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CLASSICAL CHOIRS, GREEK AND ROMAN. IN SEARCH OF THE LOST PAGAN VOCAL POLYPHONY.

Abstract

Singing seems to have been an activity inherent to the nature and traditions of Greek culture, since it permeated a good part of the acts of their social and public life. In the Greek society, *choral training* was a first order activity along with athletics and militar education, and a system of musical education was implemented in Athens at the beginning of the 5th-century BC. Around 1,200 cities have been located from the Classical World (a similar amount is still unlocated), and theatres have been found in more than 850 of these locations. The paper summarize this body of evidence related the very probable *polyphonic vocal practices* of Greeks and Romans at these buildings during centuries. The choirs, professional in many cases and *amateur* led by citizens in others, were, along with the singers' arias, the invariable nucleus of the dramatic-musical shows, both tragedies and comedies, and constituted the heart of the religious and cultural traditions of the Hellenic world and, by extension, also of the Roman.

1. Echoes of Greece: the pending question

The problem of the eventual existence of polyphonic musical practices in the Classical World continues to be one of the most critical and relevant for the history of music, given that our current (Western) culture inherits not only the aesthetic canons of the Ancients (Greek and Roman), but also the foundations of their law, philosophy, and even science.

The ambiguous position of conventional musicology, alluding to the lack of direct musical sources, such as notes or precise written indications that point to this practice, does not provide any direct answer to this pending question[1]. Even though it is true that no direct allusion to this issue appears in the preserved sources, the belief that the musical practices of Greeks and Romans were monophonic arises from the statements of Girolamo Mei in the correspondence he maintained with Vincenzo Galilei, the ideologist of the Camerata de' Bardi[2].

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[1] LAFARGA (2017).

[2] We don't have evidences of any interest on the part of the medieval political or religious authorities regarding this issue, apart from the fact that their own (liturgical) music, the only one we have news of for almost a millennium after the fall of Rome, was monophonic by prescription of the Christian authorities since the first imperial times: LAFARGA & SANZ (2022).

In his opinion, the fact that no one had found any reference to something equivalent to our current vocal registers in literary sources would confirm his presumption that the legendary power attributed to the lost music of the Ancients came from the fact that the members of the tragic choirs sang the same words, at the same rhythm, and with identical intonation, that is, in unison[3].

The success of these spectacles, even during the last centuries of the Empire, is amply accredited as are also the constant and noisy invectives of the Christian bishops, to the point that some emperors went so far as to legislate prohibiting them (and even their own sons) get closer than 500 meters of a theatre (Julian the Apostate, *Letter to a Priest*).

A notable example of its late popularity are the bitter claims of Saint Augustine himself in Carthage at the beginning of the 5th century, when his faithful abandoned his sermons to attend performances at the theatre that was 400 meters from his basilica[4]. Salvianus Massiliensis alludes, also in the 5th century to the same circumstance, describing attendance at these shows as a crime and specifying that even when they coincided with an ecclesiastical celebration, they always gathered the majority of the audience for themselves.

Joseph Jordania and others have documented the survival of a classical Greek tradition in many Balkan territories and former provinces of the Empire, including Georgia in its easternmost region: the "table singing," in which guests sing after meals, taking turns and using polyphonic forms[5].

Epirus, the homeland of Pyrrhus and his egregious relative Alexander the Great, was one of the most devoted territories to singing and musical shows. Here, and in many other places in Greece, refusing to sing after a banquet could lead to problems and diplomatic conflicts. Christianity did not spread in Epirus until after the second half of the 4th century, after the death of the last pagan emperor (Julian), as can be seen from the close relations that he maintained with relevant personalities of Epirus involved in the vast cultural circuits of the Empire.

As early as the 4th century BC, professional services for theatrical festivals were offered by traveling companies of artists (*technitai*) throughout Greece, both for cities, temples or private patrons, and during the Ptolemaic Egypt, also for Italy and Sicily, especially Syracuse and Taormina which had a long tradition of tragic and comic performances.

One of the most important synods, from the 3rd century BC. was that of the "Artists of Dionysus", active from Athens, dominated the Greek-language theatre market for

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[3] The truth is that the supporters of the so-called *Second Practice* were looking for arguments to contrast with the dominant polyphonic practice of their time, based on a "vertical" progression based almost exclusively on harmony. Mei's statement clearly advocated a melodic (monodic) line that reinforced his attempts to establish melody as the primary "agent" in the composition.

[4] DESCHNER (1993, p. 39).

[5] See JORDANIA (2015).

the next 500 years – another was the one that served the surroundings of Corinth (Isthmia-Nemea) and a third that of Ionia-Helesponto for the Asia Minor area. They received massive financing from rulers throughout the Mediterranean and continental circuit, who in return sometimes associated their names with new festivals or other pre-existing ones[6].

According to the comments of Pindar, the greatest lyric poet, choral competitions were for professionals[7]. The creation of the choral odes is attributed to Ibichus of Rhegio, a renowned specialist in their composition[8]. And during the 5th century BC. there are already celebrated choral schools with Melanípides of Melos, Timotheus, and Philoxenus of Cythera.

Thaletas of Crete and Archilochus composed choral lyrics in Magna Graecia. Here we have news of choral schools in Sicily led by Stesichorus of Himera, whose name precisely means "choir instructor"[9], and of Ibycus of Reggio and Anacreon of Teos in Samos[10]. The names of more than 200 famous tragediographers and comediographers have come down to us up to the 2nd century BC.

We find traces of techniques present today in the traditional polyphony of various European populations in a choir of Trojan women singing hymns to Dionysus in Euripides' tragedy Bacchae, imbued with ecstasy, they emit screams, vibratos, Tyrolean voices, sobs, alternate breathing and inarticulate calls[11].

2. A mute and naked remnant of a glorious musical past

Around 1,200 cities from the classical world have been located, and we have evidence of a similar number of other lost cities thanks to preserved sources. To date, theatres have been found in more than 850 of these places [12]. Another building for musical purposes, with a similar design and smaller than the open theatres, was the Odeon, in whose construction the Ancients also took great care. These were literally concert halls in the modern sense of the word, and, unlike theatres, were roofed and sumptuously ornamented, with statues and adorned with expensive stones, their acoustics were completely different from that of conventional theatres, since it was designed to reinforce the perception of speech [13].

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6 REHM (2009, p. 191). For a review of the organization and celebration of many of these festivals, see SLATER (2007) and ANEZIRI (2007). The synod (guild) of Isthmia Nemea appears for the first time in a Delphic decree of 279, and the Artists of Dionysus in a later one of 279-278; quoted by VINAGRE (2001, p. 88).

7 Quoted by NAGY (1980, Chapter 12).

8 COMOTTI (1986, pp. 20-21).

9 *Id.*, p. 20. According to WEST (1994, p. 339), Stesichorus used productions by a previous author — Xanthus (of unknown origin) — to compose pieces in which two long melodies of more than 100 notes each alternated in succession for more than an hour, so that they could contain more than 50 triads.

10 *Id.*, p. 21.

11 TSOBANOPOULOU (2009).

12 Source: <www.theatrum.de> Last access: 1-12-2017.

13 VASSILANTONOPOULOS & MOURJOPOULOS (2009)

Vitruvius says that Apaturius of Alabanda was commissioned to paint the scene of an Odeon in Tralleis, near his hometown, which he did in a naturalistic style and without including the usual myths, with such realism that he was ordered to erase it and paint it in new. From the 1st century AD, the scenes became even richer in decoration, some being covered with silver, gold, or ivory[14]. Despite being designed to accommodate a smaller number of spectators and being less frequent than theaters, Odeons were a fundamental part of the cultural complex that endowed the main cities of the Greek world, such as Argos and Athens.

Athens, the cultural capital of the entire Classical World beyond its fall had the best-known example today, due in part to its degree of conservation, superior to that of many other buildings of identical function. The Odeon of Herod Atticus, built at the foot of the Acropolis at the early 2nd century AD, was larger than many current opera houses, with a capacity of 8,000 spectators. Domitian financed the first Odeon in Rome, Trajan the second, and Hadrian is believed to have financed a third.

The oldest known Odeon is that of Skias (Sparta), built by Theodore of Samos in 600 BC and Strabo, six centuries later, continued to call them *cantorum receptaculum*. Athens had at least three of these buildings: Odeon of Pericles (5th century BC), Odeon of Agrippa (1st century BC) and Odeon of Herodes Atticus (the largest, 2nd century AD). All three Odeons were destroyed with the invasion of the Heruli (Germanic tribe) in 267 AD[15].

Odeons have been found in southern Greece: Corinth, Argos, Dyon, Epidauros, Gortyna (Crete), Kos, Rhodes, Samos, and Thessaloniki. Around the Ionian coast in Anatolia: in Tralleis, Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Paphos (Cyprus), Knidos, Teos, and Troy IX. In Roman Syria: Philadelphia (Amman), Petra, Hippos, and Gerasa. In Cyrenaica: Apollonia, Cyrene, Ptolemais, and Belagrae (Al Bayda). In Roman Africa: Alexandria, Carthage, Madauros, and Cuicul (Djemila). In Sicily (Magna Graecia): Catania, Iaitas, Syracuse, and Taormina. In Epirus (Albania): Buthrotum, Ambracia, Nikopolis (Actium), Oricum, and Epidamnos. And in Pula, the capital of Istria.

Those mentioned here are located in the southern half of the Mediterranean including the southern eastern provinces, North Africa, and Hispania. To these we should add those erected in the continental areas of the Empire – including the Italian peninsula and the Balkans as well as Gaul, Britain, and Germany – as well as Anatolia (Asia Minor).

The first odeon in Athens was built around 435 BC, in the time of Pericles, for the Panathenaic musical competitions, choir rehearsals, and as a precaution in case of bad weather for theatre spectators. It had an area of 4,000 m^2, and was roofed with rich wood and covered with beautiful stones and expensive marbles, and dedicated to singing

[14] SEAR (2006, p. 55).
[15] SEAR (2006, p. 390).

shows[16]. It is probably this building that Aristotle later refers to in Athens. Vitruvius (*De architectura*, 5, 9, 1) and Plutarch (*Pericles*, 4, 1-2) also allude to it.

It was described as the most beautiful in all of Greece by Pausanias (*The Family Minstrel,* 1836, p. 116), who tells us that it had been destroyed by the same Aristion who defended the city against Sulla in 87-86 BC to prevent him from using its materials to attack the citadel. It was later rebuilt, without sparing any expense, between 63 and 51 BC by Ariobarzanes II of Cappadocia and the architects Marcus Stallius and Menalippus with a conical roof. Currently, only the foundations of this odeon remain, attached directly to the Theatre of Dionysus, where for almost a millennium the most prestigious international tragedies and comedies competitions in the Classical World were held uninterruptedly. We have also received news that the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus of Solos died just after attending a concert in this Odeon with his students. And Athenaeus also mentions it in a fragment of dialogue from a lost work by Socion of Alexandria (*Deipnosophistae*, VIII, 336b).

The Odeon of Agrippa was a gift from Augustus's son-in-law to the city of Athens between 20 and 10 BC. Rectangular in plan, it had a capacity for 1,000 spectators, although in the middle of the 2nd century AD, a collapse of the roof forced it to be renovated, reducing its capacity by half. Its scene was decorated with coloured marble statues of the god Hermes, the orchestra paved with identical materials, and it had a monumental entrance to the south with two rows of Corinthian columns and statues of the Egyptian kings (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1, 8, 6). The columns of the north façade were adorned with attached statues of giants and tritons, as well as torsos inspired by the statues of the Parthenon. In the 5th century, a complex with rooms, courtyards, peristyles and baths was built on it, it is not known whether it was intended for a school, gymnasium, or the palace of the Byzantine governor.

The third, the largest of the three — 8,000 spectators — and the only one preserved today, was financed by the Athenian citizen Herodes Atticus in memory of his wife. He was a sophist and rhetorician, Marcus Aurelius' teacher at the request of Antoninus Pius, and a leading figure of the Second Sophistry. He was the son of Tiberius Claudius Atticus Herod and grandson of the richest banker in Athens. The building was built in 160 AD, with sumptuous ceilings built with cedar beams, decorated with luxurious statues and paintings, similar in size to some large romantic concert halls. In Athens, an odeon is cited in the ancient times of the tyrant Pisistratus, which could have been restored by Lycurgus in 330 BC, perhaps the one cited by Aristophanes for judicial matters, distribution of grain, or for the recruitment of soldiers.

16 COMOTTI (1986, p. 28).

3. Conclusions: meaningless answers to a non-existent problem

Already in the Christian Era, Gregory the Great (540-604) kept calling the place reserved for singers in the church as "odeon". The presence of polyphonic devices (instruments) for centuries in all corners of the Classical World [17] is undoubtedly an important indicator and irrefutable proof of polyphony in the traditions and civic and institutional acts of these peoples (including all ethnic groups integrated within the Empire), since it is virtually impossible for these multi-voice practices to exist in the instrumental sphere but not in the vocal one.

But it is equally undoubtable that the presence of thousands of buildings in thousands of cities, with regular civic and religious festivals for almost a millennium, and with the invariable participation of choirs made up of *both professional and amateur* citizens, is an argument of even greater significance.

The academic views that are based on the absence of sufficient sources to ignore this pending problem (*argumentum ex silentio*) are clearly insufficient today, given that hundreds of literary and iconographic sources are documented, to which we must add the intense and repeated activity choir of the Ancients and the permanence of thousands of theatres, one of its most characteristic buildings.

Furthermore, the nonexistence of a polyphonic writing system until the year 1000 does not imply the absence of polyphony, in the same way that the absence of a system of graphic symbols for speech does not imply silence or the absence of grammatical rules in any language considered — in our case any type of harmony considered (tonal, modal, or dissonant). In fact, the most ancient musical writing could have been attested to polyphonic practices[18].

Contemplating the appearance of polyphony as a late cultural product after the medieval Christian world, and denying the cognitive and aesthetic capacity for polyphony to these peoples, is an error of perspective that leads to an incoherent paradigm: that of assuming choral music of the Ancients simpler (monodic) for the sole reason that they lived before the monks who outlawed it.

A derivative opinion claiming a presumed continuity between lost ancient modes and ecclesiastical modes has long since been refuted [19]. The third possibility against our arguments in favour of classical polyphony is even more incoherent, since it supposes some type of "neural" or evolutionary (cognitive) milestone that appeared late in the middle of the medieval Christian West, which would not have occurred in other countries even much more refined in their tastes and technology, such as the Ancients.

We believe that, taking into account the facts documented by history, archaeolo-

[17] LAFARGA (2017; 2018); LAFARGA & SANZ (2018; 2020; 2022). SANZ (2018).

[18] See SACHS (1937) about Babylonian music, KILMER (1974) about Ugarit, and HIKMAN (1952) about Egyptian musical practices. All quoted by Jordania (2015).

[19] GROUT & PALISCA (2001, p. 21).

gy, and musicology about the choral activity of the Ancients, the problem related to the supposedly monophonic nature of their music should be discarded as an incoherent and meaningless paradigm is revealed, which generates many more problems and paradoxes than sensible and "realistic" questions. And it should consequently be considered a non-existent problem in light of current data.

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