

THE ANCIENT ROMAN LYRE



MICHAEL LEVY

This album is the third in a series, the sequel to *Echoes of Ancient Rome* and *Ode to Ancient Rome*. Like the first two albums in the series, *The Ancient Roman Lyre* features original compositions evoking the lost music of ancient Rome. Most fittingly, they are arranged for a modern evocation of ancient lyres dating from the Hellenistic period and are set to authentic ancient modes.

We have precious little indeed of the music of ancient Greece, which was ancient Rome's teacher in so many things. Of the sixty-one sets of manuscripts, fragments and inscriptions listed by Martin L. West in his *Documents of Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford, 2001), numbers 23-61 in his list date from the Roman period but are classified and studied as *Greek* music. Of specifically *Roman* written music beyond these, vocal or instrumental, we have nothing.

This distinction between Greek and Roman music for the Roman time period may be artificial but it does have precedent. Years ago I heard the merest fragment of a musical-verbal phrase ascribed to a composer named [Flaccus](#), a phrase featured in the play [Hecyra](#) by [Terence](#):

[TERENCIO, HECYRA 861 \(Terence\). Versus 861. Hecyra of Terence. Codex Victorianus Laurentianus XXXVIII-24, saec. X](#)

This piece may be heard on track 19 of the recording [Musique de la Grece Antique](#) by Atrium Musicae de Madrid (Harmonia Mundi France). The liner notes of the original LP version (all but entirely missing in the CD version but thankfully available as a reprint booklet from [John Wheeler](#)) have this to say about the fragment:

We have added the only surviving musical fragment of Imperial Rome: four mutilated measures from a work by Terence. It is as if nothing were left of the Acropolis but a few scattered bits of columns and a pair of ruined capitals.

Even this tiny fragment is [no longer deemed to be authentic, according to the musicologist, Thomas J. Mathiesen](#)). West is at least as pointed:

*Not surprisingly, [the near-total lack of material to study until the 19th century] gave rise to imaginative reconstructions of ancient music at quite an early date. We can only mention in passing the numerous manuscripts of Virgil and Horace embellished with medieval neumes. In a tenth-century manuscript of Terence a verse of the **Hecyra** has note symbols added that*

*have been claimed as Greek notation. A parallel case occurs in a fifteenth-century Aristophanes manuscript, where a scholiast's hand has added note symbols to three lines of the **Clouds**. In 1650 the learned Jesuit Athanasius Kircher furnished his *Musurgia Universalis* with two 'specimina musicae antiquae'. And in 1724 Benedetto Marcello printed the thirteenth Homeric Hymn with Greek notation (op. cit, p. 5).*

Musique de la Grece antique includes all these works, even as the singer-musicians acknowledge the apocryphal or at best dubious character of them.

THE ANCIENT MUSICAL MODES USED IN THIS ALBUM

But there can be little doubt that ancient Roman composers used [the ancient Greek musical modes](#). Due to the well-known and predominant influence of Greek culture across the board in the Roman world, I decided to base my evocative compositions in several of these modes.

The names in use today (Dorian, Mixolydian, etc.) for the seven diatonic musical modes are the very names used for the original, basic Greek musical modes as founded in their "diatonic genii". These names, however, changed in meaning during the Middle Ages. Thanks to a misinterpretation of the Latin texts of [Boethius](#), the medieval modes were given the wrong Greek names!

Apparently the Greeks counted intervals in a scale from top to bottom. When medieval ecclesiastical scholars tried to interpret the ancient texts, they counted from bottom to top, and so jumbled the information they received about the Greek modes. The medieval modes, so misnamed, are distinguished from their ancient Greek counterparts by being labelled "Church modes". (Articles such as [this one on the phrase "Mixolydian mode"](#) explain much about how and why the meanings of the mode names changed over time.)

According to an article on Greece in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the original ancient Greek names for the "octave species" included the following (as corresponding to the names of the white keys on the piano):

B-B: Mixolydian

E-E: Dorian

A-A: Hypodorian

D-D: Phrygian

G-G: Hypophrygian

C-C: Lydian

F-F: Hypolydian

For what Plato and Aristotle had this to say about these ancient musical modes, please see [this fascinating link](#).

THE TUNING OF ANTIQUITY

In antiquity, stringed instruments were tuned either *cyclically* (by using perfect fifths and fourths as an intervallic foundation) or else *divisively* (by using exact mathematical ratios to divide a musical string into specific pitch ratios). The former, “cyclical” tuning is called [Pythagorean tuning](#) as Pythagoras of Greece favoured it. The latter, “divisive” tuning in its most basic form is called *just tuning* or [just intonation](#). (Cf. “Scientific or Just Scale” in *The Handbook of Chemistry and Physics* for the ratios used in this most basic form of just intonation.)

Cyclical tuning was natural to harps and lyres and was commonly used. Divisive tuning was natural to lutes, especially fretted lutes. Moreover it was possible to “rough-tune” a harp or lyre in cyclical tuning and then use another set of intervals to “fine-tune” the instrument to divisive tuning by “pleasing the thirds and sixths”—or so one interpretation of certain tuning tablets found in ancient Mesopotamia would have us believe! So a harp or lyre could play in just intonation right along with a lute or other “just-tuned” instrument (such as a flute).

The modern tuning system of equal temperament was devised to enable music to be performed in any of the 12 keys of the chromatic scale whilst keeping exactly the same equal ratio of pitch between each of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale. The advantage granted is the great enrichment of harmony, to a degree unmatched outside of Western music. The disadvantage granted, sadly, is the sacrifice of the essential purity of tone found in the ancient just intonation and it alone.

Although described in the writings of Pythagoras in his experiments at dividing a musical monochord, the divisive tuning system (as much as the cyclical tuning system!) predates Pythagoras by thousands of years. Both tuning styles were known in ancient Mesopotamia, each most naturally suited to different

instruments. [John Wheeler](#), the editor of the English edition of [Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura's](#) book [The Music of the Bible Revealed](#), remarks:

The long-necked lute (according to Curt Sachs in his book [The Rise of Music in the Ancient World: East and West](#)) arose first in Mesopotamia and divisive tuning gained the ascendancy there thanks to this. At the time he wrote (page 77) he could say that “the divisive principle [gained the ascendancy] in Babylonia, earliest home of the fretted long lute.” In fact we have abundant illustrations from Sumerian times of long-necked lutes and Sachs discusses other and (he inferred) earlier means of tuning useable on lutes, such as a form of equipartition into twelve parts (pages 73-75). But this was not the most satisfactory solution even on a long-necked lute and so lutanists replaced the arithmetic progression of equipartition with the geometric progression behind divisive tuning (pages 75-76).

Cyclical tuning was also known in ancient Mesopotamia, of course, and this was confirmed long after Sachs' death by the famous theory and hymn tablets from Babylonia and Ugarit. Yet there remains this curious fact: the Babylonians used divisive tuning as the basis for their symbolic correlation of the pillar degrees of the octave with the four seasons (C'-G-F-C for summer, winter, autumn and spring). By contrast, the Chinese used cyclical tuning as the basis for the symbolic correlation of the same (G-F-D-C for winter, autumn, summer and spring). This (Sachs, p. 77) shows the same philosophical idea was connected with two tuning principles, the cyclical principle in China, the divisive tuning in Babylonia. Divisive tuning is the most "natural" tuning of the ancient lute, as cyclical tuning is the most "natural" tuning of the ancient harp and lyre. China was “the typical country of the cycle of fourths and fifths”, while Babylonia was “the earliest home of the fretted long lute”—at least as known to his time, leaving aside the Sumerian long lutes (ibid.).

I have used divisive tuning throughout this album in my attempt to recreate the purity of the just intonation used in antiquity—which, like the music of ancient Rome, has now sadly been forgotten...

ANCIENT LYRE PLAYING TECHNIQUES

All the various lyre-playing techniques heard in this album are authentically based on lyre-playing styles which have remarkably survived from antiquity and which still may be heard today in the amazing lyres still played throughout the continent of Africa. There, unlike in the Western world, precious remnants of the cross-cultural influences in the ancient world have survived.

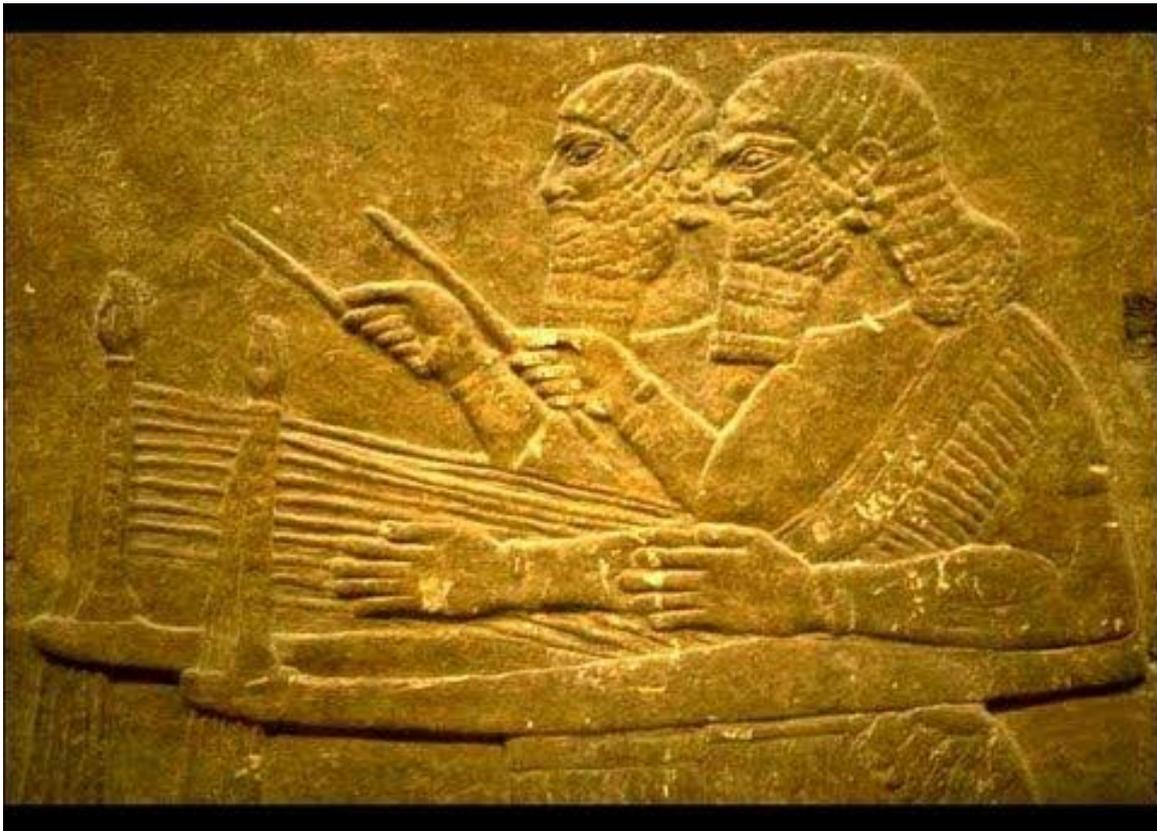
Some of the lyre-playing techniques extant in Africa include the “block and strum” method, still practised today by the [krar](#) lyre players of Eritrea in East Africa. This technique allows the player to strum rhythm and basic chords on the lyre, similar to what one may do on an acoustic guitar. The method entails blocking strings with the left hand which are not required and leaving open only the strings which form the required intervals, which then may be strummed with a plectrum in the left hand.



Ancient illustrations of [kithara](#) players imply this technique was also prominent in Ancient Greece. Many illustrations clearly depict the left hand of the lyre

player blocking/dampening the strings whilst the right hand strums the open strings with a plectrum.

Other lyre-playing techniques I use include the use of tremolo (based on the style of Egyptian [simsimiyya](#) players still heard today), alternation between harp-like finger-plucked tones played with the left hand and guitar-like, plectrum-plucked tones with the right hand, and the use of finger-plucked intervals/chords with the left hand to form a basic harmonic background for the melodic line being played by the plectrum in the right hand.



I also explore the rare percussive playing technique, in which the stings of the instrument are hit with small wooden baton (as on a hammer dulcimer) instead of being plucked with either the fingers or a plectrum. This technique is clearly documented in illustrations of *harp* players depicted by [the bas reliefs from the Palace of Nineveh \(c.700 BCE\) preserved in the British Museum](#). But it is also documented as something used by *lyre* players.



About 1000 years later, a related percussive playing technique is documented by illustrations of *kithara* players in the [Paphos Mosaics](#) in Cyprus, all of which were found in the ruins of Roman villas at Paphos. These show the lyre players each holding a small, double-headed wooden baton to strike the lyre strings, rather than plucking the strings either with their fingers or with a plectrum. (The baton looks remarkably like the “[beater](#)” often used by players of the Irish frame drum or [bodhrán](#).)



The technique even shows up in the famous 6th-century AD mosaic in the synagogue of Gaza (the current reconstruction of which is portrayed on the medal shown above), in which the Jewish King David (portrayed in a role like that of the Greek Orpheus) strikes one string of a lyre with his right hand using a baton while pinching the string being struck with the thumb and index finger of his left hand.

Here I come full circle as a musician, composer and “DIY musicologist”. I began playing modern evocations of ancient lyres as a point of contact with the [kinnor](#) and [nevel](#) played by King David and the Levitical Psalmists. In encountering this Hellenistic-style portrayal of King David playing a Hellenistic-style lyre not totally unlike the form of [the modern lyre I play now](#), the past and present come together.

Michael Levy

THE TRACKS

1. *Cogitatio (Reflections)*: This piece uses the introspective ancient Greek Hypodorian mode.
2. *Amatores (Lovers)*: This piece uses the wonderfully dream-like, feminine-sounding ancient Greek Hypolydian mode.
3. *Tranquillitas (Serenity)*: This piece features the ancient Greek Hypophrygian mode. This mode, for me, evokes feelings of inner contentment, serenity and tranquillity.
4. *Contemplationis (Contemplation)*: This piece is composed in the ancient Greek Dorian mode. Intensely introspective as used here, this mode enhances the feeling of concentration in the listener.
5. *Desiderantes (Yearning)*: This composition features the ancient Greek Phrygian mode, which seems to create a sense of beautiful poignancy, longing and yearning.
6. *Tristitia (Sorrow)*: This piece explores the mournful quality inherent in the ancient Greek Hypodorian mode.
7. *Gloria Belli (Glory of Battle)*: This piece explores the war-like quality of the ancient Greek Dorian mode, which is most evident when played in a vigorous piece such as this.

This quality is not the only one possible for the Dorian mode to express, of course. The same mode, when played slowly and softly, aptly suits the mood of *Contemplationis (Contemplation)*. Yet [according to Plato and Aristotle, the ancient Greek Dorian mode was also the most "manly" of all the musical modes](#). These ancient Greek philosophers even suggested it could inspire bravery in battle!