

MVSE

ANNUAL of the
MUSEUM OF ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI-COLUMBIA



NUMBER TWO: 1968

Musical Scenes on a Greek Vase



The handsome Greek vase in the collection of the Museum of the University of Missouri¹ has already been noticed in a major publication by J. V. Noble,² but he cites only a minor blemish—the misfiring of parts of its black glaze. It is only fair that the score be rectified by a more comprehensive study to bring out both the high interest of the subject matter of its painting and its intrinsic beauty.³

The vase is an amphora of the special sub-category known as a *pelike* (though it is now clear that the Greek term refers to a different vase form).⁴ The normal function of such a vessel was the storage of wine; for this purpose its shape is simple and functional. The low center of gravity of its ovoid shape makes it more stable than the usual Greek amphora, since its widest diameter is lower than the mid-point. It is perhaps not so aesthetically attractive as the amphora, but the two handles grow organically out of the contours of the vase, and are set at the neck in a way which is both convenient and pleasing.

It is decorated in the black-figure style characteristic of Archaic Greek vases of the sixth and early fifth centuries B.C. In this style the pottery is covered with black glaze, with panels or bands decorated with figure drawings done in black glaze silhouette against the natural red of the clay fabric. Interior details are indicated by incision and touched up with white or purple. This style was popular all over Archaic Greece, but its finest examples come from Attica, the ultimate source of this vase, I do not doubt. The provenance is unknown (it was acquired in Switzerland), but I suspect that it was found in an Etruscan tomb in Italy, where most of the undamaged specimens of Attic pottery have survived. Several considerations make it clear that the vase dates from the late black-figure period, in

the first decades of the fifth century, just before the Persian invasions.⁵

The decoration consists of two large panels on opposite sides of the vase, which I shall call sides A and B. Each panel takes up almost the entire available space from the middle of the neck to a point just below the widest diameter of the vase. The remaining surface is covered with black glaze, varied only by a reserved red band around the edge of the base. The panels themselves are framed by a ground line on the bottom, double vertical lines on the sides and a band of lotus leaves with spiral O's done in the manner of old-fashioned penmanship exercises.

Each panel contains a scene with three figures, two human and one animal. The panels are obviously related since a bearded male figure is repeated in both, and the other figure is in each case a musician. Side A has a male (beardless) lyre-player with a goat at his side; side B has a female piper accompanied (not musically!) by a dog or wolf.⁶

The bearded figure is nearly identical in both panels. So close is the resemblance that it is hard to believe that one was repeated from memory, even in so short an interval as there would be in turning from one side to the other. Surely both must have been copied from a preliminary sketch.⁷ Nonetheless there are differences between the figures which become apparent on close inspection. We can see differences in the treatment of the hair over the forehead and in the eyes. The nostril is indicated in A but not in B. In the drapery both have inscribed fold lines, but the lowest line in B does not reach up as far as the arm. Of the vertical drape, A has two, B three fold lines. Though the general outlines are similar, one is not a carbon

copy of the other. The fact that the misfiring has affected each figure differently is, of course, of no significance.

The repeated figure is a person of some importance, or so it seems. This is emphasized by some curious features: out of his hair project two long reeds, or long thin leaves. Reeds or tendrils hang from the figure in front and back.

The male lyre-player of side A stands facing the bearded figure. Two tendrils hang from his back. He is in the act of playing, not merely holding, his lyre, but it is not quite clear whether he is singing as well. He grasps the *plectron* (a device for striking the strings) in his right fist, while the retaining cord dangles below. The right hand is held out beyond the lyre, slanted in such a fashion as to make it clear that it is about to be drawn back over the strings. A new passage of music is about to begin! The left hand is held against the strings in an unusual though not unprecedented fashion. The knuckles rather than the usual outstretched fingers are dampening some of the strings. The arms of the lyre are picked out in white paint. At the lyre-player's side stands a he-goat, done in marvellously vivid naturalism. Its horns, face and belly are picked out in white paint.

The female musician on side B is playing the *auloi*, or double pipes (almost invariably, but erroneously, called "flutes"). She is not using the *phorbeia* (cheek straps) which are often worn by pipers. She has a fillet, but no reeds projecting from her hair, and two tendrils hanging behind. Her face, arms and feet are done in white, in keeping with the black-figure convention for females. At her side is a canine creature—either a dog or a wolf. Her eye is painted in the typical full front almond shape of Archaic drawing, in contrast to the inscribed eyes of the male figures, which are more like little circles. The difference no doubt reflects the natural tendencies of the two different drawing instruments involved, the scribe and the hairline brush. The peculiar pattern of the misfiring provides a clue as to the order in which the parts were painted. The animal was first filled in as a whole but with a glaze that unfortunately proved too thin and fired red instead of black. The rest of the piper's body was covered with a thicker glaze, which fired properly. Though this is not a logical order, perhaps, it is clear that such was the case.

The aesthetic composition of both panels is of a

high order, though side A is distinctly better. The balance is fairly formal, as one would expect of Archaic art. On side A the two male figures not only face each other, their poses are complementary. Both stand with feet in profile but with the upper body in three-quarter view: the lyre-player shows his chest, the bearded figure his back. Both feet of the lyre-player are flat on the ground, one behind the other in the Archaic convention. The right heel of the bearded man is lifted, imparting both variety and subtle animation to the figure. The tendrils trailed by both figures are varied in direction.

The two figures are not merely juxtaposed, they are artistically related to one another, visually and psychologically. The slight forward inclination of the bearded man's head suggests his intense interest in the music, and it is formally answered by the corresponding tilt of the lyre. His gaze is fixed on the plectron of the lyre-player, a point which serves as the focus of the whole design. This point is on the middle line of the panel about two thirds of the vertical dimension of the panel, and almost the precise center of the whole vase. To this point the eye of the viewer is directed by many of the lines of composition such as the echelon of fold lines over the bearded man's arm, the line of the top of the lyre's sound chamber and the curve of the retaining cord.

The incised lines are not only done with precision and grace, they serve to tie the composition together visually. For example, the lines of the lyre strings are continued in the lyre-player's robe. The curve of the goat's back is echoed in the curved bottom of the lyre. The varied rhythm of the lines of the bearded figure's robe is magnificently fluid. The tendrils in front of the figure tend to mark out the goat's horns, face and hooves in such a way as to include him in the sphere of interest of the man.

On the other hand, the composition of side B, though utilizing many of the same devices, comes off less successfully. Its relative failures illuminate the successes of side A. For example, here the musician is in profile throughout, destroying the balance with the three-quarter stance of the male figure. He seems to be turning away from her, listening only over his shoul-



Black-figure pelike by the Theseus Painter. *Left*: Side A; *right*, Side B. Photo Dietrich Widmer, Basel.



der, as it were. Though the piper stands much closer to the listener than does the lyre-player, she seems less related to him. The pipes are too close to the listener's face for him to focus his gaze upon them; he looks past them. Nor do the lines of composition tie things together. Even the lines of the robe are less effective; the bottom line is crowded out and ends meaninglessly beneath the armpit. Having said all this, I hasten to add that the effect of side B is by no means totally unsatisfactory.

What are the scenes about? Can we identify the subject matter? In a general way, there is no problem: both panels show scenes of music being played for an interested auditor. It may be no more than that: simply a genre scene from contemporary life.

But there are good reasons for believing that the bearded figure, at least, represents a divine or heroic person, and we ought to look for a myth which would account for all the elements of the pictures: the repeated male figure, the young male lyre-player with a goat, a female piper with a dog or wolf. Perhaps some of the elements are not significant: the animals, for example, may simply be pets or a background of some sort. Even so, I confess at the outset that I have failed to turn up any myth which accounts for all elements at once. Let us look briefly at the possibilities, however.⁸

One's first instinct is to identify the young lyre-player with Apollo, with the goat suggesting his role as shepherd (more precisely, as goatherd). This would, in turn, seem to entail identifying the female figure as Artemis, who might naturally have a dog or wolf as companion.⁹ But at this point the identifications begin to break down. Both scenes are clearly musical; though this fits Apollo, there are no references I know of to Artemis as a piper. Furthermore, the bearded male is left unexplained, and because of his importance it would seem that identification should begin with him. In a letter to me (dated November 1966) Professor Suhr made a suggestion which I find convincing. He conjectures from the tendrils, and particularly the projecting reeds on the head, that the bearded man is Dionysos. We must now ask: are there any mythological connections between Dionysos and the divine siblings,

particularly in a musical context? Though they occasionally appear together it seems that this happens only in general concourses of the gods. A fragment of Pindar, for example, alludes to Artemis "yoking up the lions for the bacchic orgies of Bromios (Dionysos),"¹⁰ but then there is no musical element.

Side B, with Dionysos, a woman and a dog, immediately suggests the story of Erigone, daughter of Ikaros, king of Athens. The latter had accepted from Dionysos the gift of the vine. But when his subjects tasted the wine he offered them, they thought they had been poisoned and in rage put him to death. Erigone, who had been seduced by Dionysos disguised as a cluster of grapes (!) set out to find Ikaros with the help of her dog Maira. On finding his body, she hung herself from a tree in grief, but Dionysos turned her and her dog into stars. Charming as the story is, there is no musical element in any version of it, and it is unlikely that we can see Ikaros in the lyre-player.¹¹

Most likely what we have here is not any particular myth, but another of the frequent depictions of Dionysos attended by devotees, a nymph on one side and a male reveller on the other. Though the normal instrument of Dionysiac music is the aulos, there are many representations of Dionysos serenaded by one or other of the various lyre-type instruments.¹² We might be a little surprised that the tone is so subdued and formal—so un-bacchic. But one can sense in these scenes, with their Archaic directness already tempered slightly with Classical reserve and dignity, some of the concealed and sinister tension of this most dangerous of the gods.

We turn now to the musical instruments. There is little to be said about the pipes, which are typical of thousands represented on Greek vases.¹³ The pipes are double, equal in size, divergent (that is, not bound together in the manner of modern Egyptian double pipes) and fingered by both hands at roughly the same point on each pipe; that is, halfway between the mouthpiece and the exit. In this they follow the normal pattern of Greek pipes.¹⁴ The articulations often seen on the pipes, and the bulbs (*olmoi*) at the mouthpiece end are not distinguished. We may assume, accepting

Becker's criterion, that the absence of the cheek straps indicates that the reeds used are of the single reed, beating tongue type, and not the double reed of the primitive oboe.¹⁵ In any case a reed mouthpiece of one type or the other is to be assumed; the pipes cannot be flutes.

I see no way of deciding whether the costumes of the musicians are to be considered formal or not. I doubt that they are.

The lyre is more interesting.¹⁶ The arms, painted white, are probably meant to be of horn or ivory. But the material of the sound box is a little harder to identify. The simplest assumption is that it is wood. In that case the lyre is not the *lyra*, which used a tortoise shell resonator covered by a skin membrane. Even when an actual tortoise shell is not used, the wooden or metal replica usually retains the characteristic round shape of the tortoise shell.¹⁷ As far as shape is concerned, this lyre seems to fit into the line of U-shaped lyres which we can trace for centuries from the four-stringed lyre of Geometric vases to the seven-stringed lyres of the Melian vases to the so-called "cradle kitharas" played by women in the fifth century. The U-shape distinguishes this lyre from the *lyra* on the one hand, with its round resonator, and the classic *kithara* with its flat bottom and intricate arms, on the other. Wegner wishes to call this U-shaped lyre the *phorminx* in view of its Homeric connections, but I do not think we can be certain what its name was.¹⁸

It just may be that the material is not wood. The artist has not been very precise, but the appearance of the resonator is such that one could easily believe that it consisted of a hide stretched between the arms of the U. This is a perfectly feasible construction, but I know of no sure parallels and no literary references. The nearest parallel is that of a Geometric bronze figurine in the Herakleion (Crete) Museum. Here one can see a continuous U-frame covered at the lower end by what seems to be shrunken hide.¹⁹

The number of strings is the canonical seven. This is normal for all lyres after the seventh century in art, though there are references in literature to experiments with greater numbers of strings, and a few representations in art (which may be due to carelessness). Pyth-

agoras, for example, was said to have added the eighth a generation before this vase was painted.²⁰ The use of uncured leather (*kollopes*) for maintaining the tension of the strings is clear; tuning pegs are a later invention.²¹ The cross-bar is set in a stub crotch on the arms, without the handles on the ends sometimes found.

The technique of playing Greek lyre-type instruments has not yet been adequately studied. Our vase provides a few clues. First of all, let us look at the right hand, which holds a plectron. This, according to the doxographers, was invented by Sappho,²² though it is attested earlier, in the seventh century. It is a thick piece of wood, metal or bone, often in a phallic shape. Because of its thickness and the roundness of its playing end it is misleading to translate it by "pick," since it could not be used to pick the strings. All that is possible is a striking or stroking action (which is in fact the primary meaning of the Greek term *krouein*, used to designate this action). The particular angle at which the right fist is held makes it probable that the motion is across the strings from the outside toward the player. A vase in the Metropolitan Museum of Art shows three satyrs in successive stages of this motion.²³ The opposite motion would be awkward as long as the plectron was held pointing forward, but it cannot be ruled out since there are representations of other lyre-players with the necessary bent wrist.

The technique of the left hand is interesting. Normally the fingers of this hand are stretched out on the strings, sometimes with the thumb bent under. Here, however, it is the knuckles which are against the string. From my own experiments with reconstructed Greek lyres I offer a conjecture as to the significance of the knuckles. It will be noted that they touch the strings at roughly the half point. If this is done exactly one can easily obtain the first or octave partial of the string clearly and with some volume when it is struck by a plectron. This "magadizing" makes another octave available for the lyre's range. It may at times be obtained by the crossed-over thumb, for the first few strings.²⁴ Other aspects of the left-hand techniques are confused by the carelessness of the artist. Though there are seven strings at the top, by the half point where the knuckles touch only six are visible. It is thus im-

possible to assign a finger to a string. Only three fingers are clearly visible, with a fourth perhaps indicated. The thumb is not shown. Normally we would expect all strings but one to be damped, leaving one to sound; if the musician is attempting to sound the octave partial, this would not apply.

Finally we must ask whether we can identify the potter and the painter. Neither left a signature, but the latter may be identified by his style. Professor Weinberg informed me that it was Sir John Beazley's opinion that the painter was the one known as the Theseus Painter. His style is described in Professor Haspels' monumental study of Attic black-figured lekythoi. I offer excerpts from the chapter devoted to this artist:²⁵

"In his figures the incisions are characteristic: he makes the most of long flowing lines . . . he combines in bearded faces, the outline of the face with the lip: so only one little extra incision, forking from the main one at the end, is needed to indicate the mouth . . . His uncovered heads often have a prominent tuft on the forehead . . . with incision for the ends of the hair in front . . . The Theseus painter likes finishing off the lower hem of chitons with a row of close staccato zig-zags falling backwards . . . There are a good many animals . . . He has a mania for goats, with long incised hair and beards; of course he can find place for a lot of them on his numerous skyphoi with Dionysiac scenes . . ." Enough has been quoted to show the many parallels with our vase. Although the Theseus Painter is not usually associated with pelikai, Beazley lists one pelike painted by him.²⁶

I finish by calling attention to two parallels. First, a lekythos attributed to the Theseus Painter.²⁷ Again we have two scenes, a youthful beardless lyre player and a piper playing before Dionysos. There are differences: in one case Dionysos is nude, in the other he is clothed. Unlike the Missouri pelike, there are no animals and the piper is male. But the similarities are so striking as to suggest a connection. The Missouri pelike is certainly more artistically effective; we can see in it perhaps a later and more successful treatment of an earlier experiment.

The second parallel is a pelike recently on the

market.²⁸ It too contains a musical scene in a Dionysiac context. There are two ithyphallic satyrs, both playing the pipes and accompanied by goats. The satyrs and the goats alike have vine stems on their heads; those of the satyrs are remarkably similar to the reed projections on our Dionysos. Both the satyrs are wearing the phorbeia and carry a pipe case over their arms. In execution and composition this vase is not so fine as the Missouri vase, but it would not surprise me if it turned out to come from the same circle, if not the same hand.

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¹Acc. No. 61.3. Gift of Chorn Memorial Fund. Height 0.338 m.; diameter of rim 0.144 m.; diameter of base 0.162 m.

²The *Techniques of Painted Attic Pottery* (New York 1965) 80-81, fig. 246.

³I wish to thank Professor Weinberg for permission to publish the vase and for subsequent encouragement and assistance. Many people have given me suggestions, but I wish to thank in particular Professor Elmer Suhr, Professor D. Weeks and Professor H. R. W. Smith, who have taken the trouble to write me their comments in letters. It will be seen that I have profited by their help immensely.

⁴See G. M. A. Richter and M. J. Milne, *Shapes and Names of Athenian Vases* (New York 1955) 4-5. Also R. Cook, *Greek Painted Pottery* (London 1960) 224.

⁵The style of the chitons, the techniques of the drawing of the eyes, the use of three-quarter view and so on. On the other hand, the almond eye of the woman is somewhat early in style. It is probable that the artist is the "Theseus Painter," whose activity falls after 500 B.C. (see page 19). The pelike shape first appears about 520 B.C. See Cook, *op. cit.* 224.

⁶I tend to favor the identification as a wolf, because the dogs of the period, common on current vases, are usually considerably smaller and thinner.

⁷See Noble, *op. cit.* 50 ff.

⁸The fact that the figure is repeated in both panels and alone has the curious reeds projecting from his head seems to indicate his importance. The combination of beardless lyre player, bearded listener, tendrils and animals (a fawn and a dog) is also found on an oinochoe in the Vatican. See Beazley, "Amasea," *JHS* 51 (1931) 264, pl. 9; he attributes it to the Amasis Painter.

⁹Representations of Apollo with various lyre-type instruments are so common in all periods as not to need illustration. On the other hand I do not know of any case of Artemis playing the pipes. Stories of

Athena playing or refusing to play the pipes are known. I cannot see the bearded male figure as Marsyas, though a case might be made for seeing side B as Athena playing the pipes before Marsyas, and Apollo playing the lyre on side A. This, however, leaves the animals, tendrils and reed projections unexplained.

¹⁰Pindar, *Dithyrambi* 86, 16 ff. (ed. Turyn).

¹¹The story of Erigone is told in Hyginus, *Fabulae* 130 (ed. Rose), and in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6, 125 and 10, 541 (ed. Merkel). I owe this suggestion to Professor Weeks.

¹²It is perhaps impossible to distinguish between nymph and maenad in this case. Lyre-players associated with Dionysos are usually satyrs (see the Polion vase cited note 23), but this figure is clearly human. *Kithara, lyra, barbiton* and other forms of lyres are all attested.

¹³A recent book by H. Becker, *Zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der antiken und mittelalterlichen Rohrblattinstrumente* (Hamburg 1966), subsumes and supersedes all previous discussions of this instrument. K. Schlesinger's *The Greek Aulos* (Oxford 1939) is a huge, badly organized book, full of priceless information about aulos, but largely concerned with a presentation of her controversial theories about Greek scales. Other discussions are reviewed in Becker.

¹⁴Becker, *op. cit.* 80-98.

¹⁵*Ibid.* 120-125.

¹⁶Unlike the aulos, the stringed instruments of Greece have not received a book-length study. The various lyre-type instruments (*lyra, chelys, barbiton, kithara, phorminx*, etc.) are best described in M. Wegner, *Das Musikleben der Griechen* (Berlin 1949) 28-51.

¹⁷Wegner, *op. cit.* 37-38.

¹⁸*Ibid.* 29-30. This is the instrument of the Geometric vases of Attica and some other mainland sites. It could be, then, the instrument that Homer himself used. But it is considerably different from the instrument used in late Mycenaean times, which has also turned up in seventh-century Ionia. See *JHS* 71 (1951) fig. 8. *Phorminx* became the word in poetic diction for all lyres.

¹⁹See Wegner, *Musikgeschichte in Bildern* II 4 *Griechenland* (Leipzig, no date) fig. 1.

²⁰According to Nikomachos, *Enchiridion* 5, in *Musici Scriptores Graeci* 244 (ed. Jan.).

²¹Wegner, *Musikleben* 33.

²²See Suidas, *Lexicon* s.v. Sappho (first notice).

²³Late Attic red-figured bell krater by Polion. Metropolitan Museum of Art 25.78.66. Illustrated in Wegner, *Musikgeschichte* fig. 37.

²⁴See Ingemar Duering, "Studies in Musical Terminology in 5th Century Literature," *Eranos* 43 (1945) 176-197, particularly 196.

²⁵C. H. E. Haspels, *Attic Black-figured Lekythoi* (Paris 1936) 142-143.

²⁶J. D. Beazley, *Attic Black Figured Vase Painters* (Oxford 1956) 519, no. 10.

²⁷Athens 9686—Haspels, *op. cit.* App. XIV, no. 62, pl. 44.2.

²⁸*Catalogue of Egyptian, West Asiatic, Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Byzantine and Viking Antiquities*, Sotheby's, London. Sale of June 12th, 1967, Item 139 (illustrated). Unfortunately it has not been possible to obtain permission from the owner of this vase to reproduce an illustration of it here.