



## Ancient Music

by Andrew Lesser, M.M.

c. 10,000+ B.C.E – 800 B.C.E.

(B.C.E. - Before Common Era)

Ancient Music consists of all music generated from prehistoric times until the advent of what has been defined by modern ethnomusicologists as “Western Music”. “Western” (not to be confused with Country-Western) music consists of primarily European and all countries affiliated with European musical tradition, beginning with the Greek city-states. It can also mean Western Hemisphere, although certain countries in the Eastern hemisphere have embraced

“Western” music over time. In any case, “Western Music” is a term that is ambiguous outside its use in music history, and it is only used in describing and relating music of a particular time and place of origin.

## Prehistoric and Early Civilization Music

*“There are people who believe that humans and dinosaurs co-existed, that they roamed the Earth at the same time. They are crazy. I can't be kind about this, because these people are watching The Flintstones as if it were a documentary.” –Lewis Black*

Unfortunately, we have no concrete examples about how music sounded before the advent of the Greek musical theory system, but we do have evidence showing some of the musical instruments, performance practice, and applications into daily life from multiple sources.

**Art:** Cave paintings, from areas such as Persia, Sumer, and early civilizations including the Egyptian and Assyrian, contain examples of artwork from over 10,000 years ago. In later years, temples, pyramids, and other structures were lined with paintings which included musicians, ancient instruments, and musical performances.

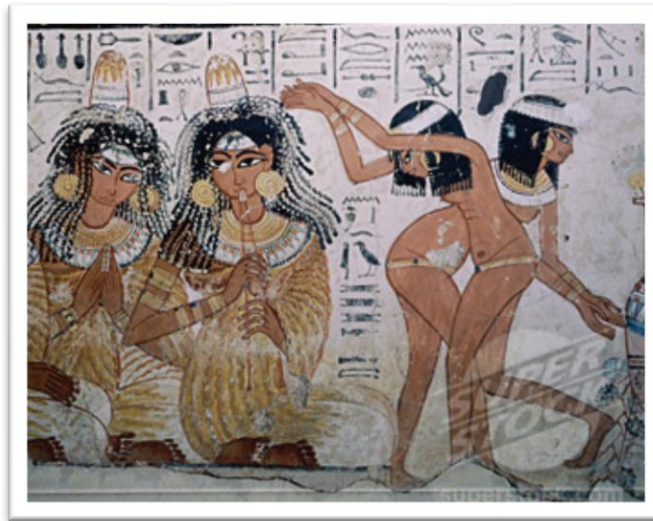


*Stone Age Musicians*



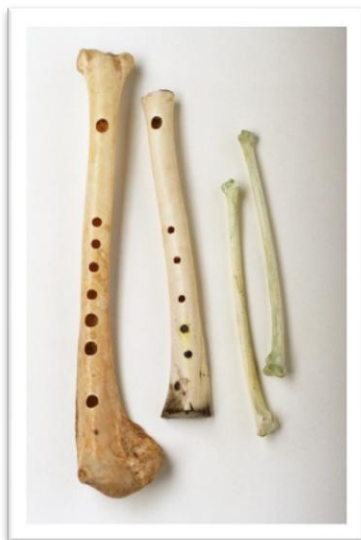
*Ancient Persian Musicians*

**Writing:** In early civilizations, writing was used to preserve aspects of daily life, including rituals and religious ceremonies, entertainment, and communication. Music was used as a tool for these events since before recorded history.



*A description of a religious ceremony involving musicians and dances – Egyptian Hieroglyphics*

**Artifacts:** From Egyptian pyramids, Mexican temples, and Persian tombs, remains of musical instruments have been discovered by archeologists and anthropologists. Some of these instruments are even still playable!



*Bone Flutes from Ireland*

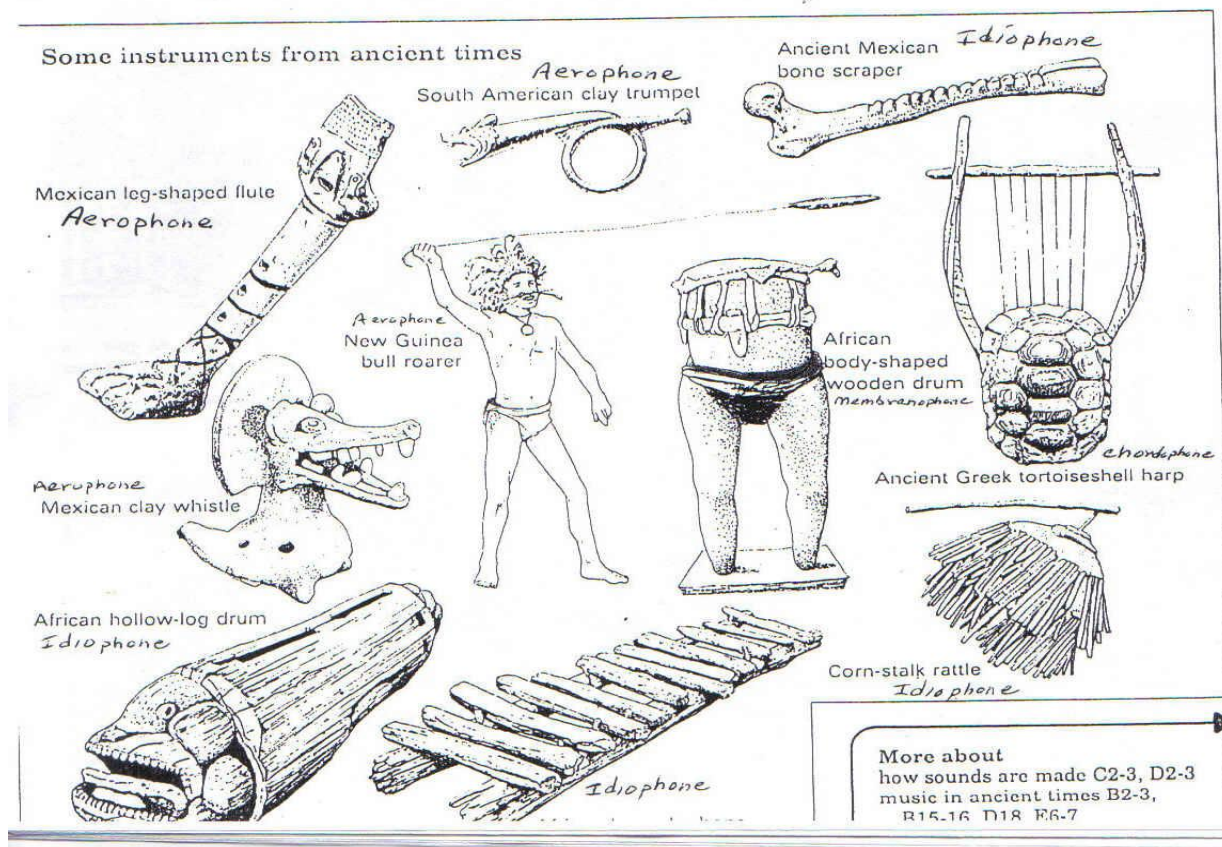


*Bone Whistle from Slovenia – Neanderthal*

### Music in the Prehistoric Era

Understanding that the origin of music before recorded history is unknown, we can logically deduce that the beginning of music came from naturally occurring sounds and rhythms. Body slaps, clapping, foot stomping, and other functions could be used to create patterns and repetition. Using voices to imitate animals and the sounds of nature led to the eventual creation of musical instruments to better reproduce those sounds. Logs, shells, and rocks could be made into rudimentary percussion instruments, while bones and sticks could be fashioned into whistles or flutes. The oldest known flute, discovered in Slovenia in 1995 (see above picture) has been predated to approximately 45,000 years ago!

Since the early humans discovered how to use their bodies and manipulate their environment to create musical sounds and rhythms, they most likely used music as a way to communicate with each other. In addition, music must have been incorporated in communicating with the spirits and deities of their culture, much like religious and worship services today. When humans discovered the use of metals, such as in the Bronze Age (c. 3500 B.C.E.) and the Iron Age (c. 1200 B.C.E.), they were able to create more sophisticated tools and instruments. Some examples of instruments from these early cultures are listed below. These instruments came in four general categories: **Aerophones, Idiophones, Membranophones, and Chordophones.**

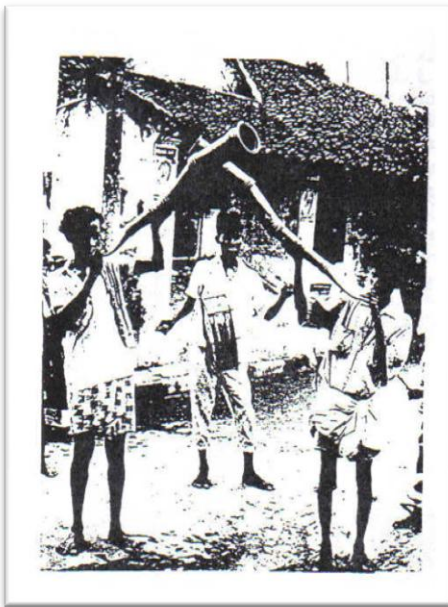




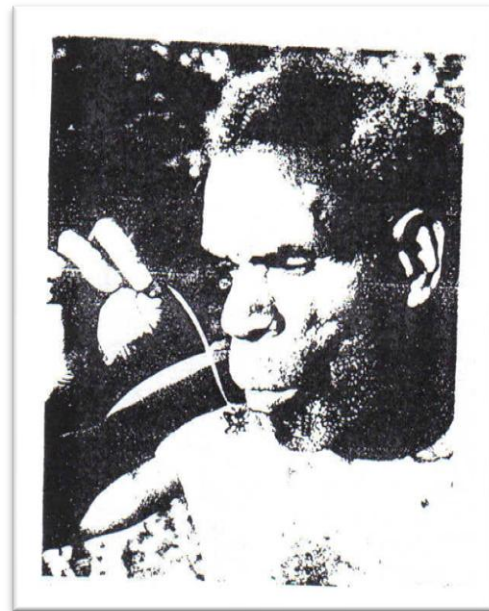
### **Ancient Musical Instruments**

Since primitive man did not have the materials or resources to create the more sophisticated instruments of the early civilizations, they constructed instruments out of materials from their natural environment. Items such as animal bones, horns, and skins, wood and shells, stones, gourds, and sticks were used in a variety of functions to create various sounding instruments. The earliest music revolved primarily around rhythms and patterns. Melody was eventually discovered by the manipulation of the voice and the refining of instruments to better reproduce a variety of pitches. These instruments of early culture have been grouped into four primary categories.

**Aerophones:** Aerophones are instruments in which the sound is produced by the vibration of air. Modern day woodwind and brass instruments use air to create the vibration necessary to produce sound. Flutes in particular, originally made from animal bone or sticks, had special significance in religious rituals because they were believed to have magical powers. Instruments such as pipes, organs, and whistles are considered aerophones; for more examples see the illustrations below.

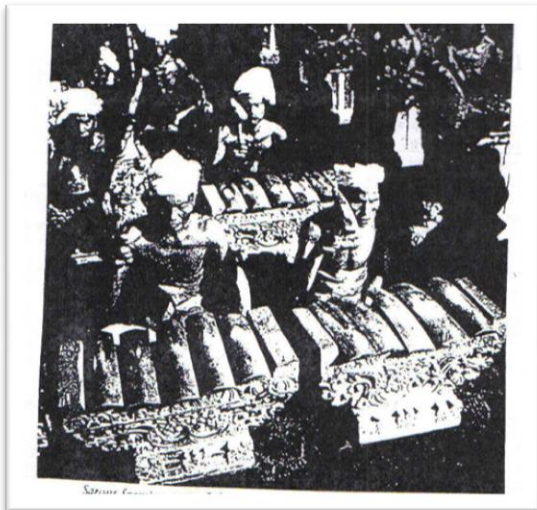


*Trumpet players with a drum in Madras, India.*



*Wam chief with live sago beetle in New Guinea.*

**Idiophones:** Idiophones are instruments made of naturally sonorous material that can be performed in various ways. The predecessor to some of our modern-day percussion instruments, idiophones can be stamped, shaken, hit, scraped, and plucked. There are many natural instruments in the environment which can be used as idiophones which come in various shapes and sizes. Common examples include bells, gongs, vessels (gourds), and bar instruments (xylophones). The percussion sub-section of the idiophones contains a wide variety of natural and man-made instruments.

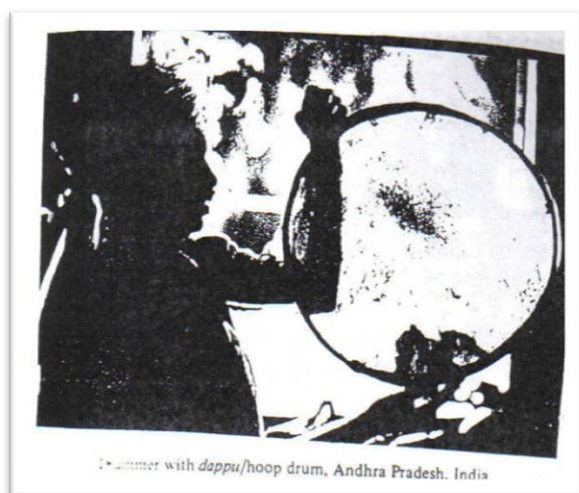


*Gamelan gong orchestra, Bali.*

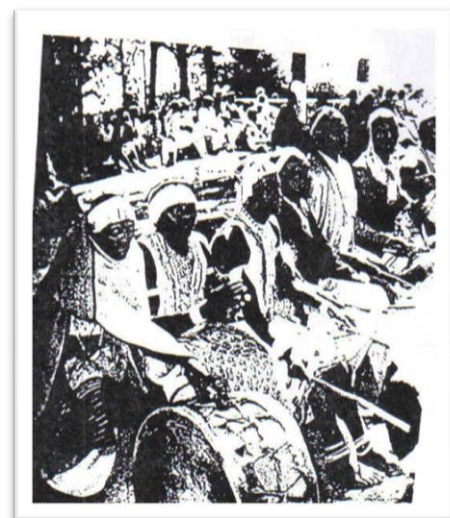


*Gambang ensemble, Tabanan village, Bali.*

**Membranophones:** Membranophones are instruments where the sound is made from stretching a membrane, or thin layer of skin, tightly around a boxed surface. These instruments include drums, although the construction and uses of drums were greatly varied in ancient cultures. For example, the shape of the drum was vital to the circumstance in daily life. Hourglass shaped drums were used for entertainment purposes, while kettle drums made of pots were used in celebrations. Drums could be tuned to vary their pitch in a variety of ways, including using water or heat to loosen or tighten the drum head, respectively. Adjustable waist bands or moving rings were also used in constructing drums in later societies. Many cultures use drums in their religious ceremonies to ward off evil spirits and to please guardian deities. Mostly drums were used to accompany singing and dancing, a vital part of prehistoric and early civilization.



*Drummer with dappu/hoop drum in India.*



*Drum Ensemble, Bantu people, South Africa.*



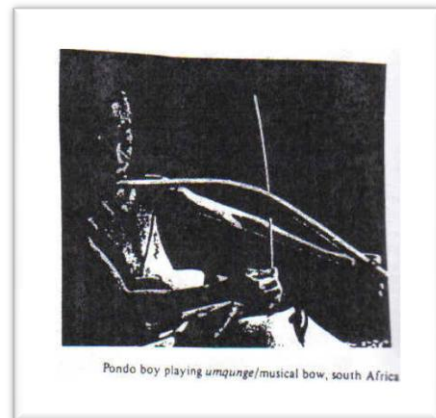
**Chordophones:** Chordophones are instruments in which the sound is made from the vibrations of strings. There are five basic types of chordophone: bows, lyres, harps, lutes, and zithers. Harps and lyres appear in the civilizations of ancient Greece and Egypt, while zithers evolved into the more common keyboard instruments of today. Lutes and bows both evolved into the modern day guitar and violin type instruments that are used extensively throughout the world. Instruments such as the modern piano and harp stemmed from primitive instruments like the hunting bow and the ancient lyre.



*Lyre made from human skull and gazelle horns, Africa.*



*Musician with kisser/lyre. Found in North and East Africa.*



*Boy playing a umqunge/musical bow, South Africa.*

### **Review**

- **Communication** was the most important function in music.
- We have no evidence as to how early music actually sounded.
- Primitive humans made music from materials in their natural environment.
- Early music consisted of **rhythm**, then melody. **No harmony** was developed.
- Music was used in social events, religious ceremonies, and dances.
- Instruments were crafted into one of four basic groups: **aerophones, idiophones, membranophones, and chordophones.**

*Source Material: "A Journey Into Ancient Music" by Dr. Christine Sezer*

