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Symposion and Philanthropia in Plutarch

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ANNABLUME

Music and symposium in Plutarch's *Convivium Septem Sapientium*: a brief note

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Abstract

In a *symposion*, music played an important role. It was through music that the traditions were perpetuated and the young men were educated. We see this in several ancient Greek texts, from Homer to Athenaeus. Music also has a significant role in Plutarch's *Convivium Septem Sapientium*. In this brief paper, my aim is to examine the use that Plutarch makes of musical themes in that dialogue. In the end, I intend to show that music marks Plutarch's way of thinking and style.

In ancient Greek culture, the banquet and the *symposion* were the most important occasions in the social life of an adult male. In a *symposion* friendship relations were created or reinforced, political decisions were discussed and influenced and a great part of poetical and musical culture was perpetuated and transmitted. So, there could never be a banquet without food, and after the banquet, a *symposion* without wine and especially music, and when we say 'music' in ancient Greece, we are talking about a complex of arts that involved what we nowadays call music, poetry and dance.

We can see this determinant role played by music in the banquet and in the *symposion* already in the Homeric poems. In the *Iliad* (1, 603-604), Apollo plays his lyre and sings with the Muses in the banquet of the gods on Olympus. In the *Odyssey* Homer says many times[1] that 'music is a banquet's ornament'. This not to mention the noteworthy presence of Demodocus in book VIII and the interventions of Phemius in book I of the *Odyssey*. But maybe the strongest demonstration that there could never be a banquet without music is in 9. 3-11, when, praising the orderly and peaceful atmosphere that reigns in Alcinoos' palace, Odysseus remembers that the *aoidos* is an essential element for the maintenance of the peace-loving and happy model of existence that prevails in the Phaeacians' Island.

We find other references to music's role in banquets and *symposia* in, for example, Xenophanes (fr. 1W) and in many fragments of Alcaeus and Anacreon. In this kind of poetry, that was composed to be performed in a banquet or in a *symposion*, there are many references to music in its practical aspect, that is, references to instruments, to the presence of a musician or to the kind of music he or she was playing. Later, after the second half of the fifth century, when another form of literature develops and a specific literary genre, the *Symposion*, flourishes, the performance of music will be reduced to give place to a new kind of 'musical' exercise: the discussion of different subjects in a dialogue among wise men. This is what we read in Plato's and Xenophon's *Symposia*, in Plutarch's *Quaestiones Conviviales* and in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistai*, to mention just some texts[2].

[1] 1, 152-155; 1, 370 and 421; 21, 430.

[2] On the *symposion*, see W. J. Henderson, 2000; and F. Frazier, 2000.

So music, as one of the most influential elements in Greek culture, could not be absent from a Plutarchean work set in a *symposion*, namely the *Convivium Septem Sapientium*. I intend to show, on the one hand, that discussions of musical themes were usual in ancient Greek banquets and, on the other, that Plutarch was familiar with and very fond of this kind of subject. Plutarch is famous because of his large knowledge of all ancient disciplines, and music was an art in which he was no beginner when he wrote this work: far from it. It is important to understand the reason why Plutarch often chooses examples taken from music to explain or illustrate some theme. And I think this is an aspect of his work and style still underestimated.

In the *Convivium*, we find important allusions to musical subjects. In 147F, dealing with the guest's behaviour, Plutarch says, through Thales' voice, that, if someone who was invited to a dinner does not behave properly, this person can make unpleasant the best wines, the most delicious foods and the performances of the most talented musicians. In making this remark, Thales indirectly is telling us about the basic components indispensable to any *symposion*.

Further on, in 149A, trying to calm a guest down, Thrasybulus' son Alexidemus of Miletus, who was not satisfied with the place of little honour that Periander gave him next to Aeolians and men from other islands, Thales gives an example of how a guest must behave in a dinner by telling a little story about a Spartan who was put by the director in the last place of a chorus, but was not discontented, and exclaimed that by doing that the director had discovered a way of making that position a place of honor. Then Thales himself, in 149F-150A, gives an example of proper behavior by sitting next to Ardalus of Troezen[3], an *aulōidos* and "a priest of the Ardalian Muses whose worship his forefather, Ardalus of Troezen, had established"[4]. In this passage, we can see irony in Thales' words when he says that he would pay to share the table with Ardalus. To understand the irony we must remember that, many times in ancient Greek literature, the musicians and most of all the ones that had some relation to the *aulos*, the *aulētai* and the *aulōidoi*, were not considered people worthy of respect[5]. So, Thales, by doing so, is showing that it doesn't matter where and next to whom the guest is placed in the table, but the most important thing is try to learn as much as possible from whoever is sitting next to us and trying to start a new friendship whenever we can.

After the dinner, the guests make a libation accompanied by an *aulētris*, a girl that plays the *aulos*, and, inspired by her presence, Ardalus asks Anacharsis if the Scythians had *aulētrides* (150D-E). Anacharsis answers that the Scythians don't have *aulētrides* or grape-vines, but they have gods, though they don't "believe that the gods have more pleasure by listening to the sounds produced by bits of bone and wood", as the Greeks do. And this leads us to a remark by the character Aesop (150F) about the good melody produced by *auloi* made of

[3] This character will appear again in 150D-E, 155E, 157D and 157F.

[4] All the translations are taken from Babbitt's edition for the Loeb Classical Library.

[5] About the situation of *auletai*, see A. Barker, 2002.

asses' bones: the ass is an unmelodious animal, but the most beautiful melodies are played with his bones. In the sequence Neiloxenus makes a commentary about a complaint that the citizens of Busiris have against the people of Naucratis because they use asses' bones to make *auloi*. For the Busirians to hear even a *salpinx*, a trumpet, was a sin, because it sounded like an ass bray and the ass was associated with Set, a malignant god sometimes represented by the features of this animal. So one can notice that a simple remark or little story leads to another one and on and on and on, like a sequence of echoes that virtually has no end, as we would expect in an idealised talk among the wisest men of Greece.

Some paragraphs later (156C), Plutarch, through the words of his character Mnesiphilus, commenting on Solon's opinion "that the task of every art and faculty, both human and divine, is the thing that is produced rather than the means employed in its production, and the end itself rather than the means that contribute to that end", tells us what he believes must be music's role because "the Muses would most assuredly feel aggrieved, if we should regard as their task a lyre or *auloi*, and not the development of the characters and the soothing of the emotions of those who make use of songs and melodies". As a follower of Platonic ideas, Plutarch would endorse Damonian ethical theory of music, according to which music has the power to transform the soul and to mould the character[6].

At the end of the *Convivium* (160C-D), Gorgus, Periander's brother, arrives and takes part in the talk. Returning from a voyage to Taenarum, Gorgus has an amazing story to tell his brother first and then to everybody there. Before Gorgus starts telling what he saw, Periander warns his friends about the extraordinary fact that Gorgus is about to report. But Bias recalls that Thales said that we must believe in our friends' words, even if they sound absurd. And besides, Bias says that Gorgus should tell his story at least "to compete with those newly invented dithyrambs" (160E). This seems to be a covert reference to Arion as the inventor of the dithyramb, according to Babbitt, in note to this passage. But I think there is more to be said about this comment of Bias. There is a latent irony in these words. It sounds as if Plutarch was making a remark about the strangeness that characterizes the dithyramb in his own time or as if he was reproducing some other author's words, maybe those of Plato or Aristoxenus, because these thinkers made this kind of comment about the degeneration of the dithyramb earlier and also influenced Plutarch's ideas in a decisive way. We know that this dialogue has a strong fictional character, but it is worth mentioning that it is an anachronism[7] told by a historical character that lived in the sixth century, when the dithyramb was still getting its 'classical' shape[8]. I think it is interesting to note that, in another work ascribed in the tradition to

[6] On ethical theories about music's power, see M. L. West, 1992, pp. 246-53.

[7] On anachronism in Plutarch's *Convivium*, see G. J. D. Aalders, 1997 and A. Billault, 2008, pp. 584-5.

[8] About this question, see G. A. Privitera, 1979 and A. D'Angour, 1997.

Plutarch, the *De Musica*, we find many references to the alleged decadence of the dithyramb, especially at the end of the fifth and first half of the fourth century B. C[9].Be that as it may, this comment by Bias prepares the reader to what will follow: the story of Arion (160E-162B).

Gorgus tells that after he had sacrificed to Poseidon, when the moon was shining over the sea, he saw dolphins leaving a man on the shore. This man was Arion, the *kitharōidos*. He gave his name and was easily recognizable because he was wearing his ceremonial robes, i.e. his special clothes for the occasions when he sang and played his *kithara*. Arion told that he was coming from Italy to Corinth, after receiving a letter from Periander. Because of this he took a Corinthian merchant vessel. After three days, Arion sensed that the sailors were planning to do something against him. Then, inspired perhaps by a divine impulse, he put on his ceremonial garments and started to sing his swan song, the *nomos Pythicos* to Apollo. When he was in the middle of his song, the sailors advanced to murder him. But Arion threw himself into the sea and was saved by dolphins. He strongly believed that he was a man beloved by the gods[10].

After Gorgus told the story of Arion, the other participants start a discussion and some report other stories about dolphins rescuing humans. Solon, in particular, tells how Hesiod's body, after he was dead, was taken by dolphins and finishes his words saying that these animals like music so much and delight themselves with the sound of *auloi* and songs (162F). This fact could explain why they help humans, specially poets and musicians like Arion and Hesiod.

To end this brief comment about the 'musical' passages of the *Convivium Septem Sapientium*, it is worth reporting some words put in the mouth of Anacharsis by Plutarch (163E-F): just as living beings depend on God's power, serve Him and are responsive to His movements, so the Scythians are responsive to bows and the Greeks are very fond of lyres and *auloi*. This remark serves to distinguish the barbarian Scythians from the civilized Greeks, but it also makes evident the love that the Hellenic people dedicated to music, love that is shown many times in this dialogue.

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[9] See chapters 3, 4, 6, 12, 29 and specifically 30, where Plutarch quotes the famous fragment from the comedy entitled *Chiron*, by Pherecrates (fr. 155 Kassel-Austin). On the authorship of the *De Musica* cf. R. Rocha, 2007, pp. 15-31.

[10] In Herodotus, 1, 24, we find another version of this story.

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