

Grecian Formulas

By Kyle Gann

Ancient Music

It's an archetypal fantasy that there is a *secret* to great music. In our century, that fantasy was most ardently expressed in *The Thematic Process in Music* (1951) by Rudolph Réti, who deduced that each great composer from Mozart to Brahms handed down to his chosen heir the secret of transforming themes. Leonard Meyer deflated that theory by revealing how far Réti had to twist notes to prove it. But the idea that the Mozart-to-Brahms line possessed (if not invented) the secret remains an Uptown fixation.

My fantasy is, if there is a secret, it predates equal temperament and the Romantics by thousands of years. Like Renaissance humanists, I want to believe Plato merely reported fact when he described how ancient melody could elicit instant ecstasy or calm, depending on the tuning. The secret must have belonged to those ears not veiled by civilization, long before the already-decadent medieval era. If it can still be decoded, it's because it's immanent in sound's nature; Scriabin had an inkling, then Dane Rudhyar and Harry Partch, now La Monte Young.

So, searching for hints, I read what I can find about pre-Christian-era music and collect recorded reconstructions. For ancient Greek music, the standard recording has long been *Musique de la*

Grece Antique by Gregorio Paniagua's Atrium Musicae de Madrid (Harmonia Mundi). Its 22 examples range from a tune from Euripides's *Orestes* (circa 408 B.C.) to a 3rd or 4th century Christian hymn, plus the sole surviving fragment from ancient Rome: four mutilated measures by Terence. However, a new contender has arrived. Christodoulos Halaris's comprehensive collection of ancient music from the Byzantine empire, more than 20 CDs to date (Orata), includes one disc, *Music of Ancient Greece*, containing 11 of the known Greek examples plus two never before recorded.

Given the rather dog-eared condition of 2000-year-old sheet music, it's reassuring that Paniagua and Halaris come as close in their conceptions of the Greek *melos* as they do. Their transcriptions are often nearly identical, though their versions of two Delphic Hymns to Apollo have little in common save quintuple meter. Ancient Greek music's quirky chromaticism, especially in the Euripides fragment, and its odd meters are satisfyingly exotic, making intervening eras comparatively prudish. No reconstruction on either disc, though, uses the quarter tones of the famous enharmonic tetrachord, which Newband play in Partch's *Two Studies in Ancient Greek Scales* (Mode).

In Paniagua's readings, I occasionally grasp why Plato found music dangerous. Paniagua tries more diverse approaches to interpretive enigmas, ensuring that

somewhere he strikes a chord a resurrected sophist would recognize. He also brings more energy; his *Hymn to the Sun* by Mesomedes of Crete (circa 130 A.D.) seethes in fervent 15/8 meter, while Halaris's version lolls along. Paniagua's orchestra—kitharas, hydraulic organ, *aulos*, monochord, and psaltery—also seems more authentic. Halaris fails to describe his instruments, but they appear to be his usual Byzantine combo of lutes, psalteries, tambouras, lyres, and a flute.

Halaris's collections of pagan classics—of which I have *Byzantine Secular Classical Music* Volumes 1 and 3, and *Hellenic Odes* Volume 1, nine discs in all—must be approached with caution. The booklets are plagued by mistakes: among them crucial symbols omitted, specious “cybernetic” explanations of ancient notation, and liner notes incomprehensibly mistranslated from Greek (*pose* for *pause*, for example). That's too bad, for Halaris also provides (as Paniagua doesn't) both the ancient notations and his transcriptions, in a laudable attempt to back up his interpretive choices. He specifies which manuscripts the songs come from, but, mad-deningly, fails to offer even approximate dates, only that the range is from the 5th century B.C. to the 15th A.D. Damn vague.

Music of Ancient Greece is the best of the Halaris discs so far. Elsewhere, without comparison recordings, it's difficult to credit his reconstructions. Though often



Muses, circa 400 B.C.

pretty, they homogenize everything into prehistoric New Age. On the Byzantine classical sets, the tempos all plod between 60 and 88 on the metronome. The hotter numbers from *Hellenic Odes* come from Greek oral tradition: possibly ancient, but no more verifiably so than other folk tunes. And one ornament is so maniacally ubiquitous—a quick double triplet A, B, C, C, B, A—you have to wonder why some geezer didn't invent a second one to break the monotony. No wonder they're dead. If Halaris's transcriptions are authentic, ancient Byzantium was *not* a place you'd want to spend Saturday night.

The only other recorded music I've found predating ecclesiastical chant is Suzanne Haik Vantoura's *La Musique de la Bible Révélée* (Harmonia Mundi), which deciphers the musical signs adorning the Hebrew Old Testament. The choral Psalms (nos. 24 and 122) are grand and stately, with interestingly chromatic modal inflections. Most of what you get,

though, is Lamentations, Song of Solomon, et al., set to melodies ostensibly different from those passed down through the European synagogues, modestly accompanied by Bible-cited instruments (psaltery, trumpet, cymbal), and sometimes by simple contrapuntal lines. The nonchoral performances are lugubrious, as though being in the Bible were a wearying imposition.

The problems of hearing ancient music are: (1) we can't escape the filter of our preconceptions and (2) the earliest music we know about already seems suspiciously evolved in its relation to society. We can patch the tunes back together, but they can't create ecstasy without the original context (a lesson for Jesse Helms and the NEA). The *idea* of ancient Greek music inspired Monteverdi, Wagner, Nietzsche, Partch, and Xenakis, but the actual melodies, if these recordings tell the truth, reveal only the secrets already lurking in your imagination. ■



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