme des Sängers: Analyse ihrer Funktion und Leistung - Geschichte und Methodik der Stimmbildung*. Stuttgart: Metzler Musik. p. 23.

¹⁵ Haefliger, Ernst. 2010. *Die Kunst des Gesangs: Geschichte-Technik-Repertoire*, Mainz: Schott Music GmbH & Co. p. 19.