

The Orphic Path to Divine Union: “Theon Therapeian” and Ritual Music in Contemporary Greek Mysteries

Antonios Chrysovergis

Abstract

Presented in this paper, I explore the value of “Theon Therapeian,” an ancient Greek therapeutic idea that emphasizes “Service to the Gods” and “Divine Worship” through ritual music. In this study, I focus on the Orphic tradition and religion in the context of contemporary Greek Mysteries. I am seeking to reveal the transformative power of Divine Worship and ritual music in achieving unity between the human soul, nature, and the divine. My research provides a brief overview of Orphic beliefs as practiced today, along with examples of contemporary Orphic rituals and musical illustrations. Ultimately, my aim is to revive and elevate ancient practices, inspiring interest in the transformative and therapeutic power of both ancient and contemporary Greek Mysteries and esotericism.

Key Words: Orphic, Greek, Mysteries, Music, Therapy

Introduction

The Orphic tradition, a mystery tradition originating from ancient Greece, draws deeply from the life and epoch of Orpheus – a revered figure from remote antiquity. This tradition profoundly intertwined elements of music, religion, mythology, science, and philosophy, among others. In this paper, I aim to highlight the Greek understanding of the Orphic Mysteries and tradition, as well as the identity of Orpheus, his followers, and the traditions and practices associated with him. Most ancient authors, along with his ancient and contemporary followers, regarded Orpheus as a historical figure rather than solely a character of mythology.

According to a popular version of local tradition, Orpheus, a Greek prince of great significance, was born in a cave on Mt. Olympus near Leibethra, an ancient city in the region of Pieria. At the end of the Orphic Argonautica, one of the ancient texts to which literary authority is attributed to Orpheus himself, Orpheus pays tribute to his birthplace: “Thus, quickly departing, I pressed on to snowy Thrace, in the region of Libethra, in my homeland, entering the famous cave where my mother gave birth to me on the bed of the brave Oeagrus” (trans. 2011). Leibethra was also Orpheus’ burial place according to tradition. This region, now located in central Macedonia with Thessaly to the south, was historically part of the Greek Kingdoms of Macedon and Thrace. However, it is essential to remember that during the time I am referencing, these kingdoms were not clearly defined, and people’s perceptions of them varied. This understanding of ancient Greek geography might be one of the main reasons Orpheus is depicted in the earliest sources (starting in the 6th c. BCE) as a Pierian Greek and later as a Thracian Greek by ancient authors, depending on the era in which his name appears. For the ancient people of archaic Greece and later in Classical and Hellenistic times within the philosophical and religious spheres, Orpheus was a celebrated ancestor who lived in the Heroic Age. He was glorified for his pioneering advancements in music and revered as a theologian for his religious reforms. Commemorated for his role as a musician and priest among the Argonauts, he was immortalized for his heroic descent into the underworld to reclaim his wife, Eurydice, using the divine power of his voice.

Historically the Orphic tradition focused on themes concerning the human condition and the concept of an immortal soul. It emphasized the power of music, poetic language, ritual drama, and symbolism. It also explored the ideas of Remembrance and Fate and utilizes

invocation to foster a direct connection between the human soul, the natural world, and the divine. In this paper, I primarily aim to delve into the ancient idea known as “Theon Therapeian,” which was one of the many therapeutic approaches in ancient Greece. Even though it is not exclusively an Orphic notion, it lies at the heart of both ancient and contemporary Greek religion and Mysteries. It emphasized “Service to the Gods,” “Divine Worship,” and the nurturing of the human soul through the worship of the Gods. Through this exploration, I will discuss the Orphic tradition in the context of contemporary Greek Mysteries and its relationship to Theon Therapeian. Additionally, I will discuss the transformative power of Divine Worship and the significance and application of ritual music in the Orphic tradition today. Finally, I will focus on specific uses of music in rituals and explore the philosophical connections between music and its role in facilitating the soul’s ascent to divine realms within contemporary Orphic Mysteries.

The Orphic Tradition in Contemporary Times: A Brief Introduction, Key Beliefs, and Practices

The story of the Orphic tradition in contemporary times began at the start of the previous century, in the early 1900s. Two prominent figures, Spyridon Nagos (1868-1933) and Spyrodemos Anemogiannis Sinanidis (1933-2021), not only laid its foundations but also nurtured it through their followers and the writings they left behind. Spyridon Nagos, a renowned esoteric figure from Kakouri, Arcadia, played a pivotal role in reviving and structuring the Orphic and Pythagorean traditions in contemporary Greece (Νάγος, 2000, p. 9). He was a leader in esoteric teachings, authored influential works, and his approach to philosophy set high moral standards for all subsequent esotericism in Greece. Among his peers, he was admired for his ecumenical and humanistic approach, which is summarized in one of his sayings: “He who worships the Whole, also worships the part” (Νάγος, 2000, p. 31).

Conversely, Spyrodemos Anemogiannis-Sinanidis, an esteemed classical scholar and researcher from Athens, made significant contributions to the Orphic tradition (“Σπυροδόημος Ανεμογιάννης - Σινανίδης,” n.d.). He taught philosophy at the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, authored several books and academic papers on ancient Greek philosophy and subjects from the Orphic tradition, lectured extensively, and is regarded as the spiritual successor to S. Nagos. Through six generations of Orphics, their legacy persists today, extending beyond the confines of Greece. Within this single, undivided lineage of the followers of Orpheus, there are two primary approaches among the various Orphic Thiasoi and circles: the groups that

approach the Orphic tradition as a form of esotericism and those that view it primarily as an initiatic mystery religion. Both are undivided and interconnected among their adherents.

The Orphic tradition, rooted in ideas attributed to Orpheus in ancient Greek religious philosophies, diverged significantly from conventional Greek religious practices because of its unique doctrines and initiation rites. This divergence often attracted the scrutiny of the established religious authorities of the city-states. Such differences, notably the use of sacred texts during rituals and the abstention from meat, posed challenges. Although today's standards are radically different from those of ancient times, sacred texts such as the Orphic Hymns and the various Orphic Theogonies still occupy a central place in the rites and rituals of contemporary Orphics.

It is worth noting that when today's Orphics refer to a text or an idea as "Orphic," they are referencing the extant written materials traditionally attributed to Orpheus. Some of these include the contents of the Derveni Papyrus, the Orphic Hymns, the Orphic Fragments, and the Orphic Argonautica, to mention a few, as well as the oral Orphic traditions passed down within the Orphic lineage from generation to generation in Greece. This is regardless of contemporary academia's debate over whether these materials are genuinely Orphic. The writings of S. Nagos and S. A. Sinanidis are also included, and they are treated as sacred, with particular emphasis always placed on them. Key tenets of the Orphic tradition include a dualistic view of the soul and body, adherence to the cosmogonic myth of Dionysus Zagreus, and rigorous ritual practices. Among these practices is the approach known as Theon Therapeian, which will be explained later. It aims to achieve personal liberation, physical and spiritual purification, and direct communion with the God Dionysus, as well as with other Gods, through a complex combination of cultural practices that include ecstatic ritual music.

Continuing, it is essential to highlight the significance of the Orphic theogonies, particularly the *Orphic Hieros Logos in Twenty-Four Rhapsodies*. This rhapsodic poem, according to scholars, originates from the Hellenistic period to the 2nd century CE, but comprises materials and ideas that reference archaic and possibly even earlier times (Chrysanthou, 2020, p. 33-34). Presently, it survives only in fragmented form. At its core is the myth of Dionysus Zagreus, which recounts the creation of the universe, the generation of the Gods, the dismemberment of the young God by the Titans, their punishment by Zeus, mankind's birth from the remnants of the Titans and the Ether of Zeus, as well as Dionysus' rebirth from his father's thigh. This theogony

advances the notion that the human soul is immortal and contains a divine spark, but it is ensnared within a Titanic earthly body which the Orphics view as a tomb. This idea is also reiterated by Plato through the voice of Socrates in two of his dialogues, *Gorgias* and *Cratylus*. In a very characteristic and cyclical way, Socrates is echoing the Orphic notion of the body as the tomb of the soul: “Who knoweth if to live is to be dead, and to be dead, to live? And we really, it may be, are dead; in fact, I once heard one of our sages say that we are now dead, and the body is our tomb...” (Plato, trans. 1996, 492E).

Furthermore, it is essential to reference the cyclical arrangements of life, death, and rebirth which hold a central place in the Orphic Mysteries and religion. In the following Orphic fragment, the cyclical nature of the Orphic Dionysian eschatology becomes immediately apparent: “Life-death-life / truth / (a) Dionysus, Orphics” (Pajares & Cristóbal, 2008, p. 39). This conception drives the Orphic pursuit of purification to free the soul from the chains of reincarnation – a perception the Greeks termed metempsychosis and metensomatosi (ἡμετεμψύχωσις, n.d.). However, an important distinction must be made: The Titanic nature should not be confused with the notion of original sin. Both ancient and contemporary Orphics perceive the Dionysian and Titanic aspects as characteristic potential tendencies toward specific life modalities, not as inherent attributes from birth.

Another important practice is the custom of the ancient funerary texts found in the tombs of Orphic initiates. From various archaeological findings, it appears that ancient adherents often referred to short funerary texts, known today as the Orphic Gold and Bone Tablets. These were inscribed with petitions for acceptance by the Greek Gods of the underworld and instructions for the initiated in the afterlife, serving as guides. An example of such a tablet was found in an Orphic tomb in Pharsalus in the region of Thessaly in Greece. L 4 Tablet from Pharsalus (c. 350–330 B.C.E), National Museum of Athens:

You will find in the mansion of Hades, on the right, a fountain
and next to it, a white cypress erect.
Don't get anywhere near that fountain!
Further on you will find, from the lake of Mnemosyne,
water freshly flowing. On its banks there are guardians
who will ask you what necessity brings you to them.
And you will tell them absolutely all the truth;
say: “I am the son of Earth and starry Heaven.
My name is Asterius. I am dry with thirst; give me, then,
to drink from the fountain.” (Pajares & Cristóbal, 2008, p. 11).

This tradition continues today among Orphics who also incorporate them during the various Orphic rites and rituals performed regularly by the Orphic Thiasoi.

Finally, regarding the traditions of abstinence from killings and violence, it is said that Orpheus was the first to instigate such practices. As Aristophanes reiterates in his play *Frogs* through the words of Aeschylus: “Orpheus revealed mystic rites to us, and taught us to abstain from killings” (Aristophanes, trans. 2002, 1032). However, it is important to indicate that the ancient Orphics, Pythagoreans, and Platonists, who were at times indistinguishable from one another, were committed to a moral life of nonviolence and practiced vegetarianism and semi-vegetarianism.

Even though the degree to which such ways were practiced varied from person to person, it is well attested in ancient texts that they also had the piety and wisdom not to abstain from certain public and private animal sacrifices that were integral to societal harmony. The approach to this delicate matter is highlighted and reaffirmed by Porphyry of Tyre in his text *On Abstinence From Killing Animals* when he discusses Pythagoras and his followers in relationship to the subject of abstinence from meat: “And some say that the Pythagoreans themselves partake of animate creatures whenever they sacrifice to the gods” (Porphyry, trans. 2014, 104.26). Marinus of Neapolis indicates in his *Life of Proclus* that such was also the case with the philosopher and expert in Orphic matters, Proclus, who would permit himself to eat meat out of piety when sacrificing to the Gods and participating in certain cult settings (Marinus, trans. 1925, 19). It is important to note that while vegetarianism is also practiced among contemporary Orphics, it is left to the discretion of the individual’s mode of living and their ability to adhere to such demanding standards of the tradition.

Today’s Orphic rites and life practices are intended to nurture the divine element within, facilitating the soul’s purification, eventual liberation from bodily constraints, and her reintegration with the divine.

“Theon Therapeian” as “Service to the Gods,” and “Divine Worship” in Contemporary Orphic Mysteries

Prior to delving into the ancient idea termed Theon Therapeian and its relevance in the contemporary Orphic Mysteries, one must first contextualize the significance of therapy. This was a fundamental aspect of daily life for the ancient Greeks. In its broader sense, the Greek term

“θεράπ-εἰα”, or “therapy” in English, was understood by the ancients to mean a form of “service” and “attendance”. It had four principal applications:

1. Service and attendance of persons and service paid to the Gods,
2. As medical or surgical treatment or cure,
3. As care and tendance of animals, and
4. In a collective sense, a body of attendants or retinue. (“θεραπεία,” n.d.)

Theon Therapeian, as an approach to therapy, can be found primarily in ancient Greek texts. It is expressed in various phraseological ways and attains a broad spectrum of meanings, some of which are still employed today in the same way as they were in ancient times. In its general sense, it is most properly understood as service paid to the Gods, conveying the development of an intimate bond with the Greek Gods through consistent ritualistic practices and worship. Socrates discusses this matter using his characteristic dialectic methodology in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*:

S. All right, yet what kind of attendance on the gods would holiness be?

E. It would be what slaves pay to their masters, Socrates.

S. I see. It would be some kind of service to the gods, it seems.

E. Very much so. (Plato, trans. 2017, 13d)

It is pertinent to note that in the wide-ranging context of Greek religion, the idea of “Service to the Gods” does not mean servitude the way we understand it today. The Greeks traditionally see their relationship with deity more as friendship rather than servitude in the strict sense of the word. The philosopher and priest of God Apollo at Delphi, Plutarch of Cheronia, mentions in his *Moralia: Advice to Bride and Groom* the above approach to deity in a very direct way: “The gods are the first and most important friends” (Plutarch, trans. 1928, 140.D.19).

Today, contemporary Orphic initiates have developed a deep and varied understanding of the idea of Theon Therapeian. This understanding encompasses a broad range of their religious and esoteric life, from establishing sacred places of worship to conducting votive processions. It also involves engaging in theurgy, performing rituals and dramas, composing music for ceremonial rites and contemplation, and executing sacred devotional acts. As I emphasized earlier, this is not part of a reconstructive effort but rather a meaningful evolution of a tradition that has been ceremoniously established, transmitted, and advanced, and is fully attuned to present-day needs.

In the following sections, I will delve into what is the essence of the contemporary Orphic Mysteries and esoterica in relationship to Theon Therapeian. Among the subjects to be discussed are the sacred acts of purification, ritual music, the use of invocations and hymns, and the use of ancient symbols.

Ritual Music in Contemporary Orphic Rituals and Practices

Music has always been at the heart of the Orphic tradition. With its origins deeply rooted in the life, times, and legend of Orpheus – who, according to tradition, charmed all of nature and even the Gods with his kithara – the Orphic tradition has consistently recognized the power of music to align the soul with the divine world. Orpheus’s musical innovations are often mistakenly attributed to ancient Thracian shamanism and ancient Greek ‘magic’ by scholars like M.L. West (West, 1993, p. 4) and W.K.C. Guthrie (Guthrie, 1993, p. 39) due to cultural relativism. However, the true influence of Orpheus’s musical innovations lies in intellectual, structural, and aesthetic advances they represent within the well-established ancient Greek musical tradition. The extraordinary abilities of Orpheus, as mentioned in ancient texts by authors such as Euripides, Aristophanes, and Apollonius Rhodius, are a poetic expression of admiration for his contributions to Greek music and culture. Rather than being contextualized with an emphasis on supposed “Thracian” shamanism and ancient Greek “magic,” these abilities should be viewed as cultural and technical innovations. This is exemplified by his addition of the Hypate, the lowest string on the ancient lyre, attributed to him. Orpheus’s innovations in the ancient melos, “melody, song,” were also renowned in ancient times, so much so that they are referenced in Plutarch’s *Moralia: On Music*, which highlights his distinctive and innovative musical style and treats him as a real person: “Terpander took as his models the hexameters of Homer and the music of Orpheus. But Orpheus evidently imitated no predecessor, as there were none as yet, unless it was composers of songs for the auloi, and Orpheus’ work resembles theirs in no way” (Plutarch, trans. 1967, 1132F-1133).

At this point, it is important to note that “mousike,” “music,” in the context of Greek tradition and religion, encompasses not just the performance of instrumental compositions but also poetry, dance, and everything under the dominion of the Muses. This includes both the arts and sciences. Furthermore, music during the Orphic rituals does not merely fulfill an aesthetic role, but it signals the arrival of the Muses and the Gods related to music in the ritual. It is within this multidisciplinary approach to mousike, and through an elevated understanding of music as

having a divine origin, that contemporary Orphic practices reemerge. In the context of Theon Therapeian, these practices are consciously aligned with the Orphic, Dionysian, Pythagorean, and Platonic traditions, primarily manifesting as serious ceremonial and philosophical expressions, among other forms.

One of the most prominent applications of ritual music in contemporary Orphic rites is its use as medicine. Today, Orphic adherents believe that this notion, when properly understood and meaningfully approached, can have a direct therapeutic effect on the souls of participants during the rites. Historically, this idea is attributed to Pythagoras. Iamblichus, in his book *The Pythagorean Life*, transmits the following important passage regarding the therapeutic use of music by Pythagoras and his followers: “But at another time they used music in the place of medicine. And there are certain melodies devised as remedies against the passions of the soul, and also against despondency and lamentation, which Pythagoras invented as things that afford the greatest assistance in these maladies. And again, he employed other melodies against rage and anger, and against every aberration of the soul” (Iamblichus, trans. 1818, XX5).

Another central religious and esoteric approach to ritual music, widely used in today’s Orphic rites, is the Harmony of the Spheres, an ancient Pythagorean idea that emphasizes celestial and musical order. Proclus, drawing inspiration from both Orphic teachings and Platonic philosophy, emphasized the cosmic significance of music. In his *Commentary on the Republic*, he describes harmony and music as tools in the hands of the demiurgic God Who uses them to create cosmic order as He fashions the Universe:

He makes imitations both visible and beautiful of things both invisible and beautiful and makes imitations that exist naturally of the things that exist intellectually; using musical modes (harmonia) through which it is provided for the virtue that is in the whole to dominate and for vice to be diminished. He gives the rhythmic metre to the motions [in the universe] so that they undergo a motion that is rational (kata logon), and produces a single living harmony and one rhythm that is composed from all things. (Proclus, trans. 2018, 68.17 - 68.22)

The utilization of specific modes and rhythms, as described by Plato, Aristotle, and even later authors such as Proclus and Aristides Quintilianus, reflects various cultural attributes and moral states. Their main aim is to assist in intellectual and spiritual ascent and to shape the character of the soul in a transcendental manner. Additionally, the use of philosophical correspondences and analogies between numbers, music, and the sensible world plays an integral role in these practices. Essential rhythms employed during the Orphic rites include the

Paean, the Anapest, the Iamb, the Cretic, and the Bacchius. Moreover, the various astrological correspondences between the ancient Zodiacal signs and the associated musical notes, primarily derived from Platonism and Ptolemaic Astrology, are also considered significant. These elements form an important part of ritual music in the contemporary Orphic Mystery and esoteric traditions. Influential philosophers and authors in this domain, such as Pythagoras, Plato, Aristoxenus, Plutarch of Chaeronea, Proclus, Aristides Quintilianus, and Nicomachus of Gerasa, have continuously informed a vast range of contemporary Orphic musical practices. Later in this study, I will explore some of these methods, as I have personally contributed to the revival of these ideas, especially the Harmony of the Spheres and the purifications via the four classical elements in relation to ritual music.

One of the fundamental reasons for engaging in these practices today is the belief in the intimate connection between music, ethos, and the shaping of character and soul. The notion of music as an essential force in harmonizing the soul is evident in several important ancient texts, including Plato's *Republic*, where he states:

"In that case, Glaucon," I said, "isn't an education in the arts most essential for these reasons, in that rhythm and melody above all penetrate to the innermost part of the soul and most powerfully affect it, bringing gracefulness, and, if one is brought up correctly, make one graceful; if not, isn't the result the opposite?" (Plato, trans. 2013, 401d)

This principle is applied to the core of Orphic practices, both ancient and contemporary.

In contemporary Orphic rituals, this ancient understanding is both revived and renewed. Ritual music is used to invoke specific deities, facilitate sacred acts, contemplative states, and create a sacred space for powerful devotional experiences. The choice of instruments, rhythm, melody, and even the silence between the notes is meticulously considered. This careful selection guides the practitioner on an immersive, transformative journey to achieve a state of ritual ecstasy and a sense of union with the Gods, known among the followers of the tradition as "enthousiasmos" ("Enthousiasmos," 2002). The ancient Greek lyre, the aulos, the frame drum, and the triangle are just a few of the traditional instruments used to achieve the inspiration and enthousiasmos sought by participants. Contemporary instruments, such as the guitar and synthesizers, are also used for their technological capabilities, though not as frequently as the traditional ones. Drawing from the wisdom of ancient musicians influenced by Orpheus, such as Terpander and Pindar, as well as polymaths like Pythagoras and Plato and the schools of thought they established, contemporary Orphics hold a unique perspective. They understand that music

is not merely an external sound, but a reflection of the inner and divine harmonies that could potentially affect a person's character and soul, and shape realities beyond that.

Four Mystery Rites Incorporating “Theon Therapeian” and Ritual Music – A Short Introduction

Below, I will attempt, to the best of my ability and within the limits allowed by tradition, to explore four contemporary Orphic Mystery rites. These rites are both religious and esoteric in nature and take place within the confines of sanctuaries and private homes. Present-day Orphics refer to their meeting places as “Orphic Sanctuaries” and “Ορφικές Οικείες” (Orphic Homes). The latter highlights the meaningful connection between the Orphic Mystery tradition and the structural dynamics of the Greek family unit. The following explorations aim to underscore the therapeutic, musical, and historical values of these rites and practices. I will also provide relevant philosophical insights accompanied by short musical excerpts to further deepen the understanding of the role of ritual music in the context of the Orphic rites.

The Purification Rite

In ancient Greek mystery traditions, as well as in contemporary mystery rites, the sacred act of purification occupies a central position in the lives of initiates and esoterics alike. Purification occurs not only during initiation rites but also in burial rites and everyday life, encompassing household worship. Within the framework of contemporary Orphic rites, purifications are commonly conducted during the early stages of initiation rites, irrespective of whether they are preliminary or represent a more advanced stage of the overall process.

The following brief description and analysis pertain to a preliminary purification rite that primarily occurs during the first stages of the initiation process. However, the formulaic nature of the rite encourages its repetition, hence it is employed at several junctures throughout the life of the initiate. This purification rite is primarily associated with the divine level of God Poseidon and is a poignant example of the contemporary Orphic Eleusinian elemental purification processes as a medium of the soul's transformation.

The initial part of the rite emphasizes the significance of water, an element often associated with rebirth and purification. As the initiate approaches the altar, they place both hands into a bowl filled with seawater to begin the first stage of purification through the cosmogonic element of Water. This immersion is an emblematic link to God Poseidon, who is usually referred to as the “second Zeus.” Poseidon's dominion over the oceans and water bodies

is not just an assertion of his power but represents the vast expanse of the element of Ether through the Cosmos. Furthermore, cosmogonic Water is one of the two primordial elements in the Orphic creation story and has been traditionally associated with purification since ancient times. The initiand's purification via the element of water suggests a cleansing of the deeper realms of the soul.

Following this sacred act, the pilgrim continues their journey on a designated Sacred Way until they meet the Priest and Priestess of Goddess Artemis and God Apollo for the next phase of purification. In the contemporary Orphic Mystery tradition, Goddess Artemis is associated with birth and rebirth but at a higher spiritual level, and God Apollo with enlightenment and the soul's freedom. The priests then perform an act of raising white candles, which symbolizes illumination, enlightenment, and the dispelling of darkness or ignorance. When they subsequently lower these candles to the heart position, it indicates an infusion of this divine light into the very core of the initiand's being. This act serves a dual purpose: it is a gesture of reverence and a means of purification by fire. The heart, often considered the seat of the soul and traditionally related to vitality and life force, is thus sanctified.

The rite concludes with another significant salutation and an act steeped in sacred symbolism. The initiand approaches the priest of God Zeus and steps on what is known as "Dios Kodion," a white sheepskin, with the left foot. The initiand acknowledges in reverence the protective embrace of the chief deity. The white fleece today has profound symbolism among contemporary Orphics, representing the vehicle of God Zeus's soul. It is also seen as a protective barrier, signifying purity at a divine level. This act also embodies the initiand's commitment to remain pure and grounded in divine wisdom. Finally, as the initiands, if more than one, depart, they carry with them the blessings and purifications of water, fire, and the divine, marking their spiritual ascent and alignment with the divine word.

The music used in the purification ritual varies; however, its primary objective remains consistent: symbolically purifying the pilgrims and instilling a sense of harmony, thereby preparing them for the forthcoming initiation processes and rites. Traditionally, during the purification rites, an ancient hymn known as the Paean is employed. This religious hymn is typically offered to Apollo, among other deities, who is invoked as a God of healing and purification. It is customary to offer the Paean at the beginning of a new undertaking and, as in antiquity, during other instances such as thanksgiving or to honor the God for granting victory

("Παιάν," n.d.). In these hymns, the Paeon which is the dominant foot of the meter comprises one long syllable followed by three short syllables (– ∪ ∪ ∪) ("Paeon," n.d.). The preferred instruments are the ancient Greek lyre and the kithara primarily due to their association with Pythagoras, Orpheus and God Apollo.

The mode used in contemporary Paeans is the ancient Dorian mode (approx. E-E' in western notation), sacred primarily to God Apollo among other Gods. In the context of the Orphic tradition, the sacredness of this musical mode is mentioned in the Orphic Hymn 34 to the God Apollo, specifically between lines 19-23 (trans. 2013):

...now again with a Doric mode, harmoniously balancing the poles, you keep the living races distinct. You have infused harmony into the lot of all men, giving them an equal measure of winter and summer: the lowest notes you strike in the winter, the highest notes you make distinct in the summer, your mode is Doric for spring's lovely and blooming season.

Here is a brief example of music that incorporates a variation of the Paeanic rhythm in 5/4 and the ancient Dorian mode during the purification rites. The melody is composed for a seven-string lyre with Pythagorean tuning:

Ex. 1



“Myesis,” “Initiation” – The Rite of the Enthronement

In the realm of ancient rituals, sacred rites from traditions deeply rooted in the ancient Orphic and Eleusinian Mysteries embody a myriad of symbolic representations, profound metaphors, and meticulous ceremonial procedures. During “Myesis,” “Initiation,” the first stage of the initiation process, the initiand approaches from the East, symbolizing new beginnings, enlightenment, and the divine realm. They are guided to a throne, usually a “Klismos,” an ancient ceremonial chair associated with the Dionysian rites, or a “Skímpous,” an Eleusinian ceremonial stool. This stool, historically favored by traveling pilgrims, symbolizes the transient and questing nature of those being initiated.

In the same ceremony, the initiand, undergoing a spiritual journey, has their head covered with a white “peplos” (veil) by the Mystagogue, their guide during the initiation process. This

white veil, indicative of purity and sanctity, provides a protective embrace while restricting the initiate's vision, symbolizing the transition from a world of darkness to the new light of the Mysteries. Priests and Priestesses, representing celestial forces, perform counterclockwise circumambulations around the enthroned pilgrim, a gesture symbolizing the rotation of the classical planets around the Sun and the idea of cosmic harmony.

Once enthroned, the initiand is presented with a torch by the Priest in their right hand. This torch serves as both a symbol of light in the darkness of the primordial night and a symbol of receptivity to divine wisdom. The Priestess then performs air and fire purifications, creating a sanctified atmosphere for the pilgrims. The final purification takes place when the High Priest places a thunderstone (black ophite) on the initiand's heart, signifying a deep spiritual connection with the divine mind and completing the purification process of the initiand's immortal soul. Interwoven in this rite is the Altar Priest's invocation of Rhea, Chthonic Demeter, and God Dionysos Zagreus, seeking blessings and protection on behalf of the initiand. Following these rites, the initiand, with vision restored, offers gratitude through tokens: an oil lamp to Rhea, wheat to Chthonic Demeter, and wine to Dionysos Zagreus. These offerings, emblematic of enlightenment, nourishment, and union with the Gods, echo the essence of the initiation process.

Concluding the rites, the newly made initiate, prepared for the second stage, which completes the process of initiation, the "Telete," is recognized as a transformed being and is gently guided back by the Mystagogue. This marks their successful journey into the sacred Mysteries. This combined rite serves as a liminal transition for the initiand from the realm of the uninitiated to that of the purified and the enlightened, surrounded by the presence of the Gods and guided by dedicated priests, priestesses, and other officials.

The "Mysis" or "Initiation" in the Orphic tradition, particularly the Rite of Enthronement, is a ceremonial process intimately connected with the Cretic and the Bacchius, ancient metrical feet used in ancient Greek poetry and dance during the ancient rites. There are several variations of these rhythms that can be performed at various speeds. A common form of the Cretic consists of three syllables: one long, one short, and one short at the end (— ~ —) ("Κρητικός," n.d.). The Bacchius consists of three syllables: one short and two long (~ — —) ("Βάκχειος," n.d.). Today, there isn't an exact correspondence with Western music rhythm, but a close approximation to the Cretic and the Bacchius is the 5/8 rhythm, which is most used in the context of rituals today. The

rite's music, following these rhythms, acts as an aural conduit to a sacred state, mirroring the initiate's transformation and spiritual ascent. Drawing upon the Dionysian ethos, as seen in Euripides' *Bacchae*, and deeply influenced by the ancient Corybantic tradition and dances, this rite employs music and movement as therapeutic expressions, reflecting the ecstatic nature of the Dionysian Mysteries and those of the Mother of the Gods, Rhea. In the Greek tradition, it is said that the Mother of the Gods used her ecstatic rites to cure God Dionysus from madness (see Apollodorus, trans. 1921, 3.5.1). Today, the Cretic and the Bacchius rhythms along with their variations are also used for their traditional therapeutic values against esoteric disharmony, emotional instability, and even depression. The ancient Phrygian mode (approximately D-D' in today's terms) was chosen for composing ritual music for the initiation because of its close association with the cult of Dionysos.

Below, you can find a brief illustration of how the Bacchius rhythm and the ancient Phrygian mode are employed in a contemporary, original composition during the initiation process:

Ex. 2



The Contemporary Asclepia Rites

Within the tapestry of Greek religion, the practices and beliefs associated with the Asclepius cult hold significant influence, resonating even in the contemporary era. The modern Orphic mystery rite, centered around the ancient Asclepius and his family, serves as an epitome of renewal and wholeness, harking back to an age of divine intervention in health and wellbeing. Through structured phases, such as the Pombe and subsequent invocations, this ritual seeks to encapsulate the healing essence and powers of the deity, calling upon the benevolence of the God of Healing, Asclepius, and his family.

Embarking on the path of purification, the ritual begins with a devotional "Pombe," (procession) an age-old custom that prepares participants by distancing them from the mundane and sanctifying them for their encounter with God Asclepius during the rites.

Following the Pombe, the next step involves the purification of the sacred space, in order to establish the place as appropriate for ritual. This process invokes the purity and serenity that

the ancient Asclepia sanctuaries were known for, fostering an environment that encourages the restoration and ascent of the soul.

As participants enter this sacred boundary, the ritual progresses to the opening invocations, specifically addressing Hygeia, the Goddess of health, cleanliness, and hygiene, Asclepius, the savior of health and healing, and God Apollo, who in the Orphic tradition is acknowledged as the father of Asclepius. These initial invocations have great significance since their function is to assist the High Priest in petitioning for the attendance of the Gods during the rites. At this juncture, the recitation of appropriate Orphic hymns occurs. These hymns, ancient and profoundly deep in meaning, create a resonance that connects the pilgrims with the divine, fostering a reciprocal communication and communion with the help of divine Eros. The recitation of the hymns is followed by the placement of sacred objects, notably a reverent installation of Asclepius' cult statue, an act that serves to physically manifest the deity's presence amongst the participants, known as Epiphany.

As the ritual further unfolds, personal purifications are undertaken. Participants engage in the symbolic act of cleansing their hands and face, echoing ancient customs that underscore the purification of the body as the vessel of the soul. Following this, the practice of "Enkoimisis," a form of incubation primarily understood as "ritual sleep," takes precedence. This phase represents the act of lying down in the sacred spaces of Asclepius, a profound gesture that symbolizes surrender and readiness to receive the deity's healing. Attendants typically participate in this stage while sitting, immersing themselves in a deep contemplative state. Contemporary adherents believe that this practice paves the way for participants to fully immerse themselves in the deepest recesses of their souls. As the ritual culminates, the pilgrims engage in sacred acts of worship, acknowledging and venerating the divine presence, solidifying their connection and communion with the Gods. In a final act of devotion, offerings are made at the altar, a symbolic gesture of gratitude and a plea for grace and healing. Finally, during these sacred rites, the therapeutic value of music is meaningfully integrated and considered, not only on behalf of the "Orpheotelestai" or "Orphic ritualists," but also by all those who are attending the rites.

In today's expression of Asclepia, music primarily conveys a slow ceremonial tone. While a variety of rhythms and musical landscapes are used in these rites, the Paeon, the ancient Dorian mode, the ancient Paeon Epibatos rhythm, and the ancient Greek lyre, as observed in purification

rituals, hold prominent positions. The Paeon Epibatos foot is a metric rhythm that consists of five long syllables (– – – – –), roughly corresponding to the 5/4 time signature in Western music notation (West, 1992, p. 156). However, the ancient concept of purification through the four classical cosmogonic elements is also a significant part of ancient Greek hieratic art. Therefore, it is incorporated into the music composed for the Asclepia, running in parallel with the sacred purification acts that occur during the rites. Proclus, in his work *On the Timaeus of Plato: Book 1*, while providing his own exegetics, openly emphasizes this ancient hieratic practice:

The one [type of] purgation arises through water, the other through fire, and in every case, purity comes to the second things thanks to the first. Hence, in Orpheus' work too, Zeus is required to bring the purgatives from Crete, as the theologians usually interpret Crete as representing the intelligible (Proclus, trans. 2007, 118.21 – 118.26).

I first introduced the above-mentioned approach to music via original musical compositions into the Orphic tradition a few years ago, and it seemed to have a great appeal and a positive effect on the purificatory experience among contemporary Orphics. For that reason, it was integrated into the tradition in a very short amount of time. However, it is important to note that even though the way the subject is approached musically today is original, the idea itself is not; it has its roots in Orphic, Pythagorean, and Platonic philosophy and practices. To integrate the idea of purification via the elements into the music composed for the rites without affecting the ancient principles that govern the most important elements of the composition, such as the choice of scales and rhythms, philosophical correspondences between certain musical notes or series of notes, and the cosmogonic elements are carefully employed to establish the appropriate elemental hierarchical order and the various analogies between the elements. For example, to musically highlight the idea of purification through water, one can incorporate the tetrachord meson into the opening section of a musical composition for the lyre: [B, c, d, e]. Later in the composition, the tetrachord diezeugmenon can be used to emphasize purification by the element of fire: [b, c1, d1, e1]. The tetrachords mentioned are part of the Greater Perfect System of ancient Greek music (Michailidis, 2003, p. 231). The philosophical correspondences between musical tones and the cosmogonic elements, as mentioned above, are preserved in Aristides Quintilianus' book *De Musica, Book III*:

We also find that the five primary elements are analogous to the tetrachords, earth, being heaviest [*barytaton*], to the tetrachord *hypaton*, water to the tetrachord *meson*, since it is closest to earth, air to the tetrachord *synemmenon*. (For air sinks down and is drawn down into the depths of the sea and the caves of the earth to enable creatures there to

breathe, since it is essential to them, and without it they would not survive.) Fire is analogous to the tetrachord *diezeugmenon*, since movement downwards is contrary to its nature and it can be drawn downwards only by an external force, while its natural movement is upwards, away from things on the earth. The aether should be assigned to the tetrachord *hyperbolaion*, since aether is the highest. (Barker et al., 1984, p. 515).

Below is a short musical passage employing a slow Paeon Epibatos and the elements:

Ex. 3



The Orphic Platonic Harmony of the Spheres Rite

The Orphic Platonic Harmony of the Spheres Rite is an esoteric initiation, constituting the second stage of a three-stage initiation process. It pays homage to the ancient Orphic-Pythagorean and Platonic cosmology, philosophy, and theology, particularly as expounded in the tenth book of the Republic, within the myth of Er. This rite, deeply rooted in Ancient Greek religious customs, primarily embodies Orphic liturgical traditions. Its purpose is to instill a sense of internal and cosmic harmony in the pilgrim's mind and their interrelation.

At the heart of the rite lies a sacred altar, venerating several ancient Greek deities, including the Olympians associated with the seven classical planets from Plato's time. The rite commences by establishing a sanctified space, participant purification, altar purification, and an opening invocation to the cosmic principle of Number Eight, reflecting Pythagorean thought. In contemporary Orphic tradition, this number symbolizes the Law of Harmony in the Cosmos and Goddess Aphrodite, perceived as the mother of Goddess Harmonia and the divine consort of God Ares.

Participants then recite Orphic Hymns, invoking the benevolence of the Gods. Each hymn serves as an epiclesis, symbolically drawing the pilgrims closer to the divine essence, allowing unity between the participant and divinity through intellect. The core of the rite encompasses sacred acts and dramatic illustrations, commencing at the Gate of the Moon, associated with Cancer in the Zodiac, and culminating at the Gate of Saturn in Capricorn. The journey of the initiate mirrors the ascent of the Platonic soul through the seven celestial spheres. Each sphere,

represented by a candle on the altar and a Priest or Priestess, embodies specific cosmological principles and their related deities. The Gate of Saturn, symbolizing the outermost realm of the Cosmos, leads to the Empyrean, where Platonic Forms reside. Here, the soul draws near to the divine levels, encountering Goddess Harmonia. Her symbol, two intertwined snakes, represents cosmic union and balance between the two principal cosmogonic substances, Water and Earth, signifying the alignment of the initiate's soul with the Divine Mind and the World Soul, resonating with cosmic harmony. The rite concludes with the High Priest lighting a torch (or candle), symbolizing the fulfillment of cosmic order at the divine levels.

The ritual music, reflecting the doctrines of Pythagorean Harmony of the Spheres, creates a harmonic microcosm of the universe in the ritual space through the laws of similarity, analogy, and the art of correspondences. This alignment guides the initiates to contemplate the idea that the principle of harmony is essential for the constituent parts of the World Soul to coexist in unity. Similarly, and by extension, the human soul, with its celestial origin, requires harmony to unify its elements, representing a microcosm of the World Soul.

Finally, the ancient Greek notion that musical scales and rhythms influence a person's ethos and character is also considered. While it is beyond the scope of this study to provide a detailed exploration of the aforementioned idea, I will share a few notable ancient references below for clarity and to assist the reader in relating to them more effectively. This will be accompanied by a brief description of the compositional technique most used for the music in these rites. Regarding the significant role of harmony as a unifying principle in the context of ancient Greek cosmology, one of the fragments attributed to the Pythagorean Philolaus relates the following: "But since the first principles were not by nature alike or akin, it would be impossible for them ever to have been arranged, had not harmony supervened, in whatever way it came into being" (Kirk et al., 1983, p. 310). Also, on fragment 18.22 the soul is equated to a form of harmony: "Philolaus <said that the soul> is a *harmonia*" (McKirahan, 2011, p. 363).

In ancient Pythagorean cosmology and Platonic thought, the planetary spheres mentioned in the description of the rite above are considered important parts of the cosmic soul. Their coordination by divine harmony makes the idea equally important for Orphic initiates to experience and participate in because it is believed to be familiar to the soul due to its divine origin. For this reason, the ancient eight-note scale (approximately E-E'), which is attributed to Pythagoras and the planets associated with the notes in that scale, are used. They highlight the

planetary positions along with the sphere of the Zodiac as they move through the night sky live during the initiation process. The ancient eight-note Dorian mode is the musical mode most used in this rite due to its association with Pythagoras, God Apollo, and the cosmic harmony He provides through it. The ethos of that scale is also relevant, as it is said to inspire a feeling of splendor, nobility, and courage. The philosopher Plutarch, while discussing the modes in his work *Moralia: On Music*, makes two important revelations regarding their ethos. The first revelation pertains to the significance of musical expertise and knowing how to use the musical scales: “For one who knows the Dorian mode without the skill to pass judgement on whether it belongs here or there will not know what effect he is producing; in fact, he will not even preserve the moral character of the mode” (Plutarch, trans. 1967, 1143c). The second concerns Plato’s preference for the Dorian mode: “...for Plato had studied the science of music with great care, receiving instruction from Dracon of Athens and Metellus of Agrigentum. No, he preferred the Dorian because, as I said earlier, it has a preponderance of noble gravity” (Plutarch, trans. 1967, 1136). The rhythm of the compositions for this is usually slow and ceremonial, and for that reason, the ancient Anapestic rhythm is selected. Today, this rhythm is primarily used in ceremonies and slow processions.

In its most basic form, the approach to creating Harmony of the Spheres music is primarily melodic, involving the following steps: The melody is simple, constructed from a series of notes that correspond to the planets as they rise, reach their respective midpoints in the heavens, and then set. In the example below, each sequence adheres to the order based on the respective timings of the rise, meridian, and set of each celestial body on the 14th and 15th of May 2024, as observed from Delphi, Greece. This perspective is from an Earth-based observer. The selected date roughly aligns with the lunar day marking the ‘birth’ of the God Apollo, the seventh day of the Attic month Thargelion, according to the sacred Greek Attic calendar as it is practiced today. The preferred rhythm for Harmony of the Spheres music is a slow Anapestic rhythm. An Anapest is a metrical foot comprising two short syllables followed by one long syllable (˘˘—) (“Anapest,” 2016) and in its most common form, it corresponds to today’s 2/2 rhythm (West, 1992, p. 136).

The Scale/Planets Relationships for the Ancient Pythagorean Dorian Octachord

(see Nicomachus, trans. 1994, Ch. 5)

1. Fixed Stars - E (High E')
2. Saturn - D
3. Jupiter - C
4. Mars - B
5. Mercury - A
6. Venus - G
7. Sun - F
8. Moon - E (Low E)

The Planets on May 14/15, 2024

Location: Delphi, Greece.

Rise (May 14, 2024):

1. Mars - B (Rises at 4:20 am)
2. Mercury - A (Rises at 5:15 am)
3. Venus - G (Rises at 6:01 am)
4. Sun - F (Rises at 6:13 am)
5. Jupiter - C (Rises at 6:29 am)
6. Moon - E (Low E) (Rises at 11:41 am)
7. Saturn - D (Rises at 3:27 am on May 15)

Mid-heaven (Meridian) (May 14 and 15, 2024):

1. Mars - B (Meridian at 10:34 am on May 14)
2. Mercury - A (Meridian at 11:44 am on May 14)
3. Venus - G (Meridian at 12:58 pm on May 14)
4. Sun - F (Meridian at 1:20 pm on May 14)
5. Jupiter - C (Meridian at 1:34 pm on May 14)
6. Saturn - D (Meridian at 9:08 am on May 15)
7. Moon - E (Low E) (Meridian at 7:09 pm on May 14)

Set (May 14 and 15, 2024):

1. Mars - B (Sets at 4:47 pm on May 14)
 2. Mercury - A (Sets at 6:13 pm on May 14)
 3. Venus - G (Sets at 7:57 pm on May 14)
 4. Sun - F (Sets at 8:29 pm on May 14)
 5. Jupiter - C (Sets at 8:40 pm on May 14)
 6. Moon - E (Low E) (Sets at 2:27 am on May 15)
 7. Saturn - D (Sets at 2:49 pm on May 15)
- ("Planets Visible in the Night Sky in Delphi, Central Greece, Greece," n.d.)

Here is an example of a composition that incorporates the planetary associations and conditions for May 14/15, 2024, along with a variation of a slow ceremonial, ancient Anapestic rhythm. The lyre has been tuned in to the Dorian mode with a Pythagorean tuning:

Ex. 4

The musical notation for Ex. 4 consists of three staves, each representing a different time of day: 'Rise', 'Meridian', and 'Set'. The music is written in 2/4 time and uses a Dorian mode with Pythagorean tuning. The first staff, 'Rise', begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The second staff, 'Meridian', also begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The third staff, 'Set', begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The music is composed of eighth and quarter notes, with some measures containing rests. The 'Set' staff ends with a double bar line.

Final Remarks

In this examination of the role of the Orphic tradition in contemporary Greek Mysteries and esotericism, I have explored the enduring relevance and transformative power of ancient Greek thought and Orphic practices in contemporary Greek religion and spirituality. Central to my study was the ancient idea of “Theon Therapeian,” an ancient therapeutic approach rooted in the service and worship of the Gods, encapsulating the essence of the Orphic way of life aimed at achieving inner harmony and divine union.

The revival of these ancient Mysteries and the esotericism produced by figures like Spyridon Nagos and Spyrodemos Anemogiannis-Sinanidis illustrates a strong yearning for spiritual depth and a connection with Greek ancestral wisdom and cultural practices. This resurgence is not merely a nostalgic return but a vibrant, evolving tradition with coherent continuity that integrates ancient insights with current spiritual needs.

Particularly important is the role of ritual music in the Orphic tradition. Far from being a mere cultural relic, it emerges as a potent agent for healing and transformation, harmonizing the human soul within and with the divine in the context of ritual. Furthermore, through this brief but meaningful exploration of the ancient and contemporary Orphic tradition, my aim is to assist in revitalizing interest in the immense therapeutic value and range of its practices. In my opinion,

having experienced them firsthand, they promote a more fulfilling life, not only on an individual but also on a communal level. As we navigate our contemporary world, the insights drawn from the contemporary Orphic way of life offer a rich source of inspiration and wisdom, with the potential to guide us toward a more profound and harmonious existence.

References

- Anapest. (2016, July 20). In The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica (Ed.), *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/art/anapest> (accessed Dec. 20, 2023)
- Barker, A., Stevens, J., & Huray, P. L. (1984). *Greek musical writings: Volume 2, harmonic and acoustic theory*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chrysanthou, A. (2020). *Defining Orphism: The beliefs, the »teletae« and the writings*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG.
- Enthousiasmos. (2002). In H. Cancik, H. Schneider, & C. F. Salazar (Eds.), *Brill's New Pauly*. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e12221560
- Guthrie, W. K. (1993). *Orpheus and Greek religion: A study of the orphic movement*. Princeton University Press.
- Kirk, G. S., Regius Professor of Greek G S Kirk; F.B.A., Raven, J. E., & Schofield, M. (1983). *The Presocratic philosophers: A critical history with a selection of texts*. Cambridge University Press.
- McKirahan, R. D. (2011). *Philosophy before Socrates: An introduction with texts and commentary*. Hackett Publishing.
- Michailidis, S. (2003). *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek Music*. National Bank of Greece Cultural Foundation.
- Paeon. (n.d.). In *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon in Thesaurus Linguae Graecae® Digital Library*. University of California, Irvine. <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=78951> (accessed Dec. 17, 2023)
- Pajares, A. B., & Cristóbal, A. I. (2008). *Instructions for the netherworld: The orphic gold tablets*. BRILL.
- Planets Visible in the Night Sky in Delphi, Central Greece, Greece*. (n.d.). [timeanddate.com. https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/night/@11287748](https://www.timeanddate.com/astronomy/night/@11287748) (accessed Dec. 20, 2023)
- Βάκχειος. (n.d.). In *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon in Thesaurus Linguae Graecae® Digital Library*. University of California, Irvine. <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=19628> (accessed Dec. 17, 2023)
- West, M. L. (1992). *Ancient Greek music*. Oxford University Press.

Σπυροδήμος Ανεμογιάννης - Σινανίδης. (n.d.). Academia.edu.
<https://independent.academia.edu/ΣπυροδήμοςΑνεμογιάννηςΣινανίδης>
(accessed Dec. 15, 2023)

θεραπεία. (n.d.). In *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon in Thesaurus Linguae Graecae® Digital Library*. University of California, Irvine. <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=49703>
(accessed Dec. 15, 2023).

Κρητικός. (n.d.). In *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon in Thesaurus Linguae Graecae® Digital Library*. University of California, Irvine. <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=61806>
(accessed Dec. 17, 2023)

μετεμψύχωσης. (n.d.). In *The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon in Thesaurus Linguae Graecae® Digital Library*. University of California, Irvine. <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/lsg/#eid=69291>
(accessed Dec. 15, 2023)

Νάγος, Σ. Κ. (2000). *Ο κάτοικος του σύμπαντος*. Ιδεοθέατρον.

Παιάν. (n.d.). Logeion, University of Chicago. <https://logeion.uchicago.edu/Παιάν>
(accessed Dec. 17, 2023)