

Philomathes

Reconstructing Auloi: Understanding Manifestations of Music, Myth, Mortals, & Morality

All of the remaining fragments of ancient Greco-Roman music scores can be played in under an hour.¹ Though the sounds of the ancient world have mostly been lost, there are hundreds of other sources on music that have survived from antiquity into modern times, including sculptures portraying musicians, depictions of performance painted on pottery, mythological stories retelling the creation of instruments, philosophical perceptions of ancient sounds, instrumental remnants, and play scripts. These pieces of evidence are used by classical scholars to (among other things) create accurate replicas of instruments such as the aulos, a doubled-pipe woodwind instrument that was used in ceremonies, celebrations, festivals, competitions, and theatrical performances. By reconstructing auloi in modernity, scholars understand more deeply the various themes entangled with aulos performance (such as religion, morality, philosophy, and politics) and can approach the perspectives on aulos performance in a new way by directly witnessing the cultural implications of the performance in antiquity. The representations of aulos performances within the context of Greek tragedy reveal the duality of worshipping the god of theater and wine, Dionysus.

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The duality of Dionysus exists in several forms: he is an immortal deity born from a mortal mother; his cult originated in Asia Minor, yet he was recognized as a Peloponnesian Olympian; he represents the fine boundary between pleasure and self-destruction as the god associated with madness, ecstasy, and festivities; he breaks gender roles by being male and having physical traits traditionally associated with women, such as long hair and pale skin; and he is a playful god with a cruel, vengeful nature. The god's contradictory identity manifests in the contrasting natures and behaviors of his mortal followers. The dichotomy encapsulated by the tensions between the perceived immorality of satyrs and Dionysus, juxtaposed with the baseness of the performance of the aulos, reveals the unbalanced, subservient relationship between the divine and mankind. Due to mythological influences on the social behavior of ancient Greeks, the role of humans in the context of Greek drama is to worship and serve the gods using the auloi, not to judge the virtue of the instrument.

One of the main events at the Festival of the City Dionysia was the competition of dramatic works. Each playwright would present a series of three tragedies and a satyr play that enacted famous legends and myths. Musical accompaniment would be played on the aulos as the chorus sang. However, the aulos was looked down upon and associated with baseness by conservative men. Though music was an intrinsic component of the education of Athenian boys, many conservative men were against the teaching and performance of the aulos. Regarding the instrument, Aristotle writes: "συμβέβηκεν ἐναντίον αὐτῷ πρὸς παιδείαν καὶ τὸ κωλύειν τῷ λόγῳ χρῆσθαι τὴν αὔλησιν. διὸ καλῶς ἀπεδοκίμασαν αὐτοῦ οἱ

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πρότερον τὴν χρῆσιν ἐκ τῶν νέων καὶ τῶν ἐλευθέρων.”² The performance of the dramas was a form of worshipping the gods, but playing the aulos prevented a person from worshipping by simultaneously singing and fingering, a task that would have only been possible on string instruments such as the lyre and kithara. Additionally, the creation myth of the aulos illustrates a long-standing notion that the performance of the woodwind was inferior to the lyre. Apollodorus’s *Library* explains that the goddess Athena created the aulos, but “οὐς ἔρριπεν Ἀθηνᾶ διὰ τὸ τὴν ὄψιν αὐτῆς ποιεῖν ἄμορφον” and cursed it so whoever played it would be condemned by the gods.³ The satyr Marsyas found the aulos and challenged the god Apollo to a musical competition; Marsyas played the aulos and Apollo, the lyre. During the contest, Apollo turned his instrument upside down and played it. Since Marsyas could not do the same, Apollo won and punished the satyr: “κρεμάσας τὸν Μαρσύαν ἐκ τινοῦς ὑπερτενοῦς πίτυος, ἐκτεμῶν τὸ δῆρμα.”⁴ This myth demonstrates that the performance of the aulos was deemed worse than the lyre by the gods and that whoever played the instrument was being irreverent to Athena and Apollo. Athena’s domain was wisdom and skill, and Apollo’s was music, so since they both discarded the instrument, no value was seen in it. The idea that

² Aristotle, *Aristotle’s Politica*, 1341a, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957). See also Aristotle, *The Politics of Aristotle*, book 8.6, 1341a, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 348-349: “...against the use of the flute [aulos] in education is the fact that flute-playing prevents the player from using words. Our ancestors were therefore right in debarring the use of the flute to youths and freemen....”

³ Apollodorus, *The Library*, book 1.4.2, trans. James Frazer (Cambridge, Mass. - London: Harvard University Press, William Heinemann, 1921), pp. 29-31: “... [Athena] had thrown [the aulos] away because they [it] disfigured her face”

⁴ Apollodorus, *Library*, 29-31: “... by hanging him on a tall pine tree and stripping off his skin”

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the aulos was a base instrument was deeply rooted in ancient Greek culture, which resulted in the stigmatization of auloi performance.

In spite of commonly held qualms about the instrument's morality, the aulos continued to be used as the main instrument accompanying theatrical productions, and many performances directly incorporated the aulos into scenes. By reconstructing the aulos, scholars can better understand how its volume and pitch informed/influenced/shaped its role in Greek drama objectively. The inner workings of the aulos are well-understood in modernity; as the air is blown and the reed is tongued, the air vibrates down the double body of the aulos producing sound. Different notes are created by changing fingerings, which alter the size of the instrument box and how much air escapes from each opening.

By listening first-hand, it is easier to discern and understand how the dynamics of the instrument allowed its sound to carry and be amplified by the architectural features of the theatron. The aulos' amplitude made it useful for theatrical performance. Each of the festival plays was performed in the Theater of Dionysus on the Acropolis, which had a width of 82 meters and could seat up to seventeen thousand individuals.⁵ Since music was an intrinsic component of the shows, the instruments used would need to be loud enough to be heard by all of the spectators in the audience, regardless of their seating. Though the theater was architecturally designed with acoustics in mind and later renovated with resonators under the benches, these features only successfully reinforce sounds directly

⁵ Thomas Hines, "Dionysus Theatre," *Whitman College: The Ancient Theatre Archive*, Nov. 12, 2016, <https://www.whitman.edu/theatre/theatretour/dionysos/dionysos.htm>.

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throughout the performance areas. Since auloi have a higher pitch and are louder than lyres, they would have been best for accompaniment in the theater. Modern reconstructions of aulos pairs have been made and played by classicists such as Barnaby Brown by using evidence including the archaeological remains of the Megara aulos pairs as a reference for shape and structure. These reconstructions are enhanced by examining ancient works of pottery and other art pieces portraying figures playing auloi, which help scholars to determine the relative dimensions of the instrument and its performance contexts. Additionally, scholars analyze ancient texts that describe the procedure of making parts of the instruments, such as reeds. They also study ancient music theory in order to create an accurate acoustic representation of fundamental pitches, tetrachords, and fingerings. Rather than solely relying on ancient sources to understand the volume and amplitude of the aulos and to estimate the acoustic physics, by directly listening to the instrument in modernity we can more objectively surmise why the aulos was used over the lyre, supplementing ancient observations.

Additionally, even though Athena and Apollo overlooked the instrument, the god Dionysus became associated with the aulos. In Euripides' *Bacchae*, the god Dionysus uses the aulos to gather more followers together as his religion travels to Thebes. The chorus exclaims: "ὄς τὰδ' ἔχει, θιασεύειν τε χοροῖς μετὰ τ' αὐλοῦ γελάσαι."⁶ On stage, it is presumed that the

⁶ Euripides, "The Bacchae," in *The Greek Anthology*, trans. W. R. Paton (London: Heinemann Ltd, 1927). See also Euripides, "The Bacchae," in *The Complete Greek Tragedies: Euripides V*, trans. William Arrowsmith (New York: Washington Square Press, 1967), v. 378-380: "... Dionysus, who has given us so much, uniting us in dance, to the sound of the flute [aulos] and our own delight"

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performers danced to the beat of the drums and the music of auloi as they sang. The performance created a parallel between the worship of the actors and the audience; the actors performed for the god, and the audience watched the retelling of the Hellenization of his cult in the performance. Though the auloi limited a performer's speech and ability to worship, they were still an attribute of the god and thereby essential in his festival. Dionysus validating the usage of the instrument in his celebrations resulted in the acceptance of aulos in tragedy, regardless of the opinions of Athenian men. Through this connection to the deity, aulos performance became integral to the City Dionysia and Athenian culture.

Furthermore, the duality of the instrument was illustrated through the imagery of satyrs in the City Dionysia and on pottery. Satyrs were male nature spirits well-known for their ribaldry. These part-human, part-beast creatures were characterized as wild, barbaric, and uncivilized. They were typically depicted on pottery with a large tail and erect penis, which was a symbol of their uncontrollable sexual desires, and were often depicted playing the aulos surrounded by other attributes of Dionysus (Fig. 1). Since satyrs were frequently depicted playing the aulos, and the instrument's aetiological myth featured a satyr who was cruelly punished by the gods, the performance of the aulos was associated with debauchery. This strengthened the negative perception of the instrument. However, even though satyrs were not well received, they too became respected due to their proximity to Dionysus. As followers of the god, their frenzied behavior and other unsavory traits allowed them to, appropriately, become close companions and attendants of the god whose nature encapsulated both madness and pleasure. During the City Dionysia, satyrs were

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celebrated through the performance of satyr plays, short performances that accompanied the three major tragedies in which the entire chorus was composed of satyrs. Satyr plays were light-hearted, contrasting the themes of the tragedies and serving as a reminder of the Dionysiac origins of theater. This acceptance of satyrs in the realm of Dionysus helped strengthen the role of the aulos in Greek tragedy, especially since the instrument was directly connected to Dionysus through his companions and attendants.

The normalization and integration of the aulos into Greek tragedy and the City Dionysia do not negate the perceived debauchery and baseness of the instrument; rather, it suggests that it is not the role of humans to judge what has been accepted by the gods. The conservative citizens of Athens believed that the instrument lacked morality and should not have been performed for several reasons. In the *Politics*, Aristotle writes that “ἀπεδοκιμάσθη διὰ τῆς πείρας αὐτῆς, βέλτιον δυναμένων κρίνειν τὸ πρὸς ἀρετὴν καὶ τὸ μὴ πρὸς ἀρετὴν συντεῖνον.”⁷ Since the performance of the aulos blocked speech, was perceived to limit worship, was associated with satyrs, and was devalued by Athena and Apollo, the conservative citizens believed that they had enough evidence to justify their opinions of the aulos. Moreover, in Plato’s *Laws*, the Athenian man suggests that music should be evaluated by the pleasure of the well-educated.⁸ Since the majority of Athenian citizens were formally

⁷ Aristotle, *Politica*, 1341a, ed. Ross, 1341a. See also Aristotle, *Politics*, book 8.6, 1341a, trans. Barker, 348-349: “... when people were better able to judge what really conduced to excellence, and what had the opposite effect, a larger experience of flute-playing led to its final rejection....”

⁸ Plato, “Laws,” in *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, vol. 10 & 11, books 2 & 3, trans. R. G. Bury (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1967 & 1968).

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educated, this mindset may have made many citizens believe that they had the right to determine which instruments and performances should and should not be accepted. Aristotle wrote that the rejection of the aulos was the result of educated men being able to accurately discern what kinds of music and performance were virtuous and morally sound.

However widespread these ideas may have been, they did not prevent the performance of auloi in the domain of Dionysus; since the god accepted the instrument, it was used to celebrate and worship him in the City Dionysia, making it an integral part of Athenian society. Through this association, the place of the aulos is defined in the theater, absolving it of any moral obligations. In the *Politics*, Aristotle wrote that “ἔστιν ὁ αὐλὸς ἡθικὸν ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ὀργιαστικόν, ὥστε πρὸς τοὺς τοιοῦτους αὐτῷ καιροῦς χρηστέον,” indicating that the case for the rejection of the aulos shifted to accommodate its role in the City Dionysia.⁹ It is not the responsibility of mortal creatures to evaluate the merit of things that the gods have already decided upon. Marsyas’ disagreement challenged the gods, and he was punished accordingly by being flayed for not knowing his place. Since the proceedings of the gods lie above mortals and the theater was the domain of Dionysus, the ancient Athenians could not have continued to reject auloi performance in the context of Greek drama and subsequently accepted the aulos in productions. Thus, humans are subservient to the gods’ wills, as they worship them and fear the consequences of disobeying their opinions.

⁹ Aristotle, *Politica*, 1341a, ed. Ross, 1341a. See also Aristotle, *Politics*, book 8.6, 1341a, trans. Barker, 348-9: “... [the aulos] does not express a state of character, but rather a mood of religious excitement; and it should therefore be used on those occasions...”

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If instruments are considered as vehicles to engage with aspects of ancient Greek civilization, much more can be gained from their reconstruction in modern times than simply attempting to perform antiquity. In this way, the ancient past can be embodied and interpreted in new ways through music. The aulos was an integral part of the Festival of the City Dionysia, despite the many controversies surrounding its performance. Many conservative men disapproved of the instrument and questioned its morality, but since the aulos was associated with Dionysus, playing the instrument in theatrical performances was a salient way to honor the deity. Moreover, the instrument, though scorned by Athena and Apollo, had Dionysus' divine approval, so it was not human beings' place to dispute its morality or usage. Dionysus is a paradoxical figure; since the god has several dualities in his identity, it is fitting that his worship is also characterized by contrarities. By using modern reconstructions of auloi as a means of understanding conceptions of performance, festivities, virtue, religion, and philosophy in ancient Greece, scholars can engage with the dichotomies of worshipping Dionysus.

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Figure 1: Two Depictions of Satyrs on Ancient Greek Drinking Vessels (A) An Attic red-figure krater (wine mixing bowl) by the Curti Painter depicting the god Dionysos holding a thyrsos surrounded by a seated satyr playing the aulos and a Maenad playing the drum. The satyr has an exposed tail and its penis is visible from between its legs. Dionysos and the satyr are both wearing his attribute, the ivy wreath. Object Number 1960.343 from the Division of Asian and Mediterranean Art in the Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, which encourages the use of images for scholarly purposes, bequest of David

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M. Robinson, retrieved from <https://hvr.dartmouth.edu/art/290813>. **(B)** An Attic red-figure kylix (drinking cup) by the Greek potter and painter Douris depicting a satyr in the nude aggressively pulling a Maenad holding a thyrsos towards him. On the left of the satyr is a drinking horn, and the satyr has an exposed tail and erect penis. Object number 1925.30.129 from the Division of Asian and Mediterranean Art in the Harvard Art Museums/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, bequest of Joseph C. Hoppin, retrieved from <https://hvr.dartmouth.edu/art/292377>.

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