

Music and medicine were linked in the ancient Greek imagination from earliest times. The connection was expressed through mythical genealogy. Music is named after the Muses, the lyre-playing half-sisters or great-aunts of Apollo Mousagetes, ‘Muse-Leader’; they sang joyously at gods’ banquets and mournfully at heroes’ funerals. Apollo is the archetypal citharode, or singer to the massive, seven-stringed virtuoso ‘yoke lute’ played by epic bards, like Homer and Orpheus, requiring the ‘soft-fingered skills’ that Pindar said doctors also needed. But Apollo can both inflict and cure disease. The *paeon* or hymn to Apollo was often an appeal for medical aid.

Men who suddenly died were thought to have been struck by an arrow of Apollo; women were smitten by his twin sister Artemis, a dancer and archer. In the *Iliad*, Apollo strides down from Olympus to the Greek camp at Troy, ‘the arrows rattling on his shoulders as moved, and he came like the night’. With a ‘terrible twang of his silver bow’ he releases the plague-bringing shafts; four hundred lines later, appeased when the Greeks sacrifice and sing hymns to him, he just as easily relieves them of the malady.

Ritual anthropologists thinking about the archer-citharode Apollo point out the similarity between bows and harps—both use strings stretched between parts of wood or bone, and bowstrings ‘sing’ in action. But Apollo did not invent the lyre. That was his naughty half-brother Hermes. When only a baby, Hermes strayed outside his mother’s Arcadian cave and made the first lyre out of a tortoise shell and bull-hide strings. Apollo heard the music, and eventually exchanged a herd of cattle for the precious instrument.

The *Odyssey* offers another clue to the association between music and medicine. When Odysseus was hurt by a wild boar on Mount Parnassus, his two uncles bandaged the wound ‘and stopped the black blood with an *epode*’. Epodes were chanted spells, and some medically oriented ones survive: the Greek words of a beautiful epode begging Apollo to

make the wearer immune to plague are inscribed on a Roman-era amulet found in the Thames, now in the Museum of London.

Other Olympians are associated with diverse instruments. Rustic Pan invented panpipes, cutting reeds to different lengths and binding them together. The aulos, a double reeded wind instrument resembling two small oboes played simultaneously, had been invented by Athena. But she disliked the way playing it distorted her face, so discarded it; it was recovered by the satyr Marsyas. Satyrs serve Dionysus, whose position as music-god was second only to Apollo, as Plato writes in *Laws*: ‘There was implanted in us men the sense of rhythm and harmony, and that the joint authors thereof were Apollo and the Muses and the god Dionysus’.

While Apollo oversaw all epic and lyric poetry, Dionysus presided over drinking-songs, song-and-dance hymns (dithyrambs) in his own honour and the theatrical genres of tragedy, satyr play and comedy. These fused spectacle, song, dance, speech and instrumental music (the double aulos, many different percussion instruments and sometimes lyres) in astonishing multimedial performances, *Gesamtkunstwerke*.

Every self-respecting Greek city had a theatre, built on the still familiar lines of a central choral dancing floor, usually circular, with raked seats on three sides and a stage for the individual actors. They were usually erected in sanctuaries of the theatre god, Dionysus. Yet, curiously, they feature regularly in the cult sites of the healing god Asclepius, a son of Apollo and father of Hygieia, Health. All Asclepius’ sanctuaries were built in the most salubrious locations, where trees, fresh water springs, medicinal herbs and restful views promoted the wellbeing of visitors, whether their malady was bodily or psychic. Available treatments included overnight sleeping in the temple and its grounds and dream interpretation (a

precursor of modern psychotherapy). Ritual bathing and daily prayer and meditation promoted optimism and positivity.

But a mystery surrounds the precise function of the stone theatres in sanctuaries of the therapeutic doctor-god, including those at Epidauros in the eastern Peloponnese, Corinth and Butrint in modern Albania; curative performances seem to have taken place at others. Now, two of Dionysus' cult titles were 'Iatros' (Physician) and 'Hygiates' (Health-Giver). Wine was widely used medicinally: Plato says Dionysus bestowed it on mankind 'as a medicine potent against the crabbedness of old age'; it helps the elderly feel rejuvenated and behave more kindly to others! But, sadly, we do not know exactly what form the Asclepian performative cures took: they may have been geared more towards mental than bodily health. The Pythagorean sect 'purified the body with medicine, the soul with music'.

The philosopher Aristotle can help us here. He insisted that relaxation and recreation were crucial to the psychic health of communities, and that learning to sing or play an instrument from childhood, and listening to calming music, are essential to human development. He speaks of the role of music, as experienced in certain religious rites, in the treatment of emotional distress. There were special 'sacred melodies', both ecstatic and calming, which, by a form of emotional homeopathy, relieved psychological ailments.

Aristotle was the son of a distinguished medical physician, who claimed descent from the *Iliad's* doctor, Machaon. Machaon had been given his medicine chest by Chiron. One source claims that Dionysus' mentor was Chiron the centaur, who taught him both music and healing arts. Chiron also taught legendary Greek heroes many skills, including music-making and medicine: the rhetorician Aelian specifies that Chiron's lessons included the properties of roots and herbs, the concocting of drugs, and spells to reduce inflammations or staunch haemorrhages. A man desperate to cure the woman he loves in Nonnus' epic *Dionysiaca*

wishes he could find Chiron, or Apollo's medicines—an analgesic flower, 'a song to sing with the godlike voice of Dionysus', plants or waters that combated mortality.

Greek drama reveals a close relationship with medicine. A comedy and a mime survive in which sick or blind individuals visit shrines of Asclepius. There are medical metaphors in the poetry of Greek tragedy. A plague afflicts Thebes in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, and a doctor appears on stage in the same playwright's *Women of Trachis* to treat the dying Heracles. Sophocles was said to have introduced the cult of Asclepius into his own household. One interpretation of the process of tragic 'catharsis', or beneficially eliciting extreme emotional reactions in an audience, defined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*, assumes that it was analogous to the psychological catharsis offered by music performed in religious ceremonies.

Researching the links between music and the cultivation of physical and mental health in antiquity offers delightful surprises. My favourite relates to the trumpet, an instrument rarely found in ancient accounts of music-making, but used to summon assemblies and marshal regiments and military flotillas. Vase-paintings depict partying satyrs playing the trumpet, however, and Aristotle (again) suggests that Greek trumpeters learned to 'relax the tension of the breath' as they played in processional revels for the delight of the community, 'to make the sound as gentle as possible'. Deliciously, a medical writer named Alexander also reports that the trumpet was used in diagnosis of problems with hearing. It was played directly into the tympanum of the ear to see what happened. Let us hope it was only used in cases where complete deafness had already been determined!