

AN INTRODUCTION TO MUSIC 3: ANCIENT PREHISTORIC MUSIC

DEFINING PREHISTORIC MUSIC

Very little information is known to us about prehistoric (primitive music), except that this type of music occurred in the very late geological history; it is the first era of music. Defining prehistoric music according to location is also difficult. The term itself generally refers to European music, European-influenced areas, and music that still exists in isolated regions, rather than Native American and Australian Aboriginal musical cultures. The prehistoric era is considered to have ended with the development of writing, and with it, by definition, prehistoric music.

Hebrew music refers to Biblical (religious) references to music, which include singing, dancing and instruments. Early music of Egypt includes hieroglyphics, depicting music as important to society; various instruments used in Egyptian music. Chinese were credited with being the first to develop a science of acoustics and a theory of music, with the first use of the pentatonic scale. The musical culture of China goes back at least 4,000 years.

The invention of music in Iran (Persian music) is credited to Jamshid. The music of Iranian culture can be traced to the Elamite Empire. We have fragmentary documents that show that ancient Persians had an elaborate musical culture. The Sassanid period (A.D. 226-651), in particular, has left us ample evidence pointing to the existence of a lively musical life in Persia. The names of some important musicians such as Barbod, Nakissa and Ramtin, and titles of some of their works have survived.

Indian classical music, or marga, from the scriptures of the Hindu tradition, or the Vedas. Samaveda, one of the four Vedas, describes music at length.

ANCIENT MUSIC

Is a term that denotes music after the prehistoric age. Characteristics include harmonies of thirds, and Pythagorean tuning of the diatonic scale. Drawings of instruments, such as the double pipes and ancient bagpipes and the writings found show that the music is polyphonic. Many instruments have been recovered from various archeological sites.

TYPES OF PREHISTORIC MUSIC

Prehistoric music is generally grouped into 3 categories or types: folk, indigenous or traditional. Natural sounds and rhythms are used to produce music of this period. One can guess that the people of this era of music used rhythmic patterns and repetition, but cannot know for certain. Most likely, the first musical instrument was the human voice itself, and using effects produced by the voice: singing, humming, whistling, clicking, coughing and yawning.

ANCIENT MUSICAL DISCOVERIES

In 2008 archaeologists discovered a bone flute in the Hohle Fels cave near Ulm, Germany. The five-holed flute has a V-shaped mouthpiece and is made from a vulture wing bone. The oldest known wooden pipes were discovered near Greystones, Ireland, in 2004. A wood-lined pit contained a group of six flutes made from yew wood, between 30 and 50cm long, tapered at one end, but without any finger holes. They may once have been strapped together.

CULTURAL CHANGES

Changes in social structure in ancient cultures brought about changes in urban civilization, and the emergence of new instruments, most notably strings, in various parts of Asia, Europe and Africa. While playing stringed instruments, ancient people discovered that the different lengths of strings produced different notes. This is due to the speed of the vibration on the strings and the relationship between the notes produced. Various music is performed, such as early hymns in India, and that of bells used in China. The earliest music, to date, is that of modern Ras Shamra, in Syria (back then Ugarit).

MUSIC: A COMMUNICATION TOOL

Many philosophers and musicians worked together to develop instruments and musical theory. Confucius, Plato (one of the earliest Greeks), and Aristoxenus, all wrote about music in some way; Confucius, distinguishing wholesome and unwholesome music, Plato, writing about music, and Aristoxenus, concerned about intervals, scales and melodies. Psalms were well established in the church by fourth century AD.

Many theologians at the time believed music was meant to be composed of sweet sounds to unite the human body with the soul of the universe. Boethius describes three levels of music: music of the spheres, music of the human being, and music using instruments. Communication of music was important as new chants were composed; cultural changes take place. Changes then happened: Music became a tool or vehicle of communication.

Musical notation goes through several changes across several regions at this point. Rules about how chant should be performed in church were applied to Biblical texts, which spread westward and possibly eastward to other countries. Tablature was developed, which was one of the first major steps in musical notation. This led to more music being sung.

TO SUMMARIZE

A recap of the musical world to the 8th century:

1. Defining prehistoric music is difficult. First era. European
2. Hebrew music: Biblical and religious, hieroglyphics, various instruments used
3. Chinese musical developments: science of acoustics, theory of music, pentatonic scale
4. Three types: folk, indigenous, traditional
5. Human voice most likely first musical instrument
6. Ancient discoveries: bone and wooden flutes in Germany
7. Cultural changes in Asia, Europe and Africa. Various music performed.
8. Earliest music, to date, Ugarit (now Ras Sharma in Syria)
9. Music as a communication tool: sweet sounds to unite the human body with the soul of the universe
10. Changes in musical notation occurred, and tablature is developed
11. Unrecorded musical cultures of Java, Burma, Central America, and parts of Africa