

AN ANCIENT LYRE

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Echoes of the Ancient World

MICHAEL LEVY

The concept of this unique album is a meditative "Musical Adventures in Time Travel"! On this Voyage, I will take you back to the entrancing sounds of ancient Egypt, examples of some of the actual surviving musical fragments of ancient Greece, and indeed, to the oldest fragment of written melody so far ever discovered, in my arrangement for solo lyre, of the 3400 year old ["Hurrian Hymn"](#) from Mesopotamia!

The lyre I play is a replica of the 10- string Lyre of the Ancient Hebrews (known in Hebrew as the ["Kinnor"](#) כנור). This incredible lyre also features in my earlier albums, ["King David's Lyre; Echoes of Ancient Israel"](#) and ["Lyre of the Levites"](#).

My evocation of the 3000 year old Kinnor Lyre of the Ancient Hebrews, is almost tonally identical to the wooden lyres played throughout the Ancient World - for example, the type of lyre played 3000 years ago in the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt (as seen on the see album cover) and the ancient Greek [Kithara](#) Lyre. Therefore, I came up with the inspiration of this concept heard here, of creating an album featuring music from all these amazing Ancient Civilizations...

THE MUSIC

1) "**An Ancient Lyre**" - my meditative prelude to the album, consisting of a spontaneous improvisation on a mesmerizing, hypnotic, dreamy ancient Middle Eastern ["Hijaz" scale](#)...

2) "**Hurrian Hymn no.6**" - My performance of the 3400 year old "Hurrian Hymn" heard here recently featured in the Internationally renowned pages of ["The Biblical Archaeological Review"](#)

The 3400 year old ["Hurrian Hymn"](#) (Text H6) which was discovered in Ugarit in Syria in the early 1950s, and was preserved for 3400 years on a clay tablet, written in the Cuneiform text of the ancient Hurrian language - it is *the* oldest written song yet known, in History!

Although 29 musical texts were discovered at Ugarit, only this text, (text H6), was in a sufficient state of preservation to allow for modern academic musical reconstruction.

In short, the Cuneiform text clearly indicated specific names for lyre strings, and their respective musical intervals – a sort of "Guitar tablature", for lyre!

Although discovered in modern day Syria, the [Hurrians](#) were not Syrian – they came from modern day Anatolia. The Hurrian Hymn actually dates to the very end of the Hurrian civilisation (c.1400BCE) .The Hurrian civilization dates back to at least 3000 BCE. It is an incredible thought, that just maybe, the musical texts found at Ugarit, preserved precious sacred Hurrian music which may have already been thousands of years old, prior to their inscription for posterity, on the clay tablets found at Ugarit!

The replica of the ancient [Kinnor](#) Lyre from neighbouring Israel, on which I am performing the piece, is almost tonally identical to the wooden asymmetric-shaped lyres played throughout the Middle East at this amazingly distant time...when the Pharaoh's still ruled ancient Egypt.

A photograph of the actual clay tablet on which the Hurrian Hymn was inscribed, can be seen here:



The melody is an interpretation by Richard Dumbrill, from the ambiguous Cuneiform text of the Hurrian language in which it was written. Although many of the meanings of the Hurrian language are now lost in the mists of time, it can be established that the fragmentary Hurrian Hymn which has been found on these precious clay tablets are dedicated to [Nikkal](#); the wife of the moon god.

There are several such interpretations of this melody, but to me, the fabulous interpretation by [Richard Dumbrill](#) just somehow sounds the most "authentic".

Below is a link to the sheet music, as interpreted by Richard Dumbrill and arranged by Clint Goss, and also to Richard Dumbrill's own website:

<http://www.flutekey.com/pdf/HurrianTabLtd.pdf>

<http://hometown.aol.com/ricdum/mane.htm#Music>

In my arrangement of the Hurrian Hymn, I have attempted to illustrate an interesting diversity of ancient lyre playing techniques, ranging from the use of "block and strum" improvisation at the end, glissando's, trills & tremolos, and alternating between harp-like tones in the left hand produced by finger-plucked strings, and guitar-like tones in the right hand, produced by use of the plectrum.

I have arranged the melody in the style of a "Theme and Variations" - I first quote the unadorned melody in the first section, followed by the different lyre techniques described above in the repeat, & also featuring improvisatory passages at the end of the performance.

My arrangement of the melody is much slower than the actual arrangement by Richard Dumbrill - I wanted the improvisations in the variations on the theme to stand out, and to better illustrate the use of lyre techniques by a more rubato approach to the melody...

3) "Echoes of Ancient Egypt" - this improvisation on the lyre, uses a genuine pentatonic ancient Egyptian scale...last heard, some 3000 years ago! Although tragically no actual written music from ancient Egypt has survived, we do know from many ancient illustrations, that the ancient Egyptians did use a form of musical notation, whereby specific gestures of the hand represented specific changes in pitch in a given musical scale - this is ancient form of musical notation is known as "[Chironomy](#)". We also know some of the specific scales once used in ancient Egypt, thanks to the discovery of several ancient Egyptian flutes, still in playable condition! The ancient lost art of Chironomy, and details of this haunting, ancient Egyptian scale are discussed at length in this fascinating article:

<http://www.rakkav.com/biblemusic/pages/chironomy.htm>

The minor pentatonic scale I am using in this improvisation was deciphered from ancient chironomy gestures by the late [Professor Hans Hickmann](#), of the Museum in Cairo.

This improvisation is therefore my attempt to evoke the sounds of the Lyres heard in the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt, over 3000 years ago...

Tracks 4 - 8 of the album continue my attempt to evoke the sounds of ancient Egypt, in my arrangements for solo lyre, of a selection of my favourite traditional Egyptian folk songs from Port Said, where the [Simsimyya](#) Lyre is still played today by the local musicians - a lyre which has its origins stretching back almost 4000 years ago, to the Middle Kingdom of Ancient Egypt...



4) **"My Heart Was Burnt by Love"** - a traditional Egyptian folk song

5) **"Salah"** - a traditional Egyptian folk song

6) **"Baghanni" (I Sing)** - a wonderful traditional Egyptian folk song from Port Said.

7) **"Sar A Lay"** - a traditional Egyptian folk song from Port Said.

8) **"I Saw The Moon"** - a wonderful traditional Egyptian folk song from Port Said.

9) **"The First Delphic Hymn to Apollo"** - This substantial fragment of ancient Greek music was discovered inscribed on a slab of marble in May 1893, in the

ruins of the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi. The Hymn is now preserved in the Museum of Delphi: *Delphi Inv. No. 517, 494, 499*.

There are two Delphic Hymns that have been discovered, and they were dedicated to the god Apollo. The two Delphic Hymns have sadly not survived in their complete form. However, they do survive in substantial fragments...giving just a tantalizing taste of the glory of the tragically lost, magnificent musical culture of ancient Greece.

The two Delphic Hymns were traditionally dated c.138 BC (the year of the [Pythian Games](#), dedicated to the god Apollo) and 128 BC (The year of the [Pythian Festival](#), dedicated to the god Apollo). However, more recent musicological research may indicate that both Hymns were actually written in 128 BCE, the year of the Pythian Festival:

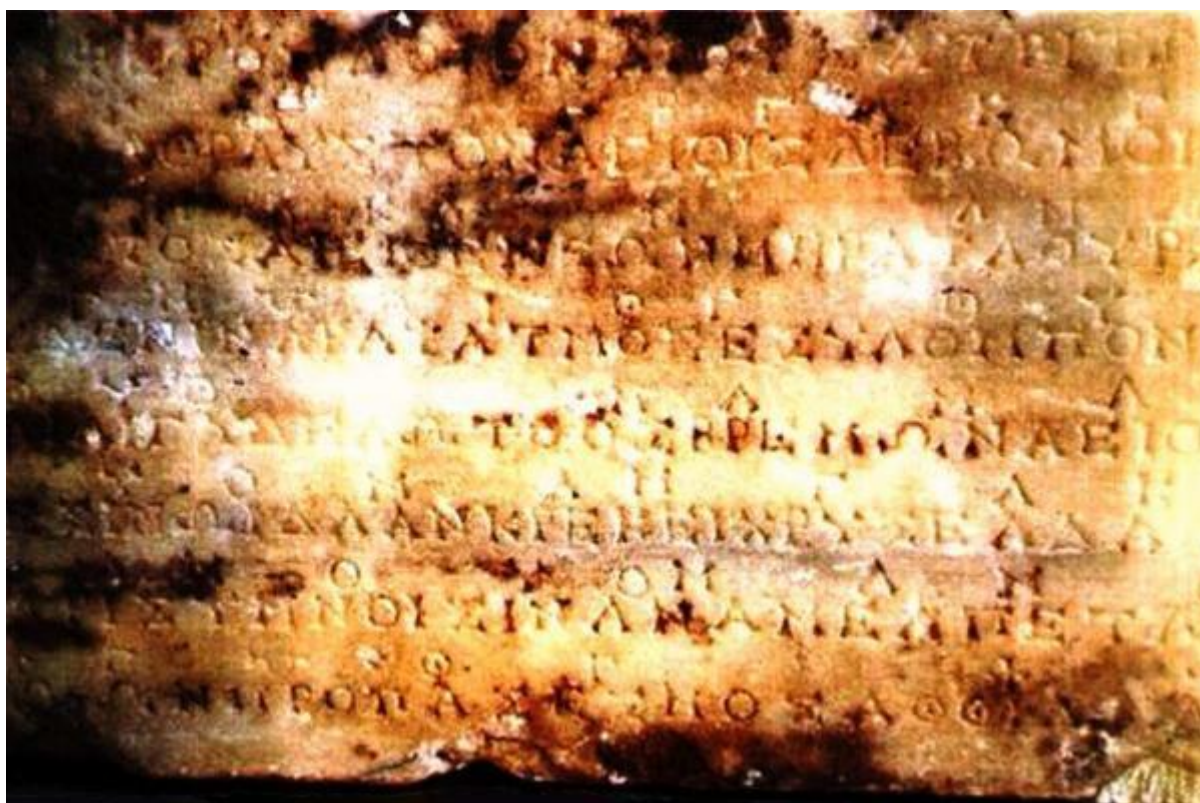
"They were long regarded as being dated circa 138 BCE and 128 BCE, respectively, but recent scholarship has shown it likely they were both written for performance at the Athenian Pythaidēs in 128 BCE (Pöhlmann and West 2001, 71–72). If indeed it dates from ten years before the second, the First Delphic Hymn is the earliest unambiguous surviving example of notated music from anywhere in the western world whose composer is known by name."

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delphic_Hymns

According to this more recent scholarship, the composer's name of the First Delphic Hymn was "Athénaios Athenaíou" (Athenios son of Athenios)

The First Delphic Hymn is written in the unambiguous alphabetical musical notation system used in ancient Greece, whereby alphabetical notation describing the pitch of the melody, is written above the text of the song. The rhythm can easily be inferred from the syllables of the text.

This ancient Greek musical notation can be clearly seen in the image below, of the actual First Delphic Hymn, as it was found, inscribed in marble:



http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Delphic_Hymns

I have based my arrangement for solo replica Kithara-style lyre, on the first half of the fragment, which is based around the ancient Greek Hypolydian Mode.

The second half of the Hymn is highly chromatic, (the piece was written for vocal performance) and not really suitable for performance on solo enharmonically tuned lyre with limited number of strings.

In order to play chromatic accidentals on a lyre, it is necessary to stop the string with the left hand to shorten it's length to achieve the required pitch - this technique can be heard towards the end of the melody, where one of the notes of the melody is required to be lowered a semitone.

The translation of the fragment of text which has survived of the First Delphic Hymn to Apollo is as follows:

*"Hear me, you who possess deep-wooded Helicon,
fair-armed daughters of Zeus the magnificent!
Fly to beguile with your accents your brother,
golden-tressed Phoebus who, on the twin peak of this rock of Parnassus,
escorted by illustrious maidens of Delphi,
sets out for the limpid streams of Castalia, traversing,
on the Delphic promontory, the prophetic pinnacle.
Behold glorious Attica, nation of the great city which,
thanks to the prayers of the Tritonid warrior,
occupies a hillside sheltered from all harm.
On the holy alters Hephaestos consumes the thighs of young bullocks,
mingled with the flames, the Arabian vapor rises towards Olympos.
The shrill rustling lotus murmurs its swelling song, and the golden kithara,
the sweet-sounding kithara, answers the voice of men.
And all the host of poets, dwellers in Attica, sing your glory, God,
famed for playing the kithara, son of great Zeus,
beside this snow-crowned peak, oh you who reveal to all mortals
the eternal and infallible oracles.
They sing how you conquered the prophetic tripod
guarded by a fierce dragon when, with your darts
you pierced the gaudy, tortuously coiling monster,
so that, uttering many fearful hisses, the beast expired.
They sing too,"*

10) "Hymn to the Muse" - a hauntingly beautiful surviving fragment of the mostly lost music of ancient Greece. This piece was written almost 2000 years ago, by Mesomedes of Crete...

Mesomedes of Crete was a Greek lyric poet and composer of the early 2nd century AD. More information can be found at:

<http://www.mlahanas.de/Greeks/Bios/Mesomedes.html>

It is written in the ancient Greek "Dorian" mode; E-E on the white note of the piano - not to be confused with the medieval "Dorian" mode, which was D-D! Due to a misinterpretation of the Latin texts of Boethius, medieval modes were given the wrong Greek names! For the correct names of the *original* ancient Greek modes, see:

<http://www.midicode.com/tunings/greek.shtml>

<http://www.harmonics.com/lucy/lsc/corrections.html>

For what Plato & Aristotle say about these ancient musical modes, please see this fascinating link:

<http://www.pathguy.com/modes.htm>

The most challenging aspect of playing this piece, is attempting to play the many accidentals required by the melody - on a *diatonically* tuned lyre...*without* the aid of any sharpening pedals, which are to be found on almost all modern harps!

According to the musicologist [Curt Sachs](#), the ancient Greeks managed to get around this by a technique I have been working on, called "*finger-stopping*" - an accidental can be played, by increasing the pitch of a lyre string by a semitone; this is achieved by pressing the string (about a centimetre in from the tuning peg), with a finger of the left hand which shortens its vibrating length, and therefore increases the pitch of the note the string produces.

The translation of the words to this ancient Greek song are as follows:

'Sing for me, dear Muse, begin my tuneful strain; a breeze blow from your groves to stir my listless brain...Skillful Calliope, leader of the delightful Muses,

*and you, skillful priest of our rites, son of Leto, Paeon of Delos, be at my side'.
(translation by J. G. Landels).*

11) Ancient Greek Fragment - This simply mesmerizing fragment of ancient Greek music, is catalogued simply as "ANONYMI BELLERMANN 97. It was preserved in an ancient Byzantine manuscript:

Conspectus codicum:

V. Venetus Marcianus appl. cl. VI, saec. XIII-XIV

N. Neapolitanus graecus III. C4, saec. XV

F. Florentius Ricc. 41, saec. XVI

I first heard this amazing piece performed on the album "*Musique de la Grece Antique*" (Atrium Musicae de Madrid, 1979)

12) "Song of Seikilos" - the final track on my album, is unique in musical history, as it is the only piece of music from antiquity in the entire Western world, that has so far been found, which has survived in its *complete* form, and unlike much earlier surviving fragments of melodies that have been found, this song is written in a totally unambiguous alphabetical musical notation, which can be played, note for note, as it was written...about 2000 years ago:

<http://www.amarantypublishing.com/SongOfSeikilos.htm>

This song was discovered in 1883 in Aydin, Turkey, inscribed on an ancient Greek burial stele and is dated between 200 BC and 100 AD:



This melody is an amazing musical legacy from ancient Greece; a precious remnant of a long-forgotten musical culture now forever lost in the mists of time. It is written in the ancient Greek "Hypophrygian" mode; the equivalent intervals as heard in a scale of G-G played on the white notes of the piano. (This mode confusingly has exactly the same intervals as heard in the *medieval* "Mixolydian" mode -the *original* ancient Greek "Mixolydian" mode, was, in fact, B-B!).

In this version, I have tried to utilize *every* conceivable lyre-playing technique I could think of, which may have also been used in Antiquity! This includes experimenting with "string blocking" at the beginning (blocking certain notes to form chords with the left hand to enable rhythm to be strummed on the lyre; just as on a guitar!), alternating between finger-plucked and plectrum plucked tones, the use of basic harmony below the melodic line, a touch of improvisation between phrases and plenty of tremolos & glissando's...in order to inject some new life into this beautiful ancient melody...

This is a more lively rendition than some of the "dire dirge-like" renditions of the song I have heard on some older recordings of it - I have recently learnt that "The Song of Sekilos" is, in fact a *drinking song*...what a *great* idea of the ancient Greeks to put a drinking song on a *Tombstone* - I want one to be on *mine!*). The ancient Greek term for a drinking song like this was called a "[*Skolion*](#)".

About 2000 years after it was written, this melody was rediscovered in 1883, in its complete & original form. It was found inscribed in marble on an ancient

Greek burial stele, bearing the following epitaph: "I am a portrait in stone. I was put here by Seikilos, where I remain forever, the symbol of timeless remembrance".

The timeless words of the song are:

*"Hoson zes, phainou
Meden holos su lupou;
Pros oligon esti to zen
To telos ho chronos apaitei"*

Translation –

*"While you live, shine
Don't suffer anything at all;
Life exists only a short while
And time demands its toll"*