

# Review

HARRY MORGAN, *MUSIC, POLITICS AND SOCIETY IN ANCIENT ROME*. Cambridge and New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. xiii + 284, illus. ISBN 9781009232333 (hbk). £75.00.

Any cultural history of music should pay particular attention to the social and political contexts in which music was produced and consumed. By providing a detailed and up-to-date overview of Roman *ars musica* over a chronological span of about three centuries (from the middle Republic to the Neronian age), Harry Morgan not only fulfils these requirements, but succeeds in the difficult task of outlining a history of the society and politics of ancient Rome through its musical culture. In this way, he reverses the perspective often adopted by specialists in the field and thus broadens the range of his potential readers.

To achieve this goal, M. arranges the evidence on music, scattered through the Latin sources of the period under examination, around four main events and key testimonies, each of which allows him to delve into a broader theme. To begin with, the triumphal games organised by the Roman praetor Lucius Anicius Gallus in 167 B.C.E. are a perfect starting point to reflect on both the use of music for propaganda purposes in military triumphs and the increasing Hellenisation of musical culture in second-century B.C.E. Rome (ch. 1: The Games of L. Anicius Gallus and the Cultural Politics of Music in the Second Century BCE). The extensive treatment of music in Cicero's *De legibus* allows for a broader discussion of the political consequences of music's popularisation in the late Republic, which was strongly encouraged by the construction of Pompey's theatre (ch. 2: Popular Music and Popular Politics in the Late Republic). The assimilation of Augustus with Apollo Citharoedus as a peaceful god after the victory at Actium, perceived by contemporaries in open contrast to the Dionysian self-representation of his former rival Mark Antony, served as a tool for political propaganda at the beginning of the Roman empire, also anticipating the Apollonian/Dionysian opposition made famous by Nietzsche (ch. 3: Augustus, Apollo's Lyre and the Harmony of the Principate). Finally, the activities of the 'musomaniac' Nero, in continuity with Augustus as far as the use of Apollonian imagery is concerned, make clear the extent to which music was consciously used by the imperial power to manipulate various social groups (ch. 4: Nero and the Age of Musomania). Three main themes remain constant and intertwine in the background of each case study, as is aptly summarised in the Epilogue: the relationship between Roman and Greek musical cultures, the interactions between elites and the popular masses, and the use of music as a political tool.

The four chapters are preceded by a rich and well-articulated Introduction, in which M. sets out the methodological basis of his work by providing a concise but timely description of the state of the art in scholarship and of the various types of ancient sources available to scholars (not only literary texts, but also archaeological and epigraphic evidence, as well as iconography), by emphasising the complexity of tracing Greek and Etruscan influences on Roman culture and by contextualising the musical events which took place in ancient Rome on specific occasions and in particular physical locations. Especially welcome is the attention paid to terminology, which does not remain confined to a mere statement of intent but becomes central to many arguments throughout the book: see, for instance, the discussion of the interpretation of the *ludus talarius* (77–81), a loud and unrestrained theatrical entertainment banned by the censors in 115 B.C.E. because of its potential for corrupting Roman senators; or the focus on Cicero's usage of the word *convicium* when describing the noisy chants of Publius Clodius' supporters (119–21), whose proximity to the archaic words *occentare/occentatio* leads M. to interpret Clodius' political strategy as a means of appealing to the musicality of the Roman plebs.

The evidence discussed by M. is varied and from different kinds of sources: material evidence, for instance, becomes crucial when discussing Augustus' promotion of Apollo as a god of harmony (ch. 3), whether analysing important cult statues or smaller-scale representations of the god on Roman coins. Unusual and very fruitful, at least in music-related scholarship, is the special focus on Cicero (ch. 2), both as a politician — the interpretation of his thought on music in the context of the political conflict between *optimates* and *populares* is extremely interesting — and as an orator and theorist of oratory, a discipline whose connection to music had been very close since classical Greek antiquity, then becoming a distinctive feature of Roman culture.

Thanks to this book, the reader will have a more articulate and diverse view of Roman attitudes to music in general and to Greek musical models in particular, since, as M. says, ‘we might more accurately speak of a plurality of Greek and Roman musical idioms, which reflected the conflicting attitudes and priorities of different individuals, both in Rome itself and throughout the Mediterranean world’ (82). While some of M.’s claims remain arguable (e.g. on 161, where the Platonic ban on the panharmonic aulos should be more correctly explained in virtue of its capacity to modulate — and hence to ‘imitate’ both virtues and vices — and not of its association with Dionysus), there is no doubt that this beautifully written book is essential reading for anyone interested not only in music but also in the social and political history of ancient Rome.

*Università di Pavia*

[eleonora.rocconi@unipv.it](mailto:eleonora.rocconi@unipv.it)

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ELEONORA ROCCONI

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