

THE LUTE OF THE SINGER ḤAR-MOŠĚ

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I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts.

So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me.—*Ecclesiastes* 2:8, 9.

When “the singer Ḥar-mošě” died and was buried near the tomb of his master at Thebes, his lute was laid beside him. Ḥar-mošě was probably attached to the household of Sen-mūt, the architect of Queen Ḥat-shepsūt and the most important man in Egypt in his day. Sen-mūt wanted to have his favorite musician near him in the next world, as he also wanted his horse and his pet monkey; so he arranged to have them buried near his own tomb. In the same way Ḥar-mošě wished to make sure of having his lute. Lutes, like horses, had only recently been brought to Egypt from Asia Minor and might not yet have found their way into “the West.”

Music has always played an important part in the lives of the Egyptians, who possess the extreme sensitivity to sound common to the people of the Near East; at the present day it is quite usual to see an Egyptian actually faint away at a musical performance. So we are not surprised to find that, long before the time of Sen-mūt and his singer, music had become a regular accompaniment to religious and ceremonial rites, an easy way of stimulating tired workers and a pleasant diversion at social gatherings. Musicians and dancers were attached to temples and palaces, to companies of soldiers, and, as we have seen, to the households of the wealthy. Ordinary people could hire independent troupes when they required them—and not only for entertainment; we are told in an ancient story how three goddesses, disguised as traveling musicians, were called in to help a sick woman.

Yet, in spite of this widespread love of music, its development was never carried beyond a

certain point. With the possible exception of clappers and the flute (which were pictured in prehistoric times) the Egyptians were content to take over the instruments of other nations. There was no system of notation, the melodies being handed down from generation to generation, just as they are today. The priests, to whom the early development of music must have been due, are said to have tried to discourage the innovations of the later periods. At the end of the dynastic age, when the influence of Western culture was becoming more and more strongly felt, the older types of instruments began to be replaced by those in use in the Greek world. In return, we hear of Egyptian music teachers being in demand abroad; and early Greek travelers discussed Egyptian musical practices and believed that their own music owed much to Egypt. Nowadays it is thought that they overestimated this influence; nevertheless Pythagoras, who discovered the numeric laws of harmony, spent a considerable time in Egypt and studied Egyptian musical ideas.

The old music had been of a quiet nature, judging by the instruments used to interpret it and the sedate way in which the players—most of them men—are pictured. The harp and clarinet were first shown at about the middle of the Old Kingdom and appear, with the flute, in typical “orchestras.” We see these orchestras playing for the great men of the time as they are being dressed for the day, enjoying a meal, or taking part in some religious ceremony. Often each instrument accompanies a different singer; the singers make set gesticulations characteristic of the East.



*Musicians at a banquet, from the tomb of Djoser-ka-Rē-sonbe, about 1415 B.C.
Facsimile by Charles K. Wilkinson*

The harp was the instrument the Egyptians liked best, and eventually many varieties of it were developed. The earliest harps were played in a kneeling position. Later we also find shallow shoulder harps on which the harper could perform while walking around among the guests at a banquet and large, standing instruments which reached from the floor to above the musician's shoulder or head. The largest harps we know of were played by priests who are shown singing a prayer for Ramesses III in his tomb. With their elaborate decoration these instruments recall an inscription of Thut-mose III on the walls of the temple of Karnak: "My Majesty made a splendid harp wrought with silver, gold, lapis lazuli, turquoise, and every splendid, costly stone, for the praise of the beauty of His Majesty [Amūn]."

The drum was introduced at about the beginning of the XII Dynasty, but large drums were always rare; we find them played most frequently by the Negro drummers attached to military bands. Tambourines, however, are

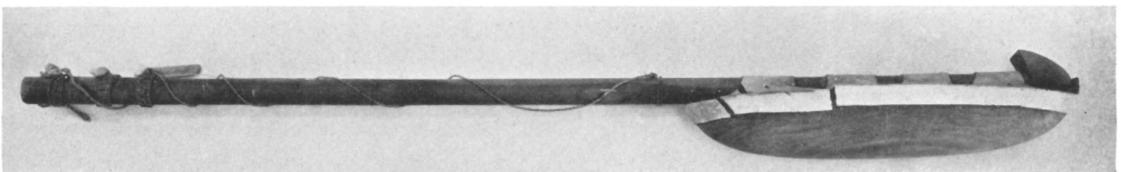
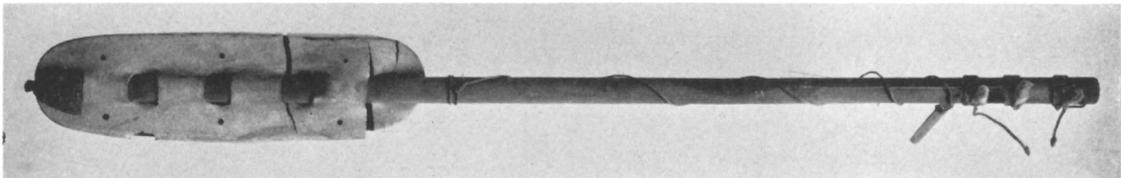
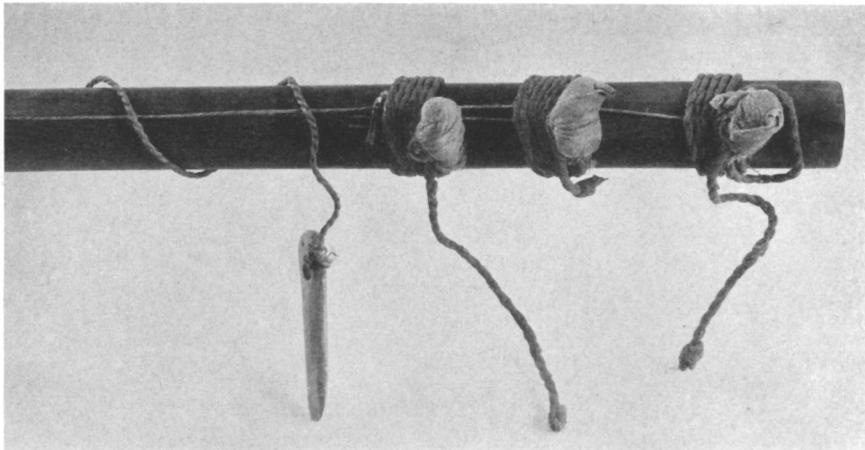
often represented in paintings of the New Kingdom and are women's instruments. Trumpets, like drums, are usually associated with soldiers; we do not find them represented until the middle of the XVIII Dynasty. The lyre first appears in a painting of the XII Dynasty, but it is shown as a curiosity in the hands of a nomad from Palestine, and we do not see it again for four hundred years.

During the XVIII Dynasty, when Asia Minor came under the influence of Egypt, the Egyptians were brought into contact with an exciting sort of music unlike their own, and with the instruments necessary to produce it. The lute, the lyre, and the oboe were introduced at this time. The oboe, though new to the Egyptians, had an immediate success and replaced the sweeter flute and the clarinet in the kind of orchestras that were now considered fashionable. From the XVIII Dynasty onwards we are constantly shown oboes in pictures of musicians—played in pairs and almost always by girls. Many of these girls must have been brought from Syria as captives. They

were highly skilled, and among their accomplishments was the ability to dance as they played, in the languorous manner thought appropriate at private entertainments.

The training of an oboe player evidently began early. When practicing, the small apprentice, like modern students of wind instruments in the Near East, probably had to sit for long hours blowing through a reed into a bowl of water, inhaling through her nose at the same time as she exhaled through her mouth, while her teacher stood over her, watching to see that the flow of bubbles was uninterrupted. Musicians who played wind instruments must almost always have been professional, considering the amount of training involved and the fact that music was not regarded as an entirely reputable occupation. We do not know the history of “the Lady

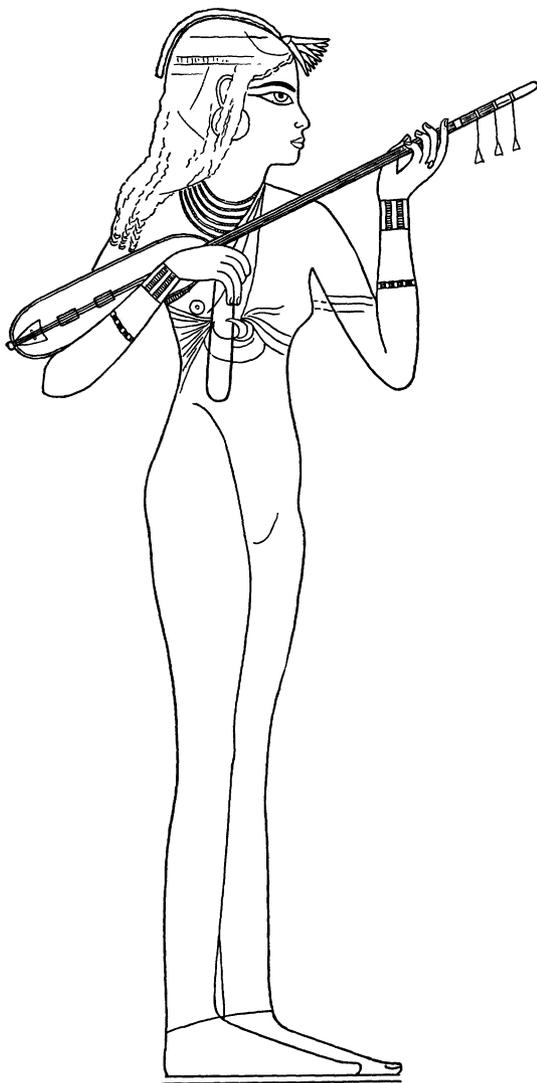
Meket,” whose oboes with their case are in Berlin; but it is likely that she achieved respectability through marriage. An exception to the rule that “ladies” and “gentlemen” were never depicted with musical instruments is found in the VI Dynasty tomb of Mererwyka-y, where the vizier’s wife is shown playing to her husband on a harp. This lady, herself a princess of the blood, evidently felt that she was above criticism and that she could afford to be shown to posterity displaying her skill; perhaps more members of the upper classes than we realize might have done the same. But on the whole we can assume that the attitude of the Egyptians was much the same in the days of Princess Wa’tyet-khet-Hor as it was last century when Edward Lane wrote: “The Egyptians in general are excessively fond of music; and yet they regard the study of this



The lute of “the singer Ḥar-moseh,” about 1490 B.C. Found by the Museum’s Egyptian Expedition and now in Cairo

fascinating art (like dancing) as unworthy to employ any portion of the time of a man of sense."

The lyre, like the harp, was an open-stringed instrument, that is, it was equipped with a separate string for each note to be sounded. The lute, on the contrary, was a stopped instrument: it had only two or three strings on which to produce all notes. This was done by pressing them against the neck so as to shorten them as required, a manner of playing entirely new to the Egyptians.



A lute player, from the tomb of Ken-Amun, about 1430 B.C. Drawing by Lindsley F. Hall

Har-mose's instrument, which dates from about 1490 B.C., is the earliest evidence of the lute in Egypt, earlier than any of the numerous paintings which show lute players, and the only actual example of its type known. Therefore it seems desirable to put the details of its construction on record. It consists of an oval wooden sound box and a soundboard of rawhide with six resonance holes, a long, straight neck, circular in section and 3 cm. in diameter, two bridges, three strings, lashings for the strings, and a wooden plectrum on a long cord. The length over all is 119.5 cm. (47 in.).

The sound box is of a straight-grained, coniferous wood, apparently a fine grade of cedar, finely finished. It is 43 cm. long, 11.5 cm. wide, and 8 cm. high; the walls are very thin, being a scant 3 mm. at the top. The soundboard was stretched in place while still damp, eight short slits having previously been made in it and the neck passed through these; the hide shrank as it dried, so that it fitted the sound box tightly and clamped the neck down along the top. A bridge of a very fine-grained wood, possibly Turkish boxwood, is attached to the end of the neck by an underlapping joint. Its top surface carries three grooves for the strings; these grooves draw together towards the knob at the end, to which the strings were tied.

The strings are of twisted gut, about 1 mm. in diameter. They are carried from this bridge along the neck to 15.5 cm. from its other end, where they cross a second, smaller bridge, a clear stretch of 97 cm. Just after the second bridge they pass under a lashing of six turns of two-ply linen cord, with knotted ends hanging down. One string ends with this lashing; it is tied around a little wooden block and is covered with a scrap of linen. At further short intervals the second and third strings end with similar lashings and blocks. The strings were tuned by pushing the lashings towards the end of the neck and then tightening the lashings by pulling their knotted ends.

As was usual, this lute was played with a plectrum tied to the neck near the sound box by a cord; the cord, of two-ply linen like the lashings, is about 80 cm. long. The plectrum is of the same wood as the bridge. Its sharp

playing edge is smooth and shiny from use.

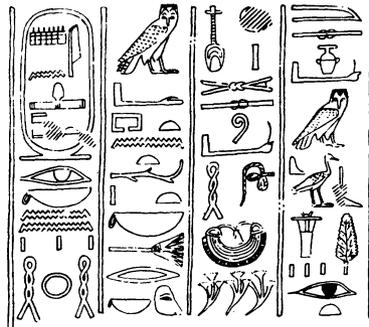
All the wood in the lute is strong and in excellent condition. The soundboard has dried out and is cracked in several places. The cords of the lashings and plectrum are well preserved. The gut strings, best preserved near the lashings, are dried and broken into short, straight lengths, showing that the lute was strung taut at the time of the burial.

The musician illustrated on page 162 is playing a lute like Ḥar-mosē's. It was most carefully painted by the ancient artist and the colors of the original, which we miss in the drawing, show us the dark wood of the neck, the lighter bridge, and the leather soundboard. We can also see the three strings and their lashings, ending here in tassels which were ornamental as well as practical. The girl is one of a group which is entertaining the youthful Amen-hotpe II. The words she is singing are written above her in brilliantly colored hieroglyphs. They are a variation of a very ancient popular song closely akin to the ninth chapter of Ecclesiastes; Ḥar-mosē must often have sung it

to Sen-mūt: "Spend the day merrily! Put unguent and fine oil together to thy nostrils, and garlands and lotus flowers on the body of thy beloved. . . . Set singing and music before thy face. Cast all evil behind thee, and bethink thee of joy, until that day cometh when one reacheth port in the land that loveth silence. Spend the day merrily and weary not thereof! Lo, none can take his goods with him. Lo, none that hath departed can come again."

And if Sen-mūt, unlike "the Preacher," did not openly connect his singers and his wisdom, at least he was ready to admit: "There was nothing from the beginning of time that I did not know."

Those who are interested in Egyptian music will find more detailed information in the works of Curt Sachs, especially Die Musikinstrumente des alten Ägyptens. The discovery of Ḥar-mosē's lute (by the Museum's Egyptian Expedition, under the direction of Ambrose Lansing) is described in the Bulletin for January, 1937, Section II.



From the song of the lute player in the tomb of Ken-Amūn: "Anoint (thyself) with oil, spend a glad day binding on garlands in thy plantation, a lotus at thy nostril, O King Amen-hotpe."