

Musica per governare: Alessandro, Adriano, Teoderico

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Recensione:

Music is a powerful mover of emotions and is a unifying force. As every professional and amateur musician knows, lyrics are laden with emotional baggage, whilst melodies and chord progressions stir our souls in the way in which the composer desires. Human beings are momentarily united by the sweet melodies of love songs, triumphant military marches or somber funeral requiems.

Donatella Restani's book, *Musica per Governare: Alessandro, Adriano, Teoderico*, addresses the role of music in the context of the ancient psyche and, in particular, as a force capable of unifying an entire population.

The subdiscipline of music in antiquity is far from mainstream. Because music is, in itself, so abstract and the music of classical antiquity is known largely through ancient texts, the scholars who write about the subject are generally musicologists or a minority of philologists. Yet despite the absence 2000 years ago of Rolling Stone Magazine, FM radio and MTV, music was important to the aristocrats and paupers of ancient Mediterranean cultures. This is attested, at a minimum, by numerous examples of poetry, references to music in the ancient texts and the enormous corpus of artistic representations of musicians and dancers in the Greco-Italic world. The book by Restani suggests that political propaganda occurred in less obvious ways than the displays of military might or elaborate groups of statuary that are so well known. Music, too, was used as a mechanism to unite people and promote the ideology of leaders.

Musica per Governare consists of a prologue and three chapters.

The Prologue essentially summarizes the main text, stressing some of the key points of the book: music in the light of ethics and politics; how rulers were portrayed as listeners, patrons or players of music; music as personal, cultural and political identity; music as a device to persuade, communicate and establish emotional coherence.

The

first chapter, "Il canto di Alessandro", focuses upon the musical education and tendencies of Alexander the Great. The reader is shown through several cases how Alexander surrounded himself with music in order to accomplish certain political or military objectives.

The

future king was educated by Aristotle, who stressed the four principle fields of study: grammar, gymnastics, drawing and music. While music had no particular benefit (one cannot earn a living through musical composition or performance, nor can one use music productively in times of war), Aristotle believed that music should be learned by future leaders in order to exercise their mind. Aristotle had given Alexander a copy of the Iliad, which served much of Alexander's inspiration throughout his life and we learn that on his trek through Asia Minor in 334 BC to confront the Persian, Alexander stopped with his troops at Ilium, where he paid homage to Athena and the fallen Greek heroes. Among the relics that Alexander wished to see was the lyre of Achilles. Aristotle taught that music represented freedom and happiness; it was intellectually enjoyable, relaxing and rejuvenating. Music provokes emotional responses and enthusiasm. Leaders were urged to learn to appreciate and even play music, deemed a gift from the gods. Rendini signals a number of examples from Plutarch that stress Alexander's fondness of music and how this ruler knew well how to employ music. According to Plutarch, music was heard everywhere: in palaces, theaters, and amphitheaters, on ports, onboard ships, in military camps. We are told that in 325 BC, during one of Alexander's final campaigns, the leader led a 7-day festival with his troops whereby they

drank wine and played music. This rejuvenating event prior to a major military endeavor was likened to a Dionysian procession.

"I miraggi

sonori di Adriano", the second chapter, centers around the tastes of the emperor Hadrian for Greek-style music (*musica alla greca*). "It was not necessary for a king to understand all music, but to play hymns on a zither or a lyre for the gods, during celebrations and to praise heroic men" (p. 32). Music was for Hadrian an important vehicle for becoming Greek and this process began in AD 112 in a meeting with the son of King Antiochus IV and a close female relative and poetess, Julia Balbilla. Hadrian had already been exposed to Greek-style music a few years earlier during the triumphal celebrations following the Dacian Wars, but it was with his first visit to Athens which solidified his interests.

An important influence on Hadrian during his formative years was the Epicurean philosopher Epictetus. One of Epictetus's important teachings was that we must become what we do and what we do reflects who we are. This may explain why Hadrian was so intimately involved in all of his pursuits from hunting to architectural design and music. For Pythagoreans, music was a sister science of geometry, arithmetic, astronomy and other pursuits, and "without it as a guide, man cannot attain contemplation" (p. 39); hence, musical training was important for philosophical ponderings. Becoming Greek was a key concept in Hadrian's political and social agenda. Hadrian's philo-Greek tendencies are well known and are especially apparent in the architectural marvels in Rome, Athens and other locations that he commissioned and may have even planned. Less well known is that Hadrian established institutions of learning which trained Romans to become Greek and music was a fundamental component in this education.

The final chapter, "Un

manuale per Teoderico", does not concern the Ostragoth King of Italy (ca. AD 453-526) who succeeded Odoacer, but the senator and philosopher Boethius, who was so instrumental in preserving Rome's glorious past. In the first part of the chapter, we learn something of Theodoric. At 8 years old, he was a hostage of the Romans in Constantinople where he acquired a princely education that would prepare him for a 29-year reign at Ravenna. In AD 500, Theodoric, characterized by his contemporaries as just, sapient and a *rex philosophus*, spent six months in Rome, where he was struck by the extraordinary reality of the *umbilicus mundi*. Cassiodorus (*Variae VII,13,4*) recounts that Theodoric had an ear for music and was able to discern melodies emanating from the statues and monuments of the *Urbs*.

The remainder of the chapter

focuses upon the philosophy of Boethius who assembled a sort of library of essential reading for Romans and their King. The thoughts of Boethius ranged from the mathematical sciences to law and justice, forms of government and the acquisition of knowledge through the senses. As one would expect, music, played a fundamental role in the writings of Boethius, and not only in *De institutiones musica*. If mathematics, geometry and astronomy represented the search for truth, music represented the search for truth as it relates to human passions and the soul. If sight was necessary for the recognition of forms, hearing was necessary to listen, judge facts and make decisions (p.72). Hearing and, hence, music, reflected a keen intellect. Music was a science and whilst singers sung, the *musicus* was able to interpret the mechanisms behind the effects of and reactions to music. Boethius concluded that certain melodies stirred the heavens (*mundanae musicae*) and equated cosmic harmony with good legislation in the city and equilibrium within the family. Boethius's manual for Theodoric certainly helped to preserve the memory of Rome and 400 years later he, himself, was honored by Gerbert: "Otto III, the pride of the empire,...judges you worthy of entering into his chambers and has established that your work shall be remembered for eternity."

Granted,

the title of the book translates to "music for governing", but my only

complaint surrounds the fact that aristocrats are the protagonists. Through a reading of this book, we gain much with regard to the appreciation of music by three of antiquity's most illustrious rulers and their peers. The governed are only implicitly mentioned and the reader does not gain a full sense of how the bulk of the population experienced or was affected by music.

For example, within the context of the "Dionysian procession", the soldiers' actions and reactions are not truly characterized and the reader must infer that the soldiers were not simply partying raucously prior to battle but were being transformed into a unified fighting machine through the participation in Alexander's week-long Woodstock. It would be of great interest to understand more concretely how the governed were manipulated by the ruling class through music.

Musica per Governare is a delightful read for scholars interested in the subject of music in the classical world and its use in political campaigns to mold a new reality. We are reminded that music was an important variety of thread in the fabric of human existence which linked more than a thousand years of history between Greece, Rome and Medieval Europe.

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