



Music in the Bible

By Theodore W. Burgh

Music is an essential element of ancient and modern cultures. It often shapes chronological periods, as did the Motown recordings of the 1960's and 70's, and marks what we grieve and celebrate. While many of the uses of music in the ancient Near East are similar to those of today, the sound and experience of music in ancient times was different. It is hard for us to imagine not being able to pull music from the air and download it upon request. In antiquity, people only heard music in live musical performances. Nothing was recorded, sampled, mixed, or mass-marketed.

Although we don't know how ancient music sounded, judging from the ways it was used we do know that music was important then as it is now. By studying the ancient remains of instruments, descriptions of musical activity in texts like the Bible, and artistic representations, we gain valuable information about these enigmatic past societies and peoples—from aspects of relationships between men and women, the types of instruments used in sacred and secular performances, and occasions when music was performed.

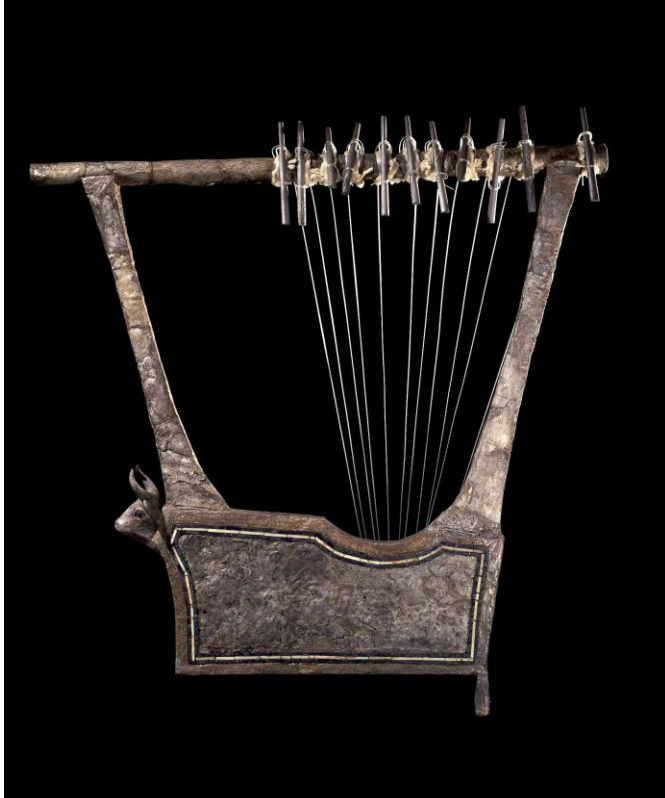
A glance at several biblical stories reveals the importance of music in the daily life of antiquity. For instance, writers describe how people used music to express an array of emotions, convey valuable information, and entertain. Moreover, there are numerous ceremonies and celebrations in the Bible where musical performance was a major part. Several passages contain descriptions of actual instruments, names of musicians, as well as places and times music was played. Pictures found on the remains of walls, stamp and cylinder seals, and pottery sherds also show different types of musical activity. All of these data show that music was an ubiquitous component of nearly every aspect of Near Eastern culture, particularly in ancient Israel. Following is a brief discussion of some of the primary musical instruments and their uses in the worlds of the Old and New Testaments.

Chordophones

Chordophones are stringed instruments and the most well known in antiquity. Modern examples of chordophones include the guitar and violin. With chordophones, strings, often but not always, stretch across the sound box of the instrument and attach to pegs or bar for tuning and a bridge or bar at the bottom of the instrument. The sound box is an opening or hole in the body, much like the one found on an acoustic guitar, which helps to amplify the sound. The pegs can be tightened or loosened to tune the string.

Performers typically used a plectrum (sometimes referred to as a pick) or their fingers to pluck, strum, or strike the strings. Lyres and harps were the most popular chordophones in the biblical world. Writers mention the use of these types of chordophones in events such as people leaving on journeys (Gen. 31:27), the performance of music in the Temple (I Chron. 25:3), to induce, initiate or enhance prophetic activity (I Sam. 10:5), and to soothe ailments (I Sam. 16:23). Although lyres and harps are chordophones, they have some important fundamental differences in their shape. For instance, lyres varied in size

and aesthetic design, but all have parallel arms with a rod across the top, which gives them the general shape of a “U.” Strings attach to pegs on the rod and extend and connect to the bottom of the sound box.



Silver Lyre From Ur, southern Iraq, about 2600-2400 BC
Courtesy of the British Museum (www.britishmuseum.org)

There has been some misunderstanding of the Hebrew words for harp and lyre, and as a result, some translations are incorrect. The Hebrew word *kinnor* means lyre; the word *nevel* means harp. Thus, contrary to many biblical translations, David played a (*kinnor*) lyre, not a harp. Harps however, have an angular shape, very much like the “<” sign. The strings connect to the arms. They are shortest at the point of the “<” and become longer as it opens. Often there is no soundbox. Pegs are usually on the top of the instrument, and like the lyre, they can be loosened and tightened for tuning. While harps and lyres have distinguishing characteristics, the biblical writers describe musicians who played these chordophones together and along with other instruments (1 Chron. 13:8). New Testament writers use the lyre and harp as similes (1 Cor. 14:7) and in the description of the instruments held by the four creatures and twenty-four elders in the book of Revelation (5:8).

Aerophones



Ram's horn shofar

Courtesy of creative commons

Aerophones are wind instruments. The player blows air through or across an opening to produce sound. Modern examples include the flute, clarinet, and trumpet. One of the most popular aerophones from the Bible, particularly from the Old Testament and ancient Israelite culture, is the *shofar*. The *shofar* is unique in that it functioned as a signaler (calling people together, preparing people for war), as well as a musical instrument (Zeph. 1:16). The *shofar* was typically made from an animal's horn, such as a ram's horn. The biblical writers describe the use of this instrument in the famous battle of Jericho (Jos. 6:5).

Like the *shofar*, trumpets were also aerophones that were used for gathering people together and to give instructions. The trumpet differs from the *shofar* in that it is made of metal instead of an animal's horn. In Numbers 10:2 Moses receives instructions regarding the specific construction of trumpets made of silver and their function. New Testament writings also show the trumpet as an instrument that sounds just before something happens (e.g., Mk 24:31; I Cor. 15:52; Rev. 8:7). The trumpet is also used to describe the sound of a voice speaking to the writer of Revelation. The instrument seems to hold a special place, as it is associated with a sound coming from God: "the sound of God's trumpet" (1Thess. 4:16).

People also played pipes, which are referred to as flutes or pipes. These aerophones were made from bone, wood, and clay, and were at times part of celebrations. Like other instruments, there are variations in the size and length of the pipes. Some had single holes and were very similar to whistles, while others were longer with several holes, much like a recorder. While the New Testament does not say much about aerophones, flutes and pipes may have been instruments used to play music for funerals and as well as dancing (Matt. 9:23; Matt. 11:17).

Membranophones



Frame Drum

Courtesy of Creative Commons

Membranophones were everywhere in the ancient Near East, and were a staple of Israelite culture. A membranophone is an instrument in which a membrane is stretched across an opening and the surface is struck. The most well known membranophone of the Bible is the *tof* or frame drum. It is some times translated as timbrel or tambourine. The frame drum is very similar to these instruments, however it does not have jingles around its rim. People played this membranophone as a solo instrument (Ex 15:20; Judg. 11:34), and in combination with others (I Sam. 10:5-ff). Miriam leads an ensemble of women as they celebrate with frame drums following the Exodus. Each has a frame drum and they play together. Jephthah's daughter welcomes her father's triumphant return from the battlefield with a solo performance of playing of the drums. The Bible gives these and other examples of women performing music, and artifacts support this description. Numerous figurines dating to the Iron Age (1200-586 BCE, "the biblical period") depict women performing with or holding frame drums. Such finds include portrayals of women with other instruments (lute, lyre), but the frame drum is most prominent. These examples show women possibly involved with music and prophecy (I Sam. 10:5-ff) and celebrating victories in battle (Judges 11:34; I Sam 18:6).

Idiophones

Idiophones are self-sounding instruments, or instruments that make sound within themselves. These include rattles, cymbals, and bells. It appears that rattles were used in celebrations and possibly religious activities, and they may have also been toys for children. Clay was the primary material used to create these idiophones. During certain periods, artisans created rattles in the form of human figures, fruit, and geometric shapes. Cymbals are pairs of discs that were often made from bronze. Those from the biblical world and Israelite culture were not the large cymbals seen today in marching bands and orchestras. They were much smaller, with most averaging below 8 inches in diameter. Performers typically struck the cymbals against each other while holding handles attached to the center of the disc. Cymbals were often part of a larger ensemble of instruments (2 Sam. 6:5). Priests also wore bells that were sewn into the hems of their garments and sounded as they walked and moved (Ex. 28:33; 39:25). These idiophones appear to have acted as signalers; bells ringing from the priest's hem would suggest his presence and activity to those outside of the sacred space (Holy of Holies).

Musicians

David, the most famous king of Israel, is also its most noted musician. However, the biblical writers still give the names of other musical performers, although they are not as popular as David was. For instance, the Chronicler provides detailed descriptions of the instruments, leaders, and times they were to play during religious ceremonies and activities in the Temple. We also see women with frame drums celebrating the victories of soldiers as they return from battle in I Sam 18:6-7. Moses, Miriam, and Deborah sing (Judges 5:1), and Heman, his fourteen sons and three daughters provided the service of music in the Temple (1 Chronicles 25:5).

Singing was also an essential part of cultures in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. It was an activity in which everyone could participate—Moses, Miriam, and others sing with the people of Israel; choirs sing in the Temple; and the psalmists encourage singing unto YHWH (Ps. 100:2). The New Testament writers also mention singing songs, psalms, hymns and generally making melody to the Lord (Eph. 5:19). It's difficult to say if all psalms were sung, but they are all considered songs. Although David often receives credit for the compositions, they are difficult to date and many of the composers are unknown. It is also uncertain if psalms were only used in liturgical contexts.

The Bible abounds with evidence that music was a vital, unique, and expressive part of life in antiquity. Although most of the sounds are lost to us, artifacts and texts reveal important details about the instruments, performers, types of songs and particular settings where music was played. While the technology and uses of music may have changed over time, music tells us about important life events in both ancient and modern worlds.

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