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## ANCIENT DRAMA – THEATER OR OPERA?

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### Abstract

The classical style of performing ancient theatre today is mainly prose with some songs performed from the chorus. But actually the reality in the past time was completely different. The theatre performances in ancient Greek era were not theatre-plays as we know them today but mainly a music-theatre where the melodic part was dominating on the play. This forgotten fact was well known to the Italian society of the 16th century, where the try of the revival of the ancient Greek drama led to the birth of western opera.

The famous theatre writers of the antiquity were well known composers. We have many testimonies for this as well as for the instruments that were used during the plays.

The knowledge that the ancient drama was performed as music theatre has major importance and has consequences concerning not only the artistic aspect but also the acoustics. The singing voice, has a higher intensity than the speaking voice.

### Keywords

*ancient theatre, drama, speech, music, singer*

## **1. Introduction**

We have all the experience from performances of ancient theatre plays. Most of them are based on the concept that the bigger part is performed as speech narration and some parts (mainly the chorals) are performed vocally as songs. This style was arbitrarily adopted because till the middle of 20th century the knowledge concerning the ancient Greek music was very limited and even more the way the dramas were performed originally. Through the extraordinary work of researchers like Egert Pöhlmann, Solon Michailidis, Andrew Barker and Trasivoulos Georgiadis and many others, the knowledge today is very rich. This paper has as aim to approach closer to the original way the ancient theatre was performed.

## **2. The beginning of misunderstanding**

The revival efforts of the ancient drama in our era started the 1st quarter of the 20th century, (e.g. Delfian Fests, 1927). Because of the lack of any knowledge, it was adopted the performing style of that period, based on the Shakespearean theatre of the time: mainly speech, which was very expressive and only the choral parts were melodic. Until today this style is accepted as the classical performing style of ancient drama.

## **3. The opera as an accident of drama revival**

What is impressive is that during the Renaissance era the knowledge that the Drama was a music theatre existed and led –actually through accident- to the birth of opera as a genre. The late Renaissance era (end of 16th century) was very enthusiastic with ancient Greek civilization and had tried to revive the characteristics of antiquity.

Following this spirit, the Florentine Camerata, an elite group of humanists, musicians, poets and intellectuals have asked the composer Jacopo Peri to write an ancient drama in the framework of the antiquity. The members of the Camerata considered that the "chorus" parts of Greek dramas, and possibly even the entire text, were originally sung all as roles. In the effort of this "restoring" Peri wrote on 1557 "Daphne" a "Drama per Musica" as it was originally called. Daphne's biggest part is melodic (instrumental, some arias and a lot of melismatic speech -the later recitativo). This attempt, close to the spirit of ancient drama, but far away from the original antiquity music, led to a new music genre that will be later named "opera".

As Daphne is lost, we can have an idea of the attempt from "Euridice", a similar work written by Peri 3 years later.

## **4. Theatre and Music**

Starting from the main theatrical genre of antiquity, the "Tragedy", the name itself includes music. The word τραγωδία (tragodia), from which the word "tragedy" is derived, is a combination of two Greek words: τράγος (tragos=goat) and ᾠδή (ode) meaning "song", from αἰδεῖν (aeidein), "to sing". The reason is that, according to Aristoteles, the early form of tragedy was improvised satiric response songs, played by mummers in the context of the Dionysian cult. The structural formation of these songs led to the formation of the classical tragedy in the 6th century by famous writers and many competitions.

Phrynichus, one of the early tragedy writers (round 508 BC), winner of the Athens theatrical competition, was well known «αει φέρων γλυκεῖαν ᾠδάν» (always bearing sweet songs), while his opponent Pratinas accused him that "he has much more songs



Of course we don't know the exact performing details (e.g. how fast) and of course we don't know how was the melismatic narration. But we can maybe assume the style, if we compare it with other neighbour music civilizations that are surviving today.

#### **6. An indirect preservation of ancient theatre.**

During the domination of Christianity from the 4th century AD, the ancient theatre disappeared, without giving its place to another artistic form. In fact, it did not completely disappear, it was integrated by the church that became then the new place of community meeting ("ecclesia"). This is very obvious visually.

The typical form of the late ancient theatre scene building has three main doors. The central, which is from where usual the king and the main roles come out, and the side doors, from where the messenger (in anc. greek "angelos") appears. Between the doors and upstairs there are statues and paintings.

The chorus (in anc. Greek "choros") is singing and dancing in front of the stage.

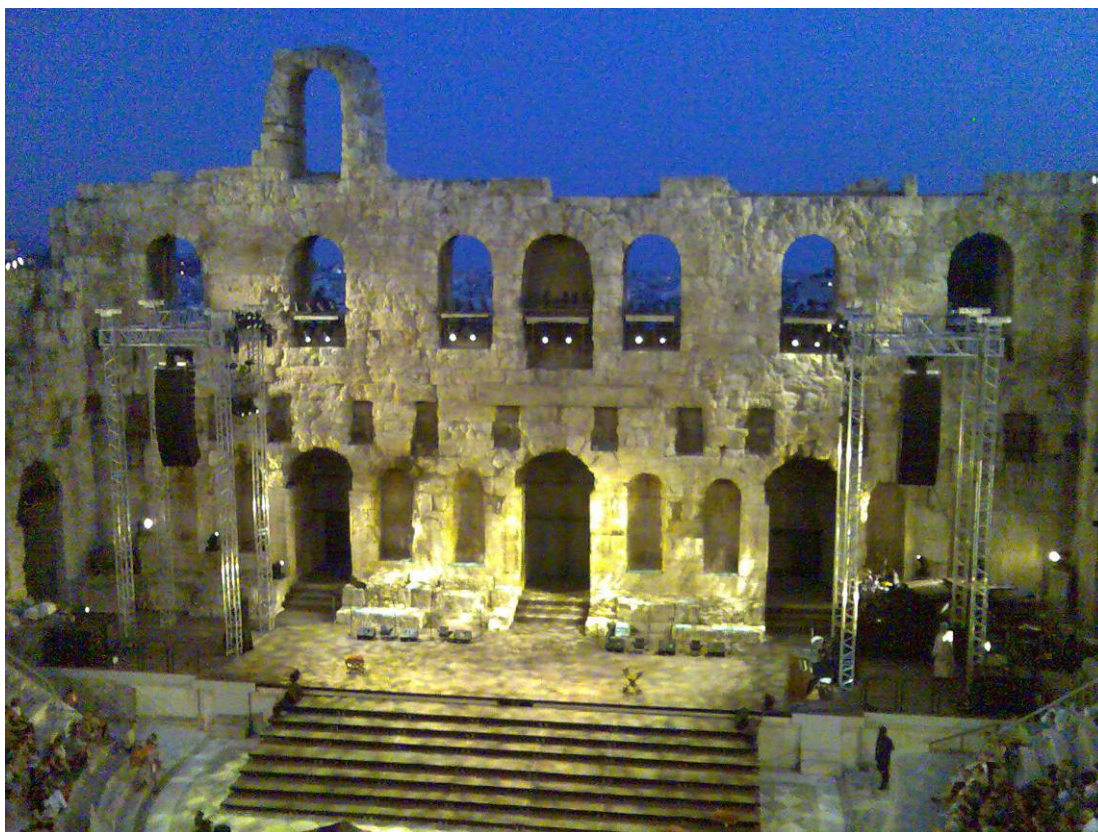


Figure 2 – The form of scene building of Herodium Atticus Theatre in Athens

If we see the typical form of "templon" in an orthodox church we can observe the similarities.

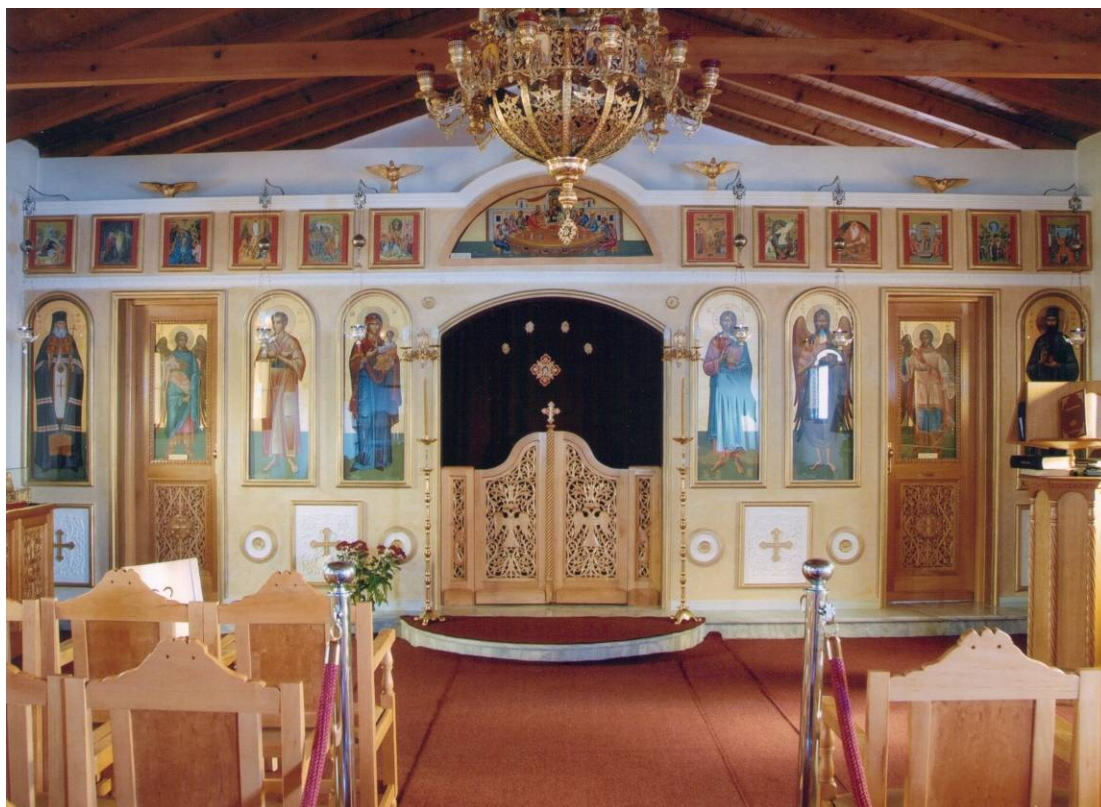


Figure 3 – Typical Greek Orthodox Church

There are here also three main doors. The central main door, where the priests appear, and the side doors, where usually an angel (in modern greek “angelos”) is painted. Between the doors and upstairs there are also paintings.

The singers left and right in the front space are called also “choros”.

These similarities can lead as to the safe hypothesis that also in the domain of music there are portings from the ancient theatre.

The music system of byzantine music is based on 8 modes (“echos”), similar to the system of ancient greek music that is based on 8 modes (“tropos”). The music performance of the orthodox liturgy has four forms. A) melismatic reading (usually from the priests) b) songs usually from the chorus c) prose (rare).

*(Dancing and musical instruments were forbidden in church.)*

### **7. The acoustic consequences**

The fact that the plays were performed mainly as musicals, has also acoustic consequences.

The singing voice is louder than the speaking voice. The Swedish voice scientist, Johann Sundberg, proved that the singing voice has the ability to be heard better than the speech. He named this effect the “*singers formant*”.

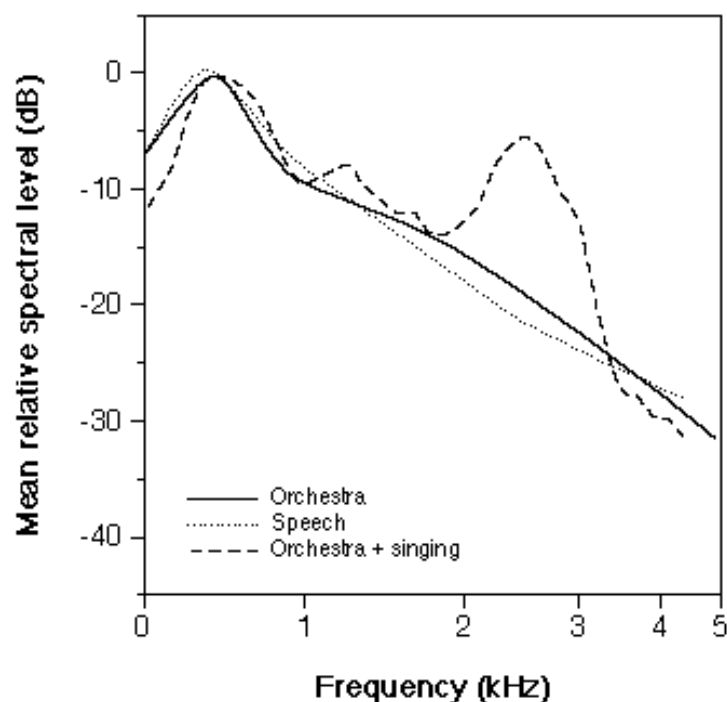


Figure 4 – Table with the ‘singers formant’ effect

As shown on the table, Sundberg found that a singer had a large 'hump' at around 3000 Hz. That hump ('singer's formant') is visible in the dotted line in the figure above. This effect exists even if the singer sings a capella (alone).

Another interesting aspect is that the music is recognized more easily from the audience as familiar, than the speech. As we know the classical plays were performed several times and were familiar to the audience. The fact that the parts were musical, helped them to be easier recognized.

## 8. Conclusion

The theatre plays of antiquity were mainly music theatre. We may not know the exact melodies, but we have a lot of other information that can help us to reconstruct the original spirit. The fact that many parts were sung has also some positive acoustical aspects.

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