The history of Greece extends far beyond the period described above, but for the purposes of our study in music history, we will confine our analysis of Greek musical development to the period where the most advances were being made and where music played the most significance in society. This is not to say that music did not play a large part in Greek culture before then, only that the most important contributions to the Greek musical system were made during this time. During this period, the first Olympic Games were performed, philosophers and authors such as Homer, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle brought forth their new ideas, and musical theorists such as Pythagoras and Aristoxenus created new systems for creative expression. Many of our history’s creative and intellectual achievements have its roots in ancient Greek culture.

**The Origin of “Western” Music**

Remembering that the term “Western” music refers to music in the Western hemisphere (primarily European and countries affiliated with Europe), we can say with certainty that the origin of our modern system of music comes from the ancient Greeks. Even the word “music” comes from Greek mythology, after the nine Muses, daughters of Zeus and goddesses of creativity. All of man’s creative achievements; art, theatre, poetry, writing, dance, and music were considered interrelated and created by the Muses. In early Greek history, it was believed that since music came from the gods it must possess magical powers. It was even said that the earliest musicians were the gods and other mythical figures such as Apollo, Orpheus, and Dionysus. In banquets and social events, Greek musicians sang poems in praise of epic heroes and great events in history. Achilles, Hector, Heracles, and Perseus were just some of the many epic figures immortalized in song. Music was also an important part in religious ceremonies. Depending on the god being worshipped, the instruments may be different; for Apollo the lyre was used, for Dionysus the kithara. For us to understand how music played a role in these religious proceedings, it is important to have a basic understanding of Greek mythology and what role it played in society.
Greek Mythology

“It’s all Greek to me.”

The Greeks practiced **polytheism**, or the worship of multiple gods. Just like the Egyptian society before them, or the Nordic and Roman cultures, Greek society revolved around the endless religious practices and festivals that defined their culture. The Greeks prayed to the gods for help and favors, offering sacrifices and libations of food and wine to appease them. Unlike the half-human, half-animal Egyptian gods, the Greek gods were human, although immortal and much more powerful than mortal men and women. In Greek theology, the beginning of the world was ruled by a great void called Chaos. From this void came the race of the Titans, giants who were led by Chronos, father of Zeus. Chronos feared that his children, of whom Zeus was the last, would one day overthrow him, so he imprisoned each of them by swallowing them and keeping them in his belly. Zeus escaped, however, and freed his brothers and sisters, who then went on to overthrow the Titans. With Zeus as the king of the gods, the race of the Olympians (named because of their dwelling on Mount Olympus) was born.

Zeus, as shown in the picture on the right, was lord of the sky. In this 5th century representation, Zeus wields his powerful thunderbolts and commands the birds of the air. Zeus’s brothers, Poseidon and Hades, were sent to command the earth and the afterlife, respectively. Thus the three planes of existence: Heaven (Olympus), Earth, and Hell (Tartarus), were each commanded and ruled over by a god. Other gods and goddesses included Hera, Zeus’s wife and sister, Athena (goddess of wisdom), Apollo (god of the sun), Aphrodite (goddess of love), and Ares (god of war). There were many more gods and goddesses, each one commanding a certain aspect of life. Thus when the Greeks prayed for a certain thing they needed, such as a good harvest or fair weather, they prayed to that particular god. Temples and shrines were built as tribute to the gods, including several of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World, such as the Temple of Zeus and the Temple of Athena. Unfortunately, these massive structures were destroyed long ago, as the last of the Seven Ancient Wonders that survive to this day are the Great Pyramids of Giza. Greek mythology was also transcribed to Roman culture, even after Greece became a Roman province in 146 B.C. The names of the Greek gods had been changed (Zeus became Jupiter, Ares became Mars, Aphrodite became Venus, etc.), but the theology behind it remained strong until the mass conversion to Christianity in the 4th Century A.D. Even in our modern era there has been a resurgence of interest in Greek mythology. The video game series “God of War”, the graphic novel/movie “300”, and the book series “Percy Jackson and the Olympians” are all based on Greek religious beliefs that existed over two thousand years ago.
Greek Musical Instruments

Some of the musical instruments that were present in the prehistoric and Egyptian era were passed down to the Greeks, but the Greeks in particular used three primary instruments, the lyre, the kithara, and the aulos. The lyre, much like the Egyptian lyre, was similar to the harp and consisted of about five to seven strings. The kithara, early predecessor to our modern guitar, was almost a simple larger version of the lyre. The aulos, however, was a single or double reed wind instrument, usually played with twin pipes.

Top Left: Tortoise shell lyre.
Middle: 1985 Postage stamp with Apollo and Dionysus
Top Right: Urn image of musician with kithara

Left: Grecian dish depicting an aulos player.

Instruments were used to accompany stories, dancing, and poems called dithyrambs, which were the forerunner of the Greek drama. The great dramatists Sophocles and Euripides would use music to accompany speech and dialogue on stage. However, these instruments could be played as independent solo instruments as well. Musical competitions were held as instrumental music grew popular and more complex. Virtuosos developed as a result of these competitions, which upset philosophers like Aristotle who believed that competition led music away from its true purpose, which was to educate and uplift the soul into more righteous pursuits.
Music of Antiquity– The Ancient Greeks

Greek Music in Philosophy and Education

Music was a very powerful entity to the ancient Greek philosophers. It was inseparable from the doctrine of ethos, or the ability to affect character and feelings. Both Aristotle and Plato commented in their writings about the proper use of music in education. Plato in particular believed that a successful blend of education involving music and gymnastics (physical education) was vital to the development of a righteous human being. It was believed that listening to the “right” kind of music could produce a well rounded individual, while the “wrong” type would cause violence, instability, and even insanity!

Music was also synonymous in numbers and astronomy. The idea of the “music of the spheres” came about in Plato’s work The Republic to describe the harmonic and numerical relationships of music throughout the universe. It was believed by theorists such as Pythagoras and Ptolemy that each planet vibrated and turned accordingly to a different numerical frequency. These frequencies, which could not be heard by human ears, created music that described the movement of the heavens. Because of this, art, mathematics, dance, poetry, and music were believed to be one unified form that dictated the laws of the universe.

Plato was very particular about music in education. In his Republic, he limits the amount of Greek scales, or modes, that should be used (the Dorian and Phrygian, which we will discuss later) because they fostered the virtues of prudence and courage. Aristotle, Plato’s most famous student, Aristotle, was less restrictive regarding using particular modes and rhythms. He believed that music could be used for entertainment as well as education, although he too disapproved of more elaborate and complex musical styles. The idea that music has power over the mind and the senses has stayed with us through the present day, and music teachers and performers are still concerned with the types of music young people listen to.

Two styles of music developed from religious worship and ritual. For those people who worshipped Apollo, music was serene and ordered, using the lyre as their main instrument. For the followers of Dionysus, god of wine and ecstasy, music was much more intense and excited. Their main instrument was the aulos. Both disciplines recognized the need for music to be ever-present in daily life, and there was not a word for artful speech or sound that did not include music.
The father of the Greek musical theory system was said to be Pythagoras. Not only did he invent the mathematical theorem that we study in algebra classes today \(a^2 + b^2 = c^2\) but he used his knowledge of mathematics to divide notes into systems called modes. The story goes that Pythagoras was walking one day when he heard some blacksmiths using hammers to pound on some anvils. After close inspection, Pythagoras discovered that the different weights of the hammers striking the anvils were causing the anvils to ring at different notes. Using the example of the hammers and the anvils, Pythagoras experimented with a monochord, which is an instrument consisting of a string stretched over a wooden rectangular box. He found that if he divided the string by placing his finger at different places, he could produce different notes. Furthermore, he used his knowledge of mathematics to deduce that certain divisions, or ratios, could predict which note would sound. The following diagram shows an example of Pythagoras’s findings:

In the diagram, if the string is stopped at the exact middle of the monochord, the note that will sound will be one octave higher than the note sounding with an open string. In addition, if the string is stopped about a third inward, there will be an interval of a fifth between that and the open string. The story of Pythagoras’s discovery led to an entire system of modes that later musical theorists, such as Cleonides and Aristoxenus, refined into what would ultimately become the seven Greek modes, paving the way for all Western music that was to follow.
The Greek Musical Theory System

“Buckle your seat beats, and put your tray tables back into their upright positions.”

Though music could be accompanied by other instruments, Greek songs are primarily monophonic, meaning that there is only one melody line and no harmony. Harmony would not take a substantial role in music until well into the Middle Ages. Greek music was unlike the music of today mostly because it involved microtones, which are notes smaller than a semitone. In our modern age, the semitone is the smallest division of musical interval that we have, but the ancient Greeks used a series of smaller intervals, which is kind of like playing “between the cracks” of the piano. Equal-temperament, discovered in the Renaissance Period, created the modern scales we hear in Western music today. Because of the fact that most instruments these days cannot produce microtones, we have to approximate to a degree when we recreate Greek melodies.

Greek theorists such as Cleonides, Aristoxenus, and Aristides Quintilianus divided the notes into different classes of tetrachords, or groupings of four notes each. Two tetrachords could be joined together into a scale of eight notes, which formed the basis of a mode. Originally, the number of modes were disagreed upon by different theorists, some exclaiming that as many as thirteen different modes could be used. However, the number of modes was eventually shortened to seven at around the 1st Century A.D. which remained the standard in musical practice. The names of the modes were taken from various geographical regions around the Aegean Sea, and remain common even now in modern performances, specifically in jazz music.

These seven modes form the basis of all Greek melodies. Later, in the Middle Ages, the modes would serve as the bedrock for the Church modes, used in Chant and liturgical services. Each mode was said to illicit a different reaction or feeling, such as the Mixolydian mode, which Aristotle believed made people depressed, or the Phrygian mode, which was said to inspire feelings of exuberance. Though there is much ambiguity surrounding the Greek theory system, we are fortunate to have several fragments of Greek melodies so that we can understand what Greek music really sounded like.
So What Did Greek Music Really Sound Like?

Thanks to the diligent efforts of archeologists and ethnomusicologists, we have approximately 40 fragments of Greek songs that are preserved today. Only one of these fragments is complete, which was written on a stele, or tombstone, in approximately the 1st Century A.D. The melody is attributed to Seikilos, which contains a clear rhythmic and melodic notation in the Phrygian mode. A transcription of the melody is below.

Above: Stele, or tombstone bearing an epitaph identified as being by Seikilos.

Left: The Seikilos tombstone was found in what is now modern-day Turkey. Our modern day musical notation is written above the Greek in clear rhythmic and melodic format.

Reprinted from Norton Anthology of Western Music, Ex. 1.5
The Epitaph of Seikilos is a *skolion*, or drinking song, as evidenced by the translation above. The mode is Phrygian, equivalent to the D-octave on the piano. As far as the mood of the song is concerned, it is neither exuberant nor depressed, but balanced between the two extremes. The message of the poem is definitely optimistic, which is characterized by the opening leap of a fifth. It is the earliest known complete example of music that survives today.

Other examples of Greek songs include the fragment from Euripides’s *Orestes*, known as the **Stasimon Chorus**. It was found on a papyrus from the 3rd to the 2nd Century B.C., although the drama had been written in 408 B.C. Euripides most likely wrote the music himself, which is an ode sung by a soloist while the chorus stood in its place in the *orchestra*, a semicircular rim between the stage and the audience. In the song, the women of Argos appeal to the gods to have mercy on Orestes, who has murdered his mother for infidelity to his father, Agamemnon. Another example that survives are the two **Delphic Hymns to Apollo**. These two fragments have been dated from 128 B.C., and were found inscribed on stone fragments on an outer wall in Delphi in 1893. Like the previous examples, the Delphic Hymns are also monophonic and could be sung or played on the kithara.

Songs in the ancient Greek modes were influential in the early 20th Century Impressionism movement. Composers such as Claude Debussy, Arthur Honegger, and Maurice Ravel used modal rhythms in many of their compositions. In addition, modal scales have been extensively used in jazz and rock music. One of the most famous uses of modal jazz is Miles Davis on the album “Kind of Blue”.
Music of Antiquity– The Ancient Greeks

For Review:

- “Western” music is music derived from European tradition.
- The word “music” comes from the Muses, who were the nine goddesses of creativity.
- Greek music was performed both as entertainment and in religious ceremonies.
- Philosophers believed that music and the other arts, including math and science were all interrelated and were the basis for the “harmony of the spheres”.
- The Greeks practiced polytheism, or the belief in many gods. Zeus, god of thunder, was the king of the gods.
- Musical theory was said to have been created by Pythagoras, who developed the Greek modes from mathematical ratios using a monochord.
- The three major instruments used by the Greeks were the lyre, the kithara, and the aulos.
- Plato and Aristotle believed that educating young people in both physical exercise and music equally would create well rounded human beings.
- Music was written using microtones, or intervals smaller than our modern semitone.
- There are seven Greek modes, each named after a specific region in Greece, and each having their own ethos, or quality of feeling.
- The Epitaph of Seikilos is the earliest known complete song.

Suggested Listening:

Epitaph of Seikilos
Euripides, Stasimon Chorus from Orestes
First Delphic Hymn to Apollo

For Further Reading:

Ovid: Metamorphosis
Edith Hamilton: Mythology

Sources: