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Ancient Music in the Modern Classroom¹

The French musicologist Jacques Chailley devoted his professional career to the revival of medieval music and ancient theater and to the study of Greek music. Of his numerous publications, a book he originally penned in French in 1961 stands out for its powerful and sweeping title: *40,000 Years of Music*. Yet, as is famously known, the book devotes only several paragraphs to the first 39,000 years of music, dedicating some 200 pages to music of the last millennium (Chailley 1975; Taruskin 2006: xxi).² Chailley was neither the first nor the last musicologist to treat ancient music as part of a general music-history survey. Especially prominent in the 1950s and 1960s, the call to broaden the horizons of music history to include non-Western and ancient musics was met with eagerness by those who believed that until Western music was seen in the setting of universal history, its special position would not be understood properly (Wiora 1965: 9). To be fair, however, Chailley had good reasons to be as concise as he and others had been in treating ancient music. When Gustave Reese published his *Music in the Middle Ages* in 1940, the oldest example of musical notation available to scholars dated from 800 BCE; it employed cuneiform characters and was judged to be “definitely undecipherable” (Reese 1940: 6).

It was not until the mid 1970s that the curtain rose on yet another, earlier beginning of music history, when the notation of a cuneiform tablet dating from around 1400 BCE and excavated in Ugarit/Ras Shamra (an ancient Mediterranean city in northern Syria) was analyzed, deciphered and transcribed by Professors Kilmer, Crocker and Brown from the University of California at Berkeley. Their reconstruction of a Hurrian hymn to the goddess Nikkal has turned an archaeological artifact into the earliest extant musical example that has been deciphered to date. If we accept that the tune is correctly transcribed and the words properly transliterated, then this discovery serves as an important precedent to what we consider to be quintessentially Western practices. The salient features of this reconstructed tune are striking: it has been suggested, for instance, that the hymn from Ugarit was performed by solo voice accompanied homorhythmically by a lyre or harp (Kilmer et al. 1976). If true, this evidence effectively extends the notated history of polyphonic music by some two millennia. What is more, the music that sets this hymn reportedly uses a diatonic pitch set, from which derive

¹ I am most grateful to my colleagues Edwin Seroussi and Ruth HaCohen for their careful reading of this paper, and for the suggestions they have made to improve it.

² Chailley’s book was originally published in French in 1961 as *40,000 ans de musique: l’homme à la découverte de sa musique* (Paris, Librairie Plon).

our major and minor scales, and, with its two-part harmony and predominance of thirds and sixths, it could serve as an important antecedent to polyphonic music, which would emerge in western Europe only some 2700 years later (I shall return to this reconstruction and its implications further below).

There exists substantial information concerning the musical practices, instruments and tuning systems of the ancient world, including even some transcriptions of the music itself.³ Yet, the judgment made by Curt Sachs, back in 1943, that the music of the ancient world has faded away, remains as prevalent today as it was over half a century ago (Sachs 1943). Paradoxically, nowhere is this view more current and persistent as it is within the field of musicology; the courses offered in most music and musicology departments around the world; the way in which undergraduate and graduate students are trained and professional societies developed; and the subject matters of most articles, published in professional, peer-reviewed journals — all testify that ancient music, and more specifically, music predating classical Greece, is somewhat of a stepchild to musicology — perhaps altogether an orphan.

In what follows, I offer several insights into this state of affairs, namely, why musicology has, on the whole, turned its back on ancient music. I suggest that methodological, historical, historiographical and institutional biases have developed into significant impediments to the inclusion of music of the ancient Near East and Mediterranean into musicology curricula far and wide.

The Department of Musicology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where I teach, offers a five-semester sequence of music history, covering the time span from “the beginning” to present days. Students taking the first two semesters (devoted to music up to circa 1750 CE) are typically first-year undergraduates; in addition to my in-class lectures, the chief vehicle by which they study music history remains the textbook. An examination of textbooks published in the past half century or so reveals that despite the variety of approaches and methodologies, and notwithstanding the proliferation of competing and parallel narratives in other fields of musicological inquiry, textbooks are still surprisingly in general agreement on at least one aspect of music history — its undisputed origins in ancient Greece. A very small number of textbooks do mention Egyptian, Meso-

³ In addition to sources cited in this article and to the references found therein, see also the recently published *Mousikè et Aretè: la musique et l'éthique de l'antiquité à l'âge moderne* (Malhomme and Wersinger 2007). Moreover, in 2008 alone two conferences were devoted to various aspects of music in the ancient World: (1) *Sounds from the Past: Music in the Ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean Worlds*, held at the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem, 7–8 January 2008, and (2) *Music in Sumer and After: International Conference of Near Eastern Archaeomusicology*, held at the British Museum, 4–6 December 2008.

potamian and Anatolian music by way of introduction, paying homage to a venerable and distant tradition. Having satisfied the desire to acknowledge some universal origins and commonalities, they quickly move on to a very particular narrative of origins, one that delineates a westerly trajectory, from Greece to the West. The most recent edition of Norton's well known and widely used textbook, *A History of Western Music* (known by students far and wide simply as "Grout") is the second of eight editions to acknowledge music that predates ancient Greece.⁴ The discussion of music in prehistory and in Mesopotamia (including references to tuning systems and to types of instruments), for instance, is very informative and relatively short; six pages later, the familiar narrative of music history, one which spans East to West, subsequently unfolds.

From a musicological and pedagogical perspective, there are good reasons to accord Greek musical theory and philosophy such a prominent position in university curricula: after all, medieval and Renaissance philosophies and theories concerning music are heavily indebted to the Greek legacy. To give just a single well-known example, the early music dramas — or operas — were born out of the same desire to revive and emulate ancient Greek ideals that characterized humanism in general, and in the case of opera, Greek tragedy in particular. Yet from a purely musical perspective, there is little reason why the music (as opposed to musical theory) of ancient Greece should fare better in the classroom than the music of Mesopotamia. After all, many of the fifty-odd pieces that have come down to us from ancient Greece are fragmentary, and our understanding of the ways they sounded and should be performed today is at best limited. There can be little doubt that the relative weight we accord to music in ancient Greece reflects only a particular set of cultural values, historical partiality and an idiosyncratic way of understanding the forces of continuity and change that figure prominently in historical musicology.

As a relatively young discipline, musicology has tended to adopt views and images received from other disciplines, and the tenacious hold that ancient Greece has over Western musical imagination is one of them. Beginning with Petrarch, Humanists built an arch of historical imagination leading from their time back to antiquity, leaving centuries of history hanging in a limbo they called "middle time." Musicology has borrowed from the discipline of history the categories of antiquity, Middle Ages and Renaissance, and the structure of both disciplines is based on the historiographic pillars placed in the sand foundations of Eurocentrism (see Page 1993: introduction). Just as history in the West is usually narrated beginning with the bloody tale of the Torjan War, because it is reported

⁴ See Burkholder et al. 2009; the 7th edition, published in 2006, was the first to recognize music from before ancient Greece.

in Homer's epic *Iliad* (the oldest extant text that has come down to us from ancient Greece), so does the history of music start with the earliest extant musical texts from Greece — not from Akkad or from Sumer. One reason why musicology seems slow or reluctant to dispose of its supposed Greek foundations in favor of even earlier examples has therefore to do with historiographical biases imported from other disciplines and eras. Already in his 1768 *Dictionnaire de musique*, for instance, Jean-Jacques Rousseau acknowledged the key role that ancient Greece played in European music; for him and for other intellectuals of the Enlightenment and romantic eras, Greece became an indispensable tool for the building of a European identity (Rousseau [1768] 1969: 310–314; Bernal 1987; both sources are quoted in Treitler 1993: 31). The centrality given to ancient Greece in the grand narrative of European music history is also attested in the oeuvre of two important historians of music writing in the course of the following two decades, namely Charles Burney (1776–1789) and Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1788). Following their respective introductions (devoted mainly to music theory in Burney, and to periodization and chronology in Forkel), the proper historical portion of their *Histories* opens with Egyptian and Hebrew music, before moving to Greek music — by far the lengthiest chapter devoted to ancient music in both books (Burney [1776–1789] 1958; Forkel [1788] 1967). Nevertheless, the reason why this grip is particularly difficult to dismantle in relation to music has to do with the antiquity of this entrenched connection, which started even before the advent of Humanism.

Almost every culture has its own creation myth: The Babylonian creation epos, *Enûma Eliš*, recounts the story of Marduk, ruler of the gods, whose war against other gods reportedly brought to the creation of the world and of mankind. According to Nordic mythology, on the other hand, the world was created by an iceberg-dwelling giant named Ymir. The discovery of music is frequently ascribed to a god or a semi-god who subsequently passes it on to mankind. The Hebrew Bible may well be a unique voice in that regard, for it posits a human, rather than a supernatural origin of music: Jubal, as the book of Genesis tells us (4:21), is “the father of all such as handle the harp and organ.”⁵ Theodor Reik has noted that “this tradition is interesting for several reasons: its deviation from other myths... [and] its brevity, which contrasts with the more elaborate stories of the origin of music...” (Reik 1962: 222). Yet, it is telling that even a devout Christian such as Jerome of Moravia, the thirteenth-century Dominican monk and music theorist, is reluctant to accept this ancestry: far from taking the word of Scripture as an article of faith, he writes that some state that the inventor of music was Linus, the son of Apollo, and that “Boethius with good reason credits Pythagoras with the

⁵ On Jubal in Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions, see Shiloah 2002: 72–83, and Shiloah 2003: 25–32.

honor” (Chailley 1975: 5–6). For the history of music, then, the arch connecting the Middle Ages with ancient Greece may well be even more long-standing and entrenched than it is for other disciplines. Nevertheless, there exist other, more contemporary and immediate impediments to the full historical integration of music from the ancient Near East into musicology.

The most obvious reason, perhaps, has to do with the extremely specialized nature of academic training required for studying the music of the ancient world: ancient Semitic languages, philology, archaeology and art history, as well as organology and ancient tuning systems, are just some of the rudimentary fields of inquiry indispensable for engaging with this repertory. Although historical musicology nowadays casts a wider net than ever over its subject matters — perceiving music through a great variety of critical lenses — rarely does the typical musicological toolbox include any of the abovementioned branches of learning and, furthermore, as they pertain to antiquity. Indeed, if the academic background of contributors to this and other volumes is indicative of a wider tendency, then it seems that the overwhelming majority of scholars writing on music in the ancient world have very little musicological training, if any at all. However, perhaps the most serious obstacle in the way of including ancient music in today’s classroom is one of classification: What kind of music is ancient music? If ethnomusicologists examine music from modern-day Syria, Turkey and Iraq, should they not also be concerned with music from the city of Ugarit, for instance?

Without opening the Pandora’s box that is the debate on whether musicology constitutes a part of ethnomusicology or vice versa, ethnomusicology might provide the appropriate analytical toolbox to examine music of the ancient Near East, because its subject matter was perceived, at least initially, “as all the music outside the Western European art tradition...It concerned itself with the musics of non-literate peoples; the orally transmitted music of cultures then perceived to be ‘high’ such as the traditional court and urban musics of China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, India, Iran and other Arabic-speaking countries; and ‘folk music’, which Nettl tentatively defined as the music in oral tradition found in those areas dominated by high cultures” (Pegg et al. 2011, §1). The scholarship of Curt Sachs, Walter Wiora, and Carl Engel is a case in point: equipped with their comparative anthropological approach, they were equally interested in the music of India, Asia, and Greece, and in that of western Europe. They saw music as a force embracing all human beings, rather than merely a phenomenon made manifest by distinct cultures or regions. Furthermore, Sachs understood the “primitive and Oriental branch of musicology...[to be] the opening section in the history of our own music” (Sachs 1943: 29). The music from second-millennium- BCE Ugarit would have surely been of great interest to musicologists and ethnomusicologists working in the 1950s and 60s, if only owing to its potential to be regarded as a

common denominator of sorts to musics of much later periods. Although music of the ancient Near East certainly qualifies as “non-Western,” a criterion that used to be a *sine qua non* for ethnomusicology, it now lies largely at the margins of the discipline’s methodological frames for two main reasons: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, ethnomusicology embraces not only the study of non-Western cultures or of illiterate peoples, but that of all musics in local and global contexts. Moreover, although most ethnomusicological studies do take into account the historical dimensions of their ethnographic pursuits in the present, they are still primarily concerned with *living* musical communities. This quality has to do with what Philip Bohlman has identified as one of “the most persistent dilemmas plaguing ethnomusicologists and historians of music: the juncture — or disjuncture — between time and place, between music as a temporal and historical phenomenon and music as a geographical and cultural phenomenon” (Bohlman 2002: 5–6). Notwithstanding the centrality to ethnomusicology of the concept of “fieldwork of the present” ever since Bartók traveled to central Europe, Turkey and North Africa in order to document and record various musical cultures, the last three decades or so have seen the gaining in importance of a “fieldwork of the past,” and it remains to be seen if ancient music will one day come under its critical attention (see, e.g., Kaufman Shelemay 1980; Nettl 1989; Seroussi 2002).

Historical musicology, moreover, has a penchant for a particular brand of history writing; it espouses a view of history as a narrative consisting of change and development, so much so that it sometimes seems as the only kind of history worthy of telling. It is in such vain that musicological research may approach issues of forms and systemizations (sonata form, rhythmic modes), of periods and regions (baroque music, Music in seventeenth-century Spain) or of individual composers (Gesualdo, Beethoven). This methodology actually predates the founding of musicology as a modern science. The turn of the eighteenth century saw the first attempts in modern times to write a history of music: in 1690 Wolfgang Caspar Printz published his *Historische Beschreibung* (Historical Description) in Dresden, and in 1715, Jacques Bonnet published the first history of music in the French language. In hindsight, it is easy to dismiss the works of both authors as naïve and flawed, yet what they had to say about the music of their own times is certainly of some interest (Chailley 1975: 3; Printz [1690] 1964; Bonnet 1715; see also Vendrix 1993). Albeit their writings about earlier periods of music history are of questionable quality, they recognized nonetheless the singular importance of their respective projects. The words of Jacques Bonnet seem particularly telling in retrospect: “Although more than twelve hundred authors have dealt with this science [of music],” he wrote, “not one had ever ventured to write its *history*” (Fubini and Blackburn 1994: 165; emphasis mine). With these words, Bonnet articulated a historical approach that would henceforth character-

ize the writing about music for subsequent generations, one which lays emphasis on identification and classification of historical trends and on the development of genres and styles, and one which marks a shift to a growing preoccupation with historical processes and with what would later become a Hegelian paradigm of progress.

Musicology seeks to place its objects of study — whether the life and works of individual composers or music analysis — on a historical continuum understood as a developing variation.⁶ This chronological gamut is a product of multiple and dynamic discourses of change and progress taking place across centuries. The history of music in particular is rife with composers, theorists and philosophers arguing about the relative merit of music of their own generation compared with that of past ones, with well-known examples including Jacques de Lièges’s scathing statements on the music of the *Ars Nova*, or Wagner’s critique on the nature and course of opera in the nineteenth century. The primary impulse of historical musicology is to recount a history of transformation and development, and to view musical works not simply as “inert records of the conditions of their creation...but also as having been active participants in the dynamics of those conditions” (Treitler 2001: 366). The literature on ancient music abounds with descriptions and analyses of musical instruments, tuning systems, occasions for playing music and etymologies of individual musical instruments. The geographical and temporal spans between these diverse historical items are so broad that they preclude a significant association between them. Finally, very little is actually known about the music itself; as we shall see below, what we do in fact know is equivocal at best. Thus, while such studies are in themselves painstakingly accurate and detailed, their components remain static items of history of a now-lost heritage. Owing to the nature of evidence about ancient music itself, it cannot be appreciated, at least presently, for its historical development, and what is static does not typically warrant musicological attention. Part and parcel of the imperative of the concept of developing variation is the resolve to define musical periods by “great composers.” Similar to the music of non-Western cultures, what little information has come down to us from Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt belies analysis according to great composers or theorists and, thus, does not fall neatly into schemes of periodization. The traditional division of a composer’s life into three creative stages — the life and works of Beethoven come to mind as a prime example of this — satisfies the exigencies made by both the “great composer” determination of history and the imperative of progress and change (Bohlman 1987: 155).

⁶ Arnold Schoenberg formulated the concept of developing variation with regard to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century music; see Frisch 1984: 1–18.

Greek music, too, falls short of fulfilling any of the provisions outlined above; there are virtually no named composers, no known development of forms and no meaningful distinctions that can be made between the style of music heard in the Olympic Games and that of the music heard in a Symposium. Nonetheless, it enjoys relative prominence in musicological discourse and in the classroom. The historical narrative of European music is about sustained processes, various beginnings, influences, renaissances and so forth, and ancient Greek music and philosophy serve as a fine foundation not only because of their antiquity, but also because they illustrate that the interest in past music itself has a long history as well. In a historical perspective, the renewed attention given to Greek musical thought during the Renaissance is an isolated, if consequential, occurrence. Throughout history, and with few exceptions, musicians paid little attention to music composed just fifty years before their time, and it is only during the first half of the nineteenth century — with Mendelssohn's famous 1829 revival of J. S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* with the *Singakademie* in Berlin — that composers would again seek knowledge of past music. To put it plainly, had the musical thought of, say, Ugarit, exerted some extent of influence on Europe, it, too, would have probably been considered a deserving object of research.

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, we need to come to terms with the extremely provisional nature of the reconstructed sound of ancient music. Returning to the Hurrian hymn reconstructed by a team of Berkeley scholars — it enjoys a very tentative reception among musicologists. Not four years had passed since its publication in 1976 when a new transcription made by Marcelle Duchesne-Guillemin suggested an utterly different interpretation of that very hymn, one that is melismatic and monophonic and that resembles traditional music sung by Babylonian Jews more so than it does Western polyphony (Duchesne-Guillemin 1980). With such complete disagreement between specialists on the absolute rudiments of the sound of that music, coupled with the highly specialized tools needed to interpret and examine it, there is little wonder that musicologists have generally shunned this small repertory altogether, especially given that the study of music has for such a long time “been grounded on the premise of the autonomous work” (Treitler 2001: 357).

How will music of the ancient world fare in the future classroom? If precedent can serve as an indication to what is yet to come, then we may well anticipate a brighter future for ancient music en route to a more meaningful presence within musicology in general and the classroom in particular. First, although the inclination to sketch music history with a broad brush using the colors of development and progress (and occasionally, also of decline) is as strong as ever, it is no longer the only paradigm through which musicologists observe various musical items. Music is also examined as a product of ideology, gender and theol-

ogy, for instance, making ancient music a likelier candidate for renewed scrutiny. Second, let us not forget that it is only in recent times that music of the Middle Ages came to be looked upon, examined and appreciated on its own terms and not only as a product of an “intermediate” period of transition, corruption and decay. The same can be said of non-Western music, which came to be integrated into the historiography of music only after some decades during which it was being “discovered.” After almost half a century of exciting discoveries, I hope we may now enter that second, promising phase of integration.

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