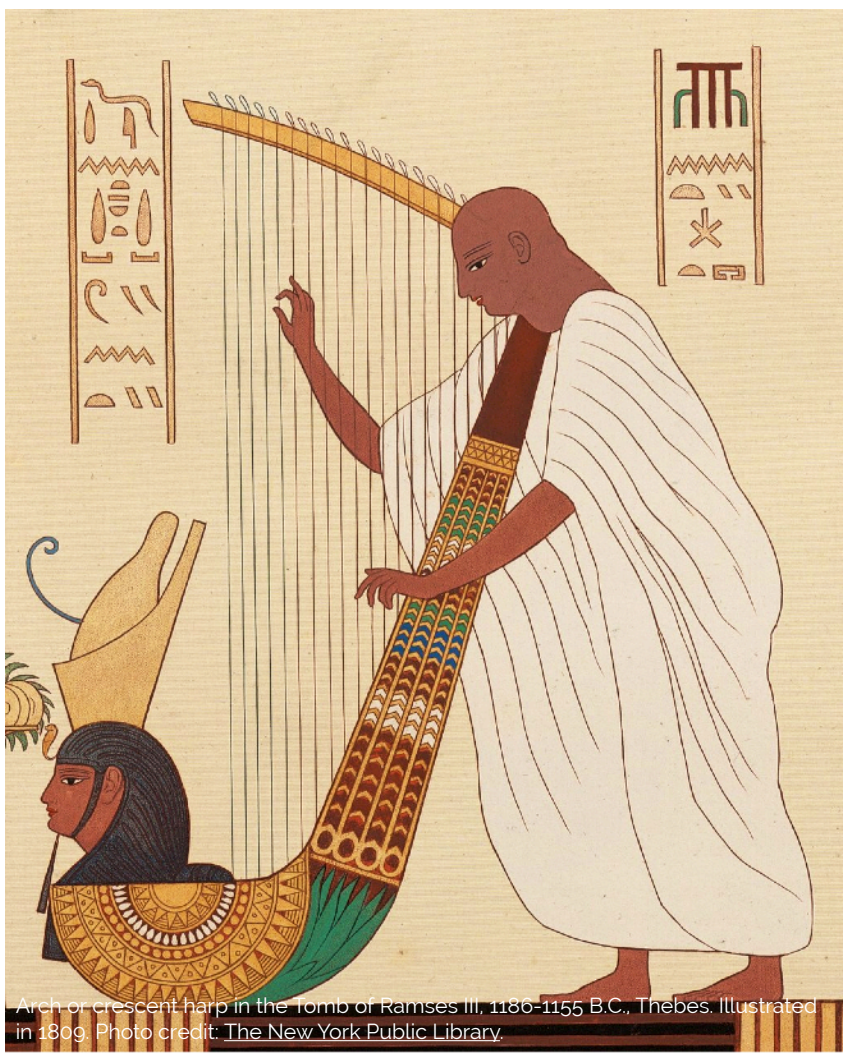
JONATHAN SKINNER

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

Scarce are those who would contest the essentiality of music. Its influence can be seen in every aspect of society, from the family home to the football stadium. While music has taken different forms as history has progressed, the fact that it's essential to human existence has been true ever since music's inception—a date which cannot be concretely established—and a prime example of this is the civilization of the ancient Egyptians. In fact, the society they had built was far more advanced than those of other peoples, as proof of the arts' existence in Egypt can be found as early as 4,000 BC, during the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties (Pulver, 1921). The ancient Egyptians built their entire culture around music, incorporating it into their religious observances, royal banquets, general entertainment for all, and everything in between. Such an extensive involvement with music would, naturally, produce not only a legion of musicians whose live were shaped by performing music, but also a wealth of musical instruments on which this music would be played. Many of these ancient Egyptian customs have had a large impact on our society today. We use many of the same instruments, although some have been modified or altered to improve playability or sound quality, assimilate music into many of the same parts of society, and take into consideration the same concerns the ancient Egyptians did. An understanding of this comes from an exploration of the four main periods of ancient Egyptian music and what those periods introduced to develop their respective musical ideas.



Arch or crescent harp in the Tomb of Ramses III, 1186-1155 B.C., Thebes. Illustrated in 1809. Photo credit: The New York Public Library.

Music was, like many other things, associated with the ancient Egyptian gods, and, initially, it was believed that Merit, a goddess also known as Meret, was the "personification of music"; in fact, "although she never became goddess of the people with cult chapels of her own . . . she was a 'chironomist goddess', whose major task was to establish cosmic order by means of her song and gestures" (Manniche, 1991, p. 57). This was mainly due to her association with some ancient Egyptian creation stories, as she is said to have been heavily involved in the symphony of creation (Mark, 2017). After some time, however, Merit's close association with music would be dropped and replaced by the goddess Hathor, who was said to bring joy and make use of a sistrum, a percussion instrument, to protect her land from evil (Mark, 2009). Such highly-regarded spiritual associations serve as the main reason why music saw such great development starting in the Fifth Dynasty.

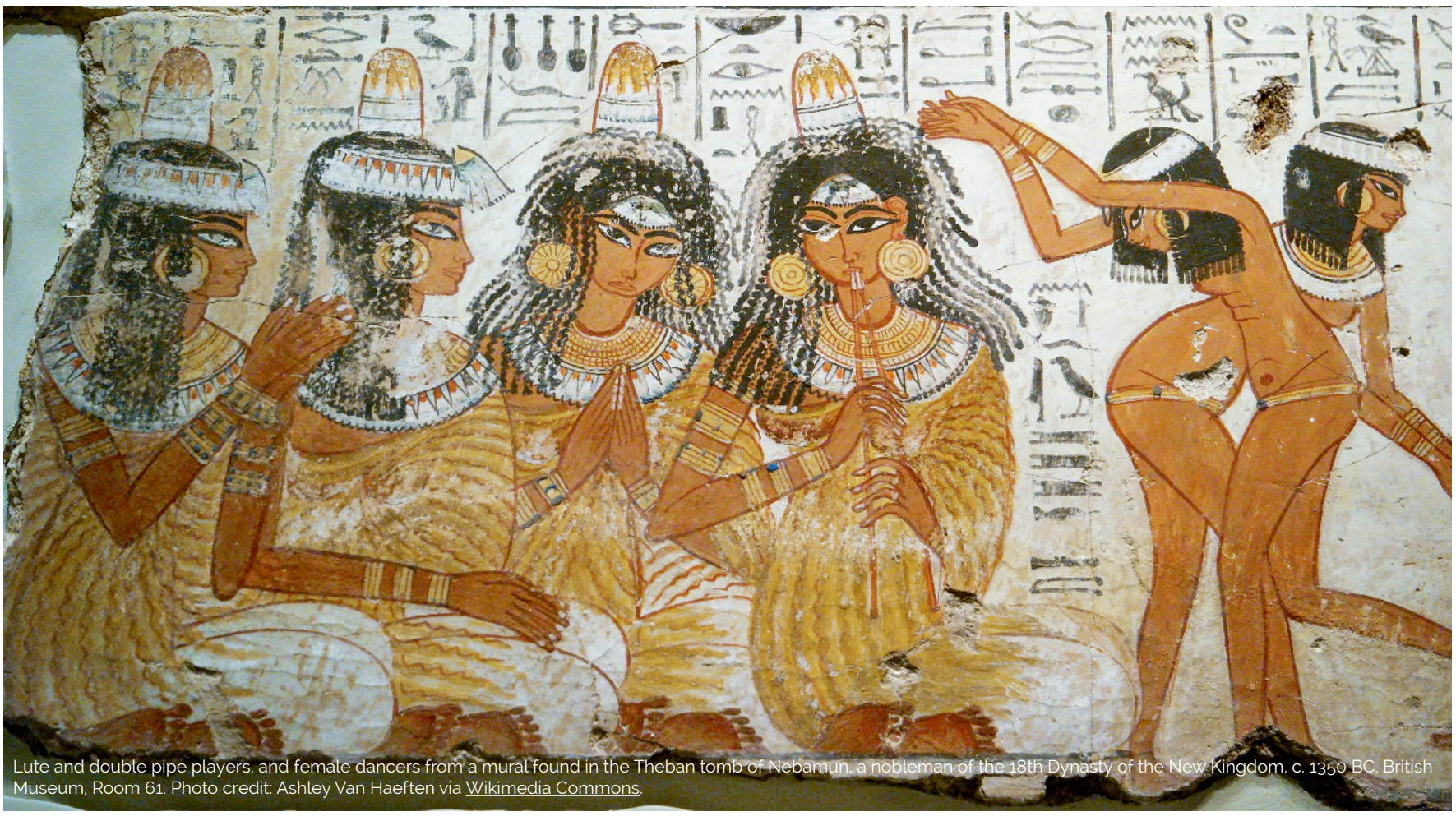
While evidence supports the idea that Egypt had the capacity to develop a diverse array for instruments as far back as the First Dynasty (around 4,400 BC), Egyptian art did not become the prevalent force that it is known by today until the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties (Pulver, 1921). During this time, schools of music began to flourish in parts of Egypt such as Memphis, and tombs from these dynasties often housed both depictions of different musical scenes and "representations of excellent instruments" (Pulver, 1921). It is in these tombs where we first glimpse what may have been considered a typical ensemble in ancient Egypt. According to Jeffrey Pulver, a depiction in the Pyramid of Gizeh showed "two harpers, with large bow-shaped, six-stringed instruments, and three flautists" (1921, pg. 35). These two instrument categories, chordophones and aerophones, are the most prominent types of instruments in ancient Egyptian music, and these wind and

stringed instruments made up most ancient Egyptian ensembles, although membranophones, such as barrel drums, and idiophones, such as cymbals and bells, would also be used when needed, particularly in religious processions and alongside trumpets in military functions (Köpp-Junk, 2018).

The popularity of music would spread throughout all of Egypt during the Sixth Dynasty, unfortunately causing the quality of the art to suffer somewhat (Pulver, 1921). While this allowed the masses to enjoy music more than they had been allowed before, the decline in quality would not slow, as later kings would fail to cultivate an environment in which music could thrive (Pulver, 1921). Thus, after the innovation which came from over a millennium of development, the first renaissance of Egyptian art would end as abruptly as it began in 3,300 BC (Pulver, 1921).

After silence for the next four dynasties, the second era of Egyptian artistic brilliance came during the Eleventh Dynasty and the reign of King Mentuhotep III (Pulver, 1921). Just as during the first period, depictions of music's flourishing are present in tombs and palaces, along with physical remains of instruments from the time (Pulver, 1921). Additionally, this period is where the first signs of outside cultural influence present themselves; while the impact of Asiatic influence is debated, its significance is not. Scholars theorize that some of the depictions in a tomb at Beni Hassan showed the biblical Jacob bringing his family to Egypt, with one of the men carrying the lyre that may have belonged to David (Pulver, 1921). On the other hand, the Greeks, rather than changing ancient Egyptian music, most likely based their musical system on the one set by ancient Egypt (Pulver, 1921). Today, a lot is owed to this Egyptian influence on Greek music due to its impact on European twentieth-century music theory and modern Western music theory by extension (Pulver, 1921). As an example, the tetrachord, adopted by the Greeks from Egypt and eventually brought to Europe, is an ascending scale of four notes "bounded by the interval of a perfect fourth"; that is, the lowest and highest notes of the scale are separated by five semitones (The Editors, 1998, para. 1). By combining two tetrachords which share no common tone together, the major scale is created; this scale is the basis for most instrumental music today and is the template from which all variations, such as minor and harmonic scales, branch from (Encyclopedia Brittanica, 1998).

The second era of Egyptian art lasted throughout the Eighteenth Dynasty, with another school of music and even more instruments created under the rule of Akhenaten III. By the Nineteenth Dynasty, a sense of sloth had again set in across the Kingdom and caused a decline in many aspects of Egyptian culture, including the arts, whose decline was initially negligible but became more severe once Rameses II came



Lute and double pipe players, and female dancers from a mural found in the Theban tomb of Nebamun, a nobleman of the 18th Dynasty of the New Kingdom, c. 1350 BC. British Museum, Room 61. Photo credit: Ashley Van Haeften via Wikimedia Commons.

to power (Pulver, 1921). Thankfully, the time between the second and third eras of Egyptian artistic development was short, as the Twentieth Dynasty and the reign of Rameses III particularly pioneered the third era of Egyptian musical culture (Pulver, 1921). This period, while much shorter than the others, accorded much value to music and art in ancient Egypt. More depictions of instruments, specifically harps, appear on various tombs, many of them featuring brilliant, gemstone-studded instruments which towered over the people drawn beside them (Pulver, 1921). Unfortunately, this was the only important aspect of this period, as although Rameses III was able to improve the arts during his reign, his successors did not share this interest, and thus, progress was stalled once again (Pulver, 1921).

The fourth and final era of ancient Egyptian musical development comes in the Twenty-sixth Dynasty, when Psamtek I and other loyal Egyptian subjects brought the Kingdom together one last time (Pulver, 1921). This was perhaps the most distinguished of the four periods due to the prioritization of a new, higher standard of art as opposed to continuing what had already been achieved (Pulver, 1921). Like the third period during the Twentieth Dynasty, however, this period only lasted through the reign of Amasis II, phasing out even before the end of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (Pulver, 1921). The Ptolemaic period solidified the end of ancient Egyptian musical development, as while imitations were attempted by artists of the time, it was no longer possible for any music which came out of Egypt to be "wholly" Egyptian (Pulver, 1921).

Although ancient Egyptian music died out many millennia ago, the period's instruments have remained topics of interest and have had impact on our music today. Harps of many kinds were used, including angular and different variations of arched harps (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). The shovel-shaped harp, which was used exclusively in the New and Middle Kingdoms, possessed five to seven strings and, as the name implies, a soundbox shaped like a shovel (Levy, 2020). The ladle-shaped harp differed in both string count and sound box design, as it usually had nine strings and sported a hemispherical sound box; additionally, the ladle-shaped harp was generally considered both a solo instrument and a pristine gift to offer a deity (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). The boat-shaped harp is the longest of the five arched harps due to its shallow sound box. It is a girthier harp with nine to twelve strings (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). The last of the arched harps, the shoulder harp, is different from the other four harps due to its portable design, small number of strings, typically four to five, and ability to be played in a variety of positions (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). The angular harp sets itself apart from all five arched harps, as not only do the two sections of its rectangular sound box form an angle at their meeting point—hence the name of "angular" harp—but it also boasted considerably more strings than an arched harp would, with many falling in between seventeen and twenty-one (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). Even though different harps were created for different eras of Egyptian rule, they were among the most popular instruments of their time due to their commonality and accessibility, as harps were a popular instrument for those with visual impairments.

Two more chordophones were popular in ancient Egypt, those being the lyre and lute. The lyre was brought to Egypt during the Middle Kingdom and shares similar structural aspects with the angular harp, having either a rectangular or trapezoidal sound box (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). These oddly shaped instruments were played primarily by women, although oversized lyres would be played by men, and, unlike most harps, lyres were played in ensembles rather than as solo instruments; they also had a strong association with deities (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). The lutes are strikingly different from harps and lyres, as they share many similarities to the modern-day guitar. A lute has a thin neck with a small number of strings and an ovular sound box. Lutes also found their place in ensembles, and thanks to their relatively small size, lute players had the freedom to dance, sing, and play simultaneously, contributing to its use in many important events, such as religious ceremonies (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). Today, many of these instruments have faded into obscurity or fallen into the vague classification of "exotic instruments," but the boat-shaped harp has avoided this fate, finding its place as one of the two primary orchestral chordophones along with the piano. Additionally, while the ancient Egyptian lute has not reemerged, the guitar finds niche usage in various wind ensembles.

While not as popular as the ancient Egyptian chordophones, aerophones were still used somewhat regularly. The most prevalent of these was the ancient Egyptian flute, being the oldest of the aerophones (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). The flute had three to four holes and was

held in a posture similar to how the modern-day flute and clarinet are held; additionally, while the number of holes is small, a player changing the way they blow into the instrument would alter the note (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). Along with the flute, a "monkey-shaped ocarina" and another type of flute called a "*uffâtah*" were occasionally used but much less common (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). Today's clarinet shares similarities with the ancient one, both because of its structural similarities—it uses a single wooden reed with six holes on the front—and the ensembles it is used in, mostly with other flutes and the harp, both common instruments in orchestras. It differs from today's clarinet in the unique way of holding it as it was held in the same way one would hold a trumpet today. Finally, it produced a dissonance of notes unlike today's instrument (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). Ancient clarinets, however, would be phased out in the New Kingdom, replaced by the oboe, an instrument which is split into two tubes, one which plays the melody and the other which holds a note underneath (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020).

The trumpet is an anomaly, being the only brass instrument in the grouping. The re-creations of ancient Egyptian trumpets seen in movies and television are surprisingly accurate when compared to their actual design: a long tube which spreads into a bell (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). With no extra holes, valves, or any other external method of modifying the note played, the only way for one to alter their notes is the change their embouchure; because of this design, the ancient Egyptian trumpet can only produce "the harmonic series of a note," that is, only notes which can be produced naturally with no tuning, and was mostly used in military operations, although it did occasionally see use recreationally (*Music in Ancient Egypt*, 2020). Unlike the chordophones, all four of these instruments are still in use today, and apart from the oboe, their designs have not been drastically altered. Further, their uses have remained almost unchanged. Even the trumpet, which was once used almost exclusively in military functions and is now a mainstay in orchestra ensembles, is still an icon of the military. One demonstration of this can be seen in the U.S. Army in the form of the Herald Trumpets, "The official fanfare ensemble to the President of the United States [which was] officially founded in 1959 . . . to add splendor to official military ceremonies" (*The U.S. Army*, n.d.).

Shovel harp as depicted in the funerary chapel of Hetepherakhet, Old Kingdom, 5th dynasty, circa 2400 B.C. Photo credit: Rob Koopman via Wikimedia Commons.

Aside from instruments, the importance of ancient Egyptian music can be seen in the design of the temples and tombs of the time, partially due to sacred music being a large part of ancient Egyptian music throughout its history, particularly during the Fifth Dynasty (Pulver, 1921). Because temples were commonly used for worship of their deities, acoustics were taken into consideration upon buildings' construction. Nada Ahmed Arisha, a

lecturer of interior design at the October University of Modern Sciences and Arts, references the design of the Holy of Holies, noting the following:

> the ceiling narrows [in] gradually and the flooring rises until we reach [the] entrance of the Holy of Holies. According to the Acoustics of sound this [allows for] large voices and echoes throughout the temple during the hymns and ceremonies at the Holy of Holies. (Al Malt, 2017, cited in Arisha, 2022)

Perhaps the most prominent example of this Egyptian focus on both acoustics and sacred music to survive to the present day is the Coptic Orthodox Church. This sect of Christianity was created when St. Mark introduced the gospel to Egypt between 45-60 BC; Coptic life shares similarities with ancient Egyptian life due to both cultures involving music in everyday life (The Library of Congress, 2009). The Coptic church views heaven as a place of eternal praise to God, and because of this, worship services, and the music sung, are meant to give a glimpse into what heaven is like (The Library of Congress, 2009). As such, Coptic churches tend to be built as large cathedrals, making them optimal for singing praises (The Library of Congress, 2009).

These elements are not simply important because of their direct impact on our music today. Nearly all melodies from the ancient Egyptians are lost to time due to their lack of musical notation systems. Because of this, we must rely on song texts and physical representations of instruments to determine what the music of ancient Egypt may have sounded like (Köpp-Junk, 2018). Plenty of attempts to reconstruct some of these ancient melodies exist, one of which was made by Michael Levy, a modern composer for lyre. Levy discusses context clues used by those who rebuild ancient melodies in his video, "Reconstructed Ancient Egyptian Melody." (Levy himself did not do so). These include a remarkably intact three-holed Egyptian flute and depictions of a banquet scene on the walls of a tomb from which the melody was reconstructed (2009). Musically, the piece never changes keys, always remaining in the key of G major, and it particularly favors E natural and A natural as its root notes, demonstrating the influence of the tetrachord. The lyre was also capable of holding an E natural on one of its strings to allow the others to play the melody, similarl to the guitars we use today. Additionally, Levy's arrangement was free-metered, which means that there was no concrete time signature present. This allows for greater expression through the instrument itself. This freedom of expression is most likely due to music being used as ways of worshipping the ancient deities.

The music of the ancient Egyptians was formed through a complex series of periods which, in their own ways, contributed to human artistic growth. Things left behind from these periods have impacted how we as a culture view music today, from the instruments we use to the techniques and theory we use for composition. Even our approach to architecture was shaped by the priorities of the ancient Egyptians. This comes from the value the Egyptians placed on music, which has survived into our time. It is no wonder that we attempt to use what little we have to reconstruct these melodies which have faded away. As more is discovered about music in ancient Egyptian societies, more connections can be made between them and the modern day. ❖

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The citation system used in this essay is APA 7th.

believe that everyone is free to do what they want as long as they respect others and the environment. If in my bank account, instead of three or four figures, there were six or seven, honestly, I would try to enjoy life without going on risky adventures. Among the missions listed above, the only one I would do is climb Everest, but with long and careful preparation. ❖

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