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Presents

Echoes of Ancient History



A 52' documentary by Bernard George
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Summary

Recently, a papyrus was discovered in store in the Louvre museum: a barely readable Greek text, topped with small strange signs. The archaeologist-musicologist Annie Bélis reveals that it is a very ancient Greek partition and more particularly a tragedy, a Medea. A grammatical feature of the text makes it possible to identify the composer, Carcinus Le Jeune, an author mentioned by Aristotle in his Rhetoric. By gradually discovering Carcinus' life, a whole world blossoms: that of Greek musicians honored like gods and who crossed the Mediterranean to take part in competitions on the model of the Olympic Games.

But how can we decrypt the music of the Medea?

To hear the score as it was heard by the Greeks 2400 years ago, you would still have to play it with vintage instruments. We will go all around the Mediterranean, where archaeological excavations gave us some ancient scores and quantity of vestiges of instruments. Thanks to new technologies developed at IRCAM and the City of Music, we will be able to virtually reconstruct ancient instruments in order to hear sounds that have disappeared over the past two millennia: the music of Greek Antiquity.

Discovery

In 1891, in Cairo, a French Egyptologist, bought from an antique dealer a cigar box in which many papyrus were rolled. After passing from hand to hand, the box lands in store of the Louvre Museum. Recently, a papyrologist discovered the cigar box and, noticing the papyrus, entrusted them to Annie Bélis who deciphered a musical score. But these are notes written in an ancient system that has nothing to do with ours. A careful investigation then begins to uncover the mysteries of the papyrus, which will prove to be a major discovery in the history of musical archeology.

Decipher the text

In her laboratory, Annie Bélis uses various techniques to decipher the ancient papyrus: infrared and ultraviolet photos, use of the binocular microscope. Reading the text is like decoding a secret message. If the musical notes were easy enough to locate, the text which accompanies them and which constitutes the booklet is almost illegible. But Annie Bélis knows that the Greek musical texts are mythological songs with their processions of gods and goddesses, heroes and nymphs. To solve the enigma of the papyrus, she therefore seeks in priority what could be proper names ... and notices the recurrence of a word: Med, Medea, Me ... The document she holds in her hands is of all evidence a Medea!

The author of the Medea

But now the question is raised about who is the author of the Medea. While studying the text of the papyrus, Annie Bélis notices a very particular Greek spelling. A syntax "error" that she has already seen in Aristotle's Rhetoric ... No more doubts, the shreds of papyrus discovered in store in the Louvre contain the score of the Medea by Carcinus le Jeune, a poet and contemporary musician of Aristotle. A song most likely heard by

Alexander the Great whose philosopher was the tutor and who had a passion for music. But who was this Carcinus Le Jeune?

Far from being unknown, he belonged to a Syracusan family settled in Athens where one was a tragic author from father to son. His grandfather, Carcinus l'Ancien, also appears on the Parthenon Attic inscriptions which list the victories obtained by poets during competitions.

The Rosette Stone of Greek Music

Armand d'Angour, British archaeologist, welcomes us near the site of Ephesus where placed on a tomb, an archaeological treasure was found in 1883: a small marble column on which was engraved a funeral song. Composed at the end of the 1st century AD, it is the oldest musical piece of which the entire text and music have been preserved. For this reason it is called "the oldest song in the world". Thanks to this discovery, we were able to begin to decipher the notation system of Greek music, by relying on the Tables of Alypius, an ancient text from the 6th century and a true "Rosetta Stone" of Greek music.



Music in classical Greece

In classical Greece, music was linked to cultural ceremonies, but also to theatrical performances and competitions. It was of such importance that all citizens received musical training. Women of good condition were required to know how to sing and play the lyre in private; as for the Hetaera, the geishas of the time, music and dance had to be their first qualities!

A first decryption

In front of large layers reproducing the Medea papyrus and the Tables of Alypius, Annie Bélis and one of her students, Nathalie Berland, archaeologist-musicologist and distinguished flutist, decipher the music of the Medea, note after note. Playing the flute, Nathalie interprets some strange melodic lines, almost dissonant, very far from our harmonic references. But the work is far from being over. Because if we now know the composer, the text and the music of the Medea, there is a new challenge: what instruments did the Greeks use in the 4th century BC?

The instruments of ancient Greece

Sylvain Perrot, researcher at the CNRS, welcomes us to the Museum where a tomb discovered in Athens in the early 80s was reconstructed: the Tomb of the Musician. Next to her lie the remains of a papyrus and wax tablets, as well as an aulos, a sort of small flute. We can also find a harp from which remain the arm and the sound box with some leather traces and metal studs. Excavations have also made it possible to find the trumpets of Tutankhamun in Thebes, cymbals in Susa, a lyre in Athens, a sistrum of an Isiac priest in Nîmes, a Gallic carnyx in Tintignac ... All these instruments circulated according to the conquests and trade and cultural exchanges. In Egypt, for example, many Greek instruments were discovered from the Ptolemaic period, just after the reign of Alexander the Great ... therefore from the Medea of Carcinus Le Jeune!

Egyptian music through oral transmission

Immense paradox: we know that music was present at any time in Egyptian life, as evidenced by the countless unearthed iconographic and archaeological traces. However, neither Egyptian score nor any musical notation on hieroglyphs and papyrus was found. According to historians, musical art was transmitted orally. Due to the absence of scores, we know very little about the music of Pharaonic Egypt: nothing allows us to really understand or define the status and life of musicians in Egyptian society ... and even less the music that was played at that time. On the other hand, we know that music was considered to be a link between men and gods: in Egyptian thought, losing the ability to hear is tantamount to dying. Starting from the new empire the scribes write the name "ears" with the hieroglyphic sign "ankh" which means "life".



Pompeii, conservation site of aulos

Christophe Vendries, archaeologist specializing in music in the Roman world, takes us to one of the most famous houses in Pompeii, that of G. Vibius. It was there that in 1867, some aulos were found in an exceptional state of conservation, once again attesting to the movement of artists and their instruments all around the Mediterranean. The divine origin of the aulos is most certainly linked to its ancientness: its invention dates back to the Cycladic civilization which developed ... between the 3rd and the 2nd millennium BC.

Other frescoes from Pompeii show that the aulos was associated with almost all occasions to play in a social context: at banquets, funerals or even during religious sacrifices, but also in the navy to punctuate the movements of oars. In Greece everyone plays it, whether it is a simple pierced reed, or a professional instrument made by a luthier.

But unlike Egypt, where music was a sacred activity, in Rome it was practiced by all: slaves, low-status musicians ... and even by the emperor himself! Unfortunately, not a single Roman partition has come up to us.

Archaeologist Christophe Vendries takes us to an old tavern in the Amalfi city. It was there that the most remarkable musical discovery took place on the site of Pompeii: that of six horns, trumpets that resounded as well on the battlefield to encourage soldiers as in amphitheaters during gladiatorial combat. We know that they are of Etruscan origin but those of Pompeii are the only ones ever identified in Italy.

Paolo Giulierini, director of the Archaeological Museum of Naples, welcomes us in front of the sumptuous palace, which has one of the most important collections of Greco-Roman antiquities in the world. The six cornua from Pompeii are displayed in a display case. They are huge: four meters long! Graceful, they unfold in a large arc. But they are broken into several pieces. And none have a mouthpiece. The ancient instruments from the excavations are wonderful, but they are obviously unusable. How to capture the sounds without being able to make them sound, resonate or vibrate?



Reshaping instruments using technology

To hear Carcinus' Medea, as the Greeks heard it, it is essential to reconstruct period instruments and make them ring accurately. This is a new challenge for the team of archaeologists-musicologists. Their goal is to recreate an aulos so that the archaeologist-musicologist and flutist Nathalie Berland can interpret the Medea by accompanying vocals! The state of current research and the most advanced technologies will provide unexpected answers.

Stéphane Vaiedelich, head of Archaeometry laboratory, welcomes Annie Bélis and Nathalie Berland in a room that looks more like a space station control center than a research institute.

We discover on a screen, reproduced digitally, in three dimensions, the Greek lyre with tortoise shell that we had discovered in the tomb of the musician in Athens. The lyre seems coming from the workshop of an antique instruments' manufacturer. Then, Stéphane Vaiedelich displays a cornu, and an aulos, always in three dimensions. The researcher shows each side of the instruments: he can go around it, see the smallest detail, and grasp the reliefs ... The researchers have even reproduced engravings on pieces of wood or horns!

The range of instruments

The visual aspect, as perfect as it is, says nothing about the way an instrument "sounded". It was at IRCAM that researchers were able to resolve this fundamental question: the range of instruments. René Caussé, director of the Instrumental Acoustics pole, presents the fruit of the latest work of his team of researchers: they have managed to model the famous cornua, found in Pompeii, yet broken and incomplete. Thanks to the Modalys sound synthesis software developed by IRCAM, and by entering the length of the horned pipe but also its diameter and the size of its mouth, we can give a true idea of the sound that the cornu produced ... It is then possible to make a "virtual" instrument and have it played by the computer.

But René Caussé also has a surprise in store for Nathalie Berland and Annie Bélis: the Greek aulos on which Stéphane Vaiedelich worked at the archaeological laboratory of the Musée de la Cité de la Musique has also been modeled!

So, finally, can the aulois found in Pompeii ring again, after 2,000 years of silence! It remains to "really" reconstruct them and to learn how to use them, because you can play an instrument in a thousand different ways! It is therefore toward the experimental archeology side that Annie Bélis will turn to provide the latest answers to her investigation.

Experimental archeology

Violin maker Paul Reuchlin has been working for over 20 years on the reconstruction of ancient instruments. He welcomes Annie Bélis and Nathalie Berland in his workshop. But once the instrument is finished, you still have to understand how to play it! Nathalie Berland will lend herself to the game, knowing that the exercise is particularly complex ...

In recent years, on the initiative of Annie Bélis, other archaeologists-musicologists and classical musicians have gradually specialized in the practice of instruments reconstructed from archaeological data. They gave life to an original musical formation: the Kérilos ensemble which recreates, in the most scientific way possible, the music of Greek Antiquity.



The concert

We meet the members of the Kérilos ensemble in the ancient theater of Arles, for an exceptional concert. In front of a crowd of curious people massed in the stands, they will revive instruments and the ancient repertoire. We recognize the Greek lyre and its turtle shell in the arms of Annie Bélis, the harp from the tomb of the musician, while other musicians have a lute, cymbals or Greek tambourines, all reconstituted, thanks to the experimental archeology. The Kérilos ensemble, accompanied by a choir, interprets for us the most famous tunes of Greek music that have come down to us: we recognize the Seikilos Epitaph or the Hymns to Apollo. But the concert obviously ends with the Carcinean Medea, first played with its two aulois by Nathalie Berland, then resumed in three voices by a tenor, a baritone and a soprano.

More than 2,000 years after its disappearance, the music of Antiquity resonates and vibrates again in the millennial amphitheater.



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