

Arystoksenos z Tarentu, *Harmonika*, przekład, wstęp i komentarz Anna MACIEJEWSKA [Aristoxenus of Tarent, *Harmonics*, Translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Anna MACIEJEWSKA], Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015, L + 61 pp., ISBN 978-83-7969-920-9.

Given the scarcity of publications on ancient Greek music in Polish¹, a translation of the most significant treatise on Greek harmonic theory by one of the few experts in this discipline affords the Polish readership a rare treat. In order to illustrate the importance of Aristoxenus' *Harmonics* and its unparalleled impact on ancient musical thought, a brief introduction to the work is, perhaps, called for.

Music, unlike other arts, especially the visual ones, defies all attempts at description and codification through easily obtainable means; nonetheless, the fifth and fourth centuries BCE saw an increasing interest in elucidating some of the puzzling phenomena provided by this elusive art form. One of the two most prominent approaches, for the sake of convenience often designated the Pythagorean school, sought to represent music in terms of numerical ratios, as part of the larger scheme of an organised and harmonious universe. Its theorists rarely adopted music as their principal object of enquiry; rather, they discerned celestial order in perfect consonances obtained by applying mathematical formulae to the division of a string, and strove to describe the realm of sounds by these minutely calculated, albeit unrealistic measurements. On the other hand, Aristoxenus chose to rely on the judgement of the ear. His approach revolutionised the discipline and left such a lasting mark on harmonic science that, apart from Ptolemy, no further original contribution was put forward in the field for the rest of antiquity. It should be noted, however, that Aristoxenus did not invent empirical harmonics himself, as it had apparently been fostered beforehand by the much criticised *harmonikoi*, whose work left no traces in the preserved sources. Nevertheless, Aristoxenus' theories were expressed in such a powerful and influential fashion that his successors hardly dared question his authority. At this point I will halt my brief outline of Greek endeavours to force melodious sounds into orderly patterns, and will refer readers to Anna MACIEJEWSKA's [= M.] work.

M. performs a twofold task: parallel to employing her translation skills, the author displays her outstanding proficiency in Greek harmonics in the first half of the book, which encompasses an ample introduction aimed at acquainting readers with the elementary ideas underpinning ancient harmonic science. This certainly works to the advantage of the book, especially in view of the generally limited number of scholars seasoned in ancient music. In the first part of the introduction M. discusses the presence of music in ancient Greece, the sources of our knowledge on the musical sciences, and the prevalent acoustic theories. The first chapter, comprising a brief characterisation of Greek musical culture, begins with valuable remarks on the problems encountered by ancient (as well as, to a certain degree, modern) scholarship in defining and describing music. At the very outset of her consideration, the author observes that a musical piece in fact exists only during its performance, and, unless recorded, escapes exact codification. What is more, the bulk of the technical terms coined to describe it is incomprehensible to a lay audience. Since effective recording techniques date back to the beginning of the 20th century, the musical output of preceding eras is irretrievably lost. Notation proves to be of some help in its reconstruction. Yet

¹ Polish readers may acquaint themselves with ancient Greek music thanks to translations of the books by M.L. WEST (*Ancient Greek Music*) and J. LANDELS (*Music in Ancient Greece and Rome*). From among ancient musical treatises, two have been translated into Polish, namely *De Musica* ascribed to Plutarch and a short work of the same title by Philodemus.

pieces of ancient musical notation have come down to us in such scarcity and fragmentation that, despite having the tools, we lack the material on which they could be used. The author holds this lack responsible, and rightly so, for the general tendency of classical studies to envisage antiquity without music. She then goes on to contrast this conviction with the actual significance of music's presence in Greek culture. Two subsequent chapters, "The Sources of Evidence" and "The Two Approaches in Ancient Greek Study of Music"², summarise Greek musical writing and briefly introduce the main paths of Greek musical thought. In the longest chapter in this part, M. elucidates Greek scalar systems alongside their key terminology, encompassing *genos*, *pyknon*, *diesis*, *eidos*, *harmoniai*, *tonos*, and *metabole*. In order to help her readers visualise the harmonic structures she is evoking, M. provides her own schematic drawings of tetrachords, the "unmodulating" system, octave species and modulations to a contiguous *tonos*. M.'s illustrations also feature in other parts of the introduction, as well as in the text of the treatise, constituting an invaluable point of reference. In the final chapter of this part, the author focuses on the psychagogic influence of music and the so-called ethos theory, a popular idea frequently referred to in literary texts, although largely disregarded by Aristoxenus, and commonly refuted by other "serious" theorists.

The following part is entirely devoted to Aristoxenus' biography and to an overview of his scientific output. Unfortunately, very little information on both survives, most of which is compiled in the sole attempt at a biography of the philosopher undertaken by VISCONTI³.

In the third part of the introduction, M. examines the subject matter and scope of the *Harmonics*, beginning with the manuscript tradition in which the treatise was handed down to us. She then proceeds to present the structure and content of the work (chapters "The Parallel Composition of Books I and II", "The 'Thesis and Proof' Composition of Book III"). There has been much scholarly debate regarding the interdependence of Books I and II, which include a considerable amount of overlapping material. M. brings out these analogies by juxtaposing the content of the two books in a chart. In the subsequent chapter, "The Discussion on the Original Arrangement of the Text", the author evokes well-established arguments for and against the unity of the treatise, and takes her own stand in accordance with LALOY, BARKER and GIBSON, who consider book I the first edition of the work, which was later revised and elaborated into books II and III. The next chapter presents the *Harmonica* as a series of lectures deriving from the Aristotelean tradition, assembled into a handbook addressed to readers with a certain degree of experience in harmonic matters. Subsequently, M. specifies the subject and purpose of the treatise. Her remarks on the modern significance of the term harmony (a diastematic, simultaneous concurrence of pitches), as opposed to the Greek counterpart of the term which is understood as the concordant horizontal arrangement of tones in a melody, draw attention to the problem that often perplexes musicologists acquainted only with modern harmonic theory. Although polyphony, heterophony and other forms of harmony were widely employed in antiquity, they left no traces in musical treatises and extant fragments of notation. Greek harmonic science deals with the "harmonious" structure of melody, which, in a nutshell, denotes the admissible succession of tones deployed in accordance with a set of rules. With reference to this definition, M. observes that in his work Aristoxenus proposed delineating the nature of melody by means of rules which ensured that certain combinations of tones sound harmonious and consonant to our ears. The following chapter ("The Scientific and Aristotelean Character of the *Harmonics*"), highlights traits of Aristotelean methodology in the treatise and states the main principles of Aristoxenus' programme, naming aural perception as the ultimate criterion for determining the aesthetic quality of a melody. M. then turns to one of the most intriguing harmonic concepts, the *dynamis*. Brought up within the virtually omnipresent major-minor system, we often tend to take functional harmony for granted. Indeed, it appears that

² I am citing the titles of the chapters after the English version of the table of contents provided by the author.

³ A. VISCONTI, *Aristosseno di Taranto. Biografia e formazione spirituale*, Napoli 1999.

tone-functions dependent on scalar context rather than pitch were known long before the development of our tonal music. Similarly to our functional system, Greek *tonoi* also made use of a tonal centre (*mese*) and other functions related to each scale step. However, as M. points out, according to Aristoxenus the notion of functionality referred not only to the position of a tone in a scale, but it also defined an interval, based on its place between scale steps more often than on its actual size. The distance *mese-lichanos*, for instance, was perceived as an interval function in its own right, although in each *genos* it was in fact filled in with an interval of a different magnitude. In the next chapter, M. analyses two concepts that formed the foundations of Aristoxenus' project: melody perceived as a natural phenomenon, and congruence between harmonic precepts and musical practice. M. advises the exertion of due caution with regard to the former point. Confined to a single musical style, Aristoxenus could not have predicted that melody was actually a product of culture or, at best, coincidence.

Despite his innovative approach, Aristoxenus was indebted to his predecessors at least for the groundwork of his studies, a fact which he admitted reluctantly. M. gives an account of his debt and his zealous critique of co-existing musical conceptions in the chapters "Dispute against the Predecessors: The Pythagoreans and the *Harmonikoi*" and "The Eristic Manipulation of Aristoxenus". The last chapter of the introduction enumerates modern editions and translations of the *Harmonics*.

M.'s work benefits greatly from its didactic character. An instructive introduction, illustrations, explanatory footnotes accompanying the translation, and a glossary of Greek harmonic terminology are aimed at ushering in as smoothly as possible all those who are unfamiliar with Greek music theory. It should be kept in mind that the task is challenging indeed. Greek harmonic precepts not only significantly differ from our contemporary systems, but, with ancient music almost lost, they pose many puzzles. Being a skilled translator well-versed in the arcane harmonic science, M. steers clear of the potential traps with exemplary ease. Moreover, her keen rendition of Aristoxenus' caustic style, especially his stinging remarks against the *harmonikoi*, encourages a vivid portrayal of the philosopher's character. In doing so, M. clearly diverges from the usual course taken by other translators, who envisage Aristoxenus' disquisition in much more elevated terms. The language of the translation is clear and informative throughout, employing easily-graspable phrases to elucidate even the most obscure technical details⁴. This, as well as other efforts to make the treatise highly accessible, is an obvious virtue of M.'s work. Although no doubt well-acquainted with other translations, the author remains independent, and offers her own, quite compelling vision of Aristoxenus' discourse.

Unlike BARKER, who provides Greek versions of the key terms (such as *systema*, *tonoi*, *phthongos*, etc.)⁵, M. translates even problematic terminology to Polish, which has both advantages and disadvantages; while it ensures painless reading for a less proficient audience, it sends off more inquisitive readers to the Greek original or other translations. Nevertheless, I find M.'s work highly recommended to both musicologists and classicists at all levels of advancement in music theory. M. does not merely perform her duties as a translator; she also goes to great lengths in order to promote ancient music among Polish scholars.

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⁴ Naturally, explication of some conundra (for instance, Aristoxenus' remarks on musical notation, [*Harm.* 49 DA RIOS]), which baffle the most eminent scholars of the field, goes far beyond the scope of translator's duties, cf. pp. 24 f., n. 75.

⁵ A. BARKER, *Greek Musical Writings*, vol. II: *Harmonic and Acoustic Theory*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 126 ff.