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# Contents

List of papers presented .....	v
List of posters presented .....	xi
Foreword .....	xiii
Introduction .....	xv
1. Revisiting Walter B. Emery at Saqqara: Exploring Emery's excavations, a re-evaluation of his field notes (1946–1956) .....	1
<i>Rinus Ormeling</i>	
2. The placement of the Predynastic grave goods and its role in mortuary context: A case study of the cemeteries at Naqada .....	22
<i>Taichi Kuronuma</i>	
3. Who are the Naqadans? Some remarks on the use and meaning of the term Naqadans in Egyptian Predynastic archaeology .....	40
<i>Agnieszka Mączyńska</i>	
4. Remarks on ancient Egyptian cartonnage mummy masks from the Late Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom .....	56
<i>Emanuele Casini</i>	
5. Generous patrons, loyal clients? Some remarks on patronage of Middle Kingdom elites .....	74
<i>Martina Bardoňová and Věra Nováková</i>	
6. Military expeditions of King Hatshepsut .....	90
<i>Filip Taterka</i>	
7. Egyptian artists in the New Kingdom: Travelling artists and travelling ideas? .....	107
<i>Inmaculada Vivas Sainz</i>	
8. Material culture and social interactions in New Kingdom non-elite cemeteries .....	121
<i>Rennan Lemos</i>	

9. New finds of Greco-Roman Period decorated wooden coffins from Abusir South.....	136
Marie Peterková Hlouchová	
10. The Egyptian land-based layer: Between god(s), cosmic sacredness and fertility beliefs.....	150
Guilherme Borges Pires	
11. Identity and the protagonist in Greek and Egyptian narrative poetry: The construction of cultural identity in Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> and the <i>Tale of Sinuhe</i> .....	159
Maxwell Stocker	
12. The south face of the Helicon: Ancient Egyptian musical elements in ancient Greek music.....	173
Daniel Sánchez Muñoz	
13. Oil press installations and oil production in ancient Egypt .....	186
Jose M. Alba Gómez	
14. Artefact (re)contextualisation: Comparative context analysis from the Egyptian collection in Zagreb – preliminary research report.....	209
Porin Šćukanec Rezniček	

# Chapter 12

## The south face of the Helicon: Ancient Egyptian musical elements in ancient Greek music

*Daniel Sánchez Muñoz*

**Abstract:** The work offers a preliminary study about Egyptian influence on Greek music from the Archaic and Classical Periods to encourage future work in this field among researchers. We will focus our attention in the aesthetic and intellectual aspects of these musical traditions. In this way, we will talk about Egyptian and Greek concepts of music, the character of their musical traditions through a textual and iconographic analysis, and the question of Egypt as a musical reference for ancient Greece. We demonstrate with our study how the Egyptian influence on Greek music was very profound before the Ptolemaic Period.

**Keywords:** interactions, concept of the music, Pre-Ptolemaic Period

### Introduction

There has been considerable historiographical insistence on Eastern influence on Western music in the Ancient World. For instance, Roman music is seen as an image of Greek music (Comotti 1986, 48–49; Landels 1999, 172; Burkholder et al. 2008, 41), and Greek music viewed as an image of the Mesopotamian music, according to several authors (Guillemin and Duchesne, 1935, 117; Lasserre 1988, 72; Franklin 2002, 3; 2016, 4).

In my opinion, it is true that Mesopotamia influenced the Greek music in the aspects of organology (West 1992, 49, 70; Head 2007, 23), the musical theory (Lasserre 1988, 72; West 1992, 61; 1994, 179; Crickmore 2009, 6), and the musical thought, though there are no recent studies in that field. Nevertheless, we know that Greece had contact with many other cultures from the Mediterranean and Near East (Martin 1996, 55–60) such as Egypt, and this contact is essential as it helps us to understand the culture and the music of the ancient Greeks.

There has been a recent contribution in the field of study of Egyptian and Greek interaction in a book edited by Ian Rutherford (2016). In that book, we find different

chapters about the Greco-Egyptian interaction in several aspects, but there is no single chapter on the subject of music; only some isolated references (Lieven 2016, 53–4; Stephens 2016, 67). From my point of view, this is rather paradoxical, since nowadays, there are very good researchers specialised in Egyptian and Greek music (such as Sybille Emerit and Annie Bélis respectively). In addition, the music has been considered one of the most singular cultural aspects of the Greek world (Bélis 1999, 15) and Greek music is often featured at the start of many courses and books on the history of Western Music (Burkholder et al. 2008, 29; Fubini 2013, 41). In any case, research on Egyptian music was hardly ever interested in this question. Sometimes there are some authors interested in the organology area (Hickmann 1954, 128; Vivas 1999, 289–300; Head 2007, 25, 31), but it is superficial and insufficient. Other times, the authors had only seen the influence from the Ptolemaic Period, forgetting the impact of other Greco-Egyptian interactions (González 1994, 428; Emerit 2013, 5).

In this paper, I would like to put forth some reflections on Egyptian influence on Greek music from the Archaic and Classical periods. There are some key aspects of this study; the first and most important of which, is that it is only a preliminary study presented to encourage future work in this field among researchers. Therefore, this is not a detailed study about the relations between the Egyptian and Greek music. The second one is that the focus of this study will be placed in the aesthetic and intellectual aspects of these musical traditions, because they are the base of any commentaries about other musical aspects. While it is true that there are many differences between Egyptian and Greek mentalities, there are also some very interesting common intellectual aspects. The last key aspect of this study is the several references to the Mesopotamian music in order to contrast my reflections.

The ultimate aim of this paper is to invite the reader to reflect on two subjects: the intense relations between musical traditions in the Ancient World and the importance of the intellectual aspects of music in order to understand them properly.

### **The concept of music and its consequences**

The starting point in my study is the Egyptian and Greek concept of music. On the one hand, we can use several Egyptian words (*hn*, *hsı*, *šm<sup>c</sup>* or *ihy*) to express our concept of ‘music’ (these words do not have any acceptations related a political, religious or funerary context) (Barahona 2000, 38–42; 2002, 12–14; 2005, 42). On the other hand, the Greek term *mousiké techné*, which is the Greek term for ‘music’ (literally, ‘the Muses’ Art’) combines three aspects: the *lexis* (the spoken word), the *orchésis* (the dance), and the *mélos* (the melody, i.e. the actual music) (García et al. 2012, 34–5).

Certainly, we can observe that these musical traditions are conceived from the standpoint of singing and not instrumental playing. So, while the Egyptian words refer to some types of singers (Barahona 2002, 15; Emerit 2013, 8), the Greek *mélos* is profoundly related to singing and lyrical poetry. It would be an extension of the *lexis*,

the spoken word (Yarza 1964, 880; Bailly 1985, 1248; Rocci 2002, 1205). I will show some reflections from this common vocal nature of the music.

### ***New visions about the lyrical repertoire***

Though they do not possess any form of musical notation (but they do have an outstanding literary dimension), we must view the works from the Egyptian and Greek lyrical poetry as a group of songs and not only of poems.

In addition, they would have some thematic similarities; therefore, we can imagine that they could have had some similarities in their musical interpretation, although we do not have much information to reconstruct it. For the time being, we will note the thematic similarities of these groups of songs:

#### *New Kingdom love poetry and Sappho's poetry*

Some people have noted the possible Asiatic origins of some topics in the Sappho's poetry. In fact, we have important lyrical poetry from Mesopotamia, but it is mostly dominated by the topic of the 'sacred marriage' between a priestess and a deified king representing the marriage between, respectively, the goddess Inanna and the pastoral god Dumuzi. However, in my opinion, the Egyptian love poetry from the New Kingdom is more intimate, personal and near to the human being although its character is a little deliberated and literary.

Therefore, I tend to believe that the Sappho's poetry has more similarities with this Egyptian love poetry than with the Mesopotamian love poetry. And that would not be by chance, since Charaxus, the Sappho's brother, visited and traded with the Greek colony of Naukratis, where he could learn this repertory in some way, as has been commented in previous studies (Fernández 1958, 8–9; Lichtheim 1976, 181; Leick 1994, 173; Lesky 2010, 215–219; Lazaridis 2016, 194).

Among these similarities, there is the common invocation to the goddesses of love (*Love Songs from Papyrus Chester Beatty I*, Ia.5 = Lichtheim 1976, 184; Tobin 2003, 325–326; Sappho frs 1 and 5 = Rodríguez 1980, 354, 356) (Lazaridis 2016, 195) or the common idea of a comfortable bed for the beloved person (*Love Songs from Papyrus Chester Beatty I*, Ic.7 = Lichtheim 1976, 184; Tobin, 2003, 325–326; Sappho fr.46 = Rodríguez 1980, 365) (Lazaridis 2016, 195).

We can also observe the common idea about love as a way to become sick or heal without any other natural or medical intervention. Thus, in Egypt, a song from the *Cairo Love Songs* (Serrano 1993, 268; Tobin 2003, 318) says that a man felt inebriate drinking nothing when he embraced and kissed a woman, while the Seventh Stanza from the *Love Songs of Papyrus Chester Beatty* (Lichtheim 1976, 185; Serrano 1993, 266; Tobin 2003, 327) shows how a man recovers his health with only the presence of his love. In Greece, Sappho shivers due to love (Eros) and she is unable to work her loom (Sappho frs 31, 102 and 105 = Rodríguez 1980, 361–362, 373, 375).

Finally, we find several reflections on the frustration and desolation due to the disillusionment and abandonment by the beloved person (*Nakht-Sobek Songs from*

*Papyrus Chester Beatty I*, 46 = Lichtheim 1976, 188; Serrano 1993, 269; Tobin 2003, 331; *Love Songs of Papyrus Harris* 500, 15 = Tobin 2003, 314–315; Sappho frs 94 and 130 = Rodríguez 1980 370–371, 377).

### *'Harper's songs' and the *Odyssey**

We find a musician called Demodocus at the well-known *Odyssey* by Homer who sang while playing the lyre, and who was blind by the Muse in exchange for his beautiful voice. He appears in the joyful banquet organized by Alcinous in the arrival of Odysseus to Scheria before his departure for Ithaca, as a sign of hospitality (*Odyssey* VIII, 59–83 = Pabón 1982, 208–209).

Blind musicians in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt are normally related with the palatial context as the case of Demodocus, who worked for Alcinous, the king of the Phaiacians. However, while the origin of blindness in Mesopotamian musicians is not necessarily related with the deities, in Egypt, musicians from the Middle and New Kingdoms' iconographic depictions are blind or wearing a white blindfold because they cannot establish a visual contact during the communication with the deity in the religious rituals (Manniche 1978, 18–21; Galán 2001, 95; Shehata 2009, 38–9; Simini 2011, 32). Therefore, their blindness and the blindness of Demodocus most likely would have been of the same origin.

In addition, several of these depictions with blind musicians performing with chordophones (harps, lutes or lyres) are associated with a text, the 'harper's songs', related with the happiness as a way to get past the death of a person. In this sense, we have an invitation from a harpist to be happy and enjoy the moment because nobody knows anything about a possible life after death, as we can read on the Antef Song from in the tomb of Paatenemheb from Saqqara and the *Papyrus Harris* 500. Another example is in the banquet scene on Wall D of the hall in the tomb of Horemhab. In this scene, a blind singer, with other musicians, performs a text about 'the good things which are received from the hand of the blessed royal scribe every day' (Lichtheim 1945, 181, 184, 192–193; Manniche 1991, 97; Serrano 1993, 270–271; Tobin 2003, 308).

The relationship between 'harper's songs' and Demodocus is clear. These songs were hiding a sad reality before the people (the death of a beloved person) and Demodocus, with his joyful and epic music about the adventures of Odysseus, hid the Odysseus' suffering due to being far away from Ithaca. Nevertheless, in this case, Odysseus uncovers the Demodocus' 'lie' with his tears before his bitter souvenirs.

### *The instruments, an accompaniment of the voice*

The musical instruments are an accompaniment of the voice in order to emphasise the content of the song lyrics and give it more emotional capacity. The ideal in both musical traditions would be the self-accompaniment as we can appreciate in the depictions of musicians in some stelae of the 'harper's songs' (Manniche 1991, 97–103; Simini 2011, 32–36) or the *hsw*-singers, who accompanied themselves with

their hands (Emerit 2013, 8), but also with the Greeks reciting poetic texts with a chordophone (the *barbitós* in the Sappho's poetry, the lyre and cithara, etc.) (García et al. 2012, 34–35, 69–70).

In this sense, the chordophones (harps, lyres, and lutes) would be the most frequent musical instruments in both cultures because they are the best suited to singing with a melodic accompaniment. Percussion and wind instruments would not be so frequent, especially the latter, although they were not totally absent, as I shall later explain (West 1992, 82, 122; García et al. 2012, 124 [16]; Emerit 2013, 4–5).

Could we establish some Egyptian influences in Greek musical instruments if they have the same mission in these two musical traditions? We have the clearest example in the chordophones. On one hand, Martin L. West (1992, 54) notes that the volutes, zigzags and other complicated ornaments from the Greek cithara in the Classical Period had a remote origin in the Minoan and Egyptian chordophones (we must keep in mind the New Kingdom depictions, in which the string instruments had very complicated shapes) (Manniche 1991, 48, 53). On the other hand, and in spite of their supposed Lydian origin, the different types of harps from the Archaic and Classical Greece (*pectis*, *magadis* and *trigon*) seem to be very similar to the Egyptian angular harp from Late Period conserved at the Louvre Museum (N 1441), a type of instrument present in Egypt since the New Kingdom. In fact, all these chordophones were used for ludic purposes and had many strings, so they would be avoided by Plato when he was conceiving his ideal city (Manniche 1991, 53, pl. 6; Lawergren 2000b, 55; Head 2007, 25, 32).

On the subject of percussion instruments, Egyptian round-frame drums were the most important influence on the Greek round-frame drum known as *tympanon*. Both instruments were used by women in popular events (West 1992, 124). The subject of aerophones will be commented on later.

## The character of the music and its consequences

### *A common character*

These reflections are interesting and original, but these Greek musical elements could have actually had a Mesopotamian origin. Certainly, the Sumerian concept *nam-nar* (the nearest to our actual concept of 'music' in Mesopotamia) is partially equivalent to the Greek *mousiké techné* because we can translate *nam-nar* literally as 'the Art of Singing' (García et al. 2012, 34–35; Ziegler 2012, 30 [9]). In addition, we can show this common supremacy of the vocal nature of the music in two myths. On one hand, in Mesopotamia, Inanna (associated with the singing and the percussions represented by the lamentation drum *šem* through two courtesans of hers) tried to killed the arrogant pastoral deity Dumuzi, who was with his musicians of woodwind instruments. On the other hand, in Greece, Apollo, with his voice and lyre, beat and killed the arrogant Marsyas (who is playing an *aulós*, more or less, a 'double oboe') (Lawergren 2000a, 124; Bottéro and Kramer 2004, 303; Gabbay 2008, 53).

Was Greek music really influenced by Egypt? I believe so, because the characters of Egyptian and Greek music were identical in opposition to Mesopotamia. First, let us take a few points from this text by Martin West on Greek music:

Pindar was a professional musician. But most Greeks, we may be sure, would have agreed with him in putting music high on the list of requisites for the good life. Music, song, and dance were seen as being, together with orderly sacrifices to the gods and athletic facilities for men, the most characteristic manifestations of a civilized community in peacetime. The grimness of war is expressed by calling it 'danceless, lyreless, generating tears'. Words like 'lyreless' are similarly used to convey the joylessness of death and other miseries (West 1992, 13–14).

Secondly, we ought to emphasise that *mélos* (the part of the *mousiké techné* which we could understand as the 'melody') has a relation with the word *melí, -ítos*: honey, i.e. sweet and nice things in Greek (Yarza 1964, 878; Bailly 1985, 1244; Rocci 2002, 1201).

This joyful character of the music was close to the character of Egyptian music. In effect, most part of the deities related with the music in ancient Egypt were related also with the love, joy, fertility or inebriety, as Meshenet, Taweret, Meret, Bastet, Bes and, most importantly, Hathor, who was associated with the singing and the sistrum during a long time (until Isis obtains this association in a late moment of Egyptian history). Diodorus Siculus (*Historical Library* I, 16 = Parreu 2001, 181–182) talks about Thoth (called in this case as 'Hermes'), the god of the scribal art and the wisdom, as the inventor of a three-stringed lyre, but we have no other connections of this deity with music (Barahona 2000, 45–51; Kasparian 2012, 49–50).

Shifting our focus to Mesopotamia, it is true that music had a close relation with happiness. For instance, Inanna was the goddess of love as Hathor in Egypt, and she had a very important relation with the music. For example, she had the 'me', the divine powers in the Sumerian imaginary among which we find some musical elements. However, she was mainly associated with the *castrati* singer of dirges known in Sumerian as *gala* (*kalû* in Akkadian) who perform the laments with the arched harp *balağ* and the lamentation drum *šem*. In addition, Dumuzi was listening to his wood wind musicians when Inanna tried to kill him, and the sister of Dumuzi, Geštinanna, appears with her musical abilities at this moment until the death of his brother. In any case, the most important idea to keep in mind about the character of music in Mesopotamia was that the principal deity and patron of music was Enki, associated with wisdom, the arts and intellectual skills (Spycket 1972, 161; Cavigneaux 1978, 178–179; Jacobsen 1987, 50; Bottéro and Kramer 2004, 195–196; Dumbrill 2005, 30; Gabbay 2008, 49; Shehata 2014, 106–107).

Thus, the character of Mesopotamian music was dominated, in a certain sense, by sadness and intellectuality. Themes of happiness that are associated to Egyptian and Greek music are not apparent in Mesopotamian music, although Egyptian and Greek music also had some relations with the sadness (García et al. 2012, 58; Emerit 2013, 11–12).

### ***The consequences of this character***

A joyous character is common in both Egyptian and Greek music. Here are the consequences:

#### *The association of dance with music*

Dance in Egypt was always used to express different emotions and attitudes in several contexts: respect to the deities (*The Instruction of Any* 3, 5–10 = Lichtheim 1976, 136), the sadness for the death of a person (*The Story of Sinuhe*, 195 = Lichtheim 1973, 229; about the dance of *mww*), but also, happiness before gods and kings (*The Autobiography of Harkhuf*, D. *To the far right*, 7–17; *Unas Pyramid Texts*, Utterance 517, 7–8; *The Birth of the Royal Children*, 11.20–12.10; Lichtheim 1973, 26–27, 48, 221). The iconography from the Old and New Kingdoms helps us confirm this, but also shows the frequent association with music, perhaps as a physical expression of the sad and happy emotions caused by music (Vandier 1958, 391–486; González 1994, 422–427; Anderson 2000, 2565–2567).

In the case of Greece, we must remember how *orchésis* (the dance) was an essential part of music according to the concept of the *mousiké techné* (García et al. 2012, 34–35). However, in Mesopotamia, in spite of the several allusions to it, dance seems more absent than in these musical traditions. I tend to think that it is logical due to the important sad and intellectual dimensions of the Mesopotamian music (Gabbay 2003).

#### *The relative importance of the aerophones*

Wind instruments had, in fact, a limited and negative presence in Mesopotamia (Spycket 1972, 171), but also in some Indo-European cultures, as the Hittites (Machabey 1944, 5–6; de Martino 2000, 2662), the Celts (who mostly featured brass instruments in addition to the lyre, in association with the figure of the bard, singing epic tales; Vendries 1999, 95–98) or the Persians, since Herodotus (*Histories* I, 132, 1 = Schraeder 1977, 201) said explicitly they did not use *aulói* (plural of *aulós*) in sacrifices (de Jong 1997, 112). Nevertheless, wind instruments attained a relevant presence in Greece, although nothing is clear about their arrival in Greece (West 1992, 82). Among these instruments, we find the straight trumpet *salpinx* or the *syrinx*, the pan flute, but above all the *aulós* in spite of the moralizing critiques against them in the literary texts due to their relation with the ecstasy (West 1992, 105).

Aerophones had also a notable presence in Egypt: since the long flute in a Predynastic mudstone palette, passing through the end-blown flute *m3t* and the single-reed instrument *mmt* in the Old and Middle Kingdom funerary, sacred and popular scenes, until the Egyptian ‘double oboe’ from the New Kingdom banquet scenes (Manniche 1988, 194; Emerit 2013, 4), which could be apparent in some texts from Herodotus under the Greek term ‘*aulós*’ in popular festivals (Herodotus, *Histories* II, 48, 1–3; II, 60, 1–3 = Schraeder 1977, 336, 349).

I gravitate towards the school of thought that this presence of aerophones in Greece and Egypt could have had their origins in the common happy spirit of their music,

and I also think that Egypt was responsible for the arrival of aerophones to Greece through the people of the Mediterranean Levant, where Egypt had a big presence during the second millennium BCE. One can find many iconographic representations of instruments similar to the Egyptian ‘double oboe’ and the Greek *aulós* (Dumbrell 2005, 33, 258–259, 350).

#### *A common and occasional ‘inconsideration’ of music*

Despite my words, music was never a very important subject in the Egyptian scribal curriculum (Williams 1972, 220). In addition, we have this sentence from the 21st Instruction of the *Papyrus Insinger*, where we can read ‘do not dance in the crow, no not make face in the multitude’ (Lichtheim 1980, 205). We must relate this sentence with another, in this instance, from Diodorus Siculus (*Historical Library* I, 81, 7 = Parreu 2001, 292–293) about the Egyptians: ‘they consider music to be not only useless but even harmful, since it makes the spirits to the listeners effeminate’.

This was a far cry from Mesopotamian thought, in which we can observe several musical allusions in Wisdom Literature (Cheng 2009, 165). However, it had certain affinity with Greek thought, since music was sometimes considered damaging for the morals and musicians were treated as vile people according to classical authors. This common inconsiderateness of music in Egypt and Greece is normal since the authors of our texts were members of the social elite dedicated to political matters. Music was, more or less, viewed as a kind of ‘hobby’ or distraction (West 1992, 34–36; Lichtheim 1973, 3).

### **Egypt, a musical reference to Greece**

Are all these ideas about the Egyptian influence on Greek music a current invention? I would like to illustrate how the Greeks considered Egypt as a musical reference for them. For instance, in spite of the contradictions and other problems of the sources on Pythagoras (or the Pythagorean School), we have several hints about that he received his knowledge from Chaldea and Egypt (Figari 2002, 180–182; Riedweg 2005, 25). So, we could say that Pythagoras received his musical knowledge from Egypt, as well as from Chaldea, and a possible example of the musical aesthetics aspect could lie in the similarities between the idea of Egyptian *Ma’at* as ‘the harmony of tones, the melodious sound’ and the Pythagorean Cosmic Harmony as ideal yet inaudible music (Barahona 1997, 230; Riedweg 2005, 82; García et al. 2012, 204–205; Stephens, 2016, 53).

Herodotus also maintained the idea of Egypt as a musical reference for Greece. Certainly, when he talked about the cultural similarities among the Spartans and the non-Greek people, he said that the Egyptian and Spartan heralds, *aulós* players and cooks inherited their profession from their parents (Herodotus, *Histories* VI, 60 = Schraeder 1981, 293–294) (Benardete 1969, 172). Nevertheless, it is more important to note how Herodotus showed an Egyptian origin for some Greek musical customs.

So, he noted how the Egyptians played the *aulós* and the *krotala* (castanets), sang and danced during the festivals for 'Dionysus' and for other deities as the Greeks in their festivals, which were more recent than the Egyptian festivals (Herodotus, *Histories* II, 48, 1–3; II, 60, 1–3 = Schraeder 1977, 336, 349). In addition, he said the Greek funeral chant sung for Linos or created by him had its origins in a very ancient Egyptian chant where Linos was called 'Maneros' (Herodotus, *Histories* II, 79, 1–3 = Schraeder 1977, 367–368).

And finally, Plato also has a musical reference for Greece in the Egyptian world. In fact, Plato considered that the regulation of the music in his ideal state would be very important for the education of people and the respect of laws, following the example of Egypt, where many thousands of years ago, the Egyptian temples fixed a group of traditional fine postures and melodies created by the goddess Isis for the training of the people (*The Laws* II, 656d–657b = Lisi 1999, 252–253).

In addition, and in my view, the musical ideas from Egypt are present also in a passage of the Plato's *Republic* (II 369a–III 414a = Eggers 1988, 121–195) where the author considered that the music only needed to accompany and reflect the nature of the characters and actions from the Homeric texts (which would be recited for the proper education of citizens in his ideal city). I lean towards this thinking because Egyptian influences in Plato's *Republic* have already been noted on at least one occasion (Stephens 2016, 53–54) and, more importantly, because music in Egypt was an accompaniment to the spoken word as explained previously.

## Conclusions

Although this was really a preliminary study, only the examination of the Egyptian and Greek musical aesthetic and intellectual aspects, and no other issues more preferred by the research in the music of Ancient World (the organology or the musicians, in addition to the musical theory), has shown that the Egyptian influence on Greek music was quite profound, prolonged and stronger than the Mesopotamian influence.

Certainly, the Egyptian influence on the music of Classical Antiquity did not end with the Hellenism. In fact, Hellenistic and Roman Egypt continued to offer a very particular musical panorama in the Mediterranean World. For instance, a very impressive and complex musical instrument of the Classical World was born in Egypt: the *hydraulis*, the water organ. We must also remember that the Egyptian papyri conserve most of the musical documents of Classical Antiquity. In addition, Egypt was the birthplace of Athenaeus of Naukratis and Claudius Ptolemy, two very important theorists about the aesthetic and the harmonic theory from the final of Classical Antiquity (West 1992, 192, 254; Vendries 2002, 171–174; Fleury 2005, 8).

I hope that this study encourages researchers to work in this fascinating field of research. I am sure that their research will help to improve my reflections

and our knowledge about two of the most interesting musical traditions in the Ancient World.

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