

LUCRETIUS, SONG AND MUSIC: A HISTORICAL APPROACH

Chantal Gabrielli

Department of Antiquities 'G. Pasquali', University of Florence, Florence, Italy

Abstract: The Latin poet Titus Lucretius Caro (1 century B.C.), speaking of the origins of music in his work *De rerum natura*, expresses an interesting opinion on the scientific and technological progress that man has attained over the course of time.

Keywords: Interdisciplinary paper, History of music, Song.

The channels of man's expressions are numerous and varied. Song and music are without a doubt, possibly some of the richest ones, because they allow us to express our emotions in ways that are sociably and culturally accessible and acceptable by all.

The origins of song in Western culture can be identified with the first literary expressions of the Greek world. The famous Greek poet Homer is said to have composed the Iliad and the Odyssey, after having skilfully combined stories and episodes on ancient heroes that the oral bards, the so-called singers of tales, recited during banquets, travelling from one Greek city to another. The same structure of the Greek tragedy foresaw several parts sung entirely by a chorus. All the Greek lyrical texts were composed to be sung in public with instrumental accompaniment. In reality, music was practically present in all moments of communal life in Greek society, in religious ceremonies, in the sporting arena, in symposiums, in solemn festivities, even during political disputes. The importance of song remains in Latin culture to such an extent that the Fathers of the Church turned to song, in order to render efficacious their attempts at evangelisation among the numerous peoples of the Roman Empire, so diversified with regard to culture and language. We know nothing of the ancient Greek and Roman music, which was composed before the III century B.C. The few musical texts that have been handed down to us from the Hellenistic and Roman period do not furnish precise and exhaustive reasons for their scarcity. There are only several inscriptions and a few fragments of papyrus, of which the interpretation and transcription are problematic. We do know that the musical system was based on the so-called tetrachords, that is, on elementary musical schemes, formed by the succession of four notes that, in Greek music, had the same function as the octave scales in our music. In addition, depending on the length of the intervals that separated these four sounds, various tetrachords existed: energetic, sweet or plaintive, according to the ambiance into which the song was introduced.

The long journey from the first sounds that man produced and individuated in nature up to the more modern compositions is also the result of a process of rationalisation that has at its core the relationship man-environment-music. And it is exactly on the origin of such a dialectic relationship between man and nature that I would like to focus, speaking of one of the most famous Latin poets who lived in the I century B.C. in Rome, Titus Lucretius Caro, and of his interesting ideas on song and music [1] [2] [3].

In the Fifth book of his work, the *De rerum natura*, the poet speaks of the origin and formation of our world and of the origin and development of humanity, describing several important steps that marked the progress of civilisation; the working of metals, weaving, the creation of language, the cultivation of the land, and song and music as well. From Greek philosophic thought comes the idea that men have learned the arts and crafts from animals, like the weaving of the spider's web, the construction of the swallow's nest, and music from the imitation of singing birds like the swan and the nightingale. However, in reality, in the discovery of the arts and techniques, man was guided by nature and pushed, according to the circumstances, by "need", by "necessity" and by what was "useful". In fact, the observation of nature caused mankind to desire its imitation; need, instead, forced him to look for instruments to better the conditions of his own life; while the benefit, or profit that emerged from the discoveries, continued to stimulate him to search with a desire to perfect his techniques [4].

Not by chance, Lucretius speaks of the origin of music (vv. 1379-1435) after the origin and the progress of techniques in the field of agriculture, almost wanting to indicate a separation between the arts that aided in the acquisition of goods, that were the first to occupy mankind to satisfy their impellent needs, and the other arts that followed, like poetry, music and song, when material necessities were no longer pressing, and one sought the pleasure of the spirit. Art, and therefore music, did not represent a necessity for man, but only a complement of his life: the liberal arts originated from the useful or advantageous. That is, from the pleasure that dance, song and poetry brought to people in moments of tranquillity or festivities. Here, the reference to the Greek philosopher Epicurus (IV-III century B.C.) is clear (his doctrine was diffuse in the work of Lucretius, his fervent disciple) and to the distinction he made between natural and necessary desires, those that are natural but not necessary, and those

that are neither natural nor necessary (Epicurus, *ad Men.*, 127, 130-131; *K. A.*, 15, 18, 29) [5]. Human needs corresponded to these desires and therefore some were real needs, others not; some were necessarily to be satisfied, others not necessarily. Epicurus appreciated the pleasure that music generated not only in the common person but also in the learned. He considered, however, the joy of music an unnecessary pleasure, that required a continuous learning process and constant practice, and for this reason could be criticised because it distracted the scholar from a more important study, that which led to real knowledge, the study of philosophy.

As for everything including music, nature has been the inspirational model for man: song originated with the imitation of singing birds, the sound of the wind that blew within the reeds, created musical instruments like the flute and bagpipes. The flute, in fact, was constituted by only one reed with openings that were covered by the fingers in order to make music while the bagpipes were formed by larger reeds tied together, of various widths and sizes. The sound was produced by passing the lips from one reed to another. Lucretius only mentions wind instruments when he speaks of music while the lira, the most famous musical instrument in the Greek world, is not mentioned. Such an absence can be explained if one thinks of the context in which this passage was introduced. Lucretius is speaking of the theory of humanity and of the discoveries that man made to better his own life. The discovery of the lira is attributed to Hermes (Mercury), a God, and for this reason is not cited. Thus, the choice of the poet is conditioned by the idea that in the development of man from a savage state to modern day society, there was no divine intervention. It was need and reason to stimulate man and to make him advance over time. The gods, that lived isolated and indifferent in the *intermundia*, did not instruct man in the fields of agriculture, metallurgy or in the arts; it was rather nature and ingenuity that compelled man to improve when driven by necessity [6].

Moreover, the description of an idyllic scene of primitive life in the midst of music and dance offers Lucretius the occasion to reflect on the important differences that existed between the rustic music of the past and the refined music of his times and on the sense and value of these changes that the course of modern civilisation had imposed. Modern music, so perfected and refined, did not produce a greater pleasure than that which one's ancestors had experienced, who instead, with simplicity, used music and song to express sentiments of joy, pain, exaltation or depression. The same Greek philosophers gave great importance, in their meditations on culture and on the formation of man, to music and its relation to morality. They considered modern music to be in decline and felt that the refinements, which had been brought to it, were the means of its perversion. At the basis of such a moral consideration was the idea that true pleasure (*voluptas*), the goal of Epicurean thought, notwithstanding progress, must have a limit, or man, who is intent on its attainment,

is destined to unhappiness. If in our lives we have not experienced something sweeter, we like what is at our disposal and this idea seems to prevail in whatever situation. If we then find something better, we immediately forget the previous pleasure and change our opinion of what we liked first. Progress, in fact, does nothing but manifest our restlessness, which then forces us to change. Moreover, it is a change, which can be compared to the individual who goes continuously from the house in the city to the house in the country and visa versa in the vain attempt to escape one's inner emptiness and to find happiness in a more pleasant place. For this reason, we must not ask progress to fill our emptiness but we should reserve our strengths for our inner perfection, following the precepts and teachings of the philosopher Epicurus [7]. These advise us to liberate ourselves from every ambition, every desire, every superstition, and every fear, to reach a state of perfect serenity similar to the beatitude of the gods. Man's happiness therefore could be identified with the healthy body and serene soul, and the pleasure (*voluptas*) which is merely the absence of pain for the body and anguish for the soul.

How can one not hear the modernity and relevance to the present in the words of Lucretius, when he reaffirms the moral damage that is caused to man by his search for continuously new objects and renewed pleasures, the same technology, if poorly used in war or in the production of superfluous consumer goods, conspires towards man's destruction and unhappiness, whose end is to then lead a chaotic and turbulent life like a violent and stormy sea: "And therefore the human race constantly suffers for nothing and consumes life in useless strife, because it doesn't know what limits possession has, and from where true pleasure is derived. That pushed life into the high seas little by little, and from the deep, unleashed the great waves of war." (vv. 1430-1435) [1] [2] [3].

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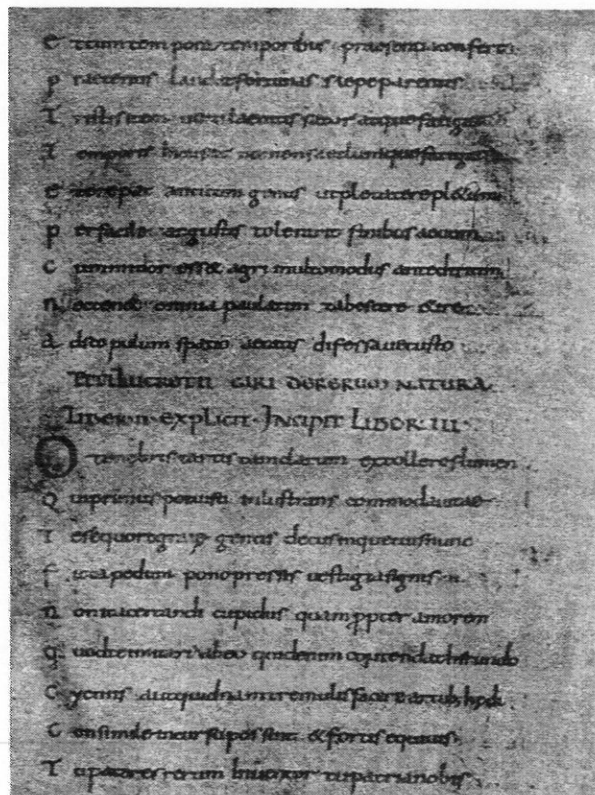


Figure 1 – Page of one of the oldest codex of *De rerum natura*, named *Oblongus* from its shape, and dated back to the 9th century A.D. It is preserved in the Library of Leiden, The Netherlands. The manuscript is also named *Vossianus*, from the name of its owner, J.Voss, a Dutch philologist. J.Voss owned another famous codex of *De rerum natura*, the *Quadratus*, which is now preserved in the Leiden Library as well.