



## Ancient Egyptian Music

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c. 3,000 B.C.E – 31 B.C.E. (Before Common Era)

### Brief Ancient Egyptian Timeline:

3000 B.C. E. – Old Kingdom

c. 2500 B.C. E. – Calendar of 365 days created

2000 B.C. E. – Middle Kingdom

1500 B.C. E. – New Kingdom

1350 B.C. E. – Exodus of the Israelites

525 B.C. E. – Egypt falls under Persian rule

332 B.C. E. – Alexander the Great conquers Egypt

31 B.C. E. – Egypt becomes a Roman province

### Historical Background of Ancient Egypt

*“Why couldn’t the mummy answer the phone?” “She was tied up!”*

As evidenced by the Pyramids of Giza and the magnificent Sphinx, the Ancient Egyptians of 5000 years ago had quite an advanced civilization. Some of the major achievements that we can credit to the Egyptians are the advent of new medical techniques, new forms of literature made possible by fashioning the papyrus leaf into parchment, a system of mathematics, and the world’s first known ships. The Egyptians had a **polytheistic** society, meaning that they worshiped many gods, such as Ra, Horace, and Osiris. This type of religious theocracy carried over to the Greeks and Romans before the massive conversion to Christianity in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.

Egyptian writing, known as **hieroglyphics**, are essentially pictographs representing different words and symbols. Hieroglyphics were written on most essential places of importance, including the walls of palaces, religious temples, and inside pyramids. It wasn’t until 1822 that Egyptian hieroglyphics were understood by outside cultures. The “Rosetta” Stone, which contained the same passage in hieroglyphics, Greek, and Coptic (later Egyptian), was found in 1799 during a French expedition. It was later translated by the British scientist Thomas Young and the French linguist Jean-Francois Champollion. Thanks to their efforts, we now have gained a better understanding of Egyptian society, including the role that music played in the Egyptians’ daily lives.

The Egyptians’ contribution to world history is present even in our own society. The **obelisk** is a tall, free standing tower with a pyramid slope at the top. Our own Washington Monument and the memorial at Lincoln’s tomb are both recreations of ancient Egyptian obelisks. Obelisks such as these also exist in places like France, England, Argentina, and even Australia!



*Left: The Rosetta Stone*

### Music Performance in Ancient Egypt

In Egypt, as in many other ancient civilizations, music was considered extremely important. Music was used primarily as entertainment by both royalty and common people. In the Egyptian hieroglyphics, there are many references to musicians and musical performances, but the Egyptians did not possess a system to properly notate music such as the ancient Greeks devised. Thus it is reasonable to say that all Egyptian music was learned by **rote**, or passed down orally by repetition. Since the music was learned in this way, writing down music was not necessary. Unfortunately for us, it resulted in the fact that we have no examples of actual music to study; thus we do not know what ancient Egyptian music really sounded like.

However, that does not mean that we cannot infer how music was used in Egyptian society. The hieroglyphics clearly show the instruments and roles each musician played in various functions. For example, look at the hieroglyphic slab below. You can clearly see the harpist taking direction from a conductor of sorts, called a **chironomist**. It was the chironomist, scholars believe, that used hands signals to express notation. They used their fingers and hands to depict the melody. In addition, the modern Coptic Church still use a chironomist, preserving their ancient heritage. Finally, scholars have studied the positioning of the chironomist's hands in relation to the harpist's, and found a correlation between the two. They determined that notes and intervals could possibly be determined by studying the relationship between the musician and the chironomist.



If you also notice, the chironomist has one hand to her ear. This gesture, which is still used by Eastern singers today, could serve to change the amplification of the sound. Try singing or talking with one hand cupped against your ear and you'll hear your sound differently. This picture and others like it lead us to believe that the Egyptians had a rudimentary knowledge of the study of acoustics.

*Left: Egyptian harpist and chironomist.*

### Egyptian Mythology

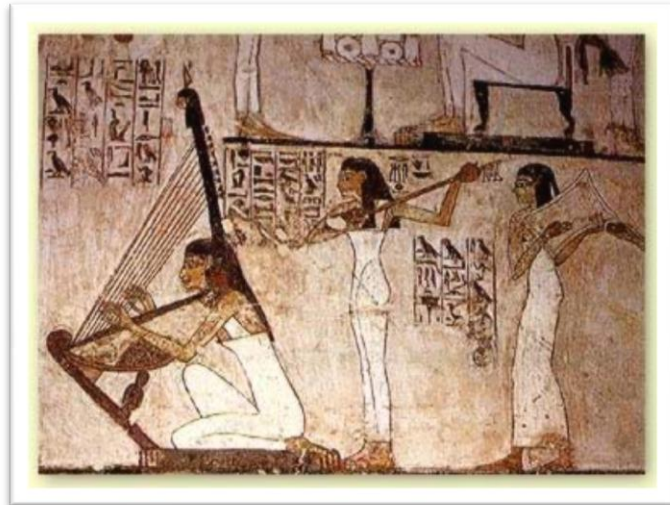
Egyptian religion contains some of the most influential examples of polytheistic deities in world culture. **Polytheism**, or the worship of more than one god, carries over into Greek and Roman society, in addition to Hindu and Norse mythologies. All of these civilizations are in common with each other because of the symbols their gods represented. The first deities were the gods of nature, which was uncontrollable and unpredictable. Religious rites, including dance and music, were performed to appease these gods for good weather or a bountiful harvest. The Egyptian gods in particular were an ever-present aspect of Egyptian society, as they each had human forms in which they could interact with other humans. The Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (Book of Coming Forth by Day), is a manual (or spellbook!) on the afterlife. In the book, when one dies, he is presented before Osiris to be judged. His heart is then placed on one end of a scale by Anubis, god of embalming, to which the other end contained a single feather. If the dead soul's heart was guilty of any unresolved sin, his heart would be laden with guilt and cause the scale to tip. However, if the heart was free of sin, the scales would be balanced, and the soul would be conducted with honor to the afterlife.



From *The Book of Coming Forth by Day*: Anubis weighs the heart of the dead soul against a feather as Osiris looks on. The upper portion of the glyph portrays the hierarchy of the Egyptian gods.

Music served not only as an entertainment, but as a way to pray to the gods for things such as fertility, health, and protection. Because of this, the office of musician, or “shemayet”, was a high-ranking position frequently held by women. In fact, musicians connected with the royal household were always held in high esteem, and instruments (and sometimes even musicians!) were buried in tombs and pyramids with the Pharaoh.

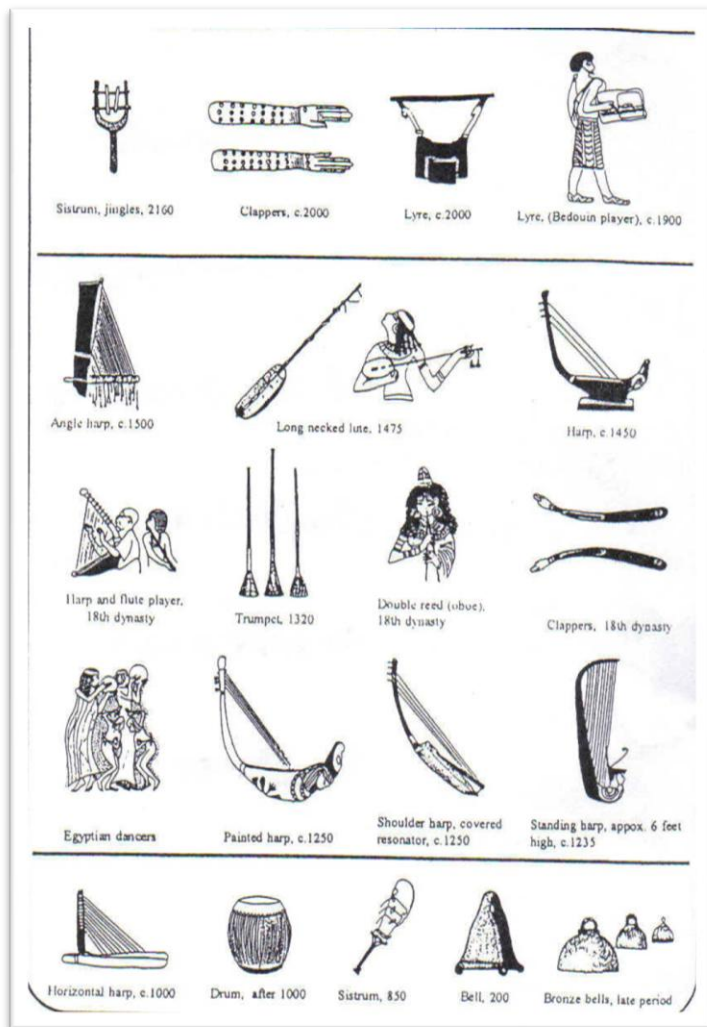




**Ancient Egyptian Instruments**

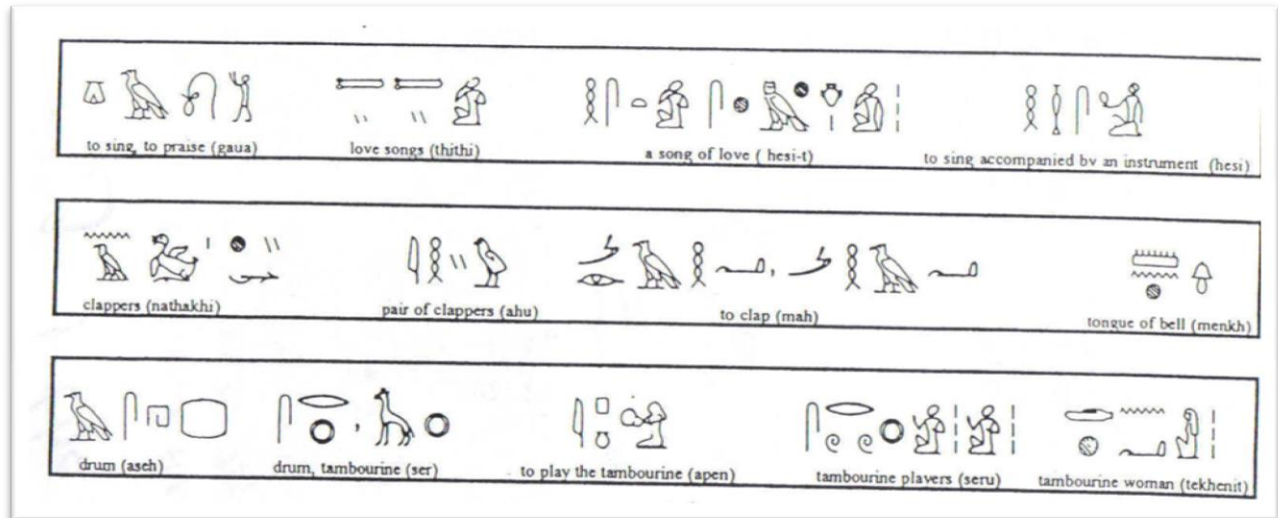
*“Walk like an Egyptian.” –The Bangles*

Looking at the evidence shown by hieroglyphics and archeological finds, the variety of Egyptian instruments reveals that ensemble playing was commonplace, with knowledge of how instruments sounded in combination with singing and dancing. The instruments that were most common in Egyptian society were the **flute, harp, sistrum** (percussive shaker), and a reed instrument resembling a clarinet which consisted of two connecting double pipes. Other types of instruments that were used included tambourines, drums, trumpets, lyres, and lutes (see above picture). Below is a chart of individual Egyptian instruments in practice:



Since entertainment was the primary source of all music in ancient Egypt, we have no examples of work songs or anything else that is not accompanied by dancing. However, the Hebrew slaves under their Egyptian masters used music primarily for religious and work purposes. It was also used as a teaching tool to educate young people about their historical background. The Hebrew instruments included the ram’s horn (shofar), the psaltery (a small harp-like instrument), and brass finger cymbals. We have no written evidence for the Hebrews living in Egypt as to how these instruments sounded together as they also possessed no notational system before the Exodus.

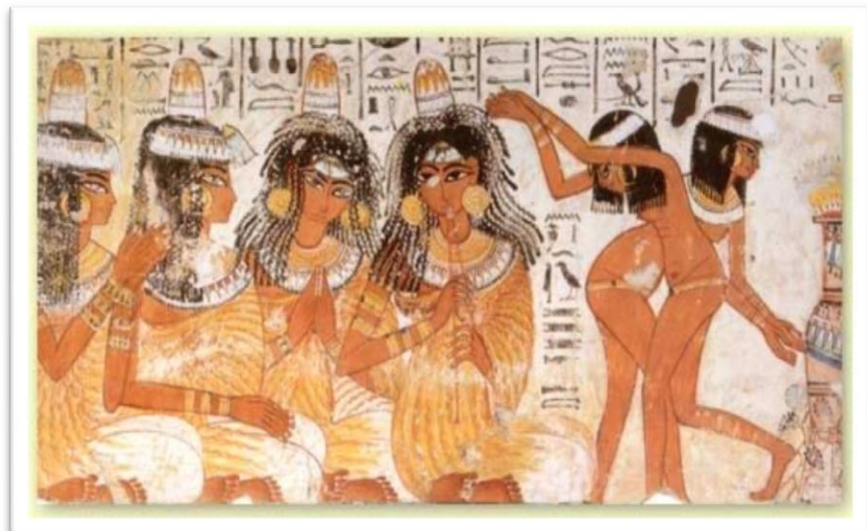
*Left: Diagram of ancient Egyptian instruments.*



*Translations and directions on how to play instruments, Egyptian Hieroglyphics*

The hieroglyphics show not only descriptions of musical instruments, but directions on the performance and practice of these instruments. The picture below shows musicians in practice while accompanying dancers.

From these visual representations of life in ancient Egypt, we can see how important music was in their culture. That importance would carry down to the next great civilization, the ancient Greeks.



**For Review:**

- Egyptian music was primarily used for **entertainment purposes**, and was accompanied by dancing.
- Musicians, **frequently women**, were held in high esteem in social standings.
- Hieroglyphics found in tombs, pyramids, and temples show ancient Egyptian instruments and practices, though they had **no notational system**.
- Many aspects of Egyptian society are still practiced today, including medicine, mathematics, and architecture.