

Dionysian Cult Rituals
and Festivals:
Instruments, Genres, and
Practices in Ancient Greek Life



Senior Thesis
Presented to
The Department of Classics
The Colorado College

Finlay Roberts
May 2022

Abstract

This paper discusses the cult worship of Dionysus in ancient Greece, specifically as it relates to music. It is natural to assume that music was prominent in Dionysian rituals, but this paper aims to delve into how and why exactly music was used. What were the major musical events of Dionysian worship? What instruments served what purposes? What genres and modes were employed? This paper also aims to discover more about musical portrayals of Dionysus regarding his perceived foreign origins, which the Greeks sometimes embraced and sometimes dismissed. Throughout this process, I have gathered sources both ancient and modern to gain a well-rounded understanding of Dionysian ritual music, as far as is possible. Valuable work has already been done in the fields of music, including some relating to Dionysian cult worship; my aim is to bring these past findings together, and thereby come to some new conclusions that will help further the study of this intersection of topics.

Introduction

Dionysus is the god of wine, ecstasy, vegetation, madness, fertility, pleasure, and other such concepts (OCD 461-464). Depending on the origin myth, he is either the son of Zeus and Theban princess Semele or the son of Zeus and his daughter Persephone¹. Music is inextricably linked with many facets of Dionysus' being and of the Greeks' worship of him. Based on the prominent use of the *aulos* and the use of percussion, the music associated with Dionysus was loud and rhythmic. It evoked wild frenzy and passion and reading about it makes one wish one could hear

¹ Καδμείη δ' ἄρα οἱ Σεμέλη τέκε φαίδιμον υἱὸν
μυχθεῖς ἐν φιλότῃτι, Διώνυσον πολυγηθέα,
ἄθᾶνατον θνητῆ: νῦν δ' ἀμφοτέρωι θεοὶ εἰσιν.

“And Semele daughter of Cadmus mingled with him [Zeus] in love and brought into the world a radiant son, gladsome Dionysus, a deathless one from a mortal: and now both are gods” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, 940-944).

the sounds and watch the ecstatic dancing of Dionysus' most devout followers. We will simply have to content ourselves with ancient writers' descriptions and our own imaginations.

A major extant written source on Dionysiac frenzy and ritual music is Euripides' *Bacchae*, in which Dionysus introduces himself, his rites, and his followers to Thebes, and brutally punishes those who would challenge the validity of his godhood.

τὰ νομισθέντα γὰρ αἰεὶ
 Διόνυσον ὑμνήσω.
 ὦ
 μάκαρ, ὅστις εὐδαίμων
 τελετὰς θεῶν εἰδὼς
 βιοτὰν ἀγιστεύει καὶ
 θιασεύεται ψυχὰν
 ἐν ὄρεσσι βακχεύων
 ὁσίοις καθαρμοῖσιν,
 τὰ τε ματρὸς μεγάλας ὄρ-
 για Κυβέλας θεμιτεύων,
 ἀνὰ θύρσον τε τινάσσων,
 κισσῶ τε στεφανωθεὶς
 Διόνυσον θεραπεύει.

For I will sing of Dionysus, practicing custom as ever. O blessed is the one, who is happy in knowing the rites of the gods, who performs the sacred rituals of life, celebrating the Bacchic mysteries, and whose soul is initiated on the mountains in holy purification, and performing ecstatic rites of the great mother Kybele, shaking the thyrsus, wreathed in ivy, he serves Dionysus (Euripides, *Bacchae* 71-82).

But Euripides does not fully describe these “bacchic rites.” German classicist Walter Burkert reminds us of an essential point: “Bacchic mysteries seem to be ubiquitous, but the living reality is difficult to grasp behind the lasting conventions of iconography and the literary impact of Euripides’ play. Nevertheless, Bacchic mysteries were still performed in the fourth century A.D.” (Burkert 1987, 35). The *Bacchae* was a play performed at the Theatre of Dionysus primarily for entertainment, though, so it is difficult to know how much truth exists in and behind the text. It is therefore necessary to delve into other works, both modern and ancient, so that we may gain a better understanding. Burkert writes that “there were always secret cults,

accessible only through some special, individual initiation, the mysteries. In Greek, to initiate is *myein* or else *telein*, the initiate is called *mystes*, and the whole proceedings *mysteria*, while *telesterion* is the special building where initiations take place” (Burkert 1985, 276). Since these initiations are indeed so “special” and “individual,” it is difficult for historians to tell what exactly would occur during these events. But Burkert also claims that in all secret societies, “the degree of solidarity achieved is in direct relation to the hardships of access” (Burkert 1985, 277). This suggests that initiation could vary wildly, with some potentially being incredibly grueling, and others quite simple. There were cults to many different gods, and the practices within them could all vary based on location, deity, and worshipers, but many of them had similar activities.

[W]e may reasonably accept that Greek cults shared the following basic performance structure: they started with a procession leading to an altar and after the sacrifice came feasting and athletic or musical contests. Depending on the length of the processional route, this ritual complex could last from hours to days. Music was played at every stage, but the songs and instruments differed (Kubatzki 4).

The procession section of the worship often included reenactments of Dionysus’ myths, such as his original journey into Athens (OCD 1213). One of the other reenacted myths may have been Dionysus’ dismemberment at the hands of the Titans, a brutal story which saw the Titans ripping the young god apart.² It is also possible that “there were certain parts or aspects of the myths that were only told to the initiates, sealed by horrible oaths of secrecy,” and among them, “the dismemberment myth of Dionysus was felt by some to belong to this forbidden category” (Burkert 1987, 74). These rituals or mysteries may have been a form of escapism. Some wished to become part of a community which rejected the structures of their daily lives through acts of

² Pausanias attributes this story to Onomacritus in 8.37.5 and claims that the latter took the titans’ name from Homer. Whoever wrote it, it was supposedly the “cardinal myth of Orphism” (Nilsson 1935, p. 202).

frenzy, in which they believed themselves to be possessed by their god.³ The cults of Dionysus endured for centuries, but different rituals likely took place depending on location and period. One thing that is ubiquitous however, is the presence of music in his cult worship, whether as music for dancing or entering a trance, music to honor the god, or music to accompany reenactments (OCD 985).



Red-Figure Kylix Showing the Death of Pentheus (exterior) and a Maenad (interior), c. 480 B.C. Douris Painter. Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas. AP 2000.02.

According to Burkert, the cult's beginnings can be traced back to at least the middle of the seventh century, but the "iconography of the Dionysiac thiasos [religious group] with satyrs and maenads achieved its fixed, canonical form" in the latter half of the fifth century (Burkert

³ "The aim of the 'mystic' form is best contrasted with that of the collective, integrative, political value of sacrificial civic religion: the individual seeks through possession/'madness' to transcend the constraints of the everyday and become a member of a privileged but contemporary community of bliss" (OCD 990).

1985, 290).⁴ Part of the cult sprang from a desire for detachment. “As the individual gains in independence, the Dionysos cult becomes a vehicle for the separation of private groups from the polis” (Burkert 1985, 291). According to this theory, Greeks wanted the opportunity to exist outside of the organized city-state for some periods of time, perhaps as a form of respite.

Women were involved in Dionysian mysteries as much or more so than men. According to Burkert, the mysteries “are esoteric, they take place at night; access is through an individual initiation, telete. As a symbolic Beyond, closed and mysterious, the Bacchic grotto or cave appears. The role of the sexes becomes less important: there are male as well as female mystai” (Burkert 1985, 291). Women played an important part in most cults, but the roles of each gender were less important in some Dionysian contexts. Though this does not seem to always be the case, as in some rituals, women had a specific duty, such as priestess, or ritual marriage to Dionysus (OCD 1576). Some rituals in fact only or primarily included women, with maenads (who were probably upper-class women) entering a ritual frenzy in the mountains (OCD 883). It is important then to note that Burkert’s claim that “[t]he role of the sexes becomes less important” should not be taken as a truth that applied to all Dionysian cult activity.

The above description by Burkert makes the cult seem appropriately mysterious, and it was just as exclusive as well, for “[t]he main concern was not propagating a faith, but withholding the central revelation” from others (Burkert 45-6). Unfortunately, this means that central revelations have been hidden from modern historians as well. Beyond their secretive activities, Dionysus cults also had ways to display their worship in a more obvious manner.

Participants engage in common activities, especially in sacrifices with the ensuing ceremonial meal, and also in demonstrations, *pompai*, which move through the

⁴ Herodotus writes of the Scythian king Skyles, who, in the mid fifth century, performs the rites and is initiated into the cult of Dionysus, before being abandoned by his people and beheaded by his brother. This passage situates the cult within that period, while showing the disdain that some (including Herodotus) felt towards the cult (Herodotus, *The Histories*, 4.78 – 80).

city and make clear to everyone who belongs to the group ... in accordance with the prevailing social system, competition is valued more highly than cooperation. It is honor, *time*, that is sought amidst the *symmystai* of a *thiasos*, honor gained especially by generous financial contributions ... (Burkert 44).

Some may have the tendency to promote the idea that there was full equality in Dionysus cults between all, making it a place for typical outcasts. Burkert's passage above shows us that this was not quite the truth. Those who excelled in competitions were regarded more highly, and importantly, the rich members held more power due to their support of the *thiasos*.

The Great Dionysia and its relationship with music

Most Dionysian worship was not performed in secret, and there were in fact major public festivals dedicated to the god. The Attic worship of Dionysus occurred in seven festivals in which Dionysus was the primary deity (OCD 463). Unsurprisingly, musical performance featured prominently in the festivals, especially in the context of tragic and comedic competitions. The largest of these festivals was the Great, or City, Dionysia. John Landels describes this festival, which took place in late March or early April.

The festivities occupied several days, and included a number of musical events. The most important ritual involved carrying a very ancient image of the god Dionysos in procession to the boundaries of the ancient Athenian territory and 'welcoming' him once more; this was intended as a gesture of apology for the fact that his original entry had been greeted with less than full enthusiasm. The statue was then carried back to his sanctuary in Athens (which was at the rear of the stage buildings of the theatre) to the accompaniment of ribald songs, reflecting the fact that it was in part a fertility ritual. All this would involve a lot of music. (Landels 1999, 3-4).

Music was likely part of the procession during the festival as well as during cult ritual. While historians believe that different myths were prominent within cult worship, we can see that the Great Dionysia featured the same one every year during the procession. Simon Goldhill details some of the specific parts of the Great Dionysia.

“The first part of the festival may not even be regarded as part of the festival – the εισαγωγή από της ἐσχάρας. This is a reenactment of the original advent of Dionysus from Eleutherai. The statue of Dionysus Eleuthereus was taken to a temple on the road to Eleutherai, sacrifice was offered there, and then the statue was escorted back to the temple ... The εισαγωγή από της ἐσχάρας is followed by the πομπή, which was a great procession leading up to the sacrifice in the sacred precinct of Dionysus” (Goldhill 59).

As both passages above suggest, the ritual involved movement between several locations.

Perhaps the accompanying music that was played served as entertainment while traveling between areas of the festival, as well as honoring the god between temples and other sacred areas.

The Great Dionysia also contained competition between groups. “For certain administrative purposes, all Athenian citizens were assigned to one of ten ‘tribes’ or clans, and each tribe had to provide two choruses, one of up to fifty men and the other of the same number of boys. Each chorus performed a dithyramb and there was fierce competition between them for prizes” (Landels 1999, 4). These dithyrambs were upbeat hymns that were sung for Dionysus, often to the accompaniment of instruments such as the *aulos*. Surprisingly, this performance was sung but not danced (Landels 1999, 4). Despite this undoubtedly impressive display of choruses up to 50 people strong, Landels claims that “[f]rom the musical point of view, the drama festival was much the most important part of the Great Dionysia. It involved tragedies, comedies, and satyr-plays... (Landels 1999, 4).

The satyr-plays in particular relate to my topic, as satyrs are often displayed alongside Dionysus and his maenads on vase paintings. These plays offered levity at the end of the day after the tragedies, with both types of plays being written by the same poets (Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, etc.). Landels explains the connection between satyr-drama and Dionysus. “In vase-paintings of scenes of Dionysiac worship ... music is often featured. Satyrs play the

aulos, occasionally the *kithara*, and most often the lyre or its ‘big brother’, the *barbitos*.

Maenads usually play the hand-drum (*tympanon* ...). It is not surprising, therefore, to find that in representations of satyr-drama the members of the *choros* are shown with various instruments, most commonly the lyre or a particular variant of it ... (Landels 1999, 21). These depictions give us a good idea of how these satyr-dramas were performed, even if many of the plays’ texts have been lost to time. These vases also provide us with information on the gender divide present within instrumentation, with women/maenads primarily playing percussion. A few instruments are mentioned by Landels above, but even more of them are used in Dionysian festivals and cults, which will be the focus of the following section.



Volute krater. Pronomos Vase, c.400 B.C. Museo Archeologico, Naples, Italy. 3240

Musical instruments used in Dionysian rituals

Several instruments were featured in cult worship, and I endeavor in this section to create a list of the main Dionysian ones and their primary uses, as well as describe the sounds that they created. One of the most prominent instruments in Greek depictions of music is the *aulos* (αὐλός). This instrument was perfect for Dionysian rituals due to its large range and high volume. West explains that “[t]he instrument had quite a penetrating tone, to judge by the ability of a single pair of *auloi* to accompany a choir of up to fifty men” (West 105). He also explains why this piercing instrument is so appropriate for the worship of Dionysus.

“The *aulos* was noted for its ability to express and to arouse different emotions. The old *aulos*-tunes attributed to Olympus, even if badly played, according to Plato, have the power to possess the bearer with frenzy and mark him out as being in need of religious purification. Aristotle calls the *aulos* ‘orgiastic’, i.e. conducive to religious frenzy, and it is regularly mentioned (together with drums) in connection with Bacchic, Corybantic, and suchlike ecstatic cults” (West 105).

The passage that West refers to is in Plato’s *Symposium*. “In fact, if someone, whether a skilled *aulos* player or a paltry *aulos* girl, plays the *aulos*, they alone inspire and point out those needing to be divinely inspired by the gods’ rites.” (Plato, *Symposium*, 215c).⁵ Plato uses the term φαύλη αὐλητρίς (“paltry *aulos* girl”), so I am not sure if West’s use of “badly played” is the correct term, since I believe that Plato instead refers to someone who can play the instrument in a simple manner, only as far as her duty requires.⁶ Nevertheless, West’s point still stands. The fact that Plato believes in the power of an *aulos* played by any kind of musician speaks volumes about the importance of the sound itself. Perhaps the very timbre of an *aulos* is as important, or more so,

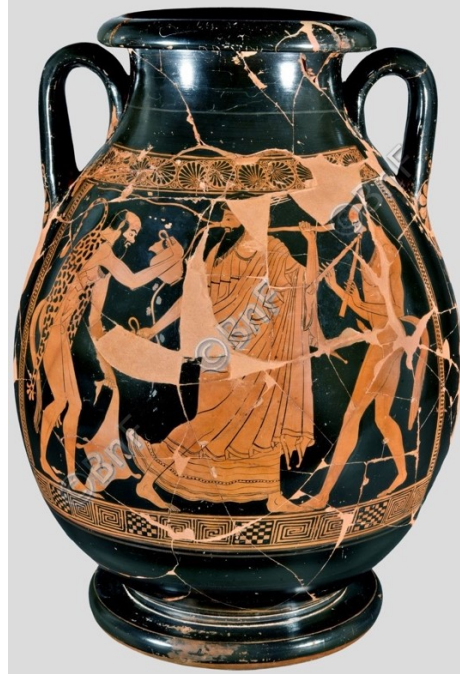
⁵τὰ οὖν ἐκείνου ἐάντε ἀγαθὸς αὐλητῆς αὐλῆ ἐάντε φαύλη αὐλητρίς, μόνα κατέχεσθαι ποιεῖ καὶ δηλοῖ τοὺς τῶν θεῶν τε καὶ τελετῶν δεομένους διὰ τὸ θεῖα εἶναι.

⁶φαύλη: “light, easy, slight, trifling ... Trivial, paltry, petty, sorry, bad. ... Of persons, low in rank, mean, common: worthless, poor, common, of no account ...” (LSJ 752).

than the quality of the song being played, or the notes that are used. Landels also notes the importance of the *aulos* in this context. “[T]he *aulos* was closely connected to Dionysos, believed by the Greeks to have been an Asiatic deity whose cult was imported into Greece and later Hellenized. Indeed, it has been suggested that the reason and occasion for the introduction of the *aulos* to the Greek mainland (along with the hand-drum, *tympanon*) was the arrival of the Dionysiac cult and its ritual” (Landels 26). Plato and Aristotle were concerned with the Greeks’ use of the *aulos*, and Spencer Klavan explains their reasoning as such:

If critics like Plato and Aristotle had to devote time and energy to running them down, *auloi* must have exerted a considerable sway over the heart and imagination of the average Athenian. We can hear that anxiety behind Aristotle’s warning that pipe playing encourages an unhealthy fixation with music for the sake of music, and that it encourages irrationality (since players couldn’t speak while playing the pipes, some philosophers worried that their music was devoid of the kind of sophisticated thought that came with verbal argumentation) (Klavan 2021, 26).

If the *aulos* was one of the primary Dionysian instruments, then one could deduce that Plato and Aristotle did not condone the actions of the cults in question. From what we know about Dionysian rituals, they do not seem to fit exactly within the bounds of rationality that Aristotle and his ilk believed in. In large part, these cult rituals were a way to lose oneself and avoid city life (OCD 462-3). It would seem to me that much of the music in this case would be “music for the sake of music,” and therefore potentially harmful in the eyes of some of the more philosophical Greek minds, who preferred music to make some sort of rational statement.



Red-figured pelike of Dionysus and two satyrs. Syleus Painter. c.480 BC. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, France. De Ridder.390

Dionysus and his music are a prime example of the Greeks' ability to Hellenize concepts and objects for their own uses. As Landels mentioned, this is true also of the *tympanon* (τύμπανον), one of the major percussion instruments used in the cult of Dionysus. It is important to note, before detailing Dionysiac percussion, that the use of drums was something of an anomaly in the ancient Greek world. "Among the Greeks, unlike other ancient peoples, percussion instruments were never widespread nor particularly important. Their use was generally restricted to the rituals of the cults of Dionysus and Cybele, and were always perceived as exotic instruments not connected with the most ancient and genuine traditions of the Greeks" (Comotti 74-75). As we can see, percussion was inherently ritualistic, which makes the study of these instruments particularly helpful when it comes to the worship of Dionysus. The *tympanon* itself was a "shallow frame drum or tambour of modest size ... The skin was stretched over a circular open frame of 30-50 cm. diameter; probably the back as well as the front was covered,

but only one side was struck. The drum was held upright in the left hand and smitten with the fingertips or knuckles of the right” (West 1992, 124). On a scene by the Curti Painter, a procession to Dionysus (and possibly Cybele) is depicted, showing a “worshiper or nymph playing the tympanon, dancing ecstatically with other female companions as part of the procession. She has a nearly frontal face, suggesting abandonment into the music and dance ...” (Bundrick 2005, 48). This vase gives us an insight into when the *tympanon* was used. It is not always easy to tell which rituals the instruments were a part of, but the vase clearly shows a procession, situating the instrument within it. John Landels makes another valuable point about the *tympanon*. “It is repeatedly stressed in the literary sources (particularly in Euripides’ tragedy, the *Bacchae*, which is much concerned with the cult of Dionysos), that the *tympanon* provided a rhythmic reinforcement for the ritual songs and cries and the *aulos*-music of the cult, rather than a sound which was interesting in itself” (Landels 82). This passage once again demonstrates the connection between the *tympanon* and the *aulos*, the two imported Dionysian instruments. Giovanni Comotti depicts the percussive sound in a slightly different, but equally helpful manner. “Because such dancing was essentially a group activity, the sound most familiar to Greek ears was that of a large number of drums beating together, in a way which could on occasions excite frenzy and mass hysteria – a phenomenon not unknown in our own times” (Comotti 81). Given these descriptions of percussion in Dionysian ritual, I am not certain about some authors’ description of percussion in ancient Greece. Just because percussion instruments were used more sparingly and especially in cult worship does not necessarily mean that the sound of the drums was uninteresting and unmusical to the Greeks, and I am not certain what has drawn some to this conclusion. Percussion in modern times also acts as a “rhythmic

reinforcement” and causes excitement and drives people to dance more than a song without any percussion would. M.L. West even calls rhythm “the vital soul of music” (West 1992, 129).



Red-figured bell-krater. Dionysus, seated, and maenad holding a tympanon while dancing. British Museum, London, U.K. 1978,0414.33

Krotala are another percussion instrument, these being closer to castanets. “*Krotala* appear most frequently in both sixth- and fifth-century vase painting; these consist of a pair of wooden bars joined by a hinge, with a performer typically holding one such pair in each hand ... They would have produced a loud clapping sound and were appreciated for their rhythmic nature and loud noise rather for any intrinsic musical value” (Bundrick 2005, 46-7). Sheramy Bundrick provides us with a valuable description of both the look and sound of the *krotala*, though this interpretation once again begs the question: are rhythm and dynamics not a part of music? It seems that the researchers and authors in this field may have slightly different boundaries of

what defines music. This is perfectly normal, but I would not make the distinction that other writers have in some of these cases. I have not encountered satisfying evidence to suggest that these percussion instruments were not perceived as musical by Dionysian cultists and other worshipers. The *krotala* is another instrument that Euripides mentions, this time in *Helen*.

κρόταλα δὲ βρόμια διαπρύσιον
 ἰέντα κέλαδον ἀνεβόα,
 θηρῶν ὅτε ζυγίους
 ζευξάσα θεᾶ σατίνας
 τὰν ἀρπασθεῖσαν κυκλίων
 χορῶν ἔξω παρθενίων
 μετὰ κούραν, ἀελλόποδες,

The Bacchic *krotala* sounded aloud with their piercing clamor, when the goddess yoked wild beasts to her chariot, to seek for her daughter, snatched out of the circling dance of maidens” (Euripides, *Helen*, 1308-14).

The following image is from the tondo of a cup in the British Museum, the *hetaira* (right) is playing the *krotala*. Bundrick writes that “[t]he animal skin references Dionysian nymphs or maenads while pointing up the wildness of both the music and the dance” (Bundrick 2005, 47). This vase provides valuable information as it shows us that *krotala* were used to accompany the *aulos*, and that they were a Dionysian instrument associated with frenzied behavior.



Red-figured kylix (drinking-cup) with a dancing girl and a youth playing the pipes. Attic, Python and Epiktetos. c.510BC. British Museum, London, U.K. 1843,1103.9

The *Kymbala* were used as well, and it is not difficult to guess this instrument's modern descendant: cymbals. "Kymbala, of which several bronze examples survive today, were favored by their clanging noise of metal on metal. They seem to have been particularly associated with Dionysian and orgiastic "mystery" cults, and were themselves of Eastern origin" (Bundrick 47). Here we have another "Eastern" instrument associated with Dionysus. The use of several instruments that were perceived as non-Greek would have added to the general sense of cultural difference that was more present within Dionysian ritual than with the worship of any other major Olympian god. Bundrick also explains the context for this instrument. "Kymbala are shown only a handful of times in red figure, always in scenes linked with Dionysos or some kind of cult. Thus a small boy plays the *kymbala* on a volute krater by the Curti Painter showing a procession toward two divinities, perhaps Dionysos-Sabazios and Kybele" (Bundrick 2005, 47-

8). We may not know exactly when these instruments were used during rituals, but it is safe to assume that they were present in Dionysian contexts, and that even young children could play them, due to their simple operation.

Another prominent instrument in such rituals was the bullroarer, or the *rhombos* (ῥόμβος). This type of instrument is also rather widespread – geographically and temporally speaking – and has been in use recently by certain groups, such as aboriginal Australians, Māori people in New Zealand, and Native American tribes (Matthews 1898, 52). In ancient Greece specifically, though, this is once again primarily a cult instrument. To play this instrument, the musician swings around the instrument on a horizontal or vertical axis and causes it to create a roaring sound. Comotti explains that “the sound it produced when rotated at a relatively slow speed resembled the lowing of a cow” (Comotti 1989). Since this instrument creates a continuous sound, one can imagine that it could not be used in a rhythmic manner like the percussion instruments. Instead, it was probably used to create a singular note for an extended period. West describes the sound of the *rhombos* as more of a “demonic roaring noise,” and writes that “it was used in some mystery cults, especially those of Dionysus and Cybele, in association with drums and cymbals,” particularly in initiation rituals (West 1992, 122). Again, because we do not know all of the specifics regarding initiation, it is difficult to say what exact role the *rhombos* played. It is possible that the “demonic” sound may have been used for some of the darker aspects of initiations.

The *salpinx* (σάλπιγξ), a trumpet predecessor, was occasionally used as a form of communication from worshipers to Dionysus. It resembles a long tube with a conical bell at the end. According to West, it had many uses, such as summoning people and beginning a chariot race, but the instrument “did have a role in certain cults. A black figure lekythos (see below)

shows a trumpeter heading a sacrificial procession, and later inscriptions from several places refer in this connection to the ‘holy trumpeter.’ The Argives summoned Dionysus out of the water with small trumpets” (West 1992, 119). The *salpinx* seems to be an inherently religious instrument and it was used in many different settings. While this was a versatile instrument, Dionysus’ worshippers fitted it into their practices by using it as a direct line to the deity, summoning him with its sound.



Black figure lekythos showing a salpinx player leading a procession, c.500 B.C. British Museum, London, U.K. B684. 1842,0728.1015

There were several stringed instruments that were prominent in Dionysian worship, most of them variants of lyres. The *phorminx* (φόρμυγξ) is the name given to a wooden stringed instrument that is depicted in art from the eighth to the fifth century BC. It has a crescent-shaped sound box with arms extending upwards from it. It is sometimes depicted in art in association

with Dionysus and his accompanying nymphs, though the more interesting aspect of this instrument is its gendered usage. “The phorminx is primarily associated with men from the eighth through the sixth centuries, appearing in scenes of the komos or other social gatherings ... When the *phorminx* does appear in fifth-century art, it is typically played by women, a gender shift that cannot be precisely explained” (Bundrick 2005, 26). This information is noteworthy, as other stringed instruments like the *kithara* are typically played by men or satyrs in vase-paintings. This suggests that some instruments were seen as more masculine or more feminine. As mentioned above, the *kithara* (κίθαρα) is shown in Dionysiac vase-paintings, where it is often played by satyrs. This instrument is similar to the phorminx, but with more of a square sound box instead. Aristotle calls this instrument a τεχνικόν ὄργανον (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341a), or an instrument that requires “technique” or “professionalism.” This indicates that it may have been one of the more difficult stringed instruments to play, and thus reserved for professional musicians for the most part. Jana Kubatzki writes that the *kithara* was used in competition in solo hymns as well as *nomoi* (Kubatzki 2016, 6), which were often played solo as well.⁷

The *Barbitos* (βάρβιτος) is a stringed instrument that Landels calls the lyre’s “big brother” (Landels 1999, 20), due to its longer arms and sound box. These instruments are often played by satyrs on vases, but also occasionally by Dionysus, as seen below. This suggests that this instrument was typically seen as more masculine, as many stringed instruments were. On the vase, Dionysus head is straight up, pointing away from the *barbitos*, indicating his mastery of the instrument. The satyrs beside him are dancing and holding *krotala*, seemingly lost in the music.

⁷ “The word νόμος means ‘a style of song with a prescribed *harmonia* (tuning) and a definite rhythm’ ... there were seven canonical types used either with *kithara* ... or with *aulos*” (OCD 1019).



Dionysus playing the barbitos. Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Paris, France.

Genres, modes, and their relationship with Dionysian rituals

Much like in our time, there were various genres of music in the ancient world. There were even several genres within cult music, which will be the focus of this section. Jana Kubatzki lists some of these, including *prosodion*, *paian*, *partheneia*, hymns, dithyramb, *hyporchema*, drinking songs, symposium songs, signalling, *nomos*, and solo hymns (Kubatzki 2016, 6).⁸ She also writes that “[f]ormal differences between musical genres employed in cult mostly derive from the different practical uses to which they were put, as certain names suggest: *prosodion* means on the way, for it was a song sung during a procession. *Partheneia* were a

⁸ Hymns featured celebrations of a god’s powers and epithets, among other details of their myths (OCD 715-6). *Paians* were often addressed to Apollo (though not exclusively) and aimed to create a dialogue between the performer and the god (OCD 1060).

genre of special hymns sung only by women, mostly girls, since *parthenos* describes a virgin” (Kubatzki 2016, 5). In addition to this, Kubatzki created a helpful chart to detail genres in rituals.

Part	Genre	Instrument	Musicians	Place
1. Procession	Prosodion, paian, partheneia, hymns, dithyramb	Aulos, kithara ²⁵ , lyra, singing, choral dances	worshippers, artists’ guilds, choruses of citizens	Processional way
2. Sacrifice	Hymns, hyporchema ²⁶	Aulos, lyra, solo singing, (choir), circular dance	Solo of priests or professionals, choruses	Altar
3. Feast	Drinking songs, symposium songs	Aulos, lyra, solo singing, chorus	Non-professionals, slaves, hetairai	Agora
4. Contest	1. Signalling 2. Contest genres: nomos, hymns (solo)	1. Salpinx ²⁷ 2. Aulos, kithara, salpinx, vocal, dance	Professionals	Agora, theatre

Tab. 1 | Official rituals (not including private rituals such as symposia). – Written examples for each station: Procession: Pindarus, Paian 7; Sacrifice: Alkaius, Apollon hymnus 307 LP; Feast: Homer, Odyssey book 8, 44–108; Contest: Pausanias Histories X, 7. 2–7, Xenophon Hieron IX 24.

It is difficult to say exactly how these genres sounded, but knowing which people performed during which sections of the worship and which instruments they used allows us to imagine at least some of the processes. The same or similar instruments were used for every different genre, so we can assume that the sound of each genre was similar, while perhaps the tempo and rhythm and time signature was what created the variations. For instance, it would make sense for drinking songs to be more upbeat and faster compared to the hymns at the sacrifice. We also can understand which genres were seen as more formal, like those played by professionals (hymns, *hyporchema*, *nomos*), and which were played by lower classes (*prosodion*,

paian, *partheneia*, hymns, dithyramb, drinking and symposium songs). Perhaps non-professionals, slaves, and *hetairai* performed during the feast so that the people who were given more rights could participate in the feast or drinking activities without having to entertain others.

In addition to genres, musical modes are a part of music theory which have continued to this day. And the names that we use for the seven major modes betray their origins: Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Locrian.⁹ Modes in ancient Greece may not have been quite the same as our own though, as we do not know exactly what these modes, or *harmoniai*, entailed.

We know that a set of ethnic names, such as ‘Dorian’, ‘Lydian’ and ‘Phrygian’, were used at various times to define patterns of notes or melodic structures, and these structures may have served as the ancient equivalent of scales as we know them. But we have good reasons for believing that the principles on which they were constructed, and the way in which the later Greek theorists analysed them and assigned names to them, changed considerably over the classical period (Landels 86).

The Phrygian mode seems to have been the primary one used in a Bacchic context. One indication of this comes from the *Bacchae*, where it is stated outright:

Χορός
 ὦ θαλάμευμα Κουρή-
 των ζάθεοί τε Κρήτας
 Διογενέτορες ἔναυλοι,
 ἔνθα τρικόρυθεσ ἄντροις
 βυρσότονον κύκλωμα τόδε
 μοι Κορύβαντες ἤϊρον:
 βακχεία δ’ ἀνὰ συντόνω
 κέρασαν ἀδυβόα Φρυγίων
 αὐλῶν πνεύματι ματρός τε Ῥέας ἐς
 χέρα θῆκαν, κτύπον εὐάσμασι Βακχᾶν:

Chorus

“O caves of the Kouretes, and sacred Cretan haunts of the country gods, birthers of Zeus, there in the cave, the triple-plumed Korybantes invented for me a circle with skin stretched over it: and in the intense Bacchic frenzy they mingled it [the circle/drum] with the sweet-

⁹ Powers et al. 2001

sounding wind of the Phrygian *aulos* into the hands of mother Rhea, resounding with the shouts of the *Bacchae*” (Euripides 120-9)

Despite this statement, Landels reminds us of an important point:

In the *Bacchae* of Euripides frequent mention is made of the fact that the *choros* of female worshippers, who have accompanied Dionysos from Asia Minor, are dressed in ‘Eastern’ clothing, and come from ‘Lydia and Phrygia’ and are singing in the foreign-sounding styles of those countries. We must, however, be cautious about taking this at its face value; in fact, the very reason for their repeated assertions might have been that they were not singing in a ‘foreign’ mode, but were asking the audience to suppose that they were (Landels 102).

We obviously do not have any recorded evidence of ancient music so it is difficult to decipher exactly what it sounded like and to which modern music theory it can be related to. However, there were skilled musicians in ancient Greece, and I believe that some of them would have been able to determine how to play and sing the *Bacchae* in a slightly different manner inspired by the music of Asia Minor, perhaps using their knowledge of music theory to employ different scales. Unfortunately, we will most likely never know definitively whether the *Bacchae* was sung using the Phrygian mode.

The renowned philosophers of ancient Greece wrote a fair amount about modes. Aristotle had an opinion on the Phrygian, which he mentions in *Politics*.

ὁ δ' ἐν τῇ Πολιτείᾳ Σωκράτης οὐ καλῶς τὴν φρυγιστὴν μόνην καταλείπει μετὰ τῆς δωριστί, καὶ ταῦτα ἀποδοκιμάσας τῶν ὀργάνων τὸν αὐλόν.
ἔχει γὰρ τὴν αὐτὴν δύναμιν ἢ φρυγιστὴν τῶν ἀρμονιῶν ἢ ἤπερ αὐλὸς ἐν τοῖς ὀργάνοις: ἄμφω γὰρ ὀργιαστικὰ καὶ παθητικὰ: δηλοῖ δ' ἡ ποίησις. πᾶσα γὰρ βακχεία καὶ πᾶσα ἢ τοιαύτη κίνησις [5] μάλιστα τῶν ὀργάνων ἐστὶν ἐν τοῖς αὐλοῖς, τῶν δ' ἀρμονιῶν ἐν τοῖς φρυγιστῶν μέλεσι λαμβάνει ταῦτα τὸ πρέπον. δηλοῖ δ' ἡ ποίησις, οἷον ὁ διθύραμβος ὁμολογουμένως εἶναι δοκεῖ Φρύγιον.

In the *Politics*, Socrates does not do well by leaving only the Phrygian with the Dorian, and by rejecting the *aulos* amongst the instruments. This is because the Phrygian bears the same power amongst harmonies/modes as the *aulos* does amongst instruments: both are exciting and emotional: and poetry exhibits this. This is because all Bacchic frenzy and all such motion is very much of the *auloi* amongst the instruments, poetry exhibits this, for instance the dithyramb is expected to conform with the Phrygian (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1342a32 – b12).

This passage gives us further evidence of the ties between Dionysus and the Phrygian mode. The mention of Bacchic frenzy as an “exciting and emotional” prospect that is related to *auloi* and the Phrygian mode highlights the importance of this mode. Aristotle also explicitly states that dithyrambs (many of which were to Dionysus) were composed in a Phrygian meter. Plato also writes of the Phrygian in his *Republic*.

οὐκ οἶδα, ἔφην ἐγώ, τὰς ἀρμονίας, ἀλλὰ κατάλειπε ἐκείνην τὴν ἀρμονίαν, ἣ ἔν τε πολεμικῇ πράξει ὄντος ἀνδρείου καὶ ἐν πάσῃ βιαίῳ ἐργασίᾳ πρεπόντως ἂν μιμήσαιτο φθόγγους τε καὶ προσφθίας, καὶ ἀποτυχόντος ἢ εἰς τραύματα ἢ εἰς [399β] θανάτους ἰόντος ἢ εἰς τινα ἄλλην συμφορὰν πεσόντος, ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις παρατεταγμένως καὶ καρτεροῦντος ἀμυνομένου τὴν τύχην: καὶ ἄλλην αὖ ἐν εἰρηνικῇ τε καὶ μὴ βιαίῳ ἀλλ’ ἐν ἔκουσίᾳ πράξει ὄντος, ἢ τινὰ τι πείθοντός τε καὶ δεομένου, ἢ εὐχῆ θεὸν ἢ διδαχῆ καὶ νοουθετήσῃ ἀνθρώπων, ἢ τούναντίον ἄλλω δεομένῳ ἢ διδάσκοντι ἢ μεταπειθόντι ἑαυτὸν ἐπέχοντα, καὶ ἐκ τούτων πράξαντα κατὰ νοῦν, καὶ μὴ ὑπερηφάνως ἔχοντα, ἀλλὰ σωφρόνως τε καὶ μετρίως ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις ...

I do not know, said I, the harmonies/modes, but leave this mode [the Dorian], which would fittingly represent the sounds of processional music of a man who practices warfare and lots of violent business, and upon failing, either by encountering injury or death, or falling into any other circumstance, in all of these steadily and strongly warding off fate: and the other [the Phrygian], for he who, on the contrary, achieves peace voluntarily without being forced, and either someone in need of persuading, whether a god through prayer or teaching a man through admonishment, or instead requiring from another either instructing or persuasion, and due to this acting in accordance with their mind, and without carrying himself arrogantly, but soundly and moderately in all of these ... (Plato, *Republic*, 399a – b).

We can see that these philosophers had set rules that they thought should apply to the modes. This gives us an indication of how seriously some people took these modes. If Plato is to be believed, the modes had specific characteristics that made them better suited to certain stories. Plato relates the Phrygian mode with characters who are less rigid than those of the Dorian, and who are able to change others’ minds and have their own minds changed. One could argue that there is a connection with the Dionysian in his statements, as the cult activities seemed to encourage choice and expression, as well as

open-mindedness, due to the supposed loss of self that occurs (OCD 462-3). However, this connection is not as explicit as in Aristotle's case, and there are arguments against it as well. Stories involving Dionysus such as the dismemberment myth and the *Bacchae* are not exactly peaceful, and cult rituals do not always seem modest. While individuality is encouraged in cult practices, I do not believe that differing beliefs regarding religion and worship of Dionysus would have been encouraged quite as much. Regardless, the connection between the Phrygian and the Dionysian is obvious when one consults these philosophers as well as the modern musical and classical scholars.

Dionysus' epithets and other frequent word usage in Greek that relates to his rituals and music

It is important to discuss the Greek terms that are related to the topic at hand, as there are subtleties that we can only draw from the original language. I have gathered several terms which I see appear often in texts about Dionysus relating to both the god himself and to his music. Dionysus had several epithets that the Greeks used in place of, or in addition to, his name. One of these is Βρόμιος, usually translated as 'noisy' or 'loud-sounding,' and is a word related to thunder. This term should come as no surprise, after hearing about the shrieks of the *auloi*, or the pounding of various percussion instruments. This is one of the terms that can sometimes fully replace the god's name, essentially meaning that the Greeks found this descriptor so important that they sometimes referred to Dionysus simply as 'the noisy one.'¹⁰ Βρόμιος had many songs sung of him, and a specific set of them were called dithyrambs (Greek nominative

¹⁰ —ἴδετε λάιν' <ῶ> ἔμβολα κίουσιντάδε διάδρομα· Βρόμιος ἀλαλάζεταιιστέγας <τᾶσδ'> ἔσω (Euripides, *Bacchae*, 591-3).

singular: διθύραμβος). This term refers to the ecstatic and (unsurprisingly) loud hymns. It seems that the term was almost exclusively used for Dionysus, and that paean was the term most often used for hymns for the other main music god Apollo.¹¹ Dithyrambs were performed at the Great Dionysia in such a way: first, there was a prologue spoken by the group leaders, then a chorus of 50 men and a chorus of 50 boys would sing and dance about the altar. Others played *auloi* as this was happening (OCD 469).

An object that comes up often in the *Bacchae* and other texts about Dionysiac worship is the *thyrsus* (θύρσος). This was a staff with a conifer cone placed at the top. The following passage from the *Bacchae* gives us more of an idea of its description:

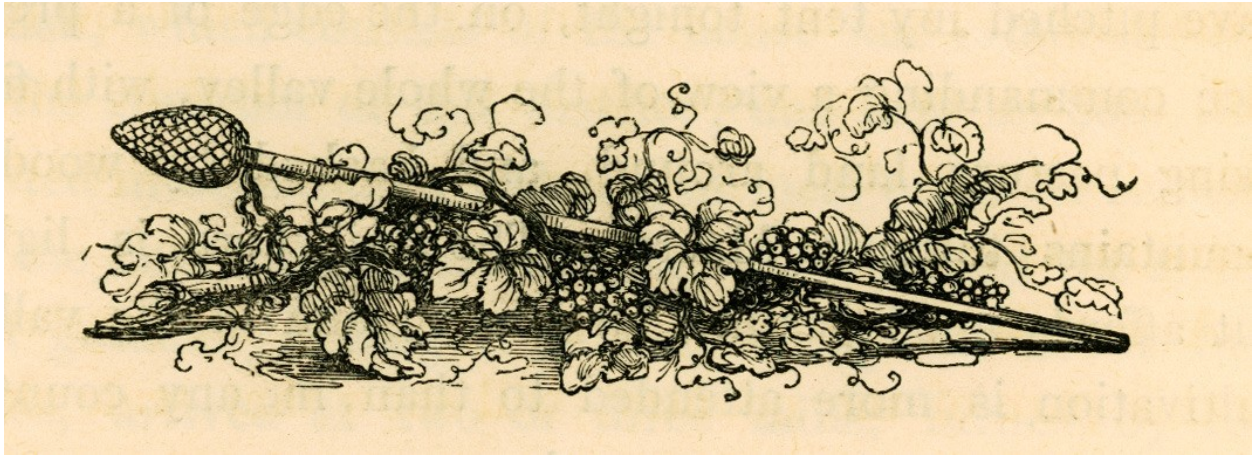
ἐς τήνδε πρῶτον ἦλθον Ἑλλήνων πόλιν,
 τὰκεῖ χορεύσας καὶ καταστήσας ἐμὰς
 τελετάς, ἴν' εἶην ἐμφανῆς δαίμων βροτοῖς.
 πρῶτας δὲ Θήβας τῆσδε γῆς Ἑλληνίδος
 ἀνωλόλυξα, νεβρίδ' ἐξάψας χροῶς
 θύρσον τε δοὺς ἐς χεῖρα, κίσσινον βέλος

“First, I came to this Hellene city, having danced and set up my rites elsewhere, so that I may be displayed as a god amongst men. I first cried out at Thebes in the Hellene earth, having fastened fawnskins to my body and placed the thyrsus into my hand, that missile of ivy ...” (Euripides, *Bacchae*, 20-25)

This missile can therefore be pictured to be somewhat like the image below by John Murray. This staff is linked with Dionysus, and is not mentioned in accordance with any other god.¹² In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus’ followers dance around holding a thyrsus. It does not seem like any music was created with this item, but it was nevertheless part of the dancing ritual.

¹¹ “This Paeon remained typical of his [Apollo’s] worship, and the quintuple rhythm characteristic of it was named after it. In like manner, the dithyramb was appropriated to Dionysus. Neither of these, however, was exclusively the property of Apollo or Dionysus...” (OCD 984)

¹² Θύρσος ... commonly *the thyrsus*, a wand wreathed in ivy and vine-leaves with a pine-cone at the top, carried by the devotees of Bacchus” (LSJ 324).



Thyrsus or staff of Dionysus. Fellows, Charles. A journal written during an excursion in Asia Minor, London, John Murray, 1839.

The *teletai* (τελεταί) were an important part of worship, and Walter Burkert defines them as “special rituals ... performed as private initiations by itinerant charismatics to serve as ‘cures’ for various afflictions, good both for this life and for the Beyond, combined with gatherings of private clubs (*thiasoi*) presenting themselves to the city in a public procession (*pompē*). The experience of ecstasy (*mania*) is crucial” (Burkert 1993, 260). Bacchic rituals could be serious affairs intended for healing or a better afterlife. If these rituals were performed during public processions, then it is likely that there was accompanying music. Perhaps the music even had a part to play in the healing process.

Burkert mentions several other Greek words in his passage, including *mania* (μανία), a word which is in common use today, but which has history with the followers of Dionysus. Liddell and Scott define it as “*madness, frenzy ... mad passion, rage, fury ... enthusiasm, Bacchic frenzy*” (LSJ 425). We can see that there is a lack of control

associated with this word – and perhaps surprisingly, compared to modern interpretations – an association with anger. This suggests that in their frenzy, worshipers released some of their rage, likely by expressing some of it in their dances and songs.

Another set of words that will seem familiar are *orgia* (ὄργια) and *orgiastikos* (ὄργιαστικός). This is where we get the modern word “orgy,” though the Greek term is not always associated with sex, as the English one is. It is in fact more closely related to excitement and mystery. ὄργια is defined as “*secret rites, secret worship, practised by the initiated alone at the secret worship of Demeter at Eleusis; also the rites of Bacchus* (LSJ 495). Whether or not these rites included activities of a sexual nature is difficult to say, especially when speaking more generally. But based on the ecstatic and drunken nature of some of the worship, as well as vases depicting aroused satyrs, one can assume that Dionysus’ cult included a certain amount of sex. All this being said, we know that cult worship included music, especially using the *aulos* or *tympanon*, which gives the term ὄργια a more musical nature which deserves to be explored further.

Dionysus’ (Perceived) Foreign Origins

Dionysus, much like the *aulos* and the *tympanon*, was viewed by the Greeks as a foreign import. This belief sometimes played into the worship of the god, and sometimes was dismissed with conveniences added to Dionysian myths. Landels describes how some Greeks claimed ownership over the god and his instruments.

“Accordingly, it might be thought, they [the Greeks] invented a story which gave priority to the Greek goddess, and then tried to account for the *aulos* having ‘emigrated’ to Asia Minor and subsequently ‘come home’ again, bringing with it the Phrygian musical tradition. There is a curious parallel here with the god Dionysos. Historically, his cult almost certainly originated in Asia Minor, and was imported into Greece; but the Greeks claimed that his mother had been a daughter of Kadmos, the Greek king of Thebes, and

that by a series of bizarre events he had been born a second time, taken to Asia Minor to be brought up by the nymphs there, and eventually ‘come home’ to Thebes.” (Landels 155).

The story itself is not particularly bizarre when one considers all the incredible happenings that take place in Greek mythology, but it is something of note that we have an explanation for the particular “series of bizarre events” in Dionysus’ life. Some Greeks who subscribed to the tale mentioned by Landels simply preferred to worship a god who was of Greek origin. The god’s time and origins in Asia Minor were still acknowledged and even highlighted in the *Bacchae* and other plays, as is evidenced by the previously discussed passage mentioning the maenads’ origins, and the fact that they are the primary worshippers of Dionysus in the *Bacchae*. “... Frequent mention is made of the fact that the *choros* of female worshippers, who have accompanied Dionysos from Asia Minor, are dressed in ‘Eastern’ clothing, and come from ‘Lydia and Phrygia’ and are singing in the foreign-sounding styles of those countries” (Landels 102). As Landels mentions, this does not prove that they actually were singing in a foreign style, but the fact that it is mentioned means that Euripides saw Dionysus’ apparent exoticism as a vital part of his and his followers’ characters. It also shows a certain level of respect for foreign music, for the play itself acknowledges Lydian and Phrygian music as powerful sounds that could affect those close to Dionysus. In the *Bacchae* in particular, we can see that Dionysus’ perceived foreign origins were embraced and respected, rather than rejected as in some myths.

Concluding Thoughts

I would argue that Dionysus is as much a god of music as he is of wine or of ecstasy. Music is intertwined with his character and rituals on a fundamental level. The Phrygian mode and the dithyramb genre were present in the worship of Dionysus more so

than in any other part of the Greek world, as were instruments such as the *tympanon*. The Great Dionysia and other such festivals featured music at the forefront, and the god had various Greek musical words associated with him. Studying Dionysian worship reveals the importance of music in Greek life, as well as the differences in music styles even within worship of different Olympian gods. We can only hope that more archaeological discoveries are made in the future that may help classicists decipher in greater detail these musical rituals, and perhaps prove definitively some of the claims outlined in this text.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. ed. W. D. Ross. 1957. *Aristotle's Politica*. Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Bundrick, Sheramy. 2005. *Music and Image in Classical Athens*. Cambridge University Press.
- Burkert, Walter. 1987. *Ancient Mystery Cults*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England.
- Burkert, Walter. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts
- Carpenter, Thomas H. and Faraone, Christopher A. 2019. *Masks of Dionysus*. Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY
- Comotti, Giovanni. 1989. *Music in Greek and Roman Culture*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Euripides. ed. Gilbert Murray. 1913 *Euripidis Fabulae, vol. 3*. Clarendon Press. Oxford.
- Goldhill, Simon. 1987. "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 107, pp. 58–76, <https://doi.org/10.2307/630070>.
- Hagel, Stefan. 2009. *Ancient Greek Music: A New Technical History*. Cambridge.
- Hornblower, Simon, and Antony Spawforth. 1996. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.
- Klavan, Spencer. 2021. *Music in Ancient Greece: Melody, Rhythm, and Life*. Bloomsbury. London.
- Kubatzki, Jana. 2016. "Music in Rites. Some Thoughts About the Function of Music in Ancient Greek Cults," *Journal for Ancient Studies*. http://www.topoi.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/eTopoi_Vol5_Jana-Kubatzki.pdf
- Landels, John G. 1999. *Music in Ancient Greece and Rome*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Lynch, Tosca, and Eleonora Rocconi. 2020. *A Companion to Ancient Greek and Roman Music*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Plato. ed. John Burnet. 1903. *Platonis Opera*. Oxford University Press.
- Mathews, R. H. 1898. "Bullroarers Used by the Australian Aborigines." *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 27: 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2842848>.
- Powers, Harold S., et al. 2001 "Mode." *Grove Music Online*. Oxford University Press. Date of access 13 Nov. 2021,

<<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.01.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000043718>>

West, M. L. 1992. *Ancient Greek Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone in the Classics department at Colorado College for helping me in my research and editing of this project. I would especially like to thank Professor Sanjaya Thakur, who read this thesis countless times in various stages of completion, and who was always willing to dedicate time to help me.