

FROM DIONYSUS TO *DIE WALKÜRE*: THE ANCIENT GREEK AULOS AS A KEY TO
WAGNER'S WRITING FOR THE OBOE AND ENGLISH HORN

by

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This work is dedicated to:

*My Mom, who sparked my love of art and music and served as an enthusiastic editor,
My Dad, who never missed an opportunity to hear my youth orchestra rehearse,
and Conor, who unfailingly supports me and brought me many cups of tea and coffee during this
process.*

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INTRODUCTION

Act III of Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* opens somberly with a protracted and sentimental passage in the string section. Tristan, who was mortally wounded at the end of Act II, hovers between life and death. Everyone is waiting for Isolde to arrive, believing she is the only one who can save Tristan's life. The dark mood established by the strings is only interrupted briefly by solo lines in the horn, winds, and cello, before returning to the dismal character of the opening. Then, quite suddenly, a new timbre captures the spotlight. A single note from the English horn emerges, not from under the stage in the pit, but from onstage. A shepherd has appeared, playing a yearning tune that floats across the fields and distant water; the English horn is the voice of his call. While the first note of the solo gently picks up the previous phrase from the strings, the texture of the music changes rapidly, leaving the English horn to sing its mournful tune, with no accompaniment, for almost three full minutes. In the stage directions, Wagner describes this solo as a "melancholy, yearning tune on a reed-pipe," and Tristan himself later describes the melody as "ancient." Many questions arise from this unique opening. As a composer known for intentionality in every aspect of his work, and with a large and diverse orchestra at his disposal, does it seem possible that Wagner's choice of English horn was arbitrary, or is it more likely that the instrument was chosen due to its unique ability to convey the emotion of this moment? Did Wagner, who specifically states in the libretto that he wishes to impart an "ancient," "melancholy" reed-pipe tune, perceive an intrinsic link between the timbre of the English horn and these musical topoi? As Wagner was fascinated by Ancient Greek culture, might there be a connection between his emotionally-driven uses of the oboe and English horn and similar uses of their ancient forerunner, the Greek *aulos*?

Since before the time of the Ancient Greeks, it has been acknowledged that music possesses a powerful ability to influence listeners' emotions. Musicians and theorists have attempted to explain or categorize this phenomenon for centuries. The Ancient Greeks, most

notably Plato and Aristotle, wrote often about the communicative power of music, their work shaping the thought of Roman and Renaissance writers. The topic continued to occupy scholars throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with notable attempts at musical categorization made by Johann Mattheson (1717), Johann Adolph Scheibe (1746), Johann Georg Sulzer (1792-1794), and Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart (1806).¹ During the twentieth century, the related field of “topic theory” was introduced by Leonard Ratner (1916-2011). Ratner identified “topics” or “topoi,” which included classification of intervals, styles, and genres encompassing such designations as “hunt,” “pastoral,” “military,” or “exotic.” His exploration of how these are manifested within music centered particularly on the Classical period. As part of their research into how musical gestures and styles affect listeners’ emotions in absolute music, psychologist Jenefer Robinson and music theorist Robert S. Hatten wrote the following:

Topic and expressive genres are not the result of wool-gathering by uninformed listeners; they have been handed down from composer to composer and they are part of the cultural tradition of Western tonal music. There is strong evidence that these expressive genres were well known to composers and listeners alike.²

Philosophy professor Kathleen Higgins modifies Robinson and Hatten’s view by highlighting the cross-cultural power of music: “Culture fleshes out many of the details of the emotional experience [of music], yet we have every reason to think that music can stir emotions of solidarity across cultural divides.”³ Therefore, if we accept these tenets, music has both an innate power to impact listeners irrespective of cultural origins, and also benefits from centuries of cultivated extra-musical associations. These aspects, true of music at large, are also true of specific instruments, including the oboe and its “sister” instrument, the English horn.

¹ Danuta Mirka, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014), 3.

² Jenefer Robinson and Robert S. Hatten, “Emotions in Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 34, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 82.

³ Kathleen Higgins, “Biology and Culture in Musical Emotions,” in *Emotion Review* 4, No. 3, 273-282, quoted in Peter Meineck, *Theatrocracy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 159.

The central arguments of this project, which explores the link between the Ancient Greek *aulos* and Wagner's use of the oboe, will be threefold: 1) that there is something inherent in the oboe and its ancestors' sounds which allow it to convey specific emotions and *topoi*, 2) that these emotions have been intensified through centuries of tradition and learned associations and 3) that the extra-musical associations assigned to the oboe are evident in the work of the musically expressive composer Richard Wagner. Chapter 1 will explore these questions in light of the oboe's connection to the Greek *aulos*, including examination of the ancient instrument's usage and emotional range. This will be followed in Chapter 2 by an evaluation of the similarities and differences between the modern oboe and the *aulos*, while Chapter 3 will explore Romantic period use of the oboe in orchestral and operatic settings. Ancient Greek culture's hold on nineteenth-century Germany and its impact on Wagner will be the subject of Chapter 4, before Chapter 5's evaluation of the treatment of the oboe and English horn within Wagner's music, particularly the *Ring Cycle*.

This project is intended to increase oboists' awareness of their instrument's history, specifically exploring how the oboe's heritage has directly influenced composers' instrumentation choices. Emotions, such as melancholy, lamentation, and yearning, and characters such as the feminine and the pastoral, have been associated with the instrument and its predecessors for almost three millennia. While many composers could have been the focus, Wagner's music is inviting to explore in this regard, due to his skill as an orchestrator, and the plethora of his writings which explain his musical ideals. Consideration of Wagner's purposeful use of the oboe and English horn—particularly in light of his fascination with Ancient Greece—will highlight how his specific uses of these instruments, far from being “the result of wool-gathering,” are dominant tropes within not only his work, but also a broader scope of orchestral, operatic, and solo literature written for the oboe and English horn.

Chapter 1: THE AULOS IN ANCIENT GREEK THOUGHT AND PRACTICE

Music in Greek Society

Greek historian Thucydides (ca. 460/455-ca. 399 BC) provides the text of the Funeral Oration Pericles delivered in memory of the fallen after the first battles of the Peloponnesian War. While his focus is on the heroism of the deceased and the pain of those left behind, Pericles also uses the opportunity to praise the city-state for which the soldiers died, celebrating Athens for its democracy, education, athletics, faith, commerce, and beauty: "In short, I say that as a city we are the school of Hellas....[and] the admiration of the present and succeeding ages will be ours."¹ To his list we could add many more contributions of the Greeks to the western world, including: language, literature, art, music, philosophy, mathematics, medicine, and Thucydides' field, history. The prophecy that Athens would become the admiration of succeeding ages did of course come to pass, as attested by Shelley's exclamation in his 1821 play *Hellas* that "We are all Greeks."²

Music was an essential part of Greek life. The Greek word for music, "mousike," meaning "art of the muses," gives insight into the artform's supposed origins and importance: "For the Greeks, music was the gift of the Muses and their divine ringleader, Apollo."³ Music was present in religious rituals and worship, featured at drinking parties called *symposia*, utilized during Greek drama, employed in the education of citizens, and used to intimidate opposing armies in battle. As musicologist Thomas J. Mathiesen states, "Music occupied a prominent place

¹ Thucydides, "Thucydides (c.460/455-c.399 BCE): Pericles' Funeral Oration from the Peloponnesian War (Book 2.34-46)," Fordham University, accessed July 12, 2020, <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/pericles-funeralspeech.asp>.

² Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Hellas: A Lyrical Drama*, ed. Thomas J. Wise (London: Reeves and Turner, 1886), viii.

³ Sheramy D. Bundrick, *Music and Image in Classical Athens* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

in everyday life not only because it was amusing and socially valuable but also because it embodied larger universal principles and was a vehicle for higher understanding.”⁴ Music, it was believed, had the power to shape a listener’s behavior and character, and should therefore be treated with caution and care.⁵ In discussing the rising importance of music in Athens, art historian Sheramy Bundrick states: “Music had always been considered essential, but in the fifth century this attitude escalated into a heightened awareness of the power of music and its ability to influence the well-being of the city and its inhabitants.”⁶ Much of what we know regarding music in Greece comes from the Classical period (or the fourth and fifth centuries BC), a time when music’s power to influence society for good or ill was seriously explored by philosophers and music theorists.

There was great variety in Ancient Greek music. Both singers and instrumentalists took part in this influential artform, although the philosophers Plato and Aristotle both considered instrumental music to be subordinate to vocal music.⁷ Singers were versatile: they could sing without accompaniment, alongside instrumentalists (particularly those playing the lyre, kithara or aulos), or while accompanying themselves on a stringed instrument. The Greeks had various types of hymns and songs, including the *paean* and *dithyramb*, commonly used in the worship of Greek gods and during festivals, and vocalists were featured entertainment during *symposia*, the drinking gatherings for male citizens. Singers were also essential to Greek theater as choruses served to comment on the action of the central characters.

The Greeks had a myriad of musical instruments at their disposal. According to Mathiesen, third to fourth-century scholar Aristides Quintilianus:

[C]andidly recognizes the popularity and importance of musical instruments in his own time...In the course of the second book of his *De Musica*, he comments

⁴ Thomas J. Mathiesen, *Apollo’s Lyre: Greek Music and Music Theory in Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 27.

⁵ Bundrick, 103.

⁶ Bundrick, 6-7.

⁷ Mathiesen, 160.

at length on the influence of music on behavior and in section 16, he observes that musical instruments are called “instruments” because—like a pruning knife—they are used to do something. In the case of music, instruments enhance delight and strengthen music’s power and effect.⁸

In order to fully tap into this power of music, the Greek instruments encompassed all the instrumental “families” with which we are familiar: brass (trumpet-like salpinx and horn), percussion (drums, bells, clappers), winds (auloi, pan flutes), strings (lyre, kithara and their derivatives) and even the hydraulis, a first-century BC water organ, forerunner of our keyboard instruments.

One of the most important of these groups of instruments was the stringed instruments, with popular varieties for both amateur and professional musicians. Although there were many types and sizes of stringed instruments, two stand out as the most widely used. The chelys lyre, a stringed instrument with a tortoise shell soundbox,⁹ has been called “the quintessential instrument of the amateur musician.”¹⁰ The other was the kithara, an elaborately carved instrument with flat sides. It was predominantly associated with virtuoso performers, frequently used in musical competitions, and highly praised for its ability to strongly affect the listener.

Wind instruments also had a place of prominence in Greek music. Instruments included the syrinx (or pan flute), salpinx (a trumpet-like instrument), and the aulos—the most highly prized of the wind instruments. The aulos was a double-piped instrument equipped with two double reed mouthpieces and open holes down the body which would be closed by the fingers. Each of the individual pipes, or resonators, was called a “bombyx” and the finger holes on the instrument were called “trupemata.”¹¹ As we will see, the aulos was ubiquitous in Greek culture, although, due to its associations, the instrument was not without controversy. Many questions

⁸ Aristides Quintilianus, *On Music in Three Books*, trans. and ed. Thomas J. Mathiesen (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), quoted in Mathiesen, *Apollo's Lyre*, 160-161.

⁹ Bundrick, 14.

¹⁰ Bundrick, 14.

¹¹ Mathiesen, 183-4.

about it remain for us today. In the following sections we will consider modern-day misconceptions regarding the instrument, what we know regarding how it was played, what ancient sources tell us regarding its usages, and why it was often the subject of controversy.

The Aulos

There are several common misconceptions regarding the aulos and its Roman successor the tibia, as noted by Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes (both noted oboists and musicologists): “While it is clear that both these terms [aulos and tibia] refer to double pipes played by one musician, the method of sound generation remains a matter of considerable debate. Were they flutes, or did they have reeds, and if so, were they single or double?”¹² Burgess and Haynes go on to state that many scholars believe the term “aulos” must have been a generic word used to describe various types of wind instruments, owing to the variety of situations for which the term is used and what they believe to be contradictory reports of the usage and sound qualities: “Aulos and tibia must have referred to any type of musical pipe: flutes, single and double reed pipes.”¹³ While the exact nature of the aulos has been much debated, scholars such as Mathiesen, Bundryck, and Barbara Levick, rejected the notion that “aulos” was a generic term, favoring instead the interpretation that the term refers specifically to a double reed instrument.

The most common misconception regarding the aulos has been that it is a type of flute. The confusion here is largely due to the unfortunate history of translating “aulos” as “flute” (or even double clarinet¹⁴), which leads readers to envision the aulos as similar to the recorder or the transverse flute, on which sound is created by blowing air horizontally across an embouchure hole. Scholars still find it necessary to battle this linguistic issue: “It should be stressed from the outset that the aulos is a reed instrument, not a flute, as the term is still translated in even quite

¹² Geoffrey Burgess and Bruce Haynes, *The Oboe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 11.

¹³ Burgess and Haynes, 15.

¹⁴ Gilbert Rouget, *Music and Trance: A Theory of the Relations between Music and Possession*, trans. Brunhilde Biebuyck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 76.

recent translations of Greek literature.”¹⁵ While bone flutes are some of the oldest instruments ever to be unearthed, the transverse flute was not used in ancient Greece.¹⁶ Written accounts, as well as iconographic and archaeological evidence, all indicate that a reed of some kind was required for the aulos to make a sound and that the instrument was held in front of the body, not out to the side.

The second question put forth by Burgess and Haynes leads us to ask whether the aulos reed was single or double. This debate originated with diverging interpretations of written accounts of aulos reed manufacture and iconographic sources rather than archaeological evidence, as no Greek aulos reeds survive. Both Theophrastus’s *Historia plantarum* and the Aristotelian *De audibilibus* discuss the correct methods for reed making, which will be discussed later, and provide insight into the single or double reed issue.¹⁷ Much of the debate hinges around interpretations of the word “glotta”—or “tongue”—and whether or not this term can definitively be linked to a reed type. Mathiesen states that since the term was used in the plural, “and implied a yoke or something yoked, it can be argued that a double reed is intended,” although he acknowledges that both sides of the debate have merit.¹⁸ Twentieth-century scholars reviewed the primary sources and came to varying conclusions regarding this question, although more recent scholars such as Bundrick have concluded that the aulos, particularly in the Classical Greek period, was a double reed instrument.¹⁹

The modern instrument most similar to the Greek aulos is the oboe: “The oboe, because it has a double-reed mouthpiece, is perhaps the closest to the Greek aulos, without being identical in form.”²⁰ This relationship is stressed by scholars such as Barbara Levick, who directly translates

¹⁵ Mathiesen, 182-3.

¹⁶ Raymond Meylan, *The Flute* (Portland: Amadeus Press, 1988), 34.

¹⁷ Mathiesen 198.

¹⁸ Mathiesen, 203.

¹⁹ Bundrick, 34.

²⁰ Bundrick, 34.

“aulos” as “oboe” in her writings: “Phrygian auloi, oboes, are familiar to Euripides, who alludes to the mode in connection with Asiatic and Bacchic worship” and “Pindar dedicated his twelfth *Pythian* to Midas, oboist of Akragas.”²¹ Re-creations based on unearthed instruments also highlight the connection between the instruments. British archaeologist and museum curator Kathleen Schlesinger, the first to write a comprehensive book on the aulos, remarked on its sound: “...we have reconstructed as accurately as we can a Greek cithara and found that it has a full round tone, and discovered that the aulos had a quality approximating to that of an oboe...”²² Oboists regularly claim the aulos as their historical predecessor without much awareness of the significant similarities that exist between the two, particularly in terms of usage.

As one of the most popular Greek instruments, the aulos’s sound was described in many ancient Greek texts. The diversity of these descriptions is noteworthy: “Written sources give a...confusing picture of the tonal characteristics of these ancient instruments. Both the aulos and tibia are described as having a strong, resonant tone, but at other times they are described as having a soft, gracious quality.”²³ The playwright Sophocles, for example, described the aulos as “sweet” and “pleasant sounding,”²⁴ whereas others described it as like the “buzzing of wasps” or “squawking like geese.”²⁵ While this may indeed seem confusing, it becomes less so when we consider the variety of sounds achievable on the modern oboe. European players have a drastically different tonal concept than American players, and—even within one school of playing—sound differs greatly based on reeds and repertoire needs. For example, we aim for

²¹ Barbara Levick, “In the Phrygian Mode: A Region Seen from Without,” in *Roman Phrygia: Culture and Society*, ed. Peter Thonemann (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 41.

²² Kathleen Schlesinger, *The Greek Aulos: A Study of its Mechanism and of its Relation to the Modal System of Ancient Greek Music Followed by a Survey of the Greek Harmoniai in Survival or Rebirth in Folk-Music* (London: Methuen, 1938), xvii.

²³ Burgess and Haynes, 15.

²⁴ James McKinnon, “The Rejection of the Aulos in Classical Greece,” in *Music and Civilization: Essays in Honor of Paul Henry Lang*, eds. Edmond Strainchamps and Maria Rika Maniates (New York: Norton, 1968), 209.

²⁵ Martin Litchfield West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 105.

somewhat different sound qualities based on whether Stravinsky, Mozart or Brahms is being performed. The body of the aulos was also crafted from a variety of materials including wood, bone, metal and even ivory, and this range of materials likely produced different sound qualities, just as the tone of modern instruments changes based on whether the instrument is made of wood or plastic. The timbre of the aulos would also be greatly influenced by different varieties of reeds. British Lecturer in Classics John G. Landels describes how different auloi reeds may have been created with particular timbres and purposes in mind: “The aulos, in its day, had a special reed of its own, carefully designed and (no doubt) often modified to give subtle effects of tone and dynamics, capable of the great variety of styles needed to match the variety of musical contexts in which it was played.”²⁶ Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that different aulos players had different tones, some of which may have been more highly prized, and that aulos sounds may have differed depending on context, including—for example—whether the performer was playing in a solo competition or as part of a large group of auletes (aulos players) leading an army to war.

In order to play the aulos, musicians would hold the two pipes out in front of them, place both reeds in their mouth, and blow. It is debated whether separate melodies would be played on each pipe, whether one would always provide a drone, over which the other pipe would weave a melody, or if the pipes would be played in unison. Iconographic evidence, such as the vase in Figure 1.1, gives us some understanding of finger placement on the aulos, but also raises more questions: “On vases, the musicians often have their fingers in the same places on both pipes—implying they were played in unison—but it is difficult to be certain whether this is artistic license or actual practice.”²⁷

²⁶ John G. Landels, “The Reconstruction of Ancient Greek *Auloi*,” *World Archaeology* 12, no. 3 (February 1981): 301.

²⁷ Bundrick, 35.



Figure 1.1. Red-figure amphora, attr. Kleophrades Painter, ca. 490-480 BC, The British Museum
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It seems a logical conclusion that in different circumstances the two pipes may play in unison, one pipe might play a drone for the other, mirror the other pipe at the fourth or fifth, or play an independent melody.

On vase paintings players are sometimes depicted with a strap which extends around the head and covers the player's mouth. This strap, called a *phorbeia*, had two slits through which the reeds would be placed (see Figure 1.1). "Phorbeia" is also a word used by the Greeks to mean "horse's halter," and it does indeed look similar.²⁸ The *phorbeia* began to appear in Greek art not long after 700 BC.²⁹ Several purposes have been suggested for this device. It is possible that the aulos was, at times, played by circular breathing—the process by which the player continues to blow through the instrument while taking in a new breath simultaneously. It has therefore been suggested that by supporting the player's cheeks, the *phorbeia* facilitates this technique and helps the player overcome high levels of backpressure.³⁰ Other scholars firmly disagree with this proposal: "Contrary to the common conjecture, the *phorbeia* does not provide special support for

²⁸ Bundrick, 35.

²⁹ West, 89.

³⁰ Burgess and Haynes, 15.

checks, enabling them to act like a bellows.”³¹ The most likely purpose of the *phorbeia* was to help stabilize the two reeds within the mouth and help keep air from escaping from around the sides of the reeds. With two reeds to control, the seeping of air from a poor seal around the reed seems to have been a common issue. Plutarch describes a famous mythological aulos player’s issue with this: “Marsyas, it seems, suppressed the violence of his breath with a *phorbeia* and *peristomios*, composed his countenance and concealed the distortion.”³² Mathiesen describes how the *phorbeia* would assist players with this problem:

[The *phorbeia*] allows the performer to maintain a relaxed embouchure because the *phorbeia* itself seals the mouth and holds the lips together against the pressure of the breath. A relaxed embouchure in turn avoids the tendency of a tight embouchure to choke the reed—or stop it from beating altogether—and allows the lips to exercise sensitive adjustments in pressure on the reed.³³

As aulos players are not always shown wearing the *phorbeia*, it is possible that it was only required when musicians needed to play for long periods of time or project outdoors.³⁴

In some vase paintings, the carrying bag for the aulos, called the *sybēnē* (or *subene*) is visible. This bag was usually made from fawn or leopard skins and included a strap by which the case could be hung nearby. Like modern oboists, auloi players protected their reeds by keeping them in a special box, called a *glottokomeion*.³⁵ Both are visible in Figure 1.2.

³¹ Mathiesen, 221.

³² Plutarch, *Moralia*, Vol. VI, trans. W.C. Helmbold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 112, quoted in Mathiesen, 220.

³³ Mathiesen, 221.

³⁴ Bundryck, 35.

³⁵ West, 89.



Figure 1.2. Terracotta Lekythos, attr. Brygos Painter, ca. 480 BC, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Use of the Instrument in Greek Society

Scholars use various research tools to obtain details regarding the beliefs, practices, and daily lives of cultures so far removed from us as Ancient Greece. Of relevance here are mythology, art and iconography, archaeology, and literary and theoretical writings. While, as Burgess and Haynes correctly note, “evidence from surviving fragments, written documentation and iconographic sources is often contradictory or ambiguous,”³⁶ there is much that we can deduce about the aulos and its usage within Greek society. From mythology, we learn of the relative merits (and demerits) of the aulos; from art, of its popularity, appearance, and uses; from archaeology, some detail of the instrument’s construction and dimensions; from literature, its uses and importance; from philosophy, debates regarding its positive and negative influences on society, and—from theorists—something of the perceived power of the music itself.

³⁶ Burgess and Haynes, 14.

The aulos is central in several Greek myths. While there are different versions of the aulos's origin story, the most popular seems to have been that Athena, goddess of wisdom and the arts, created the aulos. Upon seeing the way that playing the instrument distorted her perfect features, however, she threw it away. The aulos was discovered where Athena had discarded it by a satyr (half goat-half man) named Marsyas, who served the god Dionysus. Most unwisely, Marsyas proceeded to challenge Apollo, the god of music, to a playing competition or *agon*. Marsyas played his aulos and Apollo played his favored instrument, the lyre (or kithara in some versions). The first round ended in a draw, but the second round was won by Apollo. Reasons for his victory differ: "Post fifth-century authors recount the *agon* with much variation; some say Apollo won because he could sing and play his instrument simultaneously whereas the aulos-playing Marsyas could not, others that Apollo won by turning his kithara upside down."³⁷ Regardless of how Apollo won, the result was that Marsyas was flayed alive for his presumption in challenging the god of music. As established in the Marsyas myth, the aulos is often associated with satyrs, who are in turn associated with Dionysus. The indulgent god of wine is often depicted with an aulos nearby. The Marsyas myth also presents the dichotomy between the aulos and the kithara. Bundrick writes, "A topos in the modern study of ancient Greek music has been the alleged opposition between the music of Apollo and the music of Dionysos—the former logical, rational, and linked with stringed instruments, the latter wild, irrational and allied with the aulos."³⁸ The Greeks' beliefs regarding the geographical origins of the aulos also contributed to its mythological and emotive associations. Neither the aulos nor Dionysus had their origins in mainland Greece, but instead came from Phrygia, a neighboring land which was believed to be wild and untamed. These attributes came to be ascribed to both Dionysus and the aulos, and, as will be discussed, had far-reaching effects on the uses and reputation of the aulos in Greece.

³⁷ Bundrick, 136.

³⁸ Bundrick, 106.

The visual arts contribute greatly to our knowledge of the aulos. In fact, fifth century BC Athens—the period during which the playwrights Euripides and Aeschylus as well as philosophers Socrates and Plato lived and the aulos flourished—has been called the “city of images.”³⁹ Music-making, particularly on the lyre and aulos, is pervasive in Greek art. In addition to providing the visual details noted above regarding the aulos’s basic design (including the *phorbeia* and storage bags), vases, friezes and sculptures attest to the popularity of the instrument and provide other clues concerning its usage. Vase paintings in particular show the wide variety of uses to which the aulos was put. Players of the aulos include both males and females, slave and free. Auloi are played by humans, gods, and satyrs, and scenes with the aulos in use include festivals, processions, rituals, *symposia*, and battles. Myths related to the aulos are portrayed in vase paintings and sculptures. A notable relief sculpture depicts the afore-mentioned competition between Marsyas and Apollo. A centrally-placed servant of Apollo waits in anticipation, knife drawn, to flay Marsyas (Figure 1.3).



Figure 1.3. Marble Relief Slab, Praxitelean style, ca. 330-320 BC, National Archaeological Museum Athens, [CC-BY-SA-4.0](#), photo by George E. Koronaios

³⁹ Bundrick, 2.

Images of the aulos also provide details regarding how the instrument was played. For example, in Figure 1.4 a muse uses her fingers to adjust the reed—perhaps to manipulate the opening—as many modern oboists do today.



Figure 1.4. Red Figure Amphora, attr. Peleus Painter, ca. 440 BC, The British Museum
© The Trustees of the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

Unfortunately, art museums and art historical texts continue to perpetuate misinformation, with titles or scene depictions commonly using the term “flute” instead of “aulos.”

Some of our most valuable information about the aulos comes from archaeological findings. There at least fifteen examples of aulos pipes that survive.⁴⁰ These invaluable historical pieces, some made of wood, bone, and bronze, have been carefully measured and used to make reproductions. While these replicas provide invaluable information regarding possible hand positions, playing techniques, tone hole positions and fingerings, the lack of surviving reeds means that there is much of which we cannot be sure. Just like on the modern oboe, the shape, length, and scrape characteristics of a reed can change everything regarding the instrument’s tone and pitch.

⁴⁰ Philip Neuman, “The Aulos and Drama: A Performer’s Viewpoint,” accessed June 28, 2018, <https://www.didaskalia.new/issues/vol2no2/neuman.html>.

Greek literature provides insight into some of the uses of the aulos. For example, Homer mentioned the aulos twice in the *Iliad*, once relating to a wedding celebration and the other instance in the Trojans' camp:⁴¹ "When he [Agamemnon] gazed on the plains of Troy, he was astonished to see all those fires which were gleaming on the walls of Ilium and to hear the sound of the auloi and the syrinx mingling with the noise of the crowd."⁴² The aulos was also important to Greek theater. Citizens would crowd into amphitheaters to watch the latest Greek tragedies, comedies and satyr plays at gatherings that could last all day. Stepped seating for audiences rose in a semi-circle around a flat, circular space called the "orchestra," where singers and musicians would perform. One vital component of Greek drama was the Greek chorus. Far from being tangentially related to the real action, as choruses in nineteenth-century opera sometimes are, the Greek chorus was key to conveying meaning to the audience. Classics and music scholar M. Owen Lee explains this importance based on one famous Greek playwright: "In Aeschylus the real dramatic element is the chorus, interpreting in the orchestra the real meaning of what the actors are acting in front of the skene. The chorus sees everything at a deeper, intuitive, unconscious level while the actors hardly see anything at all, hardly knowing why they are acting as they do."⁴³ Much of Greek tragedy was sung and the key instrument that was used alongside the chorus was the aulos.⁴⁴ Bundrick provides a helpful summary of the aulos's importance in the theater: "Clearly the right aulete had tremendous influence, for during the performance it was he, more than the playwright, who drove the action. He apparently stood in the orchestra together with the members of the chorus, perhaps even in the very center near the permanent altar..."⁴⁵ As we have very few surviving examples of music from ancient Greece, it is unclear precisely how

⁴¹ West, 82.

⁴² Leon Goossens and Edwin Roxburgh, *Oboe*. Yehudi Menuhin Music Guides (London: Kahn & Averill, 1993), 7.

⁴³ M. Owen Lee, *Athena Sings: Wagner and the Greeks* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 27.

⁴⁴ Bundrick, 175.

⁴⁵ Bundrick, 175.

the aulos was used to accompany drama—for example, did the aulos play the melody with the chorus or harmonize? Nevertheless, its effects are documented: the playwrights Sophocles and Euripides describe the aulos as “sweet,” “pleasant sounding,” and “blended with light laughter,”⁴⁶ although the aulos does not only represent agreeable emotions. Aristotle’s views on the role of the aulos within drama are reframed by French philosopher Pierre Destrée: “The aulos’s high-pitched (and most probably high volume) phrases are meant to enhance [the audience’s] growing fear and pity for those heroes.”⁴⁷ Beyond the aulos’s ability to augment the onstage action with the chorus, it was even used to mimic sounds from real life, such as animal cries or the spinning of a discus.⁴⁸

The aulos is very often depicted as a part of the Greek *symposion*. A *symposion* was a drinking party for men held in a specific room of Greek homes called an *andron*, where different types of music would be played both by the attendees and hired musicians. As Bundrick notes, “[O]ne of the purposes of an education in mousike was to train young men to sing and perform at the *symposion*—the realm of Dionysos.”⁴⁹ Guests had the option of singing and accompanying themselves on the lyre, having another guest accompany them on the aulos, or hiring a professional aulos player.⁵⁰ The number of *symposion* vase paintings depicting the aulos underlines the connection of the aulos with the renowned festive excess of Dionysus. Women frequently play the aulos in such scenes, leading scholars to emphasize the erotic nature of the *symposion* and of the “flute girls,”⁵¹ as the aulos-playing women are often called. The sheer number of vase paintings with such scenes “attest[s] to the prostitute status (real or perceived) of

⁴⁶ McKinnon, 209.

⁴⁷ Pierre Destrée, “Aristotle on the Power of Music in Tragedy,” *Greek and Roman Musical Studies* 4 (2016): 243.

⁴⁸ Destrée, 243.

⁴⁹ Bundrick, 58.

⁵⁰ Bundrick, 81.

⁵¹ West, 85.

many of the professional female entertainers who frequented the *symposia*, while also suggesting the immoderation that could be induced by music itself.”⁵²



Figure 1.5. Red Figure Bell Krater, attr. Nicias Painter, ca. 420 BC, National Archaeological Museum of Spain, [CC-BY-2.5](#), photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen

This connotation regarding the aulos is a clear example of why Aristotle believed the instrument capable of producing wild and “Bacchic frenzy.”⁵³ These unruly emotions which the aulos could arouse would lead to serious discussion regarding whether or not the aulos was appropriate entertainment for Greek citizens.⁵⁴

The aulos’s connections to the god Dionysus were also highlighted during worship rituals and festivals celebrating the god. Scenes of cult worship documented on vases seem to indicate that both men and women worshiped at the altar of Dionysus and that the aulos was by far the preferred instrument for these occasions.⁵⁵ However, the aulos was not used in Dionysian cults merely because it was such a popular instrument:

⁵² Bundrick, 115.

⁵³ Destrée, 243.

⁵⁴ Aristotle quoted in Goossens and Roxburgh, 9.

⁵⁵ Bundrick, 153.

In ancient Greece the double clarinet (aulos) was the chosen instrument for the Dionysiac rituals during which the maenads and corybantes surrendered themselves to the manifestation of their enthusiasm or mania. As soon as they heard it, they fell “into the trance of divine possession.”⁵⁶

Second century AD Greek scholar Julius Pollux stated in *Onomasticon* that typical modes played on the aulos were “enthusiastic and frenzied, suited to the rites of Dionysus.”⁵⁷ It was therefore believed that the sound of the aulos itself could inspire mania or madness in worshippers.

Another form of entertainment which featured auloi players was musical competition. These large-scale events featured instrumentalists as well as singers and dramatists presenting spoken recitations. Citizen-performers and, more frequently as time passed, professional musicians would compete for acclaim and prizes on the most prestigious instruments: the kithara and the aulos. The writer Pausanias describes the use of the aulos at the Pythian Games, which were some of the most important competitions in Ancient Greece:

A significant sixth-century development was the reorganization of the Pythian Games at Delphi to include musical contests [*mousikoi agones*], generally believed to have taken place in 586 B.C., although an *agon* for kitharodes may have preceded this reorganization. Pausanias makes clear that aulos contests were a new addition to the festival, including one for aulodes (with a singer accompanying the aulos player) and one for auletes, solo performers of the instrument. Sakades of Argos first won the latter with his daring *Pythikos nomos* commemorating Apollo’s victory over the dragon, a piece that would become standard fare in competition. Pausanias adds that the aulodic contest was disbanded only four years later because the performances were thought too “elegiac.”⁵⁸

Mathiesen notes that the emergence of the genre of music Pausanias describes, “nomoi,” or lengthy works for solo musicians, likely mirrored the rise in importance of professional musicians. Such works often played by the auloi were “highly descriptive or evocative” and often

⁵⁶ Rouget, 76.

⁵⁷ Pollux, *Iluii Pollucis Onomasticon*, trans. Immanuel Becker, (Berlin: Nicolaus, 1846) 4.82, quoted in Mathiesen, 185.

⁵⁸ Bundrick, 7.

featured well-known subjects, such as the aforementioned myth of Apollo's defeat of the dragon.⁵⁹

Criticism of the Aulos

Despite the aulos's popularity, there were those who expressed concerns regarding its use, particularly beginning in the fourth and fifth centuries BC. American musicologist James McKinnon notes: "There is little trace of antagonism toward the aulos or of opposition between it and the kithara up to the time of Plato and Aristotle."⁶⁰ Aristotle, however, stated firmly that "the flute [aulos] must be eliminated," going on to explain that "it is not a moral instrument."⁶¹ One justification for those who disapproved of the aulos on moral grounds was its role in Greek mythology. As mentioned previously, the opposing natures of the deities Dionysus and Apollo were believed to be reflected in their respective instruments. The kithara and lyre were imbued with Apollo's characteristics of restraint, wisdom, and purity. The aulos, on the other hand, was tied to Dionysus's penchant for excess, drunkenness, ritual madness, and agitation. The supposed superiority of Apollo's instrument is also highlighted in the previously recounted Marsyas myth. Apollo, the "quintessential Hellenic deity"⁶² and his superior lyre defeat the aulos-playing satyr, and appropriately punish him for his presumption. Detractors of the aulos found validation in the Apollo-Marsyas myth, which then served as an allegorical tale of the superiority of the lyre or kithara to the aulos. Beginning in the nineteenth century, views regarding the dichotomy between the Greek Apollonian and Dionysian characteristics have driven much scholarship on the issue. Although others, such as Hölderlin and Winckelmann, had noted these Greek opposites, Friedrich Nietzsche is often given credit for emphasizing the principle, as discussed in his *Birth of Tragedy*.

⁵⁹ Mathiesen, 59.

⁶⁰ McKinnon, 209.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, (Bucarest: Ed. Cultura, 1924), 203, quoted in Carmen Cozma, "The Ethical Values of the Music Art of the Ancient Greeks: A Semiotic Essay," accessed June 20, 2018, <https://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Anci/AnciCozm.htm>.

⁶² McKinnon, 203.

Curt Sachs, a German musicologist who lived until the mid-twentieth century, describes a “radical antithesis” between the “immaterial-detached, noble-innocent, ‘Apollonian’” nature of kithara music and the ‘earthly-sensuous, passionate-intoxicated, ‘Dionysian’” nature of aulos music.”⁶³ Despite the influence of such descriptions, it is possible that the opposition between Dionysus and Apollo in Ancient Greece may not have been as extreme as suggested centuries later, and certainly was not the only driving force behind negative views of the aulos.

In addition to concerns presented by mythology, the Athenian philosopher Plato and his student Aristotle, together called the “Fathers of Western Philosophy,” found much to criticize regarding the aulos. The sound quality and subsequent influence on listeners were major concerns for both. In *The Republic* Plato states:

When someone gives music an opportunity to charm his soul with the flute [aulos] and pour those sweet, soft, and plaintive tunes we mentioned through his ear...if he keeps at it unrelentingly and is beguiled by the music, after a time his spirit is melted and dissolved until it vanishes, and the very sinews of his soul are cut out.⁶⁴

Aristotle added that the aulos incited “impetuous and passionate sensations in the soul.”⁶⁵ One of his fears was that if a listener indulged in aulos playing and felt these emotions for too long, the listener would adopt these weak characteristics. Aristotle is very firm in his view that “music has a tendency to form the moral character and influence the very soul.”⁶⁶ Other writers and philosophers had come to similar conclusions regarding the aulos. Pratinas, a sixth-century BC Athenian tragic poet, wrote satirically and yet decisively of his view:

Let the aulos dance behind, for it is the servant. It is accustomed to be the leader only for door to door carousals and the brawling of drunken young men. Drive away the one that has the breath of the spotted toad, burn the spit-soaked reed,

⁶³ Curt Sachs, *Die Musik der Antike*, ed. Ernst Bucken (Potsdam: 1928), quoted in McKinnon, 203.

⁶⁴ Plato, *The Republic*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 1047.

⁶⁵ Aristotle quoted in Goossens and Roxburgh, 9.

⁶⁶ Aristotle, *Politics* (1340a), paraphrased in Schlesinger, *The Greek Aulos*, xv.

the low-babbling-unmelodious-arhythmic-stepping flatterer, its body formed by a reamer.⁶⁷

Therefore, various writers and philosophers linked the aulos to weak, unsavory emotions and even drunken carousals.

The potent effects of the aulos were so concerning to Plato and Aristotle that they both wished to ban it from their hypothetical ideal societies, believing that the aulos was unsuited for cultivating the right type of Athenian citizen. Aristotle in particular spoke quite vehemently about the instrument's ethical shortcomings:

Among these refinements of art we must take only what is necessary to feel all the beauty of the rhythms and of the songs and to have a more complex sensation concerning the music than this physical excitement which even the animals feel as well as the slaves and the children...The flute [aulos] must be eliminated...It is not a moral instrument; its role is only to stir the passions.⁶⁸

In Plato's *Republic* (399b-e), his character Socrates projects a similar sentiment: "it's nothing new that we are doing, in judging Apollo and his instruments to be superior to Marsyas and his."⁶⁹ While it is unlikely that the theorizing of Plato and Aristotle radically altered the practical use of the instrument or translated to an outright ban, it is clear they wanted contemporaries to take heed of their warnings. Additionally, as their writings were among the most circulated and read by future generations, their ideas have had significant bearing on posterity's views of the instrument.

The exclusion of the aulos from Plato and Aristotle's perfect society also meant eliminating it from the realm of education. This ban had two parts: 1) that students should neither spend their time listening to aulos music, nor 2) that free men should learn how to play it. As cited time and again, the Greeks believed that music had the power to influence a person's

⁶⁷ Pratinas cited by Athenaeus, *Athenaei Naucraticae Dipnosophistarum libri XV*, 3 vols., trans. Georgius Kaibel (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1887-90; reprint, Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1965-66), 3:361.21-362.15, quoted in Mathiesen, 93.

⁶⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 203, quoted in Cozma.

⁶⁹ Bundrick, 35-36.

character or even their soul: “To the end of his life he [Plato] held that music is in itself the representation or reproduction in another medium of goodness or badness in the soul, and that by hearing good music a child is brought into contact with a good soul and so, through music, is assisted on the path toward virtue.”⁷⁰ Aulos playing, with its frenzied, passion-filled and drunken associations, was not considered conducive to pointing students down the “path toward virtue,” and indeed would have quite the opposite effect. Music theorist Aristides Quintilianus tells us that another philosopher who wrote quite a lot about music, Pythagoras, “advised his students who had heard the sound of the aulos to cleanse themselves as if stained in spirit and to chase away the irrational desires of the soul with melodies of good omens played on the lyre.”⁷¹ Additionally, mythology was once again used to reinforce Aristotle’s low opinion of the aulos:

The tale goes that Athena found an aulos and threw it away. Now it is not a bad point in the story that the goddess did this out of annoyance because of the ugly distortion of her features; but as a matter of fact it is more likely that it was because education in aulos-playing has no effect on the intelligence, whereas we attribute science and art to Athena.⁷²

Instead of the aulos, the lyre was praised as the ideal instrument for education, as it was seen to embody mathematically-perfect musical proportions and connections with the gods Athena and Apollo, thereby associating it with wisdom, knowledge and purity. Children were frequently taught to play the lyre as part of their education—there are even vase paintings featuring school scenes with young boys practicing the instrument.

Another chief criticism of the aulos was that it “robbed its player of speech.”⁷³ As a wind instrument, sound production on the aulos requires musicians to blow into two reeds, which cannot allow for simultaneous speaking or singing. While this may not seem like an insurmountable problem for those of us in the twenty-first century, rhetoric, or the art of

⁷⁰ Schlesinger, xv.

⁷¹ Aristides Quintilianus, *De musica libri tres*, 2:19, ed. Reginald Pepys Winnington-Ingram (Leipzig: 1963), quoted in McKinnon, 207.

⁷² Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341a-b, trans. Harris Rackham (London, 1932), quoted in McKinnon, 205-6.

⁷³ Bundrick, 36-7.

persuasive speech, was a very important part of the Greek liberal arts education, which included the subjects deemed necessary for free citizens to function well in society. The prevention of speech while playing the aulos led Aristotle to state:

[L]et us add that the aulos happens to possess the additional property telling against its use in education that playing it prevents employment of speech. Hence former ages rightly rejected its use by the young and the free, although at first they had employed it...but later on it came to be disapproved of as a result of actual experience, when more were more capable of judging what music conduced virtue and what did not.⁷⁴

A similar example of this belief that the aulos was inferior in education due to its restriction of speech comes in the form of an anecdote regarding a young man names Alcibiades, who would go on to become a famous statesman in Athens. The story of Alcibiades is recounted by Plutarch:

At school, he usually paid due heed to his teachers, but he refused to play the aulos, holding it to be an ignoble and illiberal thing...the lyre blended its tones with the voice or song of its master, whereas the aulos dosed and barricaded the mouth, robbing its master of both voice and speech. “Auloi, then” said he, “for the sons of Thebes; they know not how to converse. But we Athenians, as our fathers say, have Athene for foundress and Apollo for patron, one of whom cast the aulos away in disgust and the other flayed the presumptuous aulos-player.” Thus, half in jest and half in earnest, Alcibiades emancipated himself from this discipline.⁷⁵

Views regarding what was acceptable for a free citizen to study carried over into a contrast between professional and amateur musicians. Plato and Aristotle were both quite opposed to any citizens studying music to become professionals—McKinnon even states that it was their “primary motive” in the banning of instruments such as the aulos. Aristotle states in *Politics* that “auloi must not be introduced into education, nor any other professional instrument such as the kithara.”⁷⁶ The aulos and the kithara were put into the “professional” category, as both were notably played in music competitions by specialists. The reputation of the aulos again gets

⁷⁴ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1341a-6, trans. Harris Rackham (London: 1932), quoted in McKinnon, 205.

⁷⁵ Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 2:4-5, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives* (London: 1916), quoted in McKinnon, 206.

⁷⁶ Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 2:4-5, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives* (London: 1916), quoted in McKinnon, 206.

in the way, with scholars such as Pythagoras lamenting that “the sound of the aulos was ostentatious and suited to festivals but in no wise suited to a free man.”⁷⁷

Citizens, it was believed, should be adept at playing their instrument or singing, both to share their art at the *symposion* and to understand music, one of the essential elements of a liberal arts education. However, a strict line should be drawn between amateur expertise and a professional career as a musician. When a free citizen played an instrument as an amateur, it was lauded as personal development; however for those musicians who were paid to perform it was considered a menial skill: “[S]kills which tradesmen and technicians exercise to earn a living are merely tolerated, as opposed to those prized intellectual pursuits whereby the ‘freeman’ improves himself.”⁷⁸ A professional aulos player, Aristotle believed, did not “strive for his own betterment but for the pleasure of his audience,”⁷⁹ therefore failing to properly satisfy the musical element of education. Even the physical appearance of aulos players was criticized as unworthy of citizens, with Alcibiades disparaging the playing technique: “The use of the plectrum and the lyre, he argued, wrought no havoc with the bearing and appearance which were becoming to a gentleman; but let a man go to blowing on an aulos, and even his own kinsmen could scarcely recognize his features.”⁸⁰

While many Greek scholars did criticize the use of the aulos in education, there was belief that due to its emotional scope the aulos had benefits as an instrument for cathartic or casual listening. Bundryck discussed this interesting “dual perception”: “While fifth-century Athenians acknowledged the possible dangers of the aulos, they also recognized its positive aspects, when the instrument was used in moderation and in appropriate situations.”⁸¹ Both

⁷⁷ Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, 2:4-5, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives* (London: 1916), quoted in McKinnon, 206.

⁷⁸ McKinnon, 211.

⁷⁹ Pauline A. Leven, “New Music and Its Myths: Athenaeus’ Reading of the Aulos Revolution,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 130 (2010): 43.

⁸⁰ Plutarch, *Alcibiades*, *ibid.*, quoted in McKinnon, 206.

⁸¹ Bundryck, 38.

Aristotle and Plato, the aulos's sharpest critics, discuss what some of these "appropriate situations" may be. Aristotle describes the sound of the aulos as "exciting," however he also "goes on to cite some of the benefits of uses of exciting music for adults—in the dithyramb, the tragedy, and 'sacred melodies'—all accompanied by the aulos."⁸² He continues to say that "such music has the effect of purgation and harmless pleasure."⁸³ Aristotle, to be very clear that the aulos should not be used for education, states: "[The aulos] should be used in the kinds of circumstances where the spectacle offers more potential for katharsis than for learning."⁸⁴ The aulos's potential emotional impact makes it an ideal instrument to act as a katharsis. In his *Politics*, Aristotle states that he intends to further define katharsis, and while it does not appear he ever did so, Nathan Spiegel, a Polish classics scholar, iterates that the word—according to Aristotle—meant "the disburdenment of certain morbid elements embedded in the soul, which are roused and brought to the surface through direct contact with tragedy."⁸⁵ Portrayals of such emotional upheavals using the aulos occurred during the festival of Dionysus in Athens where, as Spiegel recounts,

It was customary to lament the suffering and death of the god. Savage outbursts, weeping, breast-beating, scratching of the cheeks until bleeding, the elegiac melody of the ancient flute [aulos] working its effect upon the nerves; all these induced irrepressible waves of Dionysiac wailing, leading to an ecstasy of mourning. This festival offered an opportunity for the discharge of private torments imprisoned in the breast of every participant.⁸⁶

Aristotle's examples of acceptable times for aulos playing all consist of music which conveys anguish or pining, which is desirable in order to let heavy emotions be purged from the soul. Plato also sees musical and dramatic situations associated with tragedy as appropriate times for the use of the aulos. Plato speaks with Socrates' voice:

⁸² The dithyramb was a type of Greek hymn often associated with Dionysus and accompanied by the aulos.

⁸³ Aristotle, *Politics*, 8:1342a, *ibid.*, quoted in McKinnon, 210.

⁸⁴ Bundrick, 35.

⁸⁵ Nathan Spiegel, "The Nature of Katharsis According to Aristotle: A Reconsideration," *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 43, no. 1 (1965): 23.

⁸⁶ Spiegel, 28.

Listen and consider. When even the best of us hear Homer or some other tragic poet, representing one of the heroes in a state of grief and making a long speech of lamentation, or even chanting and beating his breast, you know we give ourselves over to it. We suffer along with the hero and take his sufferings seriously.⁸⁷

Destrée explains that “the heroes involved here are singing—of course singing in the way a rhapsode does when he recites the *Iliad* with the accompaniment of his lyre, and (more literally) singing with the accompaniment of the aulos in the case of tragedy.”⁸⁸ And so, as the aulos was not going to disappear from Greek life, Plato and Aristotle admitted that some uses of the instrument were justified and indeed quite effective.

Conceptions of the Aulos Rooted in Harmonia and Phrygia

It has already been demonstrated that Greek philosophers and theoreticians believed certain instruments could directly impact the soul and character of a listener, and—in Greece as well as other ancient cultures—it was believed that particular qualities in music, such as its scale systems, would have a major impact: “The ancient Greeks and Chinese, the civilizations of India and of Islam, all the ‘high cultures’ in fact, have associated musical scales with emotions, passions, the cosmic order and ultimately, with man’s moral and physical health.”⁸⁹ In ancient Greece, the link between music and its impact on a person’s behavior or personality was called *ethos*. The term *ethos* could also be applied specifically to a musical instrument or composition in order to characterize it. The desire to fully explore the potential power of music emerged during Plato and Aristotle’s time:

Although the Greeks had long been aware of the potential effects of music on one’s actions—witness the deadly song of the Sirens in the *Odyssey*—extensive theoretical exploration of musical ethos apparently did not arise until the late sixth and early fifth centuries, escalating into the fourth.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 10:605c10-d5, quoted in Destrée, 249.

⁸⁸ Destrée, 249.

⁸⁹ Rouget, 91.

⁹⁰ Bundrick, 10.

Ethos is closely tied to the Greek *harmonia*. *Harmonia* in Greek music has several possible meanings. Generally, *harmonia* refers to “harmony” or an agreeable joining together, which was also personified as a goddess. Around the sixth century it began to refer to the “joining together” of musical notes.⁹¹ Plato and Aristotle use the term to refer at different times to the tuning of an instrument, types of melodies, and forms of scales—similar to what we would call modes.⁹² Other writers refer to modes as *tonoi*—and the decision to use one or the other term seems to be based more on the author’s preference or the period in which they were writing than a strict difference between the function of the words.⁹³

One of Plato and Aristotle’s chief objections to the aulos was its ability to play in many different *harmoniai*. Credit for the creation of auloi which were able to play in multiple modes is given to Pronomus before the beginning of the fourth century.⁹⁴ In addition to specific placement of the tone holes, rings were added which could be opened or closed to allow the instrument to play in all of the modes. This ability went to the heart of one of Plato’s criticisms of the aulos. He believed that instruments should have to re-tune in order to play in various modes, thus avoiding mode mixing within a single composition.⁹⁵

In addition to its ability to play in various modes without major adjustments, writers were also wary of the aulos because of its extensive pitch flexibility. As a result of this Plato very much favored stringed instruments:

By their very nature as stringed instruments they were associated with ideas concerning the simple relations of lengths measured on a vibrating string, and hence to mathematical speculation about numbers... The aulos on the other hand, is a musically approximate instrument, and the relation between its sounds—

⁹¹ Bundrick, 140.

⁹² Bundrick, 140.

⁹³ Since Greek music theory spans approximately one thousand years, terms tended to evolve in meaning. For further discussion of Greek music theoretical terms see Mathiesen’s *Apollo’s Lyre* and Hagel’s *Ancient Greek Music*.

⁹⁴ Stefan Hagel, *Ancient Greek Music: A New Technical History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 398.

⁹⁵ McKinnon, 211.

sounds that are easily altered by blowing differently or by differently covering the side holes—are more difficult to express in numbers.⁹⁶

The mathematical imperfection of sound vibrating through a pipe versus a vibrating string (as in a lyre or kithara), as well as the flexibility of pitch adjustments done via the embouchure or partially covering holes, all worked against the aulos. As Plato stated: “We are not innovating my friend, in preferring Apollo and the instruments of Apollo to Marsyas and his instruments.”⁹⁷

The various modes or *harmoniai*, including Dorian, Ionian, Lydian and Phrygian, originally received their names from specific geographical regions. The Phrygian mode in particular is associated with the aulos. Plato stated “The Phrygian mode has the same effect among harmonies as the aulos among instruments.”⁹⁸ The aulos originally made its way to Greece from Phrygia which is located within modern-day Turkey and was near Ionia and Lydia, which also had modes named for them. It is notable that the mythical Dionysus and Marsyas also originated in Phrygia, as their development and iconography are so intertwined with the aulos. The mythological and historical origin of the aulos also became tidily linked through assertions that when Athena rejected the aulos it landed in Phrygia, allowing both Dionysus and Marsyas to make use of it.⁹⁹ From there, Dionysus made his way into Greek culture, in part due to the importation of wine, which traveled from Phrygia to mainland Greece.¹⁰⁰ The regional origin of the aulos in Phrygia is important, since associations with Phrygia were adopted into the instrument’s aesthetics. As French ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget observes:

The Phrygian aulos players, as Louis Laloy observes, must have been the “true gypsy fiddlers of antiquity.” The instrument’s technical possibilities, the quality of its timbre and the wealth of its inflections, in conjunction with the expressive

⁹⁶ Rouget, 218.

⁹⁷ Plato, *Republic*, 399e, trans. Paul Shorty in *Plato: The Collected Dialogues*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (New York: 1963), quoted in McKinnon, 205.

⁹⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, 8:1342a, *ibid.*, quoted in McKinnon, 210.

⁹⁹ Mathiesen, 177.

¹⁰⁰ Tim Unwin, *Wine and the Vine: An Historical Geography of Viticulture and the Wine Trade* (London: Routledge, 1991), 87.

possibilities of the mode, certainly allowed players to produce melodies of great emotional impact.¹⁰¹

The placement of semitones within the modes is what distinguishes one from the next and gives each its distinctive quality. Aristotle stated that “Musical modes have divergent natures, so that listeners are affected differently....They respond to some...in a more mournful and anxious way; to others (for example the more relaxed modes), their response is more tender-minded.”¹⁰² Each *harmonia* was characterized by certain defining characteristics. Dorian, for example, is described by Aristotle as “balanced and composed,” while Phrygian “creates ecstatic excitement.”¹⁰³ While the modes were restructured in the Middle Ages, the terms, at least, retained similar musical connotations. The bottom tetrachord of the Phrygian scale has a pattern of half-step, whole-step, whole-step. When used in a descending gesture, this Phrygian tetrachord has often been associated with lament or sorrow. Interestingly, this “lament bass” is commonly used to provide the ground bass in Baroque-era laments. In his exploration of the power of the modes, American musicologist William Kimmel describes the different emotional impacts of ascending versus descending versions of the Phrygian tetrachord:

In the ascent through the major form of the tetrachord the arrival is felt as an active and successful attainment of a melodic goal. In the descent through the Phrygian form with decreasing melodic energy the arrival is felt as a passive yielding to the gravitational pull of the lower tone and a cessation of melodic energy. The implications of these two opposite manifestations of melodic energy for the dialectics of life and death in music are obvious.¹⁰⁴

The emotional scope of the Greek Phrygian mode—whether for lament or for Bacchic frenzy—is well-attested, and—when paired—the aulos and the Phrygian mode seem to have produced intense emotional responses. Aristotle links the “ecstatic excitement” of the Phrygian mode directly with the aulos in his *Politics*, stating that the Phrygian mode:

¹⁰¹ Rouget, 224.

¹⁰² Aristotle, *Politics*, 8:1340a40-b5, trans. Reeve and Barker (n.p.), quoted in Destrée, 244-5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ William Kimmel, “The Phrygian Influence and the Appearances of Death in Music,” *College Music Symposium* 20, no. 2 (Fall 1980): 46.

Has the same power among the harmonies that the aulos has among the instruments, since both are frenzied and emotional; for all Bacchic frenzy and all motions of that sort are more associated with the aulos than with any of the other instruments, whereas among the harmonies, the Phrygian melodies are the ones that are suited to them.¹⁰⁵

Just as the lyre is at times pitted against the aulos, Dorian mode is held up against the Phrygian, no doubt partly due to geographical bias, as well as their innate musical characteristics. Romanian philosopher Carmen Coszma summarizes the philosophers' thinking regarding the instrument and mode connection:

The lyre, Apollo's instrument, organ of ethos; and the aulos (a flute), belonging to Dionysus's cult, organ of pathos. This distinction of senses is in concordance with the main modes—the Dorian and the frigidian [sic]...In his turn, the exegete William Fleming, referring to this separation, remarked: "For the Athenians, this means a separation between their aspiration and ideals—an instrument with that musical mode (the Dorian...) implied clearness, restraint, moderation; the other one incited the senses and stirred the passions."¹⁰⁶

We see, therefore, that the aulos was an extremely important instrument in Greek society.

With uses that spanned from the realm of entertainment, including the theater, symposia, and musical competitions, to roles in ritual worship of the Greek gods, and even use in the military, the aulos was omnipresent. While the instrument was not without sharp criticism, even its most severe detractors (Plato and Aristotle), acknowledged the instrument's important role in entertainment and as a katharsis. The pervasive use of the instrument is documented in visual art as well as by Greek scholars, recognition which has secured the aulos its place in history. As will be explored in the following chapters, the aulos's extra-musical associations and traditional uses were preserved by the instrument's descendants far past the decline of Ancient Greece.

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle, *Politics*, 8:1342b, trans. Richards, Ross, and Destrée (n.p.), quoted in Destrée, 243.

¹⁰⁶ Coszma.

Chapter 2: THE AULOS'S CONNECTION TO THE MODERN OBOE

The aulos is widely considered to be the most ancient predecessor of the modern oboe which we can identify with confidence.¹ However, roughly eighteen hundred years pass from the days of the aulos before we see the form of the modern oboe start to appear. How did the so-called *conservatoire* oboe develop from the ancient Greek aulos? While there are some gaps, we are generally able to trace the evolution from the aulos to the oboe. After a brief overview of this development, we will examine the similarities and differences between the two instruments.

As noted in Chapter 1, the aulos traveled to Greece from Phrygia, its earliest known place of origin. It rose to prominence in Greek culture, finding popularity in day-to-day life, as well as in such venues as competitions, theater, and the military. Not surprisingly—given the Romans' fascination with all things “Greek”—there are many striking similarities between Greek and Roman culture, including their mythology, architecture, and visual art. While it does not seem as though music was held in as high esteem in ancient Rome as it was in ancient Greece (and we know less about it since the Romans left us far fewer philosophical and musical theoretical writings), what evidence we do have suggests that there were many similarities in their uses for music and the kinds of instruments they favored. The Roman equivalent of the Greek aulos was the *tibia*, a Latin word meaning “pipe.” The form of the instrument seems to have been almost identical to that of the aulos, although there is evidence that a conical bell extension was at times added to enhance the instrument's resonating power. This is a notable development: as the aulos's bore was cylindrical, the addition of a conical bell may show gradual evolution toward the ultimate conical bore of the oboe. Ovid describes the uses to which the instrument was put, which

¹ Possible exception of bone flutes, which are at least in the woodwind family.

were quite similar to the aulos: “[T]he tibia sang in the temples, it sang in the games, it sang at mournful funeral rites.”²

For the next several hundred years—or the period referred to as the “Dark Ages”—very little is known regarding instrumental development. The next clear link in the chain of oboe ancestors was the zurna, a conical bored double reed instrument. Exact origins of this instrument are unclear, although it is believed to have originated in the Middle East, and may have been influenced in its development by the Greek aulos (Roman tibia) and traditional Egyptian reed pipes. The zurna is still a popular instrument around the world to this day.

From the zurna developed the *shawm*, the direct predecessor of the early oboe. The shawm and the zurna are extremely similar, and in fact the names are at times used interchangeably. The shawm, which was conical and had a double reed, came in a variety of sizes, which allowed for consort playing, which was popular during the Renaissance. Players’ lips rested on a plate called a *pirouette*, allowing the musicians to take the whole reed in their mouth, which resulted in a loud and raucous tone. There are differing theories as to the origin of the shawm, and it is unknown exactly how or when it came to be played in Europe. Some maintain that, as the first iconographic evidence of the shawm in Europe dates from the early thirteenth century, the Crusades to the Middle East had a hand in the emergence of the instrument.³ Others, such as organologists Philip Bate and Anthony Baines believed differently, while still acknowledging the Middle Eastern cultural influence: “[They] presented evidence that double-reed aerophones were known in Europe prior to the Crusades (possibly as survivals of the *aulos* and *tibia*) . . .”⁴ It is interesting to note that Vincenzo Galilei, a member of the Florentine Camerata (discussed in Chapter 4) was under the impression that the shawm was identical in form

² Ovid, *Fasti*, quoted in James W. McKinnon and Robert Anderson, “Tibia,” accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www-oxfordmusiconline-com.proxyiub.uits.iu.edu>.

³ Burgess and Haynes, 17.

⁴ Burgess and Haynes, 17.

to the aulos and tibia: “I saw that among those of the Greeks, first is the aulos [*aulon*], which is the same as the *tibia* of the Romans and our shawm [*piffero*].”⁵ While this ultimately proved incorrect, it is nevertheless intriguing that this illustrious late sixteenth-century thinker assumed a relationship between these instruments.

In the mid-seventeenth century the oboe as we know it began to take shape. A new instrument called an *hautboy* (Baroque oboe), which also went by the more all-encompassing title *hautbois* (meaning “loud woodwind”), developed from the shawm.⁶ Diverging from the shawm’s traditional usage in the military and as part of outdoor consorts, the hautboy began to be used as a solo instrument and as part of the newly developing orchestra. In response to its new roles, the hautboy’s range was expanded to match the string section; it was also capable of playing easily in the keys of C and D, as well as accommodating standard accidentals. Several changes were made to the shawm’s form. The hautboy was divided into three sections, moving the instrument toward the oboe joints we are familiar with today, and the pirouette, a ledge on which the lips of players would rest, was discarded. This change particularly began to alter the sound concept for the oboe, since a reed which freely vibrates in a player’s mouth is more vibrant and strident than one which is dampened by lips placed directly on the cane.

One of the most important early instrument makers of the hautboy was the French Hotteterre family, which included Jean and his famous son Jacques “le Romain” (1674-1763), who served as a musician for Louis XIV and his successors. The standard Baroque oboe had three keys and a range from low C to high D, which is reflected in the contemporary repertoire for the instrument. Due to the hautboy’s harmonics, players needed to overblow to produce the upper octave. The Baroque oboe required many forked and half-hole fingerings which were retained on

⁵ Vincenzo Galilei, *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, trans. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 363.

⁶ For more on the development of the “hautboy” vs. “hautbois” terminology, refer to *The Oboe* by Burgess and Haynes, Chapter 2.

the instrument until the mid-eighteenth century. Since many of the technical innovations in the instrument originated with the Hotteterre family, it is not surprising that the hautbois was often used by Lully to accompany his operas and ballets. Its popularity spread across Europe, becoming a favorite instrument of Antonio Vivaldi and J. S. Bach, who in the first half of the eighteenth century both wrote some of the most revered music for the instrument, leading this period to be called the “Golden Age” of repertoire for the oboe.⁷

Burgess and Haynes note that “each period...possessed the ‘best’ instrument—for its time”⁸ and this is certainly true of the Classical oboe. During this period, the bore of the instrument narrowed and tone holes got smaller, both of which allowed players to more easily play in upper registers. The instrument’s range increased up to high F, and composers began to utilize this extended range (for example, Mozart uses high F’s in his Oboe Quartet in F, K. 370). Several keys were added during the Classical era, including a “slur key” which would develop into the instrument’s octave key. The Classical oboe was commonly made of boxwood, and the body was decorated with Greek-inspired molding, a testament to this era’s fascination with the Greco-Roman world. Overall, these new developments allowed for light, quick technique which reflected the balance and ease of Classical music.

The nineteenth century was another period of important developments for the oboe. Since the experiments in construction were centered in Paris and influenced by the oboe professors of the Paris Conservatoire—including Vogt, Verroust, Triebert, and Gillet—the oboe from this period has come to be called the *conservatoire* oboe. Changes included the addition of metal to protect the joint ends, use of grenadilla wood for the instrument body, refining of reed design and reed-making equipment (including the gouging machine designed by Brod), and a redesign of the instrument’s bore. One of the main goals of this period was to simplify fingerings and allow the

⁷ Bruce Haynes, *The Eloquent Oboe: A History of the Hautboy from 1640 to 1760* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001), 275.

⁸ Burgess and Haynes, 1.

instrument to match its timbre between the registers. Toward this goal, the most significant development was a system of keywork designed by the Parisian oboist and instrument builder Triebert. This system, called Triebert's Systeme 6, was influenced by Theobald Boehm, the German inventor and flute player who had recently redesigned the keywork on flutes. Triebert's instrument building business passed through several owners after his death in 1867, until it was purchased by François Lorée in 1881. Lorée is still considered one of the foremost makers of oboes and continues to refine the instrument's design to this day. Many other prominent instrument makers, including Howarth, Yamaha, and Laubin also continue to develop modern instruments.

Similarities and Differences Between the Aulos and Oboe

Based upon the information we have, clearly there are both similarities and differences between the aulos and oboe in terms of the instruments' construction, reeds, and playing technique. The first and most obvious similarity is that both the aulos and oboe are wind instruments. A double reed (often referred to as the "mouthpiece" in the case of the aulos) is inserted in the end of the resonator, or pipe. The player sets the air in motion by blowing through the double reed whose sound is amplified by the body of the instrument. The aulos and the oboe are both held out in front of the musician, who uses arms and thumbs to aim it away from the body at an angle. Both the aulos and oboe were capable of producing a large number of different pitches, a factor that led Plato to call the aulos "many stringed,"⁹ and also allowed it to play in many different *harmoniai*. While our modern conservatoire oboe is much more intricate in terms of keywork than the ancient Greek aulos, there may have been parts of the aulos, referred to by Mathiesen as "bands," which performed a similar function in altering the instrument's pitch.

These bands may have been the first attempt at keys on a double reed instrument:

Beginning in the first century BCE, the bands began to have little hooks or flanges attached to them, which would assist the performer in turning them more

⁹ Plato, *Republic*, 3:399b, *ibid.*, quoted in McKinnon, 211.

easily and quickly, perhaps even while playing. Among the fragments of auloi found at Meroe in Egypt, one has a long mechanism attached that could easily be a key for the performer to use in opening and closing a hole near the bottom of the instrument. All these mechanisms certainly enabled the aulete to change and thus perform the complex, exciting, and virtuosic music so commonly ascribed to the instrument.”¹⁰

While the aulos could easily be overblown to play in the upper register¹¹ in a similar fashion to the Baroque oboe, on some auloi there may have been a tone hole and band placed to function similarly to the octave key on a modern oboe. One such aulos is on display at the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology in Reading, England:

The Reading aulos has...a small 4 mm hole just below the holmos. A metal band surrounds this part of the instrument and possesses a corresponding hole; thus, the hole can be opened or closed by rotating the band. The function of this hole is uncertain...if it is open with the double-reed mouthpiece on the instrument, overblowing is somewhat facilitated.¹²

While there are many striking similarities between the aulos and oboe, there are some obvious differences as well. First, the aulos consists of two separate pipes with two reeds which were held and played by one person, while the modern oboe only has one bore and one double-reed. The double pipes, one controlled by each hand, allowed for several possibilities regarding how the aulos was played. Both pipes may have been played in unison, one pipe may have duplicated the other at an octave, fifth, or other interval to enhance resonance, or one pipe may have played a drone or notes of longer duration while the other played a melody. Ancient Greek images showing the aulos can be examined for playing technique, but it is risky to rely too heavily on the artists’ renderings, which—as noted in Chapter 1—may or may not reflect artistic license. It seems likely that several of these playing techniques would have been explored during the several hundred years of the aulos’s prime. There are several types of double-reed instruments utilized today which are played as pairs, although for many of them each pipe is played by a

¹⁰ Mathiesen, 191.

¹¹ Mathiesen, 213.

¹² Mathiesen, 213.

different musician. Both the *zurna* (widely played but associated in particular with the Middle East) and the *duduk* (hailing from Armenia) fit this description. In both cases, one musician plays longer note values while the other weaves a melody overtop. An additional example of an instrument which plays a drone and simultaneous melody is the bagpipe. While played by one musician whose lips do not directly touch the reed, this instrument generates a drone as air vibrates through reeds in “drone pipes;” the musician then simultaneously plays a melody on the chanter—a higher-pitched pipe with holes. The modern oboe does not readily fit the description of double-pipe or pair playing, unless we consider two oboe or oboe and English horn duets, which are a combination frequently utilized by composers of chamber music and orchestral works.¹³ Additionally, wind instruments which consist of several joined pipes played by one musician rather than two are still found across the world. The single-reed *arghul*, which originated in Egypt, has two pipes of varying lengths, one of which is used to produce a melody while the other plays a drone. And the *zummara*, another single-reed instrument with two pipes of the same length, is still played across the Middle East.

Another difference between the aulos and oboe is based on their bore design. The aulos possessed a cylindrical bore, in which the internal space of the instrument is roughly the same width from top to bottom. The oboe’s bore is conical, which means that the instrument starts off very narrowly near the reed and gradually gets wider until the final flare at the bell. This difference would impact sound quality as well as reed design needs.

Circular breathing, a performance technique in which a player continues playing while also refilling the lungs, seems to have been possible on the aulos as it is on the modern oboe. To circular breathe, players push air out of their mouth and through the reed while simultaneously breathing in through the nose. As noted in Chapter 1, scholars have differing theories as to the

¹³ For example, Handel’s “Arrival of the Queen of Sheba” from *Solomon* or Wagner’s oboe and English horn duet in *Die Walküre* (Example 5.12)

purpose of the *phorbeia*. As it would be quite challenging to maintain lip compression around two separate reeds, some scholars have speculated, correctly or incorrectly, that the *phorbeia* assisted with circular breathing.¹⁴ Alternatively to assisting with circular breathing, the *phorbeia* may have been a tool to prevent players from using excessive lip pressure on their reeds:

Wearing a *phorbeia*...allows the performer to maintain a relaxed embouchure because the *phorbeia* itself seals the mouth and holds the lips together against the pressure of the breath. A relaxed embouchure in turn avoids the tendency of a tight embouchure to choke the reed—or stop it from beating altogether—and allows the lips to exercise sensitive adjustments in pressure on the reed.¹⁵

This account seems to parallel oboists' attempts to avoid using a “muting” or “biting” embouchure, which overmanipulates or cuts off vibrations in the reed. Regardless of the *phorbeia*'s purpose, modern oboists have no similar contemporary accessory.

One feature that links the *aulos* and its descendant the oboe is the use of a double reed. Reed-making is a labor-intensive process in which an oboist chooses cane, gouges it to exact specifications, selects the proper shape, and then proceeds to scrape it according to the needs of the player and their instrument. There are many different reed styles in use globally and many excellent resources through which those interested can learn more.¹⁶ There also exist detailed accounts of Greek musicians' processes for making *aulos* reeds, including those by Theophrastus and the Aristotelian *De Audibilibus*. Mathiesen states: “As the actual voice of the *aulos*, the reed is the most important part,”¹⁷ and indeed it determines almost everything regarding the instrument's capabilities including tone, pitch, range, and dynamics. While there is much we can glean from ancient writers' descriptions of the reed-making process, the lack of surviving reeds still means that some of what they say is open to interpretation and subject to the pitfalls of translation. For example, differing conclusions regarding what Theophrastus meant regarding the

¹⁴ Burgess and Haynes, 15.

¹⁵ Mathiesen, 221.

¹⁶ Especially explore *Understanding the Oboe Reed* by Graham Salter, with contributions from oboists across the world.

¹⁷ Mathiesen, 198.

“glotta,” or “tongue,” of the reed resulted in some scholars stating that the aulos was a single, not double-reed instrument.

These descriptions, however, do give us a fascinating look into aulos reed-making. First, special attention is paid to the type of cane which is best for reeds, described by Theophrastus as those varieties which are commonly found near water sources, including lakes, rivers and marshes. He also describes the foliage on this ideal cane as having a “luxurious growth: the leaf is broad and white, but the reed has only a small plume.”¹⁸ Modern players attempting to revive aulos playing, including scholar and performer Barnaby Brown, have concluded—based on Theophrastus’s description—that *Phragmites australis* is the most likely variety of cane to have been used by the ancient Greeks.¹⁹ Theophrastus also implies that players want to choose cane which is fully mature, stating: “When the water in Lake Orchomenus is higher, the cane attains its full length the first year, but...it does not arrive at maturity until the following year if the water remains the same level.”²⁰ Cane was not harvested at all times of the year, but chosen during an optimal season, which was likely in the fall. The cane, which was cut off close to the roots, was then stored over the winter, washed and cleaned during the spring, and finally laid in the sun to finish the drying process.²¹

Once the cane was properly seasoned, it needed to be cut to a workable length. The naturally-occurring knots along the length of the cane guided where cuts would occur, as the reed-makers were looking for the smooth length of cane in between. These cuts were made above each knot and those pieces of cane which were shorter than “two palms in length” were discarded. Such shorter pieces were not usable, as two reeds (one for each pipe) needed to be

¹⁸ Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Arthur Hort (London: William Heinemann, 1916), paraphrased in Mathiesen, 198-199.

¹⁹ Barnaby Brown, “Phragmites australis vs. Arundo donax,” *The Workshop of Dionysus* (blog), March 12, 2020, <https://www.doublepipes.info/phragmites-vs-arundo/>.

²⁰ Theophrastus quoted in Goossens and Roxburgh, 8.

²¹ Mathiesen, 199.

made from the same piece of cane. As reeds “from the same section of the reed [read: cane] are consonant” this would dramatically raise the chances that the two separate reeds would be able to function together as part of the same instrument.²² Theophrastus’s reed discussion also provides evidence that both aulos pipes may have had a slightly different function: cane from the “bottom half is used for the left pipe of the aulos, the other for the right.”²³ If the pipes had been interchangeable, then this specification would be unnecessary.

Once the cane was selected and cut into two separate pieces, each individual piece of cane needed to be formed into a double reed. In order to create the double reed for a modern oboe, reed-makers split the piece of tube cane into several parts, thin it by gouging on a machine, fold the cane in half, tie it onto a metal and cork staple, and finally clip the tip open—thereby revealing the two reeds. The process for making aulos reeds, however, seemed to keep the tube intact. Instead of folding the cane over, aulos players would make cuts from the tip of the reed downward to create the double reed: “The glotta on the top half must then be cut down from the top—that is, from some point below the knot—while the glotta on the bottom half must be cut up from the bottom.”²⁴ The intact tube portion of the reed acts as the staple does for the modern oboe reed, and is inserted into the top of the instrument.

The way that the aulos reed was scraped also had an impact on the instrument’s sound and the ease of playing. In the Aristotelian *De audibilibus*, it is stated that the vibrating tips of the reeds should be “solid, smooth and even, so that the breath that passes over them is also smooth, even and unbroken.”²⁵ This means that Greek reed-makers had to consider many of the same things modern oboists must regarding how air travels through the reed, and they no doubt would

²² Theophrastus, paraphrased by Mathiesen, 200.

²³ Mathiesen, 200.

²⁴ Mathiesen, 201.

²⁵ Mathiesen, 203.

have made adjustments in order to get the desired results. In the same passage it is noted that aulos reeds should be soaked before playing:

[T]hose of the mouthpieces that have been soaked and have absorbed saliva are more euphonious (pleasing to the ear), while dry ones are cacophonous. The air is carried softly and evenly through what is wet and smooth. This is evident, for when it is wet, the breath itself beats against the mouthpiece and is broken to a much lesser degree; but dry breath is more restrained and makes a harder impact because it is forced.²⁶

Based on the description of reeds, reed-making and playing on aulos reeds, it is clear that there are similarities between the ancient Greek aulos and the oboe. On both instruments the reed is greatly responsible for determining the instrument's pitch and tone.²⁷ Since this is the case, the reed must be best equipped to match the instrument—or two, in the case of the aulos. One of the best ways to achieve this on both instruments is consistency *in* and a detailed process *for* reed-making. It is notable that ancient writers, Theophrastus in particular, describe the process for aulos reed-making in precise and exacting terms, demonstrating the type of care that modern oboists must also show in cane selection and reed-making. For both types of reeds, this begins with the cane selection process. The species of cane is important—the Greeks' preference was described in detail by Theophrastus, and oboe players' cane of choice is *Arundo donax*. Pieces of cane are selected based on their potential for producing the best results. For both the aulos and oboe, cane length and hardness are considerations. Even when every part of the process has been followed meticulously, it is possible that reeds still will not function optimally—a problem familiar to both aulos and oboe players. Theophrastus ominously states: “only a few mouthpieces succeed in their manufacture.”²⁸ Scraping was performed on both types of reed to adjust the way it vibrates—and both reeds also from time to time seemed to need adjustment to the opening of the reed using the fingers: “even good reeds will require some adjustment every time they are

²⁶ Aristotle, *Aristotelis opera*, ed. Immanuel Becker (Berlin: Reimer, 1831), 802b19-28, trans. by and quoted in Mathiesen, 203.

²⁷ Mathiesen 216.

²⁸ Theophrastus, *An Enquiry into Plants*, 370, quoted in Mathiesen, 199.

played. This is rarely illustrated, but in a red-figure amphora which is attributed to the Peleus Painter (Example 1.4), one of the Muses is shown either pressing the mouthpiece into the aulos or flexing the reed with her index finger to soften it prior to playing.”²⁹ Aulos players, like oboists, also needed to soak their reeds before playing to prevent cracking and to produce the best possible sound. While we do not know whether or not aulos reed-makers made their reeds based on the “crow,” as oboists do, they did take note of the way the aulos reed sounded without the rest of the instrument: “[W]hen the mouthpiece is taken up and blown after being removed from the instrument, its sound is indeed loud and raucous because it lacks the definition provided by the resonator.”³⁰

For double reed instruments, the reed has an enormous impact on playing technique and it seems that both the aulos and oboe have commonalities here as well. Both reeds are very flexible pitch-wise and can respond drastically to changes in air speed and support. Biting or pressing on both reeds while playing raises the pitch and makes the tone sound less deep.³¹ As a result of this, on both instruments a biting (muting) embouchure is not desirable—not only because it alters the pitch and tone but because it causes fatigue in the player. Aulos players combatted fatigue caused by playing for long periods by using the *phorbeia*, which helped encourage players to retain a more relaxed embouchure. While a *phorbeia* is not utilized, oboists also aspire to keeping the embouchure relaxed enough to prevent biting and choking off the air, allowing players to make sensitive adjustments as necessary. The *phorbeia* also allowed for the reed to be “easily withdrawn by increments from the mouth in order to shorten the length of the glotta” and facilitated “a tight seal around the mouthpieces while moving them in and out of the mouth to adjust for pitch and timbre.”³² These “sensitive adjustments,” including the option of

²⁹ Mathiesen, 212.

³⁰ Mathiesen, 215

³¹ Mathiesen, 203.

³² Mathiesen, 221.

“going in and out on the reed,” are shared by both aulos players and modern oboists. We have seen that the aulos and modern oboe share many physical and technical characteristics—as we will see in Chapter 3—they shared similar extra-musical and emotional ranges as well.

CHAPTER 3: THE RISE OF INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC AND ROMANTIC OBOE CHARACTERS

As opposed to the Baroque period, in which the instrumentation for an orchestral work varied greatly from piece to piece, the Classical period saw some standardization of orchestral forces. With the incorporation of clarinets, for example, a typical Classical wind section for symphonic and operatic works came to consist of two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets and two bassoons. Nevertheless, both Baroque and Classical instrumental pieces often allow interchangeable instrumentation. Both Vivaldi and Mozart wrote works that could be played by violin or flute, for example. This trend was often driven by the types of instrumental players composers had at hand and a desire to make their music more appealing to publishers and customers.

During the Classical period we begin to see a rise in the importance of instrumental music, which started to equal—and later rival—vocal music. Eighteenth-century French critic Jean-Baptiste Suard’s 1791 article reflects this shift:

The human singing voice doubtless has a special charm that no instrument can equal; but the possibilities of the voice are limited in comparison to those of a large instrumental ensemble whose diverse timbres, wider range, and greater freedom and precision of execution lend infinite variety to the colors and shadings of the composer’s palette. Indeed there are a multitude of effects that can be produced only by instrumental music.¹

However, Suard’s vision for music with “infinite variety to the colors and shadings of the composer’s palette” was not yet the norm. While it would be a mistake to say that Classical composers did not consider which instruments they chose for particular moments in their music, their chief concerns lay with form, melody, harmonic scheme, and the development of themes.

¹ Jean-Baptiste Suard quoted in John Spitzer and Neal Zaslaw, *The Birth of the Orchestra: History of an Institution, 1650-1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 436.

The emphasis shifted in the Romantic period. With Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, views regarding what was possible within symphonic works changed drastically. While some composers, including Richard Wagner, believed that Beethoven's incorporation of voices meant that traditional symphonic structures were no longer relevant, others, such as Hector Berlioz, took this newfound freedom in a new direction. Berlioz was the first major composer to write a treatise on orchestration—the art of skillfully using orchestral instruments in various combinations to create the exact color and timbre desired by the composer. Berlioz placed much importance on the variety of instruments used in music, at one point writing: “Instrumentation is to music precisely what color is to painting.”² His *Grande traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (1844), or *Treatise on Instrumentation*, provides an in-depth examination of each orchestral instrument, including its range, timbral descriptions, and notable examples illustrating its effective use. The resource is filled with insights into orchestration that are mirrored in Berlioz's own orchestral works. His treatise was the first in a string of important orchestration resources of the late Romantic period, including Richard Strauss's additions to Berlioz's treatise in 1905 and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov's *Principles of Orchestration* (first published in 1913). Berlioz's treatise and compositional techniques resulted in growth of the orchestra, innovative combinations of instruments, and assignment of detailed emotions and characters to each instrument.

This increased interest in orchestral timbres and resulting colors corresponds with another important facet of nineteenth-century composition: the rise of program music. “Program Music,”

² Hector Berlioz, *The Art of Music and Other Essays (A Travers Chants)*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth Csicsery-Rónay (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 5.

The nineteenth century also saw increased interest in the properties of visual color. While Leone Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci had laid the foundation for color principles during the Renaissance and Isaac Newton wrote his *Opticks* in 1704, many more color studies would be added in the first half of the nineteenth century, including those by Goethe, Chevreul, Hayter, Young, and Helmholtz. Painters increasingly explored the power of color in their art, and some—including Delacroix in his *Journal*—wrote about their ideas, often likening visual color to musical timbre.

a term coined by Liszt to mean instrumental music assigned an extramusical meaning by the composer, had been written for several hundred years before the start of the Romantic period.³ Early programmatic works include Janequin's *La Guerre*—a Renaissance chanson describing the 1515 Battle of Marignan—and Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* concertos, no doubt the most famous examples from the Baroque. It was in the nineteenth century, however, that this genre surged.

Due in large part to musicians like Berlioz, composers increasingly employed instruments not just to carry a melody, but also for their potential to evoke characters or emotions inspired by extramusical sources such as literature, individuals, sentiments, or particular events. This trend spanned the whole of the Romantic period, with examples ranging from Berlioz's monumental *Symphonie Fantastique* (1830) and Liszt's symphonic poems, including *Les Préludes*, to the many tone poems of Richard Strauss.

The oboe was assigned many specific characteristics by Romantic composers. While not in high demand as a solo repertoire instrument at a time when virtuosic performances on the violin and piano captured center stage, the oboe nevertheless became firmly established as a leader within the orchestra, featuring prominently in many symphonic and operatic works. Berlioz presents his ideas regarding the character and musical function of the oboe and English horn:

The oboe is above all a melodic instrument; it has a rustic character, full of tenderness, of bashfulness even... The oboe's special characteristics convey candour, naïve grace, sentimental delight, or the suffering of weaker creatures. It expresses this marvelously well in cantabile. It has the capacity to express agitation to a certain degree, but one should be careful not to stretch it as far as cries of passion or the splutter of rage or threats or heroics, since its little bittersweet voice becomes quite ineffective and absurd.⁴

[The cor anglais] is a melancholy, dreamy voice, dignified too, with a retiring, remote quality which makes it superior to every other instrument when it comes to arousing images and feelings of the past, or when the composer wants to pluck

³ Roger Scruton, "Programme Music." *Grove Music Online*, accessed March 3, 2020, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

⁴ Hector Berlioz, *Berlioz's Orchestration Treatise: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. Hugh Macdonald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 103-4.

the secret string of memory...The feeling of absence, of oblivion, of bitter loneliness evoked in the hearts of some listeners by this desolate melody would not have a quarter of its impact were it sung by any other instrument but the *cor anglais*.⁵

While Berlioz's description is by no means exhaustive of the oboe's extra-musical characteristics, it helps readers understand how seriously he took the oboe's expressive potential. Berlioz and other Romantic composers expanded on these elements to include a diverse array of expressive possibilities for the oboe and English horn: laments, loneliness, nostalgia and longing, the pastoral, the exotic, agitation, comparisons to the human voice (particularly female), and the erotic.⁶ Several of the most important and prevalent of these characteristics are discussed below.

The oboe and English horn are frequently used in orchestral works and operas to convey lament and overwhelming grief. Professor of English Linda M. Austin describes grief from a literary perspective, which is useful when thinking of these emotions in music: "Lamentation veers away from the cognitive and the pictorial toward sound...lamentation evokes 'a voice crying' by formulating, as much as a linguistic medium can, the noise of trauma."⁷ This tendency of poets and writers of laments to leave the realm of carefully curated words and invoke wordless cries (for example, exclamations of "ah" and "oh") may be why lamentation is so potent within music—an often wordless medium. The oboe and English horn are often used as the grief-filled "voice crying" within the orchestra:

"The oboe's special characteristics convey...the suffering of weaker creatures."⁸

"In a piece whose general mood is that of melancholy the frequent use of a *cor anglais* in the middle of an instrumental ensemble is exactly right."⁹

⁵ Berlioz, 109-110.

⁶ For more on the use of the Romantic oboe as conveying such characteristics, refer to *The Oboe* by Burgess and Haynes for an excellent and extensive chapter.

⁷ Linda M. Austin, "The Lament and the Rhetoric of the Sublime," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 53, no. 3 (December 1998): 279.

⁸ Berlioz, 103-4.

⁹ Berlioz, 111.

“The instrument [oboe] particularly lends itself...to emotion and deep melancholy.”¹⁰

“It will be seen that all the examples hitherto given have been in minor keys. Such are especially well suited to the oboe, the most plaintive instrument in the orchestra...”¹¹

“Admirable in expressing sentiments of grief and sadness, which it portrays with the most poignant intensity, [the English horn] does not partake of the oboe’s sportive and humorous side. It is an oboe in mourning.”¹²

“The tone-color of the oboe is of a nasal quality, and expressive of sadness and complaint. It is well suited for the depiction of loneliness, grief and suffering...[The English horn] is superbly adapted to the expression of sad or painful feelings...”¹³

Closely related to laments and grief are the feelings of nostalgia and longing. Burgess and Haynes describe these emotions well: “The soul becomes sick from that mysterious illness, that mix of happiness, sadness, regret, hope, and love that is called nostalgia.”¹⁴ Grief and nostalgia are often combined to great effect within orchestral music. One of the best examples of the oboe and English horn used for this purpose is found in the third movement of Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*. Berlioz’s description that accompanies this movement, titled “Scene in the Country,” establishes the programmatic setting for listeners:

It is a summer evening. He [the protagonist] is in the countryside musing when he hears two young shepherds playing the *ranz des vaches* in alternation. This is the tune used by the Swiss to call their flocks together. This shepherd-duet, the surroundings, the soft whispering of trees stirred by the zephyrs, some prospects of hope recently made known to him—all these sensations unite to impart a long-unknown repose to his heart and to lend a smiling color to his imagination. And then she appears once more. His heart stops beating...painful forebodings fill his soul. “Should she prove false to him!” One of the shepherds resumes the melody, but the other answers him no more...Sunset...distant rolling of thunder...loneliness...silence.¹⁵

¹⁰ Albert Lavignac, *Musical Education*, trans. Esther Singleton (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1902), 156.

¹¹ Ebenezer Prout, *The Orchestra: Technique of the Instruments* (London: Augener, 1897), 118.

¹² Lavignac, 157.

¹³ Gaston Borch, *Practical Manual of Instrumentation* (New York: The Boston Music Company, 1918), 14-15.

¹⁴ Burgess and Haynes, 221.

¹⁵ Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique*, Op. 14 (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1997): v-vi.

The oboe and English horn duet which opens the movement begins with an air of hope as the two “shepherds” converse from afar.

(derrière la scène)

Oboe 1

English Horn

p

Ob. 1

Eng. Hn.

>

>

sf > sf =

Ob. 1

Eng. Hn.

sf > sf > p

pp

>

<

<

Example 3.1. Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique*, Mvt. 3 “Scène aux champs”

At the end of the movement, however, the oboe has abandoned its partner and, although the English horn nostalgically calls out its melody from the opening, the only answer is thunder, represented by a timpani roll.

Another place listeners will hear numerous examples of the oboe or English horn as the voice of lamentation is in the music of Italian opera composer Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). A striking example, which comes from Act III of *La Traviata*, is discussed by American musicologist James A. Hepokoski: “‘Addio, del passato’ participates in a tradition of solo pieces for lonely or ‘isolated’ soprano with a double-reed accompaniment—the English horn or oboe—that functions as a complement to the soloist’s psychological estrangement.”¹⁶ The same could be

¹⁶ James A. Hepokoski, “Genre and Content in Mid-Century Verdi: ‘Addio, del passato’ (‘La Traviata,’ Act III),” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 1, no. 3 (November 1989): 259.

said about “Tutte le feste al tempio,” an aria from *Rigoletto* in which Gilda, with much trepidation, tells her father of her recent abduction. The oboe opens the aria and interjects a grief-filled melody again when Gilda falls silent (Example 3.2).

Oboe 1

Andantino

p con espress.

allarg.

a tempo

10

il cor par-lò

Example 3.2. Verdi, *Rigoletto*, Act II, “Tutte le feste al tempio”

Melancholy and anguish link these deeply expressive examples—although Verdi often also couples these emotional states with feminine associations and even the exotic (see *Aida*, discussed below).

Another characteristic commonly assigned to the oboe and English horn was also a key feature of Example 3.1: the pastoral. Pastoral musical scenes during the nineteenth century often featured shepherds and their flocks, water, and rolling hills or mountains. Romantic scenes of nature could venture into the sinister and mysterious (Weber’s famous “Wolf’s Glen Scene,” for example),¹⁷ but idealization of nature was a hallmark of the Romantic period:

Of all aspects of the Romantic movement, not the least remarkable is the profound change that it made in the attitude of the creative artist towards Nature [sic]...By the beginning of the 19th century, Nature had become a vital and omnipresent being, in whose infinite variety he could be sure of finding sympathetic response to his own moods and a rich source of inspiration.¹⁸

Pastoral musical tropes emerged out of those established during the Baroque and Classical periods, which were likely influenced by conventions established even earlier. Due to traditions

¹⁷ Inspired by the writings of British philosopher Edmund Burke (*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 1757) and others, the Romantics often distinguished between the beautiful---something well-formed and aesthetically pleasing; the picturesque---something “pretty,” visually delightful; and sublime---something that strikes awe and terror in the observer.

¹⁸ A. Hyatt King, “Mountains, Music, and Musicians,” *The Musical Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (October 1945): 395.

of shepherds playing wind instruments in the fields and mountains,¹⁹ the wind section became the favorite medium to represent these musical ideas:

In the early 18th century a pastoral style of instrumentation was developed in both sacred and secular pastorals, especially in German areas. Wind instruments symbolized the fluting or playing of reed pipes by classical shepherds: for this purpose such instruments as the chalumeau, oboe d'amore and oboe da caccia were used.²⁰

Time and again, composers and writers describe the oboe and English horn's potential in this area:

"The oboe is above all a melodic instrument; it has a rustic character, full of tenderness..."²¹

"The instrument [oboe] particularly lends itself to the expression of sentiments that are tender or rustic..."²²

"It [the oboe] has never lost the pastoral character inherited from its ancient prototype, and it is, therefore, of the greatest use in portraying rural effects."²³

"The development of the orchestra was carried on by operatic composers... The oboe was the principal wind instrument... Gradually the properties of the various wind instruments were discovered. It was obvious that martial scenes required trumpets and pastoral scenes oboes."²⁴

"[The oboe is] also admirably adapted for illustrating rural and mountain scenes—often in a minor key."²⁵

"Also, for imitating the shepherd's horn (Alpine Horn), and portraying pastoral scenes, [the English horn] is well adapted."²⁶

In his explanation of the oboe and English horn duet from *Symphonie Fantastique* (provided above), Berlioz describes the pastoral exchange as a "*ranz des vaches*." The *ranz des vaches* was a folk-like melody originally played on the Alphorn, which served the practical purpose for Swiss

¹⁹ "Pastor" is Latin for "Shepherd."

²⁰ Geoffrey Chew and Owen Jander, "Pastoral," *Grove Music Online*, accessed March 20, 2020, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.

²¹ Berlioz, 103.

²² Lavignac, 156.

²³ Joseph Bennett, "The Great Composers," *The Musical Times and Singing-Class Circular* 29 (1888), 274.

²⁴ "Development of the Modern Orchestra: A Record of Three Centuries of Striving," *The Music Trades* 62 (July 1921), 35.

²⁵ Borch, 14.

²⁶ Borch, 15.

cowherds of calling their cows down from the hills.²⁷ Music librarian and scholar A. Hyatt King describes this type of melody extremely well:

We should not, strictly, speak of *the* Ranz des Vaches, for there are a great many varieties of the tune. All are improvisatory in character, and are broken into short phrases, reiterated with changes of tempo and accent... Many of the Ranz [*sic*] have a remarkable power, to which there is no lack of testimony, of calling up the sights and above all the sounds inseparable from the high and lonely places of the earth.²⁸

This same technique is used in the flute and English horn duet in Rossini's *William Tell Overture*. Coming out of a violent storm, the flute, perhaps representing bird calls, leads the transition into the pastoral duet—the main melody of which is first played by the English horn.

Andante ♩ = 76

The musical score is arranged in three systems. The first system shows the Flute and English Horn parts. The second system shows the Flute and English Horn parts. The third system shows the Flute and English Horn parts. The music consists of short, repeated phrases with triplets and trills. The tempo is marked 'Andante' with a quarter note equal to 76 beats per minute. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The time signature is 3/8. The score includes various musical notations such as triplets, trills (tr), and dynamics like 'dolce'.

Example 3.3. Rossini, *Guillaume Tell Overture*

²⁷ Robert Philip, “Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868),” in *The Classical Music Lover’s Companion to Orchestral Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 638.

²⁸ King, 398.

Each instrument takes turns playing phrases with slight alterations, until finally the English horn takes control of the pastoral melody as the flute plays complementary figurations.

The lure of the exotic is yet another Romantic period characteristic with which the oboe is often linked. Exoticism in music may be described as “the borrowing or use of musical materials that evoke distant locales or alien frames of reference”²⁹ and is characterized by music meant to sound like the music of the chosen country (or the composer’s impression of it) through use of associated melodies, harmonies, rhythms, and instruments. Many of the period’s most famous operas and programmatic pieces, examples of which include *Aida*, *Carmen*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Scheherazade*, feature music meant to capture the allure of lesser-known and understood lands and peoples. Some of the oboe’s most famous solos from the nineteenth century fall into this category. In Verdi’s *Aida*, the main character is an Ethiopian princess who is being held captive in Egypt. In Act III, Aida sings the famous aria “O Patria Mia,” or “My beloved homeland.” The oboe features prominently throughout the aria, capturing Aida’s plaintive yearning for her country.³⁰

²⁹ Jonathan Bellmann, *The Exotic in Western Music* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), ix.

³⁰ “Accessible Arias: “O patria mia,” Royal Opera House, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.roh.org.uk/news/tags/accessible-arias>.

Andante mosso ♩ = 92

Oboe 1

Aida

Ob. 1

Aida

Oh pa-tria mia, mai più, mai più - ti ri-ve-drò!

Ob. 1

Aida

mai più!

mai più ti ri-ve-drò!

Example 3.4. Verdi: *Aida*, Act III, Scene 1, “O Patria Mia”

In *The Exotic in Western Music*, American musicologist Jonathan Bellman examines several lesser-known works of western music that include oboe solos, linking them to the double reed instruments from non-western cultures that might have provided the composers’ inspiration:

“the beckoning quality is intensified by the curling melody’s being given to a solo oboe, perhaps understood as the equivalent of the Arab *mujwiz*.”³¹

“...its second statement is varied by an oboe descant line that, in its soloistic freedom, evokes mental images of a player of the *zurna* improvising atop his lumbering camel.”³²

“The shrill *tárogató*, a shawmlike wind instrument that is probably related to the Turkish *zurla*, may be evoked by either the clarinet or the oboe.”³³

Part of the efficacy of the oboe in such contexts may therefore be due to the popularity of its double reed instrument relatives from places composers sought to evoke.

³¹ Bellman, 115.

³² Bellman, 114.

³³ Bellman, 90.

Often linked with exoticism both in Romantic music and the other arts are expressions of mania, frenzy, and eroticism. Such losses of control were likely fueled by European perceptions that “less developed” cultures were more likely to fall prey to base desires. One of the most popular manifestations of these characteristics in music was the bacchanale. Francesca Brittan, an American musicologist who specializes in the nineteenth century, explains:

From the late eighteenth century onward, [composers] produced a profusion of exotic bacchanales borrowing many of the tropes later enumerated by Figuiet:³⁴ incremental *accelerandi*, rhythmic repetition, heavy-footed stamping, and percussive clashing. No longer confined to scenes of Greek ritual (those involving Bacchus himself), the bacchanale became associated with ‘primitive’ geographies broadly.³⁵

Camille Saint-Saëns’ “Bacchanale” from *Samson et Dalila* is the most famous work of its type from the nineteenth century. The music for this ballet within the opera, which includes all of the characteristics Brittan described above, begins with a seductive and sinuous oboe cadenza which sets the scene for the upcoming revelry and wild celebration of the Philistines after Samson is seduced by Delilah.



Example 3.5. Saint-Saëns, *Samson et Dalila*, Act III, Scene 2, “Bacchanale”

A similarly erotic and mania-filled excerpt is the oboe solo in “Dance of the Seven Veils” from Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome*. In this scene Herod, who is obsessed with his step-daughter Salome, promises her anything she desires if she will dance for him. She finally agrees, and after the dance is over, Salome demands the head of Jochanaan—a demand to which Herod reluctantly agrees. Within this work, we hear the oboe both as initiating the manic dance (repetitive and

³⁴ Louis Figuiet was a French scientist and writer from the nineteenth century. He published influential books such as *Primitive Man* and *The Human Race*. His (and others’) work classifying people by race was ultimately influential on the Nazis’ preoccupation with eugenics (Richard Gartner, *Metadata: Shaping Knowledge from Antiquity to the Semantic Web* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 48-49.)

³⁵ Francesca Brittan, *Music and Fantasy in the Age of Berlioz* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 250.

insistent chromatic line with grace notes) and as slowly seducing the lustful king (slower-paced, mesmerizing solo based on the opening motive). Both the oboe solos Strauss and Saint-Saëns use improvisatory qualities and chromaticism to achieve what came to be recognized as an exoticized and eroticized character.

The image shows three staves of musical notation for Oboe 1. The first staff is marked 'Sehr schnell und heftig' and 'ff'. The second and third staves are marked 'stolz mit dem Niederstreich beginnen, niemals als Auftakt behandeln' and 'f'. The music is in 3/4 time and features a chromatic line with grace notes and triplet patterns.

Example 3.6. Strauss, *Salome*, Scene IV, “Dance of the Seven Veils”

Since the oboe was commonly used to convey sexualized musical ideas, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is also frequently associated with the feminine. While the oboe and its earlier forms (such as the shawm) were often compared with the trumpet³⁶—likely because of military band usage and its (then) more raucous tone—the oboe underwent physical changes during the Classical and Romantic periods. Timbral preferences evolved along with the instrument to the point that Romantic composers valued the oboe for its sweetness of tone and ability to convey vocal-style melodies.³⁷ It is likely that—in addition to qualities of tone—the oboe’s high range, which does not descend below Bb3, has also been a factor in its use to portray the feminine.

Several Romantic writers and composers describe the oboe as feminine. French librettist Alfred Guichon exclaimed:

But whose voice has such grace, such feminine softness, such secret charms that everyone seems to hang on her every word, and when the young girl retires, her

³⁶ Burgess and Haynes, 18.

³⁷ Cecil Forsyth, *Orchestration* (London: Dover Publications, 1982), 215-16.

heart still palpating, no one dreams of applauding, because all remain under the charm of a celestial spell...you have heard the oboe!³⁸

Berlioz made several statements which link the oboe to more feminine styles of music—and even goes so far as to say it is “ineffective” in expressing emotions commonly ascribed to the masculine. The oboe, he says:

Has the capacity to express agitation to a certain degree, but one should be careful not to stretch it as far as cries of passion or the splutter of rage or threats or heroics, since its little bittersweet voice becomes quite ineffective and absurd...A march melody, however direct, however beautiful, however noble, loses its nobility, its directness and its beauty when given to the oboes.³⁹

Indeed, the oboe is rarely associated with heroism or bombast—characters usually assigned to the brass section or the entirety of the strings.

Expressions of mourning and lament are far more often associated with feminine rather than masculine characters in the nineteenth century. As noted above, the oboe is often present during such musical moments—perhaps because it embodies both loss and the female persona so well. This is sustained by Berlioz, who in his description of the oboe writes that it is capable of conveying the “suffering of weaker creatures,” which likely implied women.⁴⁰ To delve further into this connection, Burgess and Haynes present an unflattering equation between the oboe’s worst stereotypes and antiquated conceptions of “female hysteria,” a common nineteenth century medical diagnosis which was rooted in sexism:

How might we account for the identification of the oboe with women and loss? Nineteenth-century writers portrayed the oboe as temperamental. Treated with gentle but persuasive control, it was capable of producing a timbre of voluptuous beauty, but if unrestrained it was likely to emit extraneous squawks and cracked notes. In its technical makeup, therefore, the oboe resembled the highly

³⁸ Burgess and Haynes, 226.

³⁹ Berlioz, 104.

⁴⁰ Berlioz, 104.

stigmatized 19th-century image of womankind as being always on the verge of hysteria.⁴¹

Richard Strauss's tone poems include several examples in which the oboe is clearly linked to female characters. The tone poem *Don Juan* captures the personality of the lustful and arrogant figure Don Juan, a Spanish nobleman who has no end of sexual conquests. While several forms of the legend exist, Strauss chose to base his version around Nikolaus Lenau's poem—portions of which he includes at the beginning of his score. While the tone poem does not convey the Don Juan story literally, there are several “scenes” which likely indicate the title character's conquests; the most noteworthy of these features an extended oboe solo.

The image shows a musical score for Oboe 1 in Richard Strauss's *Don Juan*. The score is written in 4/4 time and consists of four staves. The first staff begins with a dynamic marking of *p* and the instruction *sehr getragen und ausdrucksvoll*. The second staff has a *2* above it and an *espr.* marking. The third staff has a *cresc.* marking. The fourth staff has *dim.* and *pp* markings. The music features a melodic line with various dynamics and articulations.

Example 3.7. Strauss, *Don Juan*

Strauss scholar and conductor Norman del Mar provides his impressions of this section of the work:

There is not the slightest doubt that Strauss is now concerned with Juan's deepest love experience, whoever the heroine may be. The section which follows is one of the greatest love-songs in all music. Nothing in Strauss's previous output could have led one to expect the creation of music so profoundly, so heart-breakingly beautiful as this central episode. Sir Thomas Armstrong expressed its poignance with deep insight when he wrote of its “strange and ominous

⁴¹ Burgess and Haynes, 233-4.

beauty...the whole passage (having) that autumnal richness or regret which is so often felt in Strauss's loveliest music...⁴²

Yet again longing and nostalgia meet with an extended oboe passage. While it is not known with certainty which female character is the subject of the oboe solo in *Don Juan*, in another of Strauss's tone poems *Don Quixote*, Op. 35, it is quite clear that Don Quixote, the self-proclaimed knight, has declared Dulcinea his lady. The oboe is chosen as the vehicle to convey her beautiful, though imagined, character (Example 3.8).

Example 3.8. Strauss, *Don Quixote*, "Introduction"

Variation VI (Example 3.9) features the oboe playing a variation of Dulcinea's theme as Sancho Panza, Don Quixote's "squire," tries to convince his master that a peasant woman they see is actually Dulcinea. As opposed to the beautiful, soaring, and longing line associated with Don Quixote's love earlier in the piece, this variation attempts to provide a dose of reality to the confused knight: an oboe duet paints Dulcinea in a mocking and raucous tone.

Example 3.9. Strauss, *Don Quixote*, "Variation VI"

⁴² Norman Del Mar, *Richard Strauss: A Critical Commentary on his Life and Works* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), 72.

In Act II of Beethoven's only opera *Fidelio*, Florestan, a political prisoner, waits malnourished and forlorn. From his cell, he sings "Gott! welch Dunkel hier!" ("God! What darkness here!"), an aria which portrays regret and nostalgia for his life outside the prison walls. In the earlier part of the aria, Beethoven makes liberal use of the flute and especially the clarinet. Toward the end, however, the music changes suddenly: Florestan begins to hallucinate that he sees an angel, his beloved wife Leonore, who has come to escort him to heaven. The oboe ushers in this new section and plays a duet with Florestan as he dreams of his wife.

The musical score consists of two staves: Oboe 1 and Florestan. The Oboe part begins with a **Poco Allegro** tempo and includes dynamics such as *p*, *cresc.*, *dim.*, and *dolce*. The Florestan part is a vocal line with German lyrics. The score is divided into four systems, each with a vocal line and an oboe line. The lyrics are: "Und spür' ich nicht lind-de, sanft säu-seln-de Luft? und ist nicht mein Grabmir er-hel-let? Ich seh', wie ein En-gel im ro-si-gen Durftsich trö-stend zur Sei - te, zur Sei - te mir stell-et, ein En-gel, Le - o - nor-en, Le - o - nor-en, der Gat - tin, so gleich, der, der führt mich zur Frei-heit ins himm - lisch-e Reich." The Oboe part includes dynamics like *cresc. poco a poco*, *f*, and *dolce*.

Example 3.10. Beethoven: *Fidelio*, Act II, Scene 1

While associations of the oboe with the feminine extend to comparisons of its timbre with the female voice, the oboe is often compared with the voice in general. Eighteenth-century scholar Johann Georg Sulzer, for example, wrote the following in his *General Theory of the Fine Arts*:

Among all instruments that can produce expressive tones, the human voice is without doubt the one to be preferred. One can deduce from this the fundamental

maxim, then, that the most excellent instrument is that which is most capable of imitating the human voice. By this reasoning, the oboe is one of the best.⁴³

These comparisons yet again correspond to observations of the Greek aulos. In an ode by Pindar, “Reference is made to the player of the aulos making the instrument sound like the lamentation of the human voice.”⁴⁴ Twentieth-century Swiss oboist Heinz Holliger is on record as agreeing with Sulzer’s assessment: “The oboe, for me, is the instrument that is closest to the human voice—it has that same direct, expressive power of declamation, and the entire spectrum of the oboe’s sound resembles that of a soprano...I always try to play the oboe and project the tone as if I were a singer.”⁴⁵ The oboe’s range matches the range of soprano vocalists, likely justifying this parallel. British oboist Léon Goossens referred to the oboe as the “lady of the orchestra,” noting the instrument’s presence during any music that was “very romantic.”⁴⁶ This clear affinity of the oboe with the feminine was used by many nineteenth-century composers, including—as we have seen—Richard Strauss and, as will be demonstrated, Wagner.

Usage of the Aulos as Compared to the Romantic Oboe

Some of the characters ascribed to the oboe during this period can be traced historically through traditional associations and ultimately to timbral similarities with the aulos. Twentieth-century British oboist Léon Goossens wrote in *The Oboe*, “Oboes were developed and used for ceremonial purposes in various forms throughout the ancient world, some of which have perpetuated the same characteristics up to the present day.”⁴⁷ Although the aulos and oboe are separated by time, culture, and instrument evolution, striking similarities between the two

⁴³ Sulzer, Johann Georg, “Instrumental Music,” in *Aesthetics and the Art of Musical Composition in the German Enlightenment*, ed. Nancy Kovaleff Baker and Thomas Christensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 97.

⁴⁴ Emery Schubert and Joe Wolfe, “Voicelikeness of Musical Instruments: A Literature Review of Acoustical, Psychological and Expressiveness Perspectives,” *Musica Scientiae* 20, no. 2 (February 2016): 249.

⁴⁵ Peter G. Davis, “Heinz Holliger Refutes Thesis that the Oboe is an Ill Wind,” *The New York Times*, April 10, 1981, accessed April 13, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/04/10/arts/heinz-holliger-refutes-thesis-that-the-oboe-is-an-ill-wind.html>.

⁴⁶ Burgess and Haynes, 246-7.

⁴⁷ Goossens and Roxburgh, 6.

instruments are found not only in playing technique and physical characteristics, but also in the types of extramusical characteristics associated with each. Many of the emotive capabilities of the oboe and English horn, described by Berlioz and exemplified in his and other Romantic composers' music, reflect common uses of the aulos in Ancient Greece.

Perhaps the most documented emotion with which the aulos was associated was the lament. At ceremonies for the deceased, music was often played to help mourners manage their grief: "The music of lamentation was intended to praise the deceased and provide a release for the intense emotions of the bereaved."⁴⁸ This belief in music's ability to serve as a focal point for an outpouring of emotion is remarkably similar to Romantic attitudes regarding the power of music and the arts in general. The Greek aulos was favored above other instruments for such elegies and threnodies— Greek songs of mourning. Sophocles went so far as to state, "neither the harp nor lyre is welcome for laments."⁴⁹ Auloi of various sizes were made for the purpose of lamentation, and examples of their use in this way occur in Plutarch's writing: "threnody and the 'epikedeios aulos' move the emotions and cause tears to flow, thus little by little consuming and removing distress,"⁵⁰ and the association is even noted in the Bible: "And when Jesus came to the ruler's house and saw the flute [aulos] players and the crowd making a commotion, he said, 'Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping.'"⁵¹

In addition to the aulos's characteristic sound, part of the reason for its use in mournful music was its close association with Phrygia, and the corresponding Phrygian mode. While other modes such as Lydian were associated with grief,⁵² the Phrygian mode had a particular association with mourning. Kimmel elaborates on the aural impact of the Phrygian mode:

I am coining the term 'Phrygian Inflection' to refer to a cluster of melodic, harmonic, and structural configurations which, singly or in combination, produce

⁴⁸ Mathiesen, 126.

⁴⁹ Mathiesen, 133.

⁵⁰ Mathiesen, 132.

⁵¹ Matthew 9:23-4, English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001.)

⁵² Cozma.

musical gestures universally recognized by composers, at least during the period of tonal and prototonal music, as appropriate and adequate gestures in contexts of death.⁵³

As noted in Chapter 1, the Phrygian connection to sorrow was not exclusively used by the Ancient Greeks. In the Baroque period, the descending tetrachord known as the “lament bass” is Phrygian in nature, and was used in many mournful works, such as Purcell’s “Dido’s Lament” and Bach’s *Komm, Süßer Tod* (“Come, Sweet Death”).⁵⁴ Kimmel also observes the late Romantic period use of the descending tetrachord, although elaborated, in the oboe part to Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*,⁵⁵ which begins the work and includes the following instructions from the composer: “klagend, lamentoso” or “woeful, lamenting.”

Another connection between the aulos and oboe was signaled by the Greek lyric poet Simonides, who stated that “wine and music have the same source.”⁵⁶ The aulos, which was closely allied with both wine and music, was also closely associated with that same “source”—or the Dionysian realm of wine and frenzy and the world of Greek eroticism. Dionysus, the god of wine and pleasure, was associated with uninhibited parties and cult rituals, and the usual musical accompaniment was the aulos:

In ancient Greece the double clarinet (aulos) was the chosen instrument for the Dionysiac rituals during which the maenads and Corybantes surrendered themselves to the manifestation of their enthusiasm or mania. As soon as they heard it, they fell ‘into the trance of divine possession.’⁵⁷

Eroticism was part of the worship of Dionysus and present in some cult rituals. The Greeks’ use of the aulos in this and other erotic situations, including the *symposion*, is well-documented by contemporary writers and in “the plethora of images presenting the aulos in raucous or erotic circumstances.”⁵⁸ Various examples of vases with couples engaging in sexual acts show the aulos

⁵³ Kimmel, 44.

⁵⁴ Kimmel, 47.

⁵⁵ Kimmel, 53.

⁵⁶ Bundrick, 106.

⁵⁷ Rouget, 76.

⁵⁸ Bundrick, 38.

symbolically present, perhaps discarded to the side. While both men and women played the aulos in Ancient Greece, specific female entertainers called *hetairai*, attended *symposia* both to perform musically and display their erotic talents.⁵⁹ The aulos's ability to "stir the passions"⁶⁰ is certainly apparent in such usages to convey frenzy and erotic desire.

Even in Ancient Greece, double reed instruments were associated with the human voice: "An early reference can be found in the Twelfth Pythian, an ode dating from c. 490 BC by the Greek poet Pindar. Reference is made to the player of the aulos making the instrument sound like the lamentation of the human voice."⁶¹ In addition to linking the aulos with depictions of the human voice, Pindar also attests once again to the connection between the aulos and laments. Given its erotic associations, it is hardly surprising that the instrument was also frequently associated with the feminine voice and persona. Greek theorist Aristides Quintilianus, for example, "characterizes certain instruments—like most of the other musical elements—as masculine (such as the salpinx or the lyre), feminine (the phrygian aulos or the sambuke), or medial."⁶² The aulos's range certainly contributed to the feminine associations. This was noted by Bundrick in relation to musical contests: "Young boys were especially popular in aulodic contests, their high-pitched voices nicely complementing the tones of the aulos."⁶³

There are certainly more extra-musical parallels between the aulos and oboe which might be discussed in detail. For example, like the oboe, the aulos, which in Greek art and mythology was frequently played by wild satyrs, was commonly associated with nature and the pastoral. In *Apollo's Lyre*, Mathiesen cites Pollux's *Onomasticon* which lists instruments and types of songs suitable for earthy or mundane activities including those associated with the aulos: "the epilenion aulema for the treading of grapes and unnamed compositions for shepherding, winnowing, and

⁵⁹ Bundrick, 81-82.

⁶⁰ Aristotle, *Politics*, quoted in Cozma.

⁶¹ Schubert and Wolfe, 249.

⁶² Mathiesen, 161.

⁶³ Bundrick, 171.

rowing.”⁶⁴ Another similarity to the oboe was the aulos’s flair for conveying the exotic. As the aulos was associated with Phrygia, the instrument possessed associations which domestic Greek instruments did not. This gave the instrument a strange power: “It introduced the allure of the alien.”⁶⁵ As noted before, the oboe’s ability to evoke the exotic was capitalized upon in the Romantic period by such opera composers as Saint-Saëns and Verdi.

In addition to the above similarities of usage between the oboe and aulos, some eighteenth and nineteenth-century composers even seemed to recognize that the oboe had the ability to sound “ancient” and used it to evoke earlier times—perhaps in part due to the related characteristic often assigned to the oboe: nostalgia. Yet again, Berlioz is at the forefront of this application. While he and other composers did often use the flute to suggest antiquity,⁶⁶ perhaps due in part to the mistranslation of aulos as “flute” in Nicola Boileau’s influential 1674 French translation of Longinus’s *Treatise on the Sublime*,⁶⁷ he also carefully chose oboes to render the “antique double flute.” As noted by Berlioz treatise translator Hugh MacDonald, “In the opening scene of *Les Troyens* three ‘antique double flutes’ are seen on stage, their sound represented by three oboes. Berlioz would have known Virgil’s references to this instrument and also Kastner’s illustration of it in his *Manuel general de musique militaire* (1848).”⁶⁸ Berlioz’s stage instructions state: “Trois bergers jouent de la double flûte au sommet du tombeau d’Achille” or “Three shepherds play the double flute on top of Achilles’ tomb.” The three offstage oboes in this opening scene are featured prominently and at times render a drone for the opera chorus, hearkening back to use of the aulos with the Greek chorus.

⁶⁴ Mathiesen, 155.

⁶⁵ Peter Wilson in Peter Meineck, *Theatrocracy*, 159.

⁶⁶ Berlioz, 146.

⁶⁷ Burgess and Haynes, 13.

⁶⁸ Berlioz, 146.

Connecting the Greek Aulos and the Romantic Oboe

Some of the characteristics described above are seen not only in the aulos and oboe but were passed down by other instruments in the oboe's lineage. While we have been considering the Romantic era's oboe characters and their relationship to the aulos, the similarities which apply to these other instruments should not be ignored. The shawm was used for consort playing and was found in varying sizes, as was the Greek aulos. Due to its penetrating timbre, the shawm, like the aulos, performed a military function. In addition to being audible from long distances, it was used by the Arab Muslims as a psychological weapon—meant to intimidate the opposing army, as Crusaders learned during their invasion of the Middle East. As the shawm was widely used in Europe from the twelfth through the seventeenth centuries,⁶⁹ it is possible that after seeing the instrument's power first-hand, returning Crusaders incorporated the shawm into their own European military bands.

Additionally, the shawm was very often associated with shepherds and the pastoral. In fact, shepherds even had their own specific type of shawm, called a "hirtenschalmei" or "shepherd's shawm." This connection is frequently captured in art, such as this work by Baroque painter Jan Baptist Wolfaerts (Figure 3.1).

⁶⁹ Anthony C. Baines, "Shawm," *Grove Music Online*, rev. Martin Kirnbauer, accessed April 5, 2020, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com>.



Figure 3.1. *The Piper* (Shepherd Scene with Shawm Player), Jan Baptist Wolfarts, 1646, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

In the Baroque period, wind instruments in general (and the Baroque oboe in particular) were used extensively to represent pastoral characters. Frequently, the oboe would serve as the solo instrument which evoked shepherds, and was often featured in playing the *siciliana*, a genre defined by a compound meter and dotted rhythms. The evolution of the *siciliana* may link directly back to double reed instruments: “It seems that the common pastoral meter, in 12/8 or 6/8, may be associated with the playing of the Abruzzi shepherds who descended to Rome at Christmastime; that, indeed, the *siciliana* itself may be no more than a refinement of the music of the *pifferari*.”⁷⁰ While in Rome, Berlioz heard the *pifferari* players (Italian shepherds who played the bagpipe or reed pipes) and said that their music “may be regarded as a remnant of antiquity.”⁷¹ Musical examples of the Baroque oboe in a pastoral-type role include “Domine

⁷⁰ Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 229.

⁷¹ Hector Berlioz, *Memoirs of Hector Berlioz: From 1803 to 1865, Comprising his Travels in Germany, Italy, Russia, and England*, trans. Ernest Newman (New York: Dover Publications, 1932), 159.

Deus” from Vivaldi’s *Gloria* and the use of oboe and oboe d’amore in Bach’s opening Sinfonia to Part II of his *Christmas Oratorio*.

The oboe was often also used for laments and expressions of longing in the Baroque period. Bach employs the oboe, oboe d’amore, and oboe da caccia, the English horn’s predecessor, in many of his cantatas and large orchestral works. Two famous examples which use the oboe to such ends are Bach’s Cantata 12 (“Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Sagen” or “Weeping, Lamenting, Worrying, Fearing”) and his Cantata 82 (“Ich habe genug” or “I have enough”), which—despite the biblical text which expresses contentment—has a sorrowful edge, as Simeon announces he is ready to die.

CHAPTER 4: NINETEENTH CENTURY GERMANY'S FASCINATION WITH ANCIENT GREECE

The influence of Greek culture has been extremely widespread. Throughout many historical periods, Greek philosophical, political, and artistic ideas have permeated thought and influenced cultural development. In *The Classical Tradition*, British Classicist Gilbert Highet notes:

Our modern world is in many ways a continuation of the world of Greece and Rome...The Greeks and, learning from them, the Romans created a noble and complex civilization, which flourished for a thousand years...When the civilization of the west began to rise again and remake itself, it did so largely through rediscovering the buried culture of Greece and Rome.¹

Greek influence—while never absent from Europe—surged in the Renaissance, the fall of Constantinople in 1453 leading to the dissemination and translation of Greek texts by scholars fleeing the conquered city. The influence of the Ancient Greeks has flourished in Europe ever since. Andrew Dalzel, University of Edinburgh Professor of Greek during the nineteenth century, wrote of the Ancient Greek influence on his home country:

When the admired monuments of Greece and Rome were produced to view after the dark ages, the minds of those who became acquainted with them were seized with enthusiastic veneration. It is no wonder indeed, that men, who were beginning to search after knowledge, should have grasped at the elegant productions of the ancients with eagerness and rapture.

An acquaintance with ancient Greece, then, must be forever a favourite object to Britons...It cannot, therefore, but be attended with great satisfaction, to examine into the genius of this people, who have already run the career of glory, and whose historians, philosophers, orators, [and] poets, have by their masterly writings rendered them immortal.²

¹ Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

² Andrew Dalzel, *Substance of Lectures on the Ancient Greeks, & on the Revival of Greek Learning in Europe* (Edinburgh: A. Constable & Co., 1821), 3 and 7-8.

While many instances of Greek influence might be explored, one of the most notable is the Enlightenment—an intellectual movement of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries which sought social and political reform based on reason. Those who believed in the Enlightenment’s purpose, including such figures as Holy Roman Emperor Joseph II, German philosopher Immanuel Kant, and Declaration of Independence writer Thomas Jefferson, drastically altered the landscape of Europe and the United States, and paved the way for Romantic period thinkers. This “Age of Reason,” championing logic, scientific progress, democracy, and individual liberty, came to fruition during the Classical period, which was already heavily influenced by Greek culture. Begun as a reaction against the perceived excess and heaviness of Baroque art, architecture, and music, the art of the Classical period focused on simplicity and balance. In addition to influencing Classical music, philosophy, and literature, the Greeks inspired some of the most celebrated architecture from the period, including Berlin’s Brandenburg Gate and the United States Capitol Building. Such an attraction to Greek culture and thought has in many tangible ways shaped modern Western nations.

The Influence of Ancient Greece on Germany

Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is a fascinating example of philhellenic influence. Virtually every facet of German life in this period, including philosophy, art, music, architecture, literature, and politics, owes much to Greek culture:

Greece has profoundly modified the whole trend of modern civilization, imposing her thought, her standards, her literary forms, her imagery, her visions and dreams wherever she is known. But Germany is the supreme example of her triumphant spiritual tyranny. . . The extent of the Greek influence is incalculable through Europe; its intensity is at its highest in Germany.³

³ Eliza Marian Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry Over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 6.

How then did Germany find itself so much more indebted to the Ancient Greeks than its contemporary European countries? In the centuries before a Greek connection began to be championed, Germany—like much of the rest of Europe—looked to Rome for inspiration. Germany’s relationship with Rome, however, has been historically fraught with challenges, beginning in the days of the Roman Empire. As the Romans sought to expand their territory, they came into fierce conflict with the Germanic tribes. While there were several attempts, Rome was never able to fully conquer Germania. As the Roman Empire declined in the fourth and fifth centuries, due in part to losses against Germanic tribes, Roman Catholicism took the place of the failing emperors. The catholicization of Germany began gradually but was solidified in the late eighth-early ninth centuries under Holy Roman Emperor Charlemagne, whose official seal stated his ambition toward “the Renewal of the Roman Empire.” Known for his support of education and desire to re-unite Europe culturally and politically, he conquered much of western Europe, including the region of modern-day Germany, and converted pagans to Christianity. Eginhard, an eighth and ninth century scholar who served under Charlemagne and was his first biographer, wrote:

The war that had lasted so many years was at length ended by their [the Saxons’] acceding to the terms offered by the King; which were renunciation of their national religious customs and the worship of devils, acceptance of the sacraments of the Christian faith and religion, and union with the Franks to form one people.⁴

Throughout the Middle Ages and early Renaissance, Roman Catholicism continued to dominate the region. This would shift abruptly in 1517 when a German Augustinian monk named Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of All-Saints Church in Wittenburg.⁵ Disillusioned by what he saw as abuses of the Catholic Church, he set off the Protestant

⁴ Eginhard, *Life of Charlemagne*, trans. Samuel Epes Turner (New York: American Book Company, 1880), 28.

⁵ There is debate whether Luther actually nailed his complaints to a door. Regardless, his issues with the Catholic Church rapidly became public and were widely dispersed.

Reformation in Northern Europe and fractured the region's relationship with Rome. While Rome's power was still influential post-Reformation (much of Southern Germany and Austria remained Catholic), the schism paved the way for other influences to eventually emerge—namely, Ancient Greece.

Ancient Greece's invasion of German culture took place in several phases and was influenced by the combined motivations and interests of different groups of people. While some, such as artists and historians, studied Greece for its artistic lessons and as an intellectual discipline which would serve to enhance the educational system,⁶ others, such as the rulers of various German states, sought to bolster the Ancient Greek and German narrative to their larger political advantage.⁷ Ultimately these varied agendas ended up complementing each other to the benefit of a unified German culture.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Germany began to proclaim more and more confidently that it was the true inheritor of the Greek legacy. As musicologist Jason Geary observes: “[In their minds] only the Germans possessed a genuine spiritual affinity with the Greeks and were thus capable of reaching the heights once attained by the ancients...”⁸ Unfortunately, implementation of such ideas of cultural superiority would ultimately lead to the mentality which motivated the Third Reich during World War II. Belief in the superiority of an Aryan race “went hand in hand with Germany's self-appointed task of redeeming the modern world through its universal, civilizing culture.”⁹ While the years of war and mass genocide were far off, this ideology of exceptionality began early and in many ways grew out of Germany's perception of itself as the superior fulfillment of the Greek legacy.

⁶ Jason Geary, *The Politics of Appropriation: German Romantic Music and the Ancient Greek Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 26.

Geary notes that “The notion of Ancient Greece as representing the apex of art and humanity was deeply ingrained in German culture by the time Hellenism began to wane in influence.”

⁷ Geary, 3.

⁸ Geary, 3.

⁹ Geary, 3.

As mentioned above, the Greek influence on German culture took off during the late Enlightenment, as scholars increasingly looked to Ancient Greece and its philosophers for inspiration:

The singling out of Greece and its rhetorical elevation above Rome were distinctly the product of late Enlightenment social and political conditions, and the extraordinary group of influential intellectuals who shaped this fetish cast a long shadow over German cultural developments in the two centuries to follow.¹⁰

One such “influential intellectual” was Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). Although Prussian-born, Winckelmann spent much of his life in Italy, serving as a scholar and librarian for various Italian nobles. As a result of his passion for Greek sculpture and the publication of several acclaimed works on Greek art, Winckelmann became known as an insightful art historian, often called the “Father of Art History” and the “Father of Modern Archaeology.” His influence on philhellenism in Germany was profound. As Geary states, Winckelmann “enjoyed a prestigious position in Germany second to none. His absolute veneration of Greece contributed decisively to Germany’s awakening literary self-consciousness and its separation from French classicism.”¹¹ Summarized in his famous statement “noble simplicity and serene greatness,”¹² Winckelmann’s idealization of Greek culture and insistence on properly executed archaeology would influence a long list of German scholars and artists, including Goethe, Schiller, Humboldt, Lessing, and Herder.¹³

Winckelmann’s efforts stimulated interest in Ancient Greece and spurred a new approach to academic research:

By far the most influential form of Hellenism in early nineteenth-century Germany concerned the establishment of classical philology as a rigorous discipline...[This] reflected both a general rise in historical consciousness, as well as the renewed interest in antiquity fostered by, among other things, the

¹⁰ Suzanne L. Marchland, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 4.

¹¹ Geary, 123.

¹² Butler, 48.

¹³ Marchland, 8.

influence of Winckelmann and the impact of recent archaeological excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii.¹⁴

This developing academic approach surpassed Winckelmann's initial, somewhat idealized, view of Greek culture and led to a flourishing of scholarly activity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Advancements included the establishment of classical education ideals at German universities (championed by Wilhelm von Humboldt in particular), several translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (which maintained the original meter of the poetry) and the institution of a scholarly and systematic approach to archaeological excavation and subsequent academic advancements.¹⁵

The nineteenth-century political landscape was also constantly in motion. While many factors influenced this, a major catalyst was the rise of Napoleon I, self-proclaimed Emperor of France. His campaign to invade and conquer neighboring lands lasted until 1815, when he was defeated for the final time at the Battle of Waterloo. During Napoleon's onslaught, armies from various regions of the independently governed German-speaking lands collaborated to fight toward the Emperor's eventual defeat. Historian Frank Turner calls this unified effort "one of the defining moments in the emergence of a sense of German nationhood."¹⁶ Ideas of nationalism, the belief that a nation should be defined by people who share a common language and cultural heritage, therefore reverberated throughout the German lands.

As the desire to unify the German people grew, those with influence were faced with the challenge of defining the German nation. A rejection of French culture (whose Rococo style had been popular in Germany) seemed natural after the recent conflict with Napoleon's armies. An alternative influence was the affinity for and admiration of the Ancient Greeks, which was already in full swing from the previous century. Germany sought to use a connection to Greece to

¹⁴ Geary, 24.

¹⁵ Marchland, 17.

¹⁶ Frank M. Turner, *European Intellectual History: From Rousseau to Nietzsche*, ed. Richard A. Lofthouse (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 163.

bolster a heritage narrative—namely that their region was even more ancient and noble than any country who claimed Rome as their ancestor. The Prussian philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) stated definitively that Germans possessed “an incomparably stronger and tighter-knit bond with the Greeks than any other age or nation, even ones that are much temporally or geographically closer.”¹⁷ Aristocratic rulers throughout the region began to claim Greek connections for their political benefit, commissioning Neoclassical architecture and artistic works in an effort to link their rule with Greece. Ludwig I of Bavaria (grandfather of “Mad King” Ludwig II, the famous Wagner patron) supposedly stated, “I will not rest until Munich looks like Athens,”¹⁸ and subsequent building projects reflected this promise.

The Greek connection is readily apparent in many German art forms from the Romantic era. Music and visual art were particularly well-suited to expressing the cultural ideas of a people, sometimes in a propaganda-like way, and therefore played an essential role in defining Germany’s cultural spirit. Winckelmann yet again influenced the use of art, this time to the benefit of nation-building: “[He] drew a connection between the superiority of Greek art and the unique political freedom enjoyed by the Greeks, thereby suggesting a vital link between the political existence of a nation and its aesthetic achievements.”¹⁹ The various German philosophers and scholars, Winckelmann in particular, who championed Ancient Greek art, politics, and social structures as a way to define the German nation, would be highly influential on nineteenth-century artists, and—of particular interest here—composers who created one of the era’s most prized art forms: opera.

The Influence of Ancient Greece on Opera

In her mid-twentieth century book *The Greek Aulos*, Kathleen Schlesinger states:

The musician is attracted to the study of Greek music not merely because any manifestation of the art of organized sound is of interest to him, but largely

¹⁷ Geary, 20.

¹⁸ Geary, 171.

¹⁹ Geary, 13.

because of a widespread impression that the music of Western Europe is in some obscure way derived from that of ancient Greece.²⁰

While Schlesinger is certainly correct that many musicians have been drawn to Greek music, this influence is not so obscure. Greek drama and writings about Greek music have profoundly influenced the development of European music, and nowhere is this influence felt more powerfully than in the development of opera.

Opera emerged around the year 1600, at the beginning of the Baroque era,²¹ but the concepts and ideas behind it date back to the Renaissance and the intellectual movement known as humanism. While humanism took many forms and therefore cannot be completely distilled into a set of principles, humanist scholars, philosophers, and artists did share a love for the ancients and avidly looked for inspiration within Classical literature. Musical theorists gleaned much information from Greek sources, but met with challenges when trying to use ancient texts to learn about an aural art form:

[Renaissance scholars] were intrigued by the legendary powers and quality of music of ancient Greece, but they were frustrated by the special difficulties that presented themselves in recapturing the music of an earlier time. Sculpture, architecture, and literature all exist in tangible and more or less permanent form. But music, as a sounding medium, is evanescent. It can be described, it can be made the subject of theory, but it remains elusive.²²

Such challenges meant that scholars then and now still face an uphill battle when deciding exactly what is meant regarding music in certain Greek passages, particularly those relating to music theory.

An influential group of humanist scholars who attempted to recapture the essence of Greek music was the Florentine Camerata. These men, who included Vincenzo Galilei, Giulio Caccini, Giralamo Mei, and Pietro Strozzi, met during the 1570s and 1580s at the home of art

²⁰ Schlesinger, xvi.

²¹ Italian composer Jacopo Peri's *Euridice*, the earliest known surviving opera, dates from 1600.

²² Mathiesen, 1.

patron Count Giovanni de' Bardi.²³ Their goal was to reform music based on what they understood as the pure and pleasing qualities of Ancient Greek music. Greek tragedy, which many in the Camerata understood to be completely sung, seemed an ideal source from which to draw. The Camerata is credited for its work toward monody, an important characteristic of early opera, which they believed restored the simple beauty and style of Greek music. This type of music-making featured a melody plus accompaniment, rendering text much more easily understood.²⁴ As noted in *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage*, it was the Florentine Camerata's interest in:

...ancient Greek music, and in the relationship between words and music in Greek tragedy, that stimulated the development of a style of performance—expressive monody—that gave particular attention to conveying the meaning and the dramatic and emotional force of the words being sung.²⁵

Their new style, which came to be known as *seconda pratica* or “second practice,” was highly influenced by Vincenzo Galilei, who studied fragments of Greek music available at the time, in addition to Greek texts.²⁶

In his book *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, Galilei provides an in-depth rationale for the musical changes he recommends based on his interpretation of the ancient sources. Even in the formatting of his work we see the influence of the Greeks: the book is organized as a conversation between Bardi and Strozzi, reflecting the influence of Plato, who presented his philosophy in the form of the Socratic dialogue. It is also interesting to note that Galilei discusses Greek musical life and instruments, writing of the aulos several times:

²³ As Richard A. Carlton notes, there were other important individuals who spurred operatic development as well, including Jacopo Corsi and his Camerata, which continued their work after Bardi and Galilei's Camerata has disbanded. (Richard A. Carlton, “Florentine Humanism and the Birth of Opera: The Roots of Operatic ‘Conventions,’” in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 31, no. 1 (2000), 71.)

²⁴ A practical example of their work includes Caccini's *La nuove musiche*, a set of arias and madrigals which moved away from the contrapuntal style previously favored.

²⁵ Peter Brown and Suzana Ograjenšek, eds., *Ancient Drama in Music for the Modern Stage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), vi.

²⁶ Lee, 52.

Strozzi: You told me many times that the ancients sang their tragedies and comedies to the sound of the aulos and the kithara, but you have not shown me what authority moved you to say and believe this, nor did you tell me what induced them to do so.

Bardi: You have a thousand reasons. Now, note that the Greeks really sang the tragedies and comedies in the manner you have heard. Among others who say so and are trustworthy are Aristotle...Returning to treat the origin of the wind instruments, as I promised, I saw that among those of the Greeks, first is the aulos [*aulon*], which is the same as the *tibia* of the Romans and our shawm [*piffero*].²⁷

Bardi: Comic and tragic actors sang—also in the satyr plays—in these two tonoi continually to the sound of the aulos when they recited their lines on the stage...Marsyas was the first to play the aulos [*piffero*] with holes—holes being unknown before him—playing two of the auloi with one breath. He was also the first to mix low and high pitch. To that instrument they later sang elegies in an ordered manner.²⁸

He even cites a Greek comparison of the aulos to a goose, which is comical due to the oboe's persistent comparison with a duck: "I shall pass over...whether those [auloi] whose hoarse sound resembled the crying and squeaking of geese were called *gingrae* by the Phoenicians who created them..."²⁹ Finally, his mentions of auloi are all the more interesting as he uses the instrument in a passage justifying his belief in the superiority of monody and simplified melodic lines:

Singing in consonance to the aulos in those times could not be anything but the aulete playing his air while someone else sang the same air, pronouncing the words at the same time but at a different pitch level: for example, at the octave or perhaps the fifth...But no one with a good knowledge of their music believes that two or more sang different airs in consonance at the same time in the manner customary today...It is true that today they take more license than is suitable, spurred on perhaps by polyphonic music [*canto figurato*], which did not happen among the ancients for reasons already given.³⁰

Therefore Galilei, who knew of the aulos and its utility in Greek music, frequently uses the instrument to justify his opinions advocating monodic style.

²⁷ Vincenzo Galilei, *Dialogue on Ancient and Modern Music*, trans. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 363.

²⁸ Galilei, 152-53.

²⁹ Galilei, 249.

³⁰ Galilei, 260-261.

From its beginning around 1600, opera flourished as an art form, constantly adapting to accommodate differing music historical periods as well as diverse languages and regional tastes. In eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany there was a clear trend toward blending regional opera tradition with what was known regarding Greek music and drama. Like the humanists before them, “German artists and intellectuals of the period looked to ancient Greece as a model of aesthetic beauty and a touchstone of humanity.”³¹ A key figure in the integration of Greek dramaturgical ideals with German opera was Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787). While Gluck’s ideas for opera revolutionized the genre, his fascination with the Greeks was influenced by others, including his knowledge of the Florentine Camerata and Winckelmann, whom Gluck may have met in Rome.³² In his famous preface to the opera *Alceste*, Gluck laid out his ideals for opera reform, which relied heavily on this Greek influence. Gluck spoke of his reasons for reform:

I resolved to free [opera] from all the abuses which have crept in either through ill-advised vanity on the part of singers or through excessive complaisance on the part of composers, with the result that for some time Italian opera has been disfigured and from being the most splendid and most beautiful of all stage performances has been made the most ridiculous and the most wearisome.”³³

Vocal simplicity and clarity were at the heart of his modifications, as Gluck believed this path reflecting the purity of Greek music would lead to a more effective style of drama. The meaning of the text now took center stage. Finally, in addition to Greek theater’s influence on Gluck’s musical style, many of his operatic plots rely heavily on Greek mythology and history, including *Orfeo ed Euridice*, *Alceste*, and *Iphigenie en Aulide*.

The connections to ancient Greece were immediately noted. After watching a production of *Alceste*, one contemporary witness observed: “Every time I listen, I feel myself cast back to the days of ancient Athens, and I believe that I am sitting at productions of the tragedies of Sophocles

³¹ Geary, 2.

³² Brown and Ograjenšek, 12.

³³ Patricia Howard, ed., *Gluck* (London: Routledge, 2016), 23.

and Euripides.”³⁴ Calzabigi, Gluck’s librettist, stated: “Reduced to the form of Ancient Greek tragedy, the drama has the power to arouse pity and terror, and to act upon the soul to the same degree as spoken tragedy does.”³⁵ While Greek influence on drama was not highly unusual—as Classicist Peter Brown and music scholar Suzana Ograjenšek note, “Those who have called for a reform of the theater have tended to return to ancient drama to seek support for the ideas that they were promoting”³⁶—Gluck’s reforms in particular were highly influential on later composers.

In the next century, Felix Mendelssohn wrote several sets of incidental music to accompany revivals of Greek plays. His first, music to accompany Sophocles’ *Antigone* (1841), received much acclaim—even warranting King Friedrich Wilhelm IV to order a commemorative medal for the production, which he claimed “celebrated nothing less than the German resurrection of ancient tragedy.”³⁷ With such attention, Mendelssohn’s Greek-inspired music played a large role within the cultural and political realm of German nationalism.

Gluck biographer Adolf Bernhard Marx discussed his friend Mendelssohn’s Greek-inspired works and the influence Gluck had on them: “[Mendelssohn] here held up Gluck’s style as authoritative, a claim that may be justified if one considers how far apart Mendelssohn’s *Antigone* stands from his own specific style of writing and how close it is to Gluck.”³⁸ Musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, who quotes Marx in his *Das Problem Mendelssohn*, goes on to point out how little Mendelssohn’s music resembles Gluck’s in general, except for the works which demonstrate Greek influence.³⁹ As part of Mendelssohn’s desire to recreate Greek drama, he adopted characteristic poetic meters, unison chanting, and even invoked the traditional Greek chorus.⁴⁰

³⁴ Howard, 454.

³⁵ Howard, 453.

³⁶ Brown and Ograjenšek, vi.

³⁷ Geary, 1.

³⁸ Adolf Bernhard Marx quoted in Benedict Taylor, ed., *Mendelssohn* (London: Routledge, 2016), 8-9.

³⁹ Taylor, 9.

⁴⁰ Brown and Ograjenšek, 4.

Nineteenth-century appropriation of Greek music and drama ultimately took several forms. While composers such as Mendelssohn sought a “resurrection of Greek tragedy,” others—such as Richard Wagner—would sharply critique this approach, choosing instead to use knowledge of Greek dramatic principles to forge a new compositional path.

Wagner’s Fascination with Ancient Greece

With the possible exception of Beethoven, German composer Richard Wagner (1813-1883) loomed larger on the nineteenth century than any other composer. His numerous music dramas and philosophies could not help but influence the art of various disciplines for generations, whether artists were disciples of his style or not. Wagner lived a complex and sometimes contradictory life. He took part in revolutions, lived in exile, was patronized by a king, built an opera house, wrote both beautiful music, and penned racist attacks. Wagner’s ideas were shaped by such diverse influences as Buddhism, Christianity, the Middle Ages, and the writings of numerous philosophers of his time, all of which made their way into his music. But one influence which reigned supreme in his works was his interest in the Ancient Greeks. Wagner himself said in *Art and Revolution*:

In any serious investigation of the essence of our art of today, we cannot make one step forward without being brought face to face with its intimate connection with the *Art of Ancient Greece* [sic]. For, in point of fact, our modern art is but one link in the artistic development of the whole of Europe; and this development found its starting point with the Greeks.⁴¹

While this influence was not readily apparent in his early operas (in fact not until after *Lohengrin* is this connection explicit in his dramas),⁴² Greek mythology, philosophy, and culture captured Wagner’s imagination early in life.

Wagner’s interest in the Greeks was not unusual for his time. As previously discussed, Germany had a tradition of reliance on the Greeks for cultural and educational models. Wagner

⁴¹ Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future and other Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 32.

⁴² Lee, 57.

was well-aware of the Greek influence on Gluck's work and his contemporary Mendelssohn's wildly successful music written for productions of Greek plays. Of the latter's work, Wagner was extremely critical: "We have to accomplish something completely different than simply re-creating Greek antiquity. Indeed, the foolish restoration of a pseudo-Greek form of art has already been attempted..."⁴³ Wagner's tendency toward jealousy at others' successes and his strong anti-Semitism played no small part in this criticism: "Wagner's basic claim was that, as members of a foreign race alienated from the European cultures into which they had assimilated, Jews were incapable of creating true art but were adept at imitating it in a superficial and trivial manner."⁴⁴ This played directly into Germany's politically-motivated view that other races and nationalities were ill-equipped to be the heirs of Greece. Believing himself superior, Wagner would channel aspects of Greek drama into his own operatic reforms—a "reinvention" rather than "recreation"⁴⁵—which he believed was the correct path forward for opera.

Wagner's knowledge of the Greeks stemmed from a variety of sources. He loved reading the works of acclaimed scholars from his and the previous century who celebrated Greek culture, at one time exclaiming: "Hail Winckelmann and Lessing, ye who, beyond the centuries of native German majesty, found the German ur-kinsmen in the divine Hellenes, and laid bare the pure ideal of human beauty."⁴⁶ Musically, Gluck had a great influence on Wagner. Wagner lauded Gluck's use of Greek plots in his operas and praised Gluck's opera *Iphigenie en Aulide* for years before re-orchestrating the work for an 1847 performance in Dresden.⁴⁷ To the opera, Wagner contributed preludes, postludes, and transitions, as well as adding clarinets and brass. In the overture, Wagner also retained Gluck's original plaintive oboe solos in several minor sections as

⁴³ Geary, 207.

⁴⁴ Geary, 8.

⁴⁵ Geary, 7.

⁴⁶ Daniel H. Foster, *Wagner's Ring Cycle and the Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 26.

⁴⁷ Howard, 435.

well as an extended oboe solo line toward its conclusion. Wagner even noted how Gluck “introduced musical ideas for particular emotive states that ran throughout the piece,” which, as Gluck scholar Patricia Howard observes, work like leitmotifs.⁴⁸

Despite being called “somewhat dilettantish” in his approach to Greek scholarship⁴⁹ (Wagner tried and failed to learn Greek and was more passionate than academic in his approach), he acquired and read from many translated Greek sources.⁵⁰ Aeschylus, Homer, Sophocles, and Aristophanes were some of his favorite poets and playwrights. Wagner’s wife Cosima recounts a time when he read aloud from Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*:

I feel as if I have never before seen him like this, transfigured, inspired, completely at one with what he is reading; no stage performance could have a more sublime effect than this recital...Richard says “I declare that [chorus] to be the most perfect thing in every way, religious, philosophic, poetic, artistic.” Cosima says she would put only the *Ring* beside it. Wagner at first demurs, makes a feeble joke, and then, turning serious, says simply, “It fits with my work.”⁵¹

Cosima also recalled that Wagner would write music in the morning and read Greek plays in the afternoon, indicating that Greek literature often took a central place alongside composition in his daily routine.⁵² Unfortunately, regarding Greek musical sources, M. Owen Lee believes it unlikely that Wagner had access to the few pieces of Greek music which had been discovered by Wagner’s day, although they had been known to Mei and Galilei in the late Renaissance.⁵³ Nevertheless, insights Wagner gleaned from his reading of Greek drama and other sources would clearly influence his revolutionary approach to reforming nineteenth-century opera.

⁴⁸ Howard, 469.

⁴⁹ Foster, 10.

⁵⁰ In *Wagner’s Ring Cycle and the Greeks*, Daniel H. Foster includes detailed lists of primary and secondary sources Wagner was known to have owned and those he would have known by reputation.

⁵¹ Lee, 23-24.

⁵² Lee, 71.

⁵³ Lee, 52.

Greek Influence on Wagner's Writing and Operas

Wagner was a prolific writer, and his numerous books and articles provide insight into his compositional process and the origins of his ideas. While the philosophies expressed in such books as *Art and Revolution* or *Opera and Drama* do not always perfectly align with his compositions, they reveal what Wagner believed was most important regarding operatic reform and drama at the time he was writing. By exploring his major dramatic ideals as seen through his writings and operas, it is possible to evaluate what Wagner appreciated about the Greek approach to drama and how this knowledge directly or indirectly influenced his works.

Gesamtkunstwerk, or “total art-work,” is one of Wagner’s best-known dramatic principles. It is the concept that the many components of opera—vocalists, orchestra, poetry of the libretto, dance, acting, and stage design—should work together to create something far greater than each element would be individually. Greek drama, he believed, embodied this concept better than any other artform in human history. One of Wagner’s favorite playwrights, Aeschylus, served as an example for this mode of artistry. As Lee states, “[Aeschylus] composed his own texts and his own music, did his own directing, staging, and choreography, and, at least at first, acted and sang in his own dramas.”⁵⁴ After the decline of Greece, however, Wagner believed humanity had not managed to recover this way of creating art. In *Art and Revolution* Wagner lamented that “Rhetoric, sculpture, painting, music and the rest abandoned the roles they had played together. Each went its own way, self-sufficient but isolated, to continue its own development.”⁵⁵ Wagner wanted to recreate this long-lost, interdisciplinary artform in which everything was connected. To this end, he claimed control over all aspects of his dramas—writing his own libretti and music, and even going so far as to design his own opera house in Bayreuth, seeking control of the entirety of the viewers’ experience.

⁵⁴ Lee, 46.

⁵⁵ Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, quoted in Lee, 60.

Wagner also admired how seamlessly art was integrated into Greek life, religion, and culture. Greek art was for the public. All levels of society attended the theatrical performances, which they essentially regarded as religious rituals. Wagner wrote about these Greek performances:

The days on which tragedy was performed in Greece were religious occasions...And the tragic playwright himself was standing—physically present—in the midst of the measures of the dance, raising the voices of the chorus and revealing in ringing words the utterances of divine wisdom. This was the supreme art form produced by Greece. It was Apollo embodied in real, living art. It was the Greek people at its highest point of truth and beauty.⁵⁶

The tragedy enjoyed by the Greeks, which Wagner believed embodied the “expression of the deepest and the noblest principles of the peoples’ consciousness”⁵⁷ and integrated seamlessly into Greek culture, was—in his mind—decidedly missing from contemporary life and leading to the downfall of modern drama. He spoke directly about his nation’s inability to produce national art and lamented that religious expressions were not acceptable in the theater. Wagner bemoaned modern drama’s destruction of what had been a perfect artform and devised a plan to renew the Greek model. Author and Wagner interpreter James Treadwell describes Wagner’s approach: “Since the frivolity and incompetence of repertory theater was for Wagner the image of a degraded society, theatrical reform would be a way of ennobling public life.”⁵⁸

Part of this reform would take the shape of Wagner’s Bayreuth Festspielhaus, built in the 1870s according to his specifications. The first performance at the opera house would be the premiere of his *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in 1876. The inside of the theater shares similarities with the amphitheaters of ancient Greece, particularly in the auditorium’s arched seating, which guaranteed each audience member an equal view of the stage. Wagner gave a speech to this effect at the laying of Bayreuth’s foundation stone: “The only way to place the seats was in rows

⁵⁶ Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, quoted in Lee, 8.

⁵⁷ Wagner, “Art and Revolution,” in *The Artwork of the Future and other Works*, 47.

⁵⁸ James Treadwell, “The “Ring” and the Conditions of Interpretation: Wagner’s Writing, 1848-1852,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no. 3 (November 1995): 209.

climbing in regular steps...And so the arrangements of our seating took on the character of the amphitheater of ancient Greece.”⁵⁹ Wagner spent much time devising the orchestra pit as well:

The orchestra had to be placed...at a depth such that the spectator could look directly over the top of it to the stage...while the music rising ghostlike from the “mystic abyss” like the vapours arising beneath the seat of Pythia from the holy womb of Gaia, transports him into that visionary rapture in which the scene spread before him now becomes the truest image of life itself.⁶⁰

Here, Wagner references the oracle of Delphi, a priestess whom Greeks believed could divine the future while in a trance-like state. Wagner’s explanation for the orchestra placement was thoroughly Greek-inspired, demonstrating yet again how Greek drama was on his mind as he designed his theater. He intended that Bayreuth would fill the void of “religious ritual” drama missing from German life and art.

Mythology is one of the most obvious influences from Greece that Wagner implemented for dramatic purpose. In *Opera and Drama* Wagner wrote, “The unique thing about myth is that it is true for all time; and its content, no matter how terse or compact, is inexhaustible for every age.”⁶¹ In *Art and Revolution* he exclaimed, “Everything vital and compelling in the myths, and everything that corresponded in the spectators, was realized in the theater. Heart and soul, eye and ear, saw and heard and understood the myths.”⁶² Wagner was captivated by mythology’s timelessness and universality, and chose to harness its power in some of his most compelling works. At first glance, his early operas may not appear to show the influence of Greek mythology, although in *A Communication to my Friends* written years after his early works, Wagner discussed the Greek influence. In *Athena Sings*, Lee paraphrases Wagner stating the early operas “owed their power to being German equivalents of Greek myths, that the *Flying Dutchman* was a figure similar to Homer’s wandering Odysseus, that Venus in *Tannhäuser* was

⁵⁹ Brown and Ograjenšek, 21.

⁶⁰ Brown and Ograjenšek, 21.

⁶¹ Wagner, *Opera and Drama*, quoted in Magee, *Aspects of Wagner* (New York: Stein and Day, 1969), 5.

⁶² Wagner, *Art and Revolution*, quoted in Lee, 7.

Circe, that Elsa in *Lohengrin* was Semele.”⁶³ As Lee clearly states, however, Wagner never claimed to hold these myths in his mind as he composed—rather such similarities became apparent to him later in life.

Wagner’s affinity for mythology is particularly apparent in the *Ring Cycle* (premiered 1876), which explores relationships between the gods and mortals, and incorporates magical objects and mystical powers. Some of these aspects directly parallel Greek myth, and scholars have debated which Greek playwrights—who captured mythological stories within their plays—most influenced Wagner’s characters and overarching plot elements. Jason Geary and L.J. Rather see the greatest influence from Sophocles, particularly within *Antigone* and *Oedipus Rex*. Geary draws on Wagner’s discussion of the Oedipus trilogy in *Opera and Drama* and links the characters of Antigone and Brünnhilde: “Both characters help to bring about destruction of the existing social order...Wagner himself points to the redemptive nature of Antigone’s actions and appears to regard this figure as the general model for Brünnhilde and her redemptive function.”⁶⁴ Another interesting mythological parallel is the incestuous relationship in Sophocles’ work between Oedipus and his mother Jocasta with the Völsung twin siblings Siegmund and Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*. Again, Wagner wrote about the Oedipus myth, stating that the incestuous Greek pair was unfairly censured. His beliefs are paraphrased by Geary:

The relationship between Oedipus and his mother was in no way a crime, least of all a crime against nature. Indeed, how could it have been if nature saw fit to bless this union with four healthy children, one of whom was Antigone, the very embodiment of “purely human” love and compassion?⁶⁵

The Oedipus relationship offers a striking comparison to Siegmund and Sieglinde, whose son Siegfried, along with his eventual consort Brünnhilde, played a vital role in the renewal of Wagner’s fictional world at the end of *Götterdämmerung*.

⁶³ Lee, 57.

⁶⁴ Geary, 201.

⁶⁵ Geary, 215.

M. Owen Lee and Classicist Michael Ewans maintain that Aeschylus was the supreme inspiration for Wagner. In their view, Brünnhilde compares strikingly to Athena in Aeschylus' trilogy *The Oresteia*: "Both Athena and Brünnhilde take the stage at the close of their massive trilogies to bring them to a conciliatory close, each of them the embodiment of her father's will."⁶⁶ Another example parallels a major plot point of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. Here conflict begins when the dwarf Alberich renounces love and steals enchanted gold from the Rhinemaidens. In the final scene of the opera, Alberich places a curse on the ring he made from this gold, punishing anyone who possesses it until the ring is returned to him. This curse persists through the other three operas until the gold is returned to the Rhinemaidens and Brünnhilde destroys the world through immolation. Lee elaborates on the similarity to Aeschylus's work: "a curse operates throughout the [*Oresteia*] trilogy, affecting every generation of the house of Atreus—only lifted when the sky god's daughter [Athena] appears to establish in Athens a new concept of justice."⁶⁷ The theft of fire by Prometheus, the title character in another Aeschylus play, echoes Alberich's original theft of the gold. Friedrich Nietzsche, the once great friend and admirer of Wagner, wrote: "no ancient work has ever had as powerful an influence as that of the *Oresteia* on Richard Wagner,"⁶⁸ reinforcing Lee and Ewans' claim that Aeschylus was the supreme influence on Wagner's dramas.

While relating more to Greek philosophy than to Greek mythology, a final example worth exploring is the plot ending of *Götterdämmerung*. After Siegfried's death, Brünnhilde takes the ring from his finger and places it on her own before riding her horse onto Siegfried's funeral pyre and setting the whole stage ablaze. The Rhine River overflows and the Rhinemaidens recapture the ring. Wagner scholar Daniel H. Foster observes that the whole plot of the *Ring Cycle*:

⁶⁶ Lee, 40.

⁶⁷ Lee, 66.

⁶⁸ Michael Ewans, *Opera from the Greek: Studies in the Poetics of Appropriation* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 9.

...revolts against the past only to return to it, ending almost exactly where the entire cycle began, thus embodying certain Greek notions about the return to stasis at the close of tragedies... The *Ring Cycle*'s finale both is and is not what it seems: a new beginning and the eternal return of the same.⁶⁹

While the end of the opera does indeed compare to the exodus in some Greek tragedies, there are other potential philosophical inspirations here as well. Some point to the fiery ending of *Götterdämmerung* as reflecting Buddhist thought. British philosopher Brian Magee, for example, discusses how followers of Buddhism may be released from suffering by following the eightfold path which “may lead us to the goal of redemption from life in this world,”⁷⁰ and the Buddhist idea of the earth’s continual and cyclical regeneration mirrors the end of *Götterdämmerung*. However, yet again the Greek connection cannot be discounted. Greek stoics conceptualized *palingenesis*, a term which referred to “the continual re-creation of the universe...which in its broadest sense denotes the theory that the human soul does not die with the body but is born again in new individuals or incarnations.”⁷¹ Schopenhauer, the German philosopher who exerted a profound influence on Wagner, shared certain aspects of both the Buddhist and the Greek philosophy. He believed in the cyclical nature of existence, although he was more partial to terminology of “the will” than “the soul.”⁷²

Mythological influences in Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* are not limited to the Greeks. Several medieval sources that had remained in relative obscurity until they were revived in the nineteenth century also found their way into Wagner’s dramas. These are particularly interesting in that they defined a mythology closer to home—that of the Germanic and Scandinavian regions. The

⁶⁹ Foster, xvii.

⁷⁰ Brian Magee, *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000), 165.

⁷¹ Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and its Aftermath in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), 50.

⁷² There is debate regarding how much of an influence Schopenhauer could have been on Wagner’s *Ring Cycle* based on when Wagner first read *The World as Will and Representation*, which may have been several years after he completed the libretto. Warren J. Darcy explores the impact Schopenhauer may have had on Wagner’s music at the end of *Götterdämmerung* and the controversial “Schopenhauerian verses” in his article *The Metaphysics of Annihilation: Wagner, Schopenhauer, and the Ending of the Ring*.

Nibelungenlied, an epic poem completed around 1200, which likely originated in modern-day Austria, shares some similarities with his operas, particularly *Götterdämmerung*.⁷³ Included in the saga are the characters of Siegfried the dragon-slayer and the Rhinedaughters. The work inspired and corresponded to other literature which dated from around the same time, including the *Thidrekssaga*, which elaborated on the Siegfried legend. Wagner also studied other Norse mythology including the *Poetic Edda* and the *Volsunga Saga*, which originated around the same date as the *Nibelungenlied* and provided more of Siegfried's backstory.⁷⁴ By harnessing the power of myth observed in his study of Greek drama and utilizing the Germanic region's cultural heritage, Wagner sought to create a powerful new mythology for his music dramas.

In his conception of the *Ring Cycle*, Wagner expressed his wish to create “a Hellenistically optimistic world for myself, which I held to be entirely realizable if only people wished it to exist.”⁷⁵ Part of how he sought to achieve this, as mentioned above, was outlined in Wagner's extensive prose works, which include his philosophies and goals for music drama, and stretched to his use of Greek mythology, the creation of public dramatic events, and his adoption of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* ideal. Some scholars have asked whether his prose theory or musical style evolved first. Wagner spoke about the unusual frame of mind in which he developed his theory, stating that he had to “treat as an intellectual theory something that my creative intuition already had an assured grasp of.”⁷⁶ Regardless of whether his philosophic texts inspired his music or vice versa, Wagner's operas—including musical aspects and libretti—strongly reflect Greek inspiration.

⁷³ Elizabeth Magee, “In Pursuit of the Purely Human: the “Ring” and its Medieval Sources,” in *Wagner's Ring of the Nibelung: A Companion*, ed. Stewart Spencer and Barry Millington (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 2000), 29.

⁷⁴ Magee, “In Pursuit of the Purely Human,” 31.

⁷⁵ Foster, xi.

⁷⁶ Bryan Magee, *Aspects of Wagner*, 15.

In Greek drama, the chorus was vital in conveying meaning to the audience. Always present, the chorus was given the role of contextualizing what was occurring on the stage, particularly since the action and dialogue were often static. As M. Owen Lee states:

In Aeschylus the real dramatic element is the chorus, interpreting in the *orchêstra* the real meaning of what the actors are acting in front of the *skene*. The chorus sees everything at a deeper, intuitive, unconscious level while the actors hardly see anything at all, hardly know why they are acting as they do.⁷⁷

Similarities between the Greek chorus and Wagner's use of the orchestra are clear. Wagner explains how he chose to use his orchestra in a very similar way:

The orchestra will have much the same relation to my sort of drama as in Greece the chorus had to the tragic action...The orchestra in my modern symphonic drama will participate so intimately in the motives of the action that it alone, and not the singers, will give the music definite shape. And it will keep that music in an endless flow in order to communicate what the drama means."⁷⁸

In the *Ring Cycle*, Wagner writes almost nothing for a traditional operatic chorus, only making use of it in *Götterdämmerung* in the realm of the Gibichung people. As Foster details, this is likely because he considered the chorus redundant, believing that the operatic orchestra had evolved directly from the Greek chorus and therefore fulfilled that role.⁷⁹ Any moment of Wagner's later operas could be used to illustrate the intimate connection the orchestra has to the drama—the complex network of leitmotifs making this possible. Wagner himself, however, discusses a purely musical example, Siegfried's "Funeral March," which illustrates how he used the power of the orchestra to convey meaning:

I have composed a Greek chorus...but a chorus which will be sung, so to speak, by the orchestra; after Siegfried's death, while the scene is being changed, the Siegmund theme will be played, as if the chorus is saying "This was his father"; then the sword motive; and finally his own theme...How could words ever make the impression that these solemn themes, in their new form, will evoke? Music always expresses the direct present.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Lee, 27.

⁷⁸ Lee, 63.

⁷⁹ Foster, xvi.

⁸⁰ Brown and Ograjenšek, 25.

The last part of this statement, “Music always expresses the direct present,” should mean that listeners can take any moment in Wagner’s drama and relate what they hear in the orchestra to precise action or dialogue onstage. This immediacy of meaning is a large part of what makes Wagner’s compositional method so effective, connecting as he does the many complexities of plot and action.

Wagner’s orchestra operated in a similar capacity to the Greek chorus due to another structural aspect of his compositional style: leitmotifs. Leitmotifs include a range of melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic musical ideas, each associated with a particular character, object, event, or emotion within the drama. Wagner was not the first nineteenth-century composer to use musical associations in this way—for instance, Weber used “reminiscence motives” in his operas—but Wagner brought this idea to its culmination. Themes associated with ideas or people are present beginning in his early operas. An example is what has been dubbed the “redemption” theme, which first appears in the overture to *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1843) and is played by the oboe and English horn.

The musical score shows two staves: Oboe 1 and English Horn. The Oboe 1 staff starts with a whole rest, then enters with a melodic line. The English Horn staff plays a similar melodic line. The tempo markings are 'Andante', 'ritard.', and 'a tempo'. Dynamic markings include 'p dolce', 'p', and 'pp'. The score is in 2/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

Example 4.1. Wagner, *Der Fliegende Holländer*, Overture

The theme is replayed by the oboe and flute a final time at the very end of the opera while the spirits of Senta (who threw herself into the sea) and the Dutchman ascend together into heaven. The theme represents the redemption of the Dutchman through the love of a loyal woman. By the time Wagner composed the *Ring Cycle*, his compositional style featured many layers of leitmotifs with complex, nuanced associations, and maintained their meaning throughout the four operas.

Leitmotifs too may have roots in the work of the Greeks. Greek tragedy is full of imagery which shifts and takes on new meanings throughout the course of a drama. Aeschylus is particularly noted for his use of multi-layered images: “[His] method of using key images to sustain and develop a dramatic theme has for some time now been recognized as an important feature of his style.”⁸¹ Aeschylus’s recurring images include such themes as ships, eagles, yokes, and the fluctuation between light and dark.⁸² Classics scholar William C. Scott discusses the rich network of wind and breath imagery which Aeschylus invoked in the *Oresteia*, which were favorite plays of Wagner’s. Here Aeschylus uses blowing and wind descriptors not only to color the text, but as important plot points. Scott elaborates how Aeschylus uses words for “wind” which share an underlying sound within the original Greek language: “pn” forms the basis for *pneuma*, *pneô*, *ekpneô* and so forth. “This [base] is the word which establishes the image,” Scott writes. “Once the image is firmly set in the minds of the audience, the poet can extend and elaborate his image by using other words for the wind.”⁸³ The final aspect of Aeschylus’s writing that is important to note is his use of imagery which is important to the plot as well as to the artistic construction of the drama. As Scott notes in his conclusion: “Imagery for Aeschylus is not external decoration; it is an integral part of the play.”⁸⁴ The same could be said for Wagner’s leitmotifs. Similar to Aeschylus, his themes directly relate to characters, objects, and locations which form the plots of his operas. Once he establishes them for the listener, Wagner manipulates the motives to highlight the evolving dramatic situation and deeper connections. As evidenced by Wagner’s statement that the orchestra alone gives his music “definite shape,” his musical imagery, like Aeschylus’s, is certainly an integral part of his drama.

⁸¹ J. A. Haldane, “Musical Themes and Imagery in Aeschylus,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 85 (1965): 33.

⁸² Haldane, 33.

⁸³ William C. Scott, “Wind Imagery in the *Oresteia*,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 97 (1966): 461.

⁸⁴ Scott, 470.

Another structural comparison with Greek drama corresponds to treatments of text within Wagner's libretto. In numerous moments in the *Ring Cycle*, Wagner groups together words with the same sound or letter, forming alliterative verses. This repetition of sound serves to augment certain moments and draw the listener not only to the meaning of the words, but also the rhythm of the text. The following are several examples of alliterative verse within Wagner's libretti:

Alberich (*Das Rheingold*): He he! Ihr Nicker! Wie seid ihr niedlich, neidliches Volk! Aus Nibelheim's Nacht naht' ich mich gern, neighted ihr euch zu mir.⁸⁵

Wotan (*Das Rheingold*): Wie im Traum ich ihn trug, wie mein Wille ihn weis, stark und schön stehet er zur Schau: hehrer, herrlicher Bau!⁸⁶

Siegmond (*Die Walküre*): Winterstürme wichen dem Wonnemond, in mildem Lichte leuchtet der Lenz; auf linden Lüften leicht und lieblich, Wunder webend er sich wiegt.⁸⁷

Yet again, we see Aeschylus's influence. His work includes purposeful alliterations, as "through alliteration, he could orchestrate the sound of vowels and consonants for meaningful dramatic effect."⁸⁸ While alliteration within poetry is of course not exclusive to the Greeks (for example, The Norse *Poetic Edda* exhibits alliterative features as well), Wagner was quite aware of its function within Greek drama. A close family friend of the Wagners, Johann August Apel, wrote a book about Greek poetic meter titled *Metrik*, which Wagner studied. He also stated that it was through Apel's influence that he "felt 'urged' to 'sketch out tragedies on the models of the Greeks.'"⁸⁹

Regarding his construction of the libretti, Wagner chose to break from the traditional operatic structure of recitatives and arias and instead move toward a form which eliminated unnatural breaks between sections. This style of text-setting, which incorporated the natural

⁸⁵ Trans. Spencer and Millington, 58.

⁸⁶ Trans. Spencer and Millington, 70.

⁸⁷ Trans. Spencer and Millington 134-5.

⁸⁸ Stratos E. Constantinidis, "The Broadhead Hypothesis: Did Aeschylus Perform Word Repetition in *Persians?*," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aeschylus*, ed. Rebecca Futo Kennedy (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 393.

⁸⁹ Foster, 276.

rhythms of speech, came to be known as endless melody. Many scenes within the *Ring Cycle* feature only a few characters at a time singing in this manner, which allows for long exchanges and elaborations on the desires or fears of these characters. Consider, for example, Act III, Scene 3 of *Die Walküre*, in which Brünnhilde and Wotan debate Brünnhilde's treachery and subsequent punishment, ultimately exchanging tearful goodbyes. As M. Owen Lee points out, this structure is equivalent to the *agones* in Greek drama—or periods within the drama which exhibit “protracted clashes of wills,”⁹⁰ which were common in both Greek comedy and tragedy.

A final similarity to Greek drama is the overall structure of the four *Ring Cycle* operas. Greek plays were often organized into trilogies—three plays grouped together which would tell different parts of a larger mythological story. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Sophocles' *Oedipus* trilogies both have this structure. This large-scale organization allows time for both plots and characters to be developed. Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is often described as a tetralogy, as it includes four operas: *Das Rheingold*, *Die Walküre*, *Siegfried*, and *Götterdämmerung*. In *A Communication to my Friends*, however, Wagner described his vision for the *Ring Cycle*: “I propose to produce my myth in three complete dramas preceded by a lengthy Prelude.”⁹¹ In other words, this is a trilogy in the same vein as those written by his heroes the Greek playwrights, plus an extra evening to best set the stage for listeners.

⁹⁰ Lee, 71.

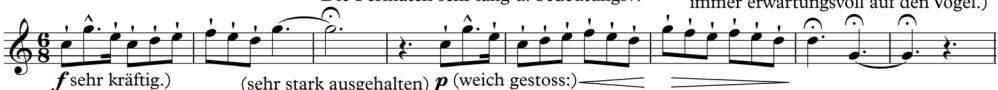
⁹¹ Wagner, *The Artwork of the Future and Other Works*, 391.

CHAPTER 5: WAGNER’S USE OF THE OBOE AND ENGLISH HORN IN HIS OPERAS

As we turn to consideration of the oboe and English horn in Wagner’s music, it is first useful to explore his use of the orchestra in general. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Romantic period saw a rapid increase in the orchestral forces used by both symphonists and opera composers. Even considering this trend, the size of Wagner’s orchestra was extraordinary. In the wind section for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* he employed three each of flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons, and had additional players for the piccolo, English horn, and bass clarinet. Other sections saw a massive increase in players as well, including the brass section, which called for eight horn players instead of the traditional four, bass trumpet and contrabass trombone. He also utilized at least six harps and unconventional percussion, including anvils. The size of Wagner’s orchestra allowed him to create distinctive colors for each opera, which has often been noted, including by Wagner himself: “Even before I begin writing a single line of the text or drafting a scene, I am already immersed in the musical aura of my new creation, I have the whole sound and all the characteristic motifs in my head...”¹

The diversity of orchestral forces allowed Wagner to strengthen the impact of his leitmotifs by linking specific instruments with individual motives and the personality, mood, or other characteristics he wanted to convey. One of Siegfried’s leitmotifs, for example, is characterized by a recurring horn call.

Die Fermaten sehr lang u. bedeutungsv:
(Beiden langgehaltenen Tönen blickt Siegfried
immer erwartungsvoll auf den Vogel.)

Horn in F 

Example 5.1. *Siegfried*, Act II, Scene 2

¹ David Trippett, *Wagner’s Melodies: Aesthetics and Materialism in German Musical Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 149.

The horn, which had long been associated with hunting and nature, enhanced Siegfried's characterization by coupling the instrument's traditional associations with Wagner's leitmotif. Such compositional techniques can be found throughout Wagner's score. Wagner has been consistently praised for his ability to convey an astonishing variety of emotions through his use of the orchestra. After viewing a performance of the *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Grieg said: "I think that the voice parts play only a secondary part in the *Ring*—the orchestra is all—and of primary importance," and Tchaikovsky claimed that "Wagner was really a symphonist by nature," going on to state that "Wagner has transferred the centre of gravity from the stage to the orchestra."² Wagner was able to achieve this relocation of the "centre of gravity" not only through his sumptuous melodies and integration of narrative with music, but through his orchestration choices.

Instrumental timbre was already an important topic during the Romantic period. As the orchestra grew, the inclusion of instruments including the English horn and bass clarinet became standardized, composers explored the use of traditional instruments for new timbral effects, including *Flatterzunge* (flutter-tonguing), and the size of the orchestra grew exponentially. The emergence of this diverse palette of orchestral instruments led Romantic-era composers to the "practice of associating instrumental timbres with semantic meanings," which had the power to represent the gamut of emotional states.³ Musicologist and cultural historian David Trippett voices a practical question related to this trend: "Can melodic sounds carry a meaning that is intuitively comprehensible?"⁴ Wagner seemed to believe the answer to the question was "yes." He stated: "We...are able through our hearing, to hold that now merely imagined emotion secure

² Jonathan Brown, *Great Wagner Conductors: A Listener's Companion* (Canberra: Parrot Press, 2012), 39.

³ Jürgen Maehder, "A Mantle of Sound for the Night: Timbre in Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*," in *Richard Wagner: Tristan und Isolde*, ed. Arthur Groos (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 104.

⁴ Trippett, 8.

in all its purely melodic manifestation: it has become the property of pure music, and...then made perceptible to the senses by the orchestra's appropriate expression..."⁵

While timbral and melodic meaning can be challenging to discuss in relation to specific characters or emotions unless these features coincide with a programmatic element, some nineteenth-century scholars attempted to assign tangible meanings to timbres and melodies, nonetheless. These attempts initially arose from the equation of orchestration with color:

Until instrumental sonority became equated with color, tones and colors were considered analogous media; with the birth of the idea of tone-color, the musical tone became a more complicated and aesthetically nuanced substance: a tone was not equivalent to color but rather it possessed color as one of its many properties."⁶

One scholar who took the idea of color and tone literally was Joachim Raff (1822-1882). A composer of opera himself, Raff evaluated Wagner's works and believed that timbre was of chief importance therein.⁷ In his own work, Raff went so far as to assign color designations for a variety of instruments, including the oboe, which he designated as light yellow to grass green, and the bassoon, assigned gray to black.⁸ Adolf Bernhard Marx (1795-1866) took a related approach when he assigned fixed meaning to melodic intervals. Believing that each interval possessed an explicit emotional meaning, Marx presented his description of each interval in detail. The following is a sampling of his designations: Minor 2nd—calm but powerless, faint movement, Major 3rd—firm ascertainment, with the awareness of accomplishment, Diminished 7th—soft, but hopeless longing.⁹

⁵ Trippett, 328-9.

⁶ Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 256.

⁷ Trippett, 364.

⁸ Trippett, 366.

⁹ Trippett, 59.

As far as we know, Wagner did not subscribe to Marx or Raff's theories regarding fixed melodic or timbral assignments, but we do know he was very particular regarding his instrumentation choices:

Wagner had observed to Uhlig [a friend of Wagner's and a music critic] that harmony and instrumentation were inseparable in his music. He continued the work of Berlioz in refining the orchestral palette, the poetic implications expressed by his harmonies being yet more subtly shaded by his use of timbre. In order to achieve certain tone colors in the *Ring*, he introduced additional brasses to the orchestra, the most famous of them being the so-called "Wagner tubas" later used by Bruckner and Strauss. Again, following Berlioz's example, Wagner frequently demanded instrumental resources that can rarely be realized.¹⁰

Wagner's precise timbral desires for his operas and resulting willingness to create new instruments to address these needs stretched to the double reeds. Working with Wilhelm Heckel, the lauded bassoon-maker, Wagner commissioned the "Wagner bell" which enabled the bassoon to descend an extra half-step to a low A, allowing him to use the bassoon in certain desired passages rather than modifying his instrumentation choice based on the dictates of the instrument's range. From Heckel he also requested an instrument which could play an octave lower than the oboe but retain the timbre of an Alphorn.¹¹ The resulting instrument was the heckelphone—a tall double reed instrument with bocal and onion-shaped bell, which was unfortunately not completed until twenty-one years after Wagner's death. Such efforts demonstrate that, while Wagner did not document an exact extra-musical meaning for each instrument, his meticulousness in instrumentation means that his orchestration choices are anything but arbitrary.

Wagner's *Klangfarbe*, or use of orchestral timbre, was widely praised by contemporary composers and writers including Hanslick, Raff, Liszt and Berlioz.¹² As noted above, Wagner

¹⁰ Eva Rieger, *Richard Wagner's Women*, trans. Chris Walton (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2011), 415.

¹¹ "Heckelphone," Wilhelm Heckel GmbH, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://heckel.de/en/products/#heckelphone-anchor>.

¹² Trippett, 161-2.

himself wrote very little regarding his use of specific instruments as they related to “semantic meanings.” How then may we draw concrete conclusions regarding his intentions? The answer is found in Wagner’s prose writings. In an 1852 letter to Theodor Uhlig, for example, he spoke regarding the co-dependence of his operatic elements: “[T]he person who, in judging my music, divorces the harmony from the instrumentation does me as great an injustice as the one who divorces my music from my poem, my vocal line from the words!”¹³ Therefore, according to Wagner, we have not only the permission but the imperative to associate what is happening in the libretto with what is going on in the orchestra. This allows us to evaluate the timbral choices he makes in his orchestration as corresponding directly and intentionally to the drama onstage.

While we have an abundance of knowledge regarding Wagner’s love of Greece and its influence on his music dramas, there is likely no conscious connection between his awareness of the Greek aulos and his writing for the oboe. Nevertheless, Greek influence is suggested, due to the long tradition of similar usage between the two instruments. In *The Wagner Compendium*, Jonathan Burton, former surtitled at the Royal Opera House and Senior Music Librarian for the Glyndebourne and English National Operas, observes that one of the notable features of Wagner’s orchestration is his expressive use of the oboe and English horn:

Wagner uses the oboe in the earlier operas for conventional expressions of pathos, its plaintive tones giving voice both to Senta’s pity for the Dutchman ...and to Erik’s own suffering in his Cavatina in Act III...The cor anglais brings to the oboe section not only added weight but an inescapable air of sadness and longing.¹⁴

While Burton designates this use of the oboe as characteristic of Wagner’s early operas, this sensitive and prominent use of the oboe is found in his later works as well. As Wagner was a prolific composer, the following evaluation of his oboe writing will be limited to *Der Ring des Nibelungen* plus a small number of other important examples. The *Ring Cycle* was chosen

¹³ Wagner quoted in Trippett, 153.

¹⁴ Jonathan Burton, “Orchestration,” in *The Wagner Compendium: A Guide to Wagner’s Life and Music*, ed. Barry Millington (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992): 338-9.

because—of all Wagner’s works—it most overtly pays homage to the Greeks and because it is commonly considered his crowning achievement.

Trippet stated that “melody as a symbolic representation of feeling is shape that acquires signification by association (tradition) and context.”¹⁵ These same types of accumulated associations give the oboe timbre its unique power to represent definite emotions and ideas. Such extra-musical associations, which were originally associated with the aulos in ancient Greece, are repeatedly found within the pages of Wagner’s scores.

Wagner’s Specific Uses of the Oboe and English Horn

While Wagner’s music does not exemplify all the characteristics historically assigned to the aulos and oboe (discussed in Chapter 3), he does employ many, including longing, lamentation, the feminine, nature, and the pastoral. Evaluation of emotional content is challenging due to elements of subjectivity, but well-founded conclusions can be drawn from extensive evaluation of Wagner’s scores.¹⁶ Before specific examples are cited, it is useful to note overarching characteristics of his use of the oboe. Contrary to Burton’s claim that the oboe is used “sparingly”¹⁷ in the later operas, a conservative count has identified one hundred and seventy notable oboe or English horn excerpts in the *Ring Cycle*. A breakdown of how many excerpts are found in each opera is shown in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Notable *Ring Cycle* Oboe and English Horn Excerpts by Opera

Opera	Estimated Number of Notable Excerpts*
<i>Das Rheingold</i>	28
<i>Die Walküre</i>	42
<i>Siegfried</i>	40
<i>Götterdämmerung</i>	60
*“Notable” designations for excerpts are subjective. The excerpts range in importance from oboe or English horn as the primary solo instrument, to timbral dominance, or other significance due to context.	

¹⁵ Trippet, 62.

¹⁶ All libretto examples are taken from two sources: Spencer and Millington’s translation of *Wagner’s Ring of the Nibelung*, and translations of the Metropolitan Opera’s 2011-2012 productions of the *Ring Cycle*.

¹⁷ Burton, 339.

Throughout Wagner’s operas, wind and brass instruments generally have the greatest potential for distinctive timbral association. While strings are sometimes utilized in this way, their numbers, homogenized sound, and place as the foundation of the ensemble mean that much of the color is left to the sections at the back of the orchestra. Wagner often wrote string tremolos and string or wind chords in the accompaniment to oboe or English horn solos, a timbral decision which allows the player to project over the massive ensemble (Example 5.2).

Dritte Szene

English Horn *p* (*ausdrucksvoll*) *trem.* *f* *p*

Violin I *pp* *trem.*

Violin II *pp* *trem.*

Viola *pp* *trem.*

Violoncello *pp*

Example 5.2. *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 2

In addition to other wind instruments, the cello is regularly used in exchanges with both the oboe and English horn. This is particularly notable in *Die Walküre*, where the cello is frequently associated with the character Siegmund and the oboe or English horn is often paired with Sieglinde (Example 5.3).

Oboe 1 *sehr ausdrucksvoll* *p* *piu p* *pp*

Violoncello *p* (*zart*) (*immer mehr sich verlierend*)

Ob. (*sehr zart*) *piu p* *pp*

Vc. *pp* *pp*

Zweite Szene
Mässig langsam

Example 5.3. *Die Walküre*, Act I, Scene 1

Wagner predominantly uses the oboe and English horn for poignant moments expressing vulnerable emotions, such as love, longing, lamentation, heartache, and the sensual. The oboe is rarely used for expressions of anger, scorn, vengeance, or mocking. As demonstrated in the examples below, emotional characteristics expressed by the oboe are multi-faceted, and therefore often overlap—for example, an excerpt may feature a female’s leitmotif and express yearning simultaneously. In what could be deemed Wagner’s most emotionally-charged scenes and passages, there is a large upturn in the number of very important oboe and English horn excerpts. A clear example of this is Act III, Scene 3 of *Die Walküre*, in which Wotan bids a heart-breaking goodbye to his favorite child, Brünnhilde (see Example 5.12 below). Out of the forty-two identified oboe and English horn excerpts from *Die Walküre*, fifteen are found in this scene alone. Similarly, in Act III, Scene 3 of *Siegfried*, Brünnhilde and Siegfried finally meet, and he at last learns to feel the human emotion of fear. Almost half of the notable oboe and English horn excerpts from the entire opera are heard in this scene, which introduces the two characters’ budding romance as well as the first entrance of that opera’s main female character—Brünnhilde. Scenes such as Act III, Scene 1 of *Die Walküre*, which features the gathering of the heroic Valkyries, or Act III, Scene 2 of *Siegfried*, which shows an intense clash of wills between Wotan and Siegfried, rarely have any oboe excerpts.

In a related observation, Wagner uses the oboe and English horn more prevalently in scenes which focus on human interactions, rather than those featuring imaginary creatures from his fictional world such as the gods, giants, or the Nibelung race. Included in the “human interactions” designation are scenes in which the gods express their humanity, rather than flaunting their god-like status. Wagner’s gods, like the gods of the Greeks, have moments of invincibility and moments when their frailties are exposed, such as Act III, Scene 3 of *Die Walküre*, described above. *Das Rheingold* has the least oboe and English horn of the *Ring Cycle*

operas, as it focuses on the relationship between the gods and non-human creatures.¹⁸ Similarly, the “coming of age” scenes of the male hero Siegfried do not lend themselves to many oboe and English horn passages; only sixteen excerpts come from the middle seven scenes of *Siegfried*. This ability of the oboe to represent human qualities echoes the Greek association of the aulos not with the gods, who, like Apollo are prone to play the lyre or kithara, but with humans and other less pretentious creatures, such as the satyr Marsyas.

Additionally, in scenes which feature human interactions and emotions, the oboe and English horn are closely associated with female characters. As will be examined later, leitmotifs representing females are prevalent throughout the *Ring Cycle*. Generally, scenes with little or no focus on the four characters most frequently associated with the oboe—Brünnhilde, Gutrune, Sieglinde, and Freia—have the fewest notable excerpts identified. Scene 3 of *Das Rheingold* is a good example of this. Here Alberich, Wotan and Loge have a battle of wits regarding the Nibelung treasure and, while the human emotion of greed is explored, there is little use for emotional oboe passages here. Similarly, Act II, Scene 1 of *Siegfried* finds Alberich and the Wanderer—Wotan in disguise—discussing their varied attempts to gain or maintain power before provoking the sleeping dragon, Fafner. In this scene we hear foreboding low brass and strings but few wind passages and no notable oboe excerpts. *Götterdämmerung*, which features a love triangle between Siegfried, Brünnhilde and Gutrune, has the most oboe and English horn excerpts of all the operas. The idea of females as linked to the major heartfelt and vulnerable emotions of love, longing, loss, yearning, and redemption make for more appropriate oboe use than scenes featuring heroism or violence.

¹⁸ *Das Rheingold* is also the shortest of the *Ring Cycle* operas, which accounts in some part for the fewer number of excerpts.

Musical Examples from the *Ring Cycle*

Much of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* plot revolves around love, longing, and yearning. These emotions take a myriad of forms depending on the motivation of the characters. Siegfried, who lost his mother when he was young, longs for a female companion to fill an emotional void. Similarly, Siegmund and Sieglinde long for companionship after years of suffering apart. Fasolt the giant yearns for a lovely woman to brighten his home with love. Alberich, on the other hand, renounces love altogether as he craves power above all else. Treadwell discusses the overarching use of longing in Wagner's works:

Wagner's narratives are...overwhelmed by the burden of desire...The scenario of longing goes back to the 1848 outline of the Nibelung drama, which hinges on Wotan's need for a free agent to expiate the guilt of the gods...redemption will come about when what is missing is supplied.¹⁹

This "burden of desire" is often coupled with complex themes of love. Wagner himself discussed this theme of longing in *A Communication to my Friends*: "a yearning for appeasement in a higher, nobler element; an element which...could but appear to me in the guise of a pure, chaste, virginal, unseizable and unapproachable ideal of love."²⁰ The importance of these emotions to Wagner is apparent in his scores and libretti, and the oboe is often used for the manifestation of desire and love.

While there are many occurrences of desire and longing relating to a myriad of characters and even objects within the *Ring*, two couples have the monopoly on yearning and love: Siegmund and Sieglinde, and Brünnhilde and Siegfried. Oboe and English horn excerpts are threaded throughout their scenes. In Example 5.4, Hunding, Sieglinde's husband, has arrived at the cabin and is suspicious of the new visitor, Siegmund. Nevertheless, the soon-to-be couple Sieglinde and Siegmund find moments to stare at each other longingly. Wagner describes the action: "Siegmund stares thoughtfully ahead of him. Sieglinde, who has sat down beside Hunding

¹⁹ Treadwell, 221.

²⁰ Treadwell, 222.

and opposite Siegmund, fixes her gaze on the latter with evident interest and attraction.” The oboe plays the “Twin’s Love” motive as she gazes across the room at Siegmund.²¹

Siegmund gegenüber gesetzt, heftet ihr Auge mit auffallender Teilnahme und Spannung auf diesen.

Example 5.4 *Die Walküre*, Act I, Scene 2

Another example comes near the end of *Die Walküre* as Brünnhilde makes her case to Wotan about why she felt the need to disobey him: “Not wise am I, but one thing I knew, that you loved the Wälsung [Siegmund].” The oboe plays the “Love as Fulfillment” motive, underlining both her and Wotan’s love for the murdered Siegmund. This same motive is used in subsequent operas to highlight Brünnhilde’s and Siegfried’s love—which reminds us that Siegfried is a product of the love between Siegmund and Sieglinde, which was fought for in *Die Walküre*.

²¹ All leitmotif labels in quotation marks are from Donnington (Robert Donnington, *Wagner’s ‘Ring’ and its Symbols: The Music and the Myth* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1963).

Oboe 1

English Horn

Brünnhilde

Nicht wei - se bin ich, doch

wußt' - ich das ein - ne daß den Wäl - sung du lieb - test.

Example 5.5 *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 3

Siegfried and Brünnhilde’s love is also featured in the leitmotif played by the oboe in Example 5.6. Although this motive is called “Siegfried’s Love” by Donnington, it represents the mutual connection found between the two main characters. Brünnhilde longingly sings “so long have I loved you, Siegfried!” as the oboe line enhances the meaning of her words.

Oboe 1

Clarinet in A 1

Brünnhilde

Etwas Breiter
ausdrucksvoll

Etwas Breiter

So lang' lieb' ich dich, Sieg-fried!

Example 5.6 *Siegfried*, Act III, Scene 3

Soon after Brünnhilde’s exuberant declaration comes Example 5.7. Here, Brünnhilde explains how she has loved Siegfried since before he was born, and that she fought for him, as she alone understood the will and desires of Wotan. She sings of her yearning and longing for him, even though her actions resulted in her being punished: “The thought which I could never name; the thought I did not think but only felt; the thought for which I fought, did battle and have striven;

for which I flouted him who thought it; for which I atoned...Because that thought...was but my love for you!” The oboe expressively accompanies her impassioned testimony.

English Horn *ausdrucksvoll*
p

Brunnhilde
der Ge - dank - e, den ich nie - - - - - nen - nen darf - te, den ich nicht dach - te, son - dern nur

cresc.
f

fühl - te, für den ich focht, kämpf - te und stritt, für den ich trotz - te dem, der_ ihn dach - - te;

Example 5.7 *Siegfried*, Act III, Scene 3

Even though Brunnhilde declares to always love Siegfried, she feels the sting of his betrayal in *Götterdämmerung*. While her Act II admission of Siegfried’s weakness eventually leads to his murder, in Act III, Scene 3 Brunnhilde declares that Siegfried’s betrayals were ultimately the fault of the gods, which leads her to destroy them. In Example 5.8, as Siegfried lies dead before her, Brunnhilde states: “Purer than sunlight streams the light from his eyes: the purest of men it was who betrayed me!” While she musters the strength to declare the gods guilty and burn the world to the ground, here she tenderly sings of her longing for Siegfried even in the midst of his betrayal. The “Love as Fulfilment” motive, played by the oboe, highlights her inner emotions.

Oboe 1
p

Brunnhilde
Wie Son - ne lau - testrahlt mir sein Licht, der Rein - ste war er, - der mich verrieth!

Example 5.8 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 3

Example 5.9 takes place at the end of *Götterdämmerung* as Brunnhilde prepares to ride into the flames to be united with Siegfried and bring about the end of the gods. The “Transformation” leitmotif is played in the oboe as Brunnhilde sings the text: “Feel my heart yearning to meet him [Siegfried] there!” Yet again, the oboe is instructed to play expressively as Brunnhilde longs to be

with Siegfried again in death. This same yearning motive returns notably at the end of *Götterdämmerung*. Now, however, the motive is played peacefully by the strings. Wagner augments the motive as the final chords approach, as if telling the audience that the yearning is at its end and an equilibrium has been reached by the return of the ring to the Rhinemaidens.

Oboe 1 *ausdrucksvoll*
p ————— *poco f* ————— *p*

Brunnhilde
 Fühl' - - mei - ne - Brust auch, wie - sie - ent -
 brennt, hel - les Feu - er das Herz mir er fasst,

Example 5.9 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 3

In addition to examples in which listeners can feel and hear emotional intensity and desire, Wagner also explicitly used the oboe and English horn when characters sing of “Sehnsucht”—wistful longing or yearning—or words with similar meaning. In Act I, Scene 3 of *Siegfried*, Mime asks if Siegfried has ever felt fear and describes the shaking and quaking one might feel while afraid. The oboe solo in Example 5.10 is a transformation of the oboe line heard while Mime was trying to frighten him. Siegfried admits that he has never felt fear: “What a strange feeling that must be. I long for such delight.”

Oboe 1 *sehr ausdrucksvoll*
p ————— (*zart*) ————— *sf*

Siegfried
 seh - nend ver langt mich der Lust!

Example 5.10 *Siegfried*, Act I, Scene 3

As he sings of this “longing” we hear the oboe. The melody is the “Innocent Sleep” leitmotif of Brunnhilde, who, at the end of this opera, will finally teach Siegfried fear and love.

As yearning and love are so prevalent in Wagner’s dramas, it stands to reason that a character’s desires will at times be thwarted. Tragedy follows many of the characters throughout their narrative and defines the overall plot of the tetralogy. Siegmund’s life, for example, has been so fraught with disaster that he names himself “Wehwalt” or “full of woe,” before Sieglinde helpfully alters his name to “Siegmond” in the following scene. Laments and mournful passages are a hallmark of Wagner’s music and are clearly present in both the orchestra and libretti. For Wagner, the oboe and English horn are key instruments for any expression of grief or pain. Conservatively, a third of the identified oboe and English horn excerpts could be described as mournful.²² The excerpt in Example 5.11 occurs immediately after Brünnhilde has been commanded by Wotan to kill Siegmund. Warily she departs to complete her distasteful task: “Alas, my Wälsung! In deepest grief a faithful woman must faithlessly forsake you!” Stage directions state that she slowly turns and walks toward the stage exit as the English horn reveals her internal distress.

Oboe 1

(sehr ausdrucksvoll und etwas hervortretend)

English Horn

p *mf* *p* *p*

Dritte Szene
Bewegter

Ob. 1

Eng. Hn.

p *p*

Example 5.11 *Die Walküre*, Act II, Scene 2

An even more extended example featuring the oboe and English horn as manifestations of lamentation occurs in the emotionally-charged Act III, Scene 3 of *Die Walküre*. As punishment for disobeying his commands, Wotan has sworn to exile Brünnhilde and strip her of her status as

²² As many of the excerpts share characteristics between several categories, it is likely this estimate is below the actual number of excerpts that fit this designation.

a goddess. While he must punish her, Wotan is anguished about losing his most beloved child. Brünnhilde, who has sunk to the ground in humiliation, asks: “Was what I did so lacking in honor that my lapse must deprive me forever of honor?” She continues: “O tell me father! Look in my eyes and silence your anger; curb your wrath and explain to me clearly what hidden guilt forces you now, in stubborn defiance your dearest child to disown!”

Oboe 1
 English Horn
 Brünnhilde

O sag, Va ter! Sieh mir ins Aug ge, schwei-ge den Zorn, zäh - me die

Ob. 1
 Eng. Hn.
 B.

Wut, und deu - te mir klar die dunk - le Schuld die mit star - kem Trot - ze dichzwingt, zu ver - sto - ßen deintrau - te - stes Kind!

Example 5.12 *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 3

Both before Brünnhilde begins and during her entreaty, the oboe and English horn play a tragic duet. This extended passage is accompanied by the clarinet, bass clarinet and bassoon.

A final example of the oboe as the voice of lament comes from the Vorspiel to *Götterdämmerung*. Here, the Norns spin their rope, recounting events that have come to pass and examining which foreboding events may happen in the future. In Example 5.13, one Norn recounts how a spring in the wood where Wotan used to spend his time has dried up, leading to the death of the World Ash Tree: “As if grieving, the stream ceased to flow and then my song became sorrowful.” The oboe solo directly follows this recounting, expressing the sorrow of her song.

Oboe 1

3rd Horn

trü - ben Sin - nes ward mein Ge - sang

Example 5.13 *Götterdämmerung*, Vorspiel

The often-used interval of a half-step, commonly designated the “Woe or Grief” motive, is another manifestation of anguish in the *Ring Cycle*. Chromatic passages and isolated half-steps representing lamentation occur regularly in both the oboe and English horn parts. This suggests that Wagner saw the oboe and English horn as particularly capable of conveying the pathos of the interval. Example 5.14 accompanies Loge as he tells the story of Alberich stealing the gold from the Rhinemaidens. As he sings “The maidens mourn their loss,” we hear the English horn play the plaintive half-step motive.

English Horn

Loge

Um den gleis - sen - den Tänd der Tief - e ent - wandt

Eng. Hn.

Loge

er klang mir der Töch - ter Klag - e

Example 5.14 *Das Rheingold*, Scene 2

Another illustration comes from Act II, Scene 4 of *Die Walküre* (Example 5.15). Brünnhilde has come to take Siegmund to Valhalla, and although she recounts the honors that would await him in the realm of the gods, he ultimately forsakes the glorious afterlife when he learns Sieglinde cannot come with him: “Wherever Sieglinde lives, Siegmund must live too.” The oboe mirrors Siegmund’s text: “You seem young and fair but I know your heart is cold...If all you can do is mock me, go! Or stay and gloat at my grief.” The main leitmotif present here is an embellished “Relinquishment” motive, but the last interval of the oboe and English horn line in both phrases,

which is a half-step, reminds the audience of the “Grief” motive (and consequently) the grief Siegmund is experiencing.

Example 5.15 *Die Walküre*, Act II, Scene 4

While retaining the heaviness of sorrow, the half-step “Grief” motive also frequently accompanies a quality of foreboding. Wagner often uses the English horn in particular for these figures, commonly scoring for the instrument’s low octave. In Example 5.16 below, Brünnhilde warns Wotan that his wife Fricka is coming: “I warn you, father, forearm yourself; a violent storm you’ll have to weather: Fricka, your wife, draws near...” Fricka has come to argue for the death of Siegmund, and the ominous score reflects the upcoming dispute.

Example 5.16 *Die Walküre*, Act II, Scene 1

Example 5.17 from *Götterdämmerung* is heard immediately after Brünnhilde reveals that Siegfried could be killed if he were struck in the back. While she had provided him protection everywhere else, she knew he would not turn his back to an enemy, which now leaves him

vulnerable to betrayal. Hagen triumphantly proclaims: “and there my spear shall strike him!” as the oboes, along with the horn and bass clarinet, foretell the woe and grief at Siegfried’s death.

Lebhaft

Oboe 1

Hagen

Und dort trifft ihn mein Speer! Auf, Gun-ther, ed-ler Gib-i-chung!

Example 5.17 *Götterdämmerung*, Act II, Scene 5

Another example of foreboding and grief occurs during Brünnhilde’s “Immolation Scene,” in which she brings an end to the world and the gods (Example 5.18). As she explains what she now understands (“All things, all things, all things I know, all is clear to me now!”), the crows of Wotan, symbolically the harbingers of death, gather. Brünnhilde sends the hovering birds away with a message that the time of the gods is ending. The half-step in the English horn dominates the orchestral texture to highlight this moment, enhanced by sforzandos in the stopped horns.

English Horn

Brünnhilde

Auch dei-ne Ra - ben hör' ich rau - schen

Example 5.18 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 3

An escalation of this same “Woe” leitmotif occurs right before Siegfried’s death in *Götterdämmerung*, illustrating that all the foreboding passages which occurred before now were leading to this culmination. Here, the Rhinemaidens sing Siegfried’s name in the form of the “Woe” leitmotif, which the oboe accompanies along with the full wind section in the first iteration and alongside the flutes and clarinets in the second (not pictured). Together the maidens call Siegfried’s name as they try to warn him of the calamity which will befall him if he does not immediately surrender the ring. He of course does not pay heed and is killed in the next scene. Their attempted warning serves as one of the final and most insistent times we hear the foreboding “Woe” motive before disaster strikes.

Example 5.19 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 1

Throughout the *Ring Cycle* the “Woe” motive usually begins on beat 1. Here, however, Wagner places it on beat 2, resulting in a syncopation. Wagner’s displacement of the motive draws more attention to the Rhinemaidens’ dire admonition.

Wagner demonstrates a clear preference for representing female characters with the oboe and English horn, not only in the *Ring Cycle*, but in many of his operas. In describing Wagner’s use of the oboe in *Der Fliegende Holländer*, German musicologist Eva Rieger states: “For Wagner, the oboe was the instrument of purity and naturalness, and thus also of womanliness.”²³ She goes on to describe his instrumental associations in *Lohengrin* and *Tannhäuser*:

The woodwinds are regarded as an expression of female inferiority. The oboe describes Elisabeth’s characteristics and is also assigned to Elsa: in both cases Wagner uses his choice of instrument to stress the virtue, grace, and modesty of women...He assigns the oboe and cor anglais to the expressive realm of suffering. And by employing them often to describe women, he introduces characteristics that were typical of the accepted view of women at the time.²⁴

²³ Rieger, 37.

²⁴ Rieger, 209-10.

Within the *Ring Cycle*, female-associated leitmotifs, played by the oboe in particular, are interwoven with female singers' lines in all four of the operas. Various leitmotifs and excerpts are directly linked to the Rhinemaidens, Freia, Sieglinde, Brünnhilde, Guttrune, and the Norns.

As already noted in Example 5.12, the oboe and English horn are the voice of Brünnhilde's earnest lament near the end of *Die Walküre*. The oboe line in Example 5.20 comes from the same opera but relates to the other most important female character: Sieglinde. Sieglinde, represented by both the clarinet and the oboe, is associated with some especially poignant oboe excerpts at crucial moments for her character. In Act I, Scene 2 we hear a luscious oboe line, mirrored at times by the English horn at the octave. While there are no singers providing context at this moment, Wagner provides stage directions:

[Sieglinde] turns to Siegmund in order to meet his gaze, which he keeps permanently fixed on her. She notices that Hunding is watching them and turns at once to the bedchamber. On the steps she turns round once again, gazes yearningly at Siegmund and indicates with her eyes, continuously and with eloquent explicitness, a particular spot on the ash-tree's trunk.²⁵

The oboe defines this yearning exchange. The "Twins' Love" and "Sword" leitmotifs are both heard here, voicing both Sieglinde's longing for Siegfried and indicating an important plot point, as she makes him aware of the weapon lodged in the tree's trunk.

Example 5.20 *Die Walküre*, Act I, Scene 2

²⁵ Trans. Spencer and Millington, 130.

The oboe solo in Example 5.21 occurs as Gutrune, who hopes to marry the hero Siegfried, offers him a drink. The oboe plays her leitmotif, which recurs throughout *Götterdämmerung* and indicates her longing for love and security.

Sehr mässig

Oboe 1

p (zart)

Gutrune

Will - kom - men, Gast, in

Ob. 1

ausdrucksvoll

p

dim.

G.

Gi - bich's Haus! Sei - ne Toch - ter reicht dir den Trank

Example 5.21 *Götterdämmerung*, Act I, Scene 2

Often the female characters are not even present when their leitmotifs are presented and are instead invoked by male characters who are thinking about or discussing them. This is the situation for the following examples. In many of these cases, the oboe and English horn stand in as the absent female character. In Act I, Scene 2 of *Das Rheingold*, the two giants Fasolt and Fafner have finished building Valhalla for Wotan and have come for their payment. As Wotan is unable to pay immediately, the giants require the goddess Freia to come with them as collateral. In this moment, Fasolt sings from the heart: “We worked to win a loving woman to brighten our humble home.” The prominent oboe represents that loving woman, Freia, with whom Fasolt is particularly enamored (See Example 5.22).

Oboe 1

(weich)

piu *p*

Fasolt

ein Weib zu ge-win-nen das won - nig und mild bei uns Ar-men woh - ne:

Example 5.22 *Das Rheingold*, Scene 2

In Act I, Scene 3 of *Die Walküre*, Siegmund sings of Sieglinde, after she revealed the sword on the trunk of the ash tree, and the oboe represents her lingering gaze: “Is it the glorious woman’s

glance, which she left behind her, clinging there, when she passed out of the hall? Nighttime’s shadows shielded my eyes; the flash of her gaze then glanced upon me, bringing warmth and light” (Example 5.23).

Example 5.23 *Die Walküre*, Act I, Scene 3

Example 5.24 comes from Act II, Scene 4 of *Die Walküre* and is one of several examples in which the women represented by the oboe are not main characters. Here, Brünnhilde tells Siegmund of the wonders that await him in Valhalla, including fair maidens, who will serve him at the table by filling his cup. The oboe is the manifestation of these women, both when Brünnhilde describes them to Siegmund and when he later tells Brünnhilde to greet on his behalf all those who live in Valhalla, because he will not be coming.

Example 5.24 *Die Walküre*, Act II, Scene 4

An example outside the *Ring Cycle* which shows Wagner’s association of the oboe with the feminine occurs in the first three bars of the *Tristan und Isolde* Prelude. The work begins with the defining leitmotif of the opera: a passionate minor sixth leap up and chromatic descent in the celli are heard before the oboe takes over with a rising chromatic line, often called the “Yearning” motive. According to conductor Leo Wurmster, Richard Strauss “regarded the opening cello

phrase as the masculine, Tristan element and the oboe phrase as the feminine, Isolde; so he usually took the first phrase slightly pressing forward, and the second one slightly hesitating...²⁶

Langsam und schmachtend

Example 5.25 *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude

While this opening motive is passed around the wind section in the Prelude, the oboes play the motive the final time in the last seconds of the opera as Isolde joins Tristan in death (Example 5.26).²⁷

Example 5.26 *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, Scene 3

Wagner also links the oboe and English horn with the power of the female gaze. In Scene 4 of *Das Rheingold* the giants have once again come to claim their treasure. Fasolt, who is distraught at losing Freia, demands that the gold be piled in such a way that he can no longer see her. Example 5.27 shows his exclamation and the accompanying oboe solo played when he

²⁶ Brown, *Great Wagner Conductors*, 538.

²⁷ Wagner uses this same idea at the end of *Die Fliegende Holländer*: the oboe plays the “Redemption” motive one last time as the opera comes to a close. This use of the oboe from near the beginning and, in the case of *Tristan und Isolde*, near the end of his career, means that his use of the oboe for important emotional moments and for female characters was a consistent characteristic of his music.

realizes he can still see her: “Alas! Her glance still gleams on me here; her starry eye still shines upon me. I cannot but see it through the crack! While I still see this lovely eye, I’ll not give up the woman.”

Oboe 1
pp *p* *cresc.*

Fagott

Ob.
molto cresc. *f*

F.
3

Ob.
piu f *ff*

F.

Weh! Noch blitzt ihr Blick zu mir her; des Au-ges
 Sternstrahl mich noch an; durch ein-e Spal-te muss ich's er spä'h'n
 Seh' ich diesswonn - i-ge Au - ge, von dem Wei - be lass' ich nicht ab!

Example 5.27 *Das Rheingold*, Scene 4

In Act I, Scene 1 of *Die Walküre*, Siegmund stumbles into the cabin where Sieglinde lives, and the two have an immediate connection. Wagner’s stage directions give us insight into the musical interlude before Act I, Scene 2 begins: “He leans against the hearth; his gaze is fixed on Sieglinde in calm and resolute sympathy: the latter slowly raises her eyes again to his. A deep silence ensues, during which they both gaze into each other’s eyes with an expression of great emotion.” Wagner associates the oboe with the pair’s intense gaze and deep emotional connection. Within this passage we hear the “Bliss” and “Longing for Bliss” motives, as named by Donnington. This scene is interrupted by the entrance of Hunding, Sieglinde’s husband. The music conveys this sudden interruption through a sudden key change and outburst in the strings, followed by Hunding’s leitmotif in the horns.

Oboe 1 *sehr ausdrucksvoll*
 Horn in F *p* (*sehr zart*)
 Viola *p*

Zweite Szene
Mässig langsam

Ob. *piu p* *pp* (*sehr bestimmt*)
 Hn. *p*
 Vla. *Bog. sf* *sf*

Example 5.28 *Die Walküre*, Act I, Scene 1

Another passage in which the oboe represents the “gaze of that radiant woman,” (Sieglinde) is shown above in Example 5.23. Finally, in Act III, Scene 2 of *Götterdämmerung* (Example 5.29), as Siegfried lies dying of his wound, his mind turns to Brünnhilde and we hear many musical references to the scene in which they first met. He remembers how her eyes were closed when he first saw her and cries: “Now her eyes are open forever, filled with smiling enchantment.” The oboe and flute, which share the “Love as Fulfillment” motive, accompany his words. Slightly different markings in the score here may underline the oboe’s timbral supremacy—the oboe has the additional marking of “ausdrucksvoll” (meaning “full of expression”) as well as an earlier crescendo and a “più piano” rather than a simple “piano.”

Flute 1 *p* *pp*
 Oboe 1 *ausdrucksvoll* *piu p*
 Siegfried *p* *3*

Die-ses Aug - ge e - wig nun of-fen Ach, die-ses A-thems won - ni-ges We-hen!

Example 5.29 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 2

The oboe's characteristic timbre allows it to poignantly render audible a silent action. An interesting parallel can be drawn if we consider that we refer to a person's eyes, glare, or glance as "penetrating," just as the oboe's timbre is often described as "penetrating" as well. Wagner's link of the oboe with the eyes or the gaze is not unprecedented; this effect of double reed instruments may span back to ancient Greece. A fifth-century BC vase, now located in the Athens National Archaeological Museum, depicts a bride and groom locking eyes as the figure of Eros—playing an aulos—hovers above them:

Eros serves an allegorical function as a personification of love and sexual desire. When bride and groom directly confront one another and gaze into each other's eyes, Eros suggests the seductive and desirable qualities of the bride, emanating forth from her to tantalize her new husband. The music of Eros' aulos, while certainly lending an element of celebration and festivity, also signifies the *harmonia* understood to exist between the couple. Compositionally, Eros is strategically situated between the locked gazes of the bride and groom, directly above the symbolic hand-to-wrist gesture, adding to this meaning.²⁸

The aulos, therefore, is the literal soundtrack to accompany the couple's intense gaze.

As noted in Chapter 3, the oboe and English horn have frequently been associated with the human voice, and Wagner promoted the connection of the oboe with the female voice specifically. In his essay *On Conducting*, Wagner discusses the influence a soprano had on his interpretation of the oboe cadenza in Beethoven's Fifth Symphony:

I received the best guidance with regard to the tempo and the performance of Beethoven's music from the soulful, carefully accentuated singing of the great Schröder-Devrient; thus it was impossible for me thereafter to let the inspiring oboe cadenza in the first movement of the c-minor symphony be blown in that same embarrassing manner in which I have ever otherwise heard it.²⁹

Another example of Wagner's linkage of the oboe with the female voice comes from his story of working directly with Philipp Joseph Fries, an oboist in his orchestra, in an attempt to make his playing sound more vocal: "The *Egmont Entr'acte* I rehearsed with the oboist in my room as if he

²⁸ Bundrick, 187-9.

²⁹ Wagner quoted in Chris Walton, "Wagner's Peculiar Oboist: Philipp Joseph Fries" in *Fontes Artis Musicae* 49, no. 4 (October-December 2002): 272.

were a female singer; the man was beside himself with joy at what he finally produced...”³⁰

Wagner certainly believed that his orchestra possessed a “faculty of speech,” and—consequently—the association of instruments with specific voice types, in this case female, seems natural.³¹

While practically all the oboe and English horn excerpts in the *Ring Cycle* could be described as voice-like, one excerpt in which the relationship between instruments and speech is particularly notable is shown in Example 5.12 (above). The first notes of the English horn’s line in this example are particularly interesting to this discussion. Before Wagner, recitatives in opera were intended to be closer to the rhythms of speech than the arias which followed them, with the additional goals of furthering the story and providing musical contrast. Wagner moved away from traditional recitatives, striving to make all vocal lines as natural as possible. In this example, the pathos of the recitative is transferred into the realm of the purely instrumental. The English horn opens the duet with a repeated octave F#. As note repetition was extremely common to provide dramatic impact within vocal lines, it is possible that this is the same expressive gesture Wagner was striving for here. As musicologist Frederick Neumann notes, “Note repetition is an age-old means of reflecting insistence, determination, constancy, solemnity, imperiousness, heroic resolve and similar states of mind.”³² The four repeated notes in the English horn line certainly add a vocal quality and sense of insistence to Brünnhilde’s supplications to her father, who is intent on her punishment. A similar example occurs in the English horn during Act III, Scene 3 of *Siegfried*. As Siegfried sings of his burning desire for her, Brünnhilde faces a moment of hesitancy and speaks of her horse Grane, to turn their discussion to other topics. The orchestra, however, shows her discomfort. The repeated E-flats in the English horn, and later oboe, depict her moment of uncertainty.

³⁰ Wagner quoted in Walton, 272.

³¹ Trippett, 361.

³² Frederick Neumann, “A New Look at Mozart’s Prosodic Appoggiatura,” in *Perspectives on Mozart Performance*, eds. R. Larry Todd and Peter Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 95.

Sehr mässig

English Horn

Example 5.30 *Siegfried*, Act III, Scene 3

Wagner also uses the English horn and, to a lesser extent, the oboe to evoke the past and even to convey the “ancient” or “primaeval.” It could be stated that all of Wagner’s leitmotifs refer to the “past,” as they direct the minds of audience members to earlier moments in his dramas—the previous term for leitmotifs was after all “reminiscence motives.” However, Wagner uses orchestration to illustrate details of memory and the ancient within his plot as well. While not featuring the oboe or English horn, the opening motives of *Das Rheingold* present the first iteration of an “Ancient” or “Primaeval” motive, beginning with the long-held notes in the basses and bassoons. Eventually, eight staggered horns enter with repeated ascending arpeggios (Example 5.31).

Ruhig heitere Bewegung

Bassoon 1, 2, & 3

Horn in Eb 7

Horn in Eb 8

Double Bass 1 & 2

Bsn.

Eb Hn.

Eb Hn.

Db.

Example 5.31 *Das Rheingold*, Vorspiel

This leitmotif, designated by Donnington as “Nature,” represents the depths of the Rhine River and the creation of the world, and is “associated throughout the tetralogy variously with

primordial matter.”³³ A leitmotif closely associated with this same “Nature” leitmotif is that of Erda, an ancient goddess who periodically arises from the depths of the earth to discuss important matters with Wotan. Her motive also features a slowly rising arpeggio, but it is in minor, as opposed to the *Das Rheingold* opening, which is major. Her “ancestral wisdom” and knowledge of “nature’s deepest secrets” are derived from her age, which Wagner conveys by linking her motive to the foundations of his fictional world. According to Rieger, “[Erda] herself is characterized by the wan sound of woodwind and brass, especially the cor anglais.”³⁴ The English horn certainly contributes to this illustration of somber awareness, although the clarinets and bass clarinet in particular often define her soundscape. Similarly to Erda’s character, her daughters—the three Norns—weave the rope of destiny and sing of the past, present, and future in the Vorspiel to *Götterdämmerung*. Without a doubt, the English horn and oboe dominate the timbre of this Vorspiel. Wagner paints a dark picture of what has happened in the past and provides ominous warnings regarding events yet to come. Example 5.13 (above) features a motive played by both the oboe and English horn which is musically linked to both Erda and the “Nature” motive. While this line descends initially, the contour changes into a rising minor arpeggio near the end, mirroring Erda’s motive. The Norns have another leitmotif which is heard each time the rope is passed between them (Example 5.33). This motive, called “Relinquishment” by Donnington, also contains rising minor thirds and is heard multiple times in the oboe and English horn.

The image shows a musical score for two instruments: Oboe 1 and English Horn. The music is in 3/4 time and marked 'ausdrucksvoll' (expressive) and 'p' (piano). The score is titled 'Erstes Zeitmass'. The Oboe 1 part starts with a descending line of notes (G4, F#4, E4, D4) followed by a rising minor arpeggio (D4, E4, F#4, G4). The English Horn part follows a similar pattern. A 'cresc.' (crescendo) marking is placed at the end of the phrase for both instruments.

Example 5.32 *Götterdämmerung*, Vorspiel

³³ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind, and His Music* (New York: Time Incorporated, 1968), 399.

³⁴ Rieger, 143.

This same motive is also prominent in *Die Walküre* when Brünnhilde tries to take Siegmund to Valhalla before his death (Example 5.15), and yet again features the oboe.

Another example of the English horn conveying ancient memories comes from *Tristan und Isolde*. This long excerpt for a solo English horn offstage comes at the beginning of Act III. The music, heard as Tristan lies unconscious, is played by a shepherd and described by Wagner as a “melancholy, yearning tune on a reed-pipe.”

auf dem Theater

English Horn

Example 5.33 *Tristan und Isolde*, Act III, Scene 1

Here the English horn, which German musicologist and opera director Jürgen Maehder describes as “a symbol of mourning throughout the score,”³⁵ implies improvisation through its repetitiveness, an element which is commonly employed in lamentation. As Canadian musicologist Michael Dias argues, the bar form (AAB) and modal aspects (F minor with a flat seventh scale degree) of this long excerpt contribute to this “ancient topos.”³⁶ The music later

³⁵ Maehder, 110.

³⁶ Michael Dias, “‘You Ancient, Solemn Tune’: Narrative Levels of Wagner’s *Hirtentreigen*,” in *Musicological Explorations* 14 (Spring 2014): 75.

returns after Tristan awakens. He questions where the “ancient, solemn tune” is coming from and discusses how he has heard this “ancient tune of anxious yearning” and lament throughout his life in tragic moments—such as his parents’ deaths. Now, Tristan says, “the ancient tune repeats again, yearning—and the death!”³⁷ This time, however, he believes it is calling to him. This excerpt exceptionally demonstrates many of the characteristics associated with the oboe and English horn including longing, lamentation, the pastoral, the ancient, and memories.

Nature is an important theme that runs through the *Ring Cycle*. Stage settings for scenes throughout the four operas are described in detail, from rocky mountain landscapes, to pine woods and the billowing waters of the Rhine River. Wagner correspondingly wrote many leitmotifs which enhance characters, objects, and plot details involving nature, and he utilizes many of the musical elements traditionally associated with the pastoral. While English musicologist Barry Cooper spoke of Beethoven’s use of the pastoral, the elements he identifies apply to Wagner’s renderings of nature as well:

[Beethoven] was no doubt aware of a long tradition of pastoral music, stretching back at least to the late seventeenth century, if not to the Ancient Greeks. The distinctive features of the classical pastoral style had crystalized in the early eighteenth century, and were exploited by numerous composers, often in the context of Christmas music. They commonly included gentle moods, homophonic texture, prominent use of the woodwind instruments, drone bases (in imitation of bagpipes) or very simple harmonies, major keys (most often G or F), lyrical or dance-like melodies in mainly conjunct motion, often in compound metre, and sometimes actual rural sounds such as imitation of birdsong or horn-calls.³⁸

In Act II, Scene 2 of *Siegfried*, the title character sits in the wood while awaiting his fight with the dragon Fafner and meets a friendly woodbird who lends him advice. While the flute is often associated with birds and their calls, in *Siegfried* and *Götterdämmerung*, the flute, oboe, and clarinet all share responsibility for voicing the bird leitmotif. In fact, the oboe in this instance

³⁷ Richard Wagner, *Tristan und Isolde: Opera Study Guide and Libretto*, ed. by Burton D. Fisher (Boca Raton: Opera Journeys Publishing, 2017), 95.

³⁸ Barry Cooper, *Beethoven* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189.

takes the lead more than the other two high woodwinds. In Siegfried's first attempt at communication with the woodbird, the oboe is the first to present the full leitmotif after all the upper winds have taken turns with short bird calls (Example 5.34).

Example 5.34 *Siegfried*, Act II, Scene 2

Soon after, Siegfried tries to fashion a reed pipe with which to communicate with the bird. Unfortunately, he fails spectacularly and comically. The English horn renders his weak attempts to mimic the bird's call and is provided such instructions in the score as “grell und unrein, zure Nachahmung eines rohen Rohrinstrumentes” or “garish and impure, imitation of a primitive pipe instrument.”

grell und unrein, zur Nachahmung eines rohen Rohrinstrumentes.
Er bläst auf dem Rohr.

Er setzt ab, schnitzt wieder und bessert.

Er bläst wieder

Er schüttelt mit dem Kopfe und bessert wieder

Er versucht.

Er wird ärgerlich, drückt das Rohr mit der Hand und versucht wieder (sehr grell.)

Example 5.35 *Siegfried*, Act II, Scene 2

Another example in which the oboe timbre takes primacy in manifesting the bird motive is in Act III, Scene 2 of *Götterdämmerung*. Here, Siegfried recounts his adventures to Gunther, Hagen, and the Gibbichung vassals and the oboe is featured with the bird's leitmotif. The compound meter and the melody's similarity to real bird calls heighten the pastoral association.

Oboe 1

Example 5.36 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 2

Additionally, the oboe is also used along with the other winds to render the Rhinemaidens' leitmotifs in *Götterdämmerung* Scenes 1 and 3 (Figures 5.37 and 5.38). Wagner uses compound meter and a folk-like melody to convey the flow of the water.

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

Oboe 3

English Horn

Example 5.37 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 1

Oboe 1 & 2

Clarinet in Bb 1 & 2

p *cresc.*

p *cresc.*

f *tr.* *tr.* *p*

f *p*

Example 5.38 *Götterdämmerung*, Act III, Scene 3

Examples of the oboe and English horn representing nature and the pastoral are not limited to the *Ring Cycle*. The English horn solo from *Tristan und Isolde* (Example 5.33) is intended to be played by a shepherd in a field on a rustic instrument, and in Act I, Scene 3 of *Tannhäuser* Wagner paints a similar scene: “Tannhäuser then finds himself in a lovely valley under blue skies. Cowbells tinkle in the distance. A shepherd plays a folk-like tune on the cor anglais.”³⁹ Here the English horn renders a rustic, pagan tune to the goddess Helda, which contrasts sharply with the *a cappella* hymn of nearby Pilgrims.

Finally, Wagner regularly uses both the oboe and English horn to end phrases or scenes. Wagner’s purpose in highlighting the oboe or English horn timbre in these cases is to convey an ongoing sense of emotional turmoil, outpouring of grief, or the introspection of characters. There are at least twelve clear examples of Wagner using oboes for this purpose, which he executes in several different forms. First, he uses the oboe or English horn in conjunction with the singers to enhance the emotion they are expressing. In Example 5.22 (above), Fasolt sings longingly of a woman to brighten his home. The oboe dies away along with Fasolt’s voice at the end of the phrase, and several beats of silence follow. This indicates Fasolt pulling himself out of the dream of his ideal life and back to the matter at hand—payment for Valhalla. In Act III, Scene 3 of *Die*

³⁹ Rieger, 50.

Walküre, Brünnhilde lies on the ground in shame as Wotan has said she must be banished for her attempt to save Siegmund. Oboe and English horn timbres are threaded throughout the entire beginning of this scene even before their extended duet. In Example 5.39, the oboe lends an air of mourning to the end of her first phrase of the scene: “Was it so shameful what I did wrong that you punish that wrong in so shameful a way?” Brünnhilde’s question fades away and the oboe, playing the “Unavoidable Destiny” motive, lingers momentarily before silence ensues.

Oboe 1 & Woodwinds

Brünnhilde

War es so schmachlich, was ich ver-tat, daß mein Ver-

bre - chen so schmachlich du be - strafst?

Example 5.39 *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 3

Wagner uses the oboe similarly in the first bars of *Tristan und Isolde*, in which he allows the oboe timbre to dominate the first iteration of the “Desire” motive (Example 5.25).

Wagner also uses the oboe and English horn as lingering timbres for some of the most poignant and extended scene endings. Example 5.11 immediately follows Brünnhilde’s mournful acknowledgement that she has been commanded to let Siegmund die. As she slowly walks from the stage, an English horn voices her lament and carries us into Scene 3, where Siegmund and Sieglinde reappear. Example 5.40 takes place after Wotan has found Brünnhilde, who tried to take shelter amongst her Valkyrie sisters. Wotan commands the other eight Valkyries to scatter and they depart as Brünnhilde faces her punishment. The English horn conveys the upcoming sorrow both Wotan and Brünnhilde feel as the transition into the final scene of the opera occurs. While the tone is mournful, a ray of hope shines through. The English horn foreshadows the

coming of Siegfried in the ascending motive we hear, although his leitmotif is cut short by Wotan's "Spear" motive.

English Horn  **Dritte Szene**

Example 5.40 *Die Walküre*, Act III, Scene 2

Additional examples of the oboe and English horn ending Wagner's operas have already been noted: in both *Der Fliegende Holländer* and *Tristan und Isolde* the oboe gets to play the final heart-felt leitmotif statement before the closing chords. The "Redemption" and "Desire" motives are heard respectively.

Wagner's use of the oboe and English horn, which links them to emotions of longing, lamentation, female characters, and tropes like the pastoral, is consistent with use of the aulos by the Ancient Greeks. While it cannot be demonstrated conclusively that Wagner drew specific inspiration from the Ancient Greeks' use of the aulos, notable parallels demonstrate that: 1) the oboe and English horn possess inherent sound qualities which have led generations of scholars and composers to utilize them for certain musical content, and 2) these established cultural tropes have grown stronger throughout the centuries, so much so that they have become synonymous with the instruments.

CONCLUSION

The impetus for this project was a musical example which led to a set of questions. At the beginning of Act III of *Tristan und Isolde*, Wagner—known for the dense fabric of his orchestral writing—essentially stops all stage action for more than three minutes, shining the spotlight on a lone English horn. Wagner’s stage directions describe this solo as a “melancholy, yearning tune on a reed pipe,” and his main character Tristan later refers to this melody as “ancient.” Is it likely that Wagner, who took such care in all aspects of his compositions, arbitrarily chose that instrument for this poignant moment? Did Wagner perceive a link between the emotions and characters he wished to impart and the English horn timbre? As the influence of Ancient Greece loomed large over Wagner’s time, might there be a connection between his uses of the oboe and English horn and their ancient forerunner, the Greek aulos?

These questions led to an examination of the Ancient Greeks’ quintessential “reed pipe,” the aulos, a survey of its usage and the topoi it engendered in ancient Greek culture and beyond, Wagner’s fascination with that culture, and his surprisingly consistent use of the oboe and English horn to express these topoi in the *Ring* cycle. What we have seen is that for at least three millennia composers have consistently used the aulos and its descendants to express related emotions and characters. Therefore, as has been demonstrated, there is indeed a connection between the use of the aulos in Ancient Greece and Wagner’s thoughtful and consistent use of the oboe and English horn in his operas.

Consideration of Wagner’s contribution to this heritage was particularly worthwhile for several reasons: 1) his skill as an orchestrator; 2) his many writings which provide insight into his creative mindset; 3) Wagner’s opera focus which provides both libretti and stage directions to illuminate his intentions; and 4) Wagner’s fascination with Ancient Greece, where the oboe’s ancestor the aulos emerged. After a brief review of the unique circumstances that led to Wagner’s

compositional style, we will highlight the benefits of this study, and propose several directions for future research.

The period in which Richard Wagner composed is a fascinating span of musical history. Several converging cultural trends facilitated Wagner's becoming "Wagner" at this moment and help explain his uniqueness even amongst his contemporaries. First, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many in German society drew inspiration from Ancient Greece. As scholars and politicians increasingly relied on the ancients to help shape their notions regarding education and nationhood, German artists and composers also sought inspiration from their Greek predecessors. Within that milieu, the Greeks became a life-long fascination for Richard Wagner. In *Mein Leben*, Wagner wrote of this powerful influence which was prompted by his reading of Greek drama and philosophies:

...My ideas about the whole significance of the drama and of the theater were, without a doubt, moulded by these impressions...I read the principal dialogues of Plato, and from the *Symposium* I gained such a deep insight into the wonderful beauty of Greek life that I felt myself more truly at home in ancient Athens than in any conditions which the modern world has to offer.¹

Wagner's operas and writings attest to the lasting influence the Greeks had on his artistic imagination, and—without such inspiration—he may never have established his unique path to opera reform. Although Wagner does not speak explicitly about the aulos, the popular Greek instrument was integral to the drama and culture which he so admired. Therefore, while it cannot be definitively stated that Wagner's understanding of and appreciation for ancient music resulted in a tangible link between the aulos and his own writing for the oboe, it is clear that he utilized the topic connections that began with the Greeks.

The rise of Romanticism also meant new emphasis on the individual. Artists were now encouraged to pour their emotions and personal interests into their music, with highly distinctive results. This new notion that one person's thoughts and passions could define their art perfectly

¹ Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1911), 415-416.

suited Wagner's compositional approach. Due to the thoroughness of Wagner's prose works we gain a uniquely detailed glimpse into his mind and music, both of which were preoccupied with the Greeks. Wagner's personal passion for ancient culture and drama takes center stage in his operas and writings in part due to the Romantic belief that the artist's vision is of utmost importance.

The Romantic period also saw a new emphasis on timbre, championed by such composers as Berlioz, which led to larger and significantly more diverse orchestral forces. This development complemented Wagner's "Gesamtkunstwerk" ideal—his vision that all aspects of his drama be interrelated. With enormous orchestral forces and countless timbres to choose from, he could color his orchestra to perfectly reflect and enhance the drama onstage, making his music particularly well-situated to convey precise meaning. Although Wagner wrote little regarding his specific use of orchestral instruments, we can learn a great deal regarding his view of the emotional capacity of each instrument directly from his music. Wagner's choice of the oboe to represent loss, longing, the pastoral, and the feminine is clear from the number and prominence of the passages matching these topics. Benefits of this study have included enhanced knowledge of Wagner's compositional process, particularly as it relates to orchestration for a specific instrument, something that has received surprisingly little attention in Wagner scholarship. Additionally, a spotlight has been placed on the topoi which the oboe and English horn are well-suited to expressing, which will hopefully contribute to the ever-growing field of topic theory.

Another benefit of this study is its contribution to oboe performance and pedagogy. Music historical research may at times seem far removed from what we as performers do onstage or in the studio, but such knowledge can and should inform our musical decision-making. As performers and teachers, we are tasked with bringing composers' musical visions to life. Without due diligence, a composer's work may never reach its full potential. Therefore, we have a duty to be informed regarding the conditions under which the art was created and to bring that knowledge into our work. Music is not created in a vacuum; it is composed at a specific place and time under

specific circumstances. An interdisciplinary approach to teaching and performing enables us to get beyond notes and rhythms and truly get into the spirit of the creative process.

Acknowledgement in our performances of what the composer intended is vital. As soprano Maria Callas observed, “Music is very difficult...There’s a lot to it—lots of devotion, dedication [and] respect for the composer...We go by very little [with printed music] and you have to search...We have to read what the composer would have wanted: a thousand colors, expressions...”² This study should enable teachers and performers to enrich and inform their own performance preparation “searches” by enhancing interdisciplinary understanding.

One way to achieve the colors and expressions Callas mentions is through the common pedagogical technique of interpreting a passage by introducing an extramusical story or image. Although he was not going too far afield in using one instrument to inform another, we see this approach directly from Wagner when he coached an oboist to draw inspiration from the human voice. By identifying tropes including the pastoral, the feminine, longing, or lamentation we can highlight such passages in a way which is more fulfilling to us and our audiences. We often speak of transferability when studying the music of a particular composer; for example, if you can produce clean and stylistic mixed articulation in the Mozart Oboe Concerto you will not need to re-learn the concept when you play a Mozart symphony. This idea could well apply to the common oboe characters we find within the repertoire. The rocking motion and compound pulse of a passage in pastoral style can be stressed, for example, whether we are performing Vivaldi or Verdi, Bach or Berlioz. A mournful oboe line will pull on chromatic notes in order to heighten the intensity whether we are performing a work from the Baroque or the Romantic periods.

Finally, for oboists, awareness that our instrument is the latest iteration in a series which has evolved for several millennia should bring as much excitement as knowing our personal family heritage. The connections between the aulos and the oboe can reduce the distance between

² David McGill, *Sound in Motion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 13.

us and the people who played our instrument's forerunner, causing us to recognize that we are not so far removed in terms of the basic human desire to make music. While much of this document focuses on the ancient Greek aulos, the take-away for those of us who play the modern oboe should not be that we must recreate the music of the aulos on the oboe. Instead, we should recognize that by showcasing the emotions which have over time become synonymous with our instrument, we can produce more impactful and informed performances.

Potential for future research is vast, but can be categorized into three areas: topic examination of additional works, not only by Wagner but also those of other composers; study of the emotional meanings in music as they relate to this study; and exploration of the acoustical links between the aulos and its successors.

First, additional Wagner operas and other composers' outputs could be examined using a methodology similar to that used in this study. There are several Wagner operas which could not be included in the scope of this project, including *Parsifal* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, which may augment or expand the already discussed topic associations. While any music could be studied with an eye toward its use of topoi, opera is particularly fruitful, since one can link the music to the specific ethos of the libretto. Gluck comes to mind as an opera composer who was also fascinated by the music of Ancient Greece and composed for the oboe in interesting ways. Study of other opera composers who use the oboe and English horn for poignant moments, such as Giuseppe Verdi or Gioachino Rossini, may also provide valuable insight. While these composers' connections to Ancient Greece may not be as immediately obvious, Greece's influence has been so pervasive that it is likely connections would emerge nevertheless. Although Mendelssohn never composed an opera during his maturity, the incidental music he composed to accompany revivals of Greek drama could serve as an interesting comparison to Wagner as well.

Another direction for future research is in the realm of psychology. In his book *Theatrocracy*, Peter Meineck cites separate research by Patrik Justlin and E. A. Simpson who both explored how "certain instruments that are super-expressive...act on the brain as extreme

forms of the human voice and provoke heightened cognitive responses.”³ Based on contemporary descriptions, Meineck infers that the aulos fits this “super-expressive” description. Of the aulos, he states:

While we can still only speculate on the actual music that the aulos was used to play in classical dramatic performances, we can know how this distinctive instrument significantly heightened the affective states of its listeners. This was in large part due to the way its evocative sound acted on the mind’s music-processing neural networks, and in turn how it greatly helped create a dissociative and dissonant aesthetic environment.⁴

While Meineck does not clearly link the aulos and the oboe, instead mentioning the oboe only tangentially along with a stream of other highly-expressive instruments, it is likely that further research would find that the two instruments function in an extraordinarily similar way. The oboe has been one of many instruments included in studies which attempt to gauge the emotional scope of a group of instruments.⁵ However, comprehensive research into the impact of the oboe specifically is needed, as well as side by side comparisons with the aulos’s sound. By partnering with psychologists, a more thorough understanding of the emotional impact the oboe and aulos have on our cognitive responses could be achieved.

Additionally, reconstructions of the aulos based on archaeological evidence and descriptions of reed construction, such as that by Theophrastus, would allow us to explore the similarities and differences in sound between the aulos and the oboe. Instrument makers, like Robin Howell, have attempted reconstructions based on archeological examples, including the Louvre aulos. In partnership with a physicist, research could be undertaken to identify physical elements which drive our cognitive responses to the oboe and aulos, including a thorough examination of each instrument’s unique overtone series. A greater understanding regarding the

³ Meineck, 157.

⁴ Meineck, 158.

⁵ See, for example, Liu, Xu, Alter, and Toumainen’s 2018 study titled “Emotional Connotations of Musical Instrument Timbre in Comparison with Emotional Speech Prosody: Evidence from Acoustics and Event-Related Potentials.”

similarities or differences in the aulos and oboe's sounds would provide more understanding regarding the historical continuities between the instruments.

Although much will no doubt be gleaned from future partnerships with psychologists and physicists, as well as similar analyses of other composers' works, for now the impact the music holds for each of us is enough to show the importance of this research. As Jonathan Jones observed in 1875, shortly after the London premiere of *Lohengrin*:

The emotions of the mind have also their equivalents in sound. Overt feeling of the heart has its natural utterance, and every passion of the soul its voice. A feeling or passion, when partially and moderately excited imparts to speech an appropriate color and force of sound. The musical poet is he who can realize the grades of passion and has the Prospero-like power over the realms of sound to express them...Herein is Wagner's excellence.⁶

These inspiring "passion[s] of the soul," which the oboe and English horn are so gifted at voicing, owe much to the lasting heritage of the Greek aulos, and to the captivating influence Ancient Greek culture held for Richard Wagner.

⁶ Jonathan Jones, "Lohengrin," *The Musical World* 53, 1875 quoted in Trippet, *Wagner's Melodies*, 359.

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