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*'Democritus' hypothesis' of the origins of music**

ABSTRACT: The oldest conception of the origins of music in European culture was formulated by Democritus, who stated that music arose as an imitation of birdsong. This conception was the most serious working hypothesis on the beginnings of music before Darwin. In the musicography of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it constituted an alternative to the predominant creationistic theory, paving the way for the scientific positivist approaches which in the nineteenth century led to the eventual depreciation of thinking rooted in religion. In evolutionistically- and scientistically-oriented comparative musicology the mimetic theory was rejected on the grounds of a lack of scientific evidence of the evolutionary link between birds and man and especially between birdsong and music.The aim of the article is to show that the mimetic theory of the origins of music was a relict of a mythical vision in which birds represented the materialised image of transcendence. The beginnings of music were linked to the voices of birds, which in many cultures symbolised human spirituality—above all spirituality manifest through death. Thus Democritus' 'hypothesis' may be interpreted as a myth in which the 'song of the beginning' is identified with mourning

KEYWORDS: birds, origins of music, Greek mytology, Democritus, Lucretius, lament, Phoenix, swan, simorg

The idea of music as the imitation of birdsong was first formulated by Democritus of Abdera (460–370 BCE), who in an unidentified work uttered the following words:[1]

> We are pupils of the animals in the most important things: the spider for spinning and mending, the swallow for building, and the songsters, swan and nightingale, for singing, by way of imitation.[2]

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[1] The utterances of Democritus are analysed by Andrzej M. Kempiński in 'Demokryt, łabędź i słowik czyli o najstarszej wersji mimetycznej teorii genezy muzyki wokalnej' [Democritus, the swan and the nightingale, or On the oldest version of the mimetic theory of the genesis of vocal music], *Monochord. De musica acta, studia et commentarii* 3 (1994), 7–15.

A few hundred years later, the laughing philosopher's idea was recast in poetical form by Lucretius (99–55 BCE), in *De rerum natura*:

> And from the liquid warblings of the birds
> Learned they their first rude notes, ere music yet
> To the rapt ear had turned the measured verse.[3]

'Democritus' hypothesis', better known in Lucretius' later version, was the object of lively debate in music historiography of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,[4] although it never became a dominant concept in reflection that was very strongly engaged on the side of faith and the truths written in the Scripture. A certain role was undoubtedly played here by the authority of the Roman poet and philosopher, although of greater importance may have been the fact that his views on the origins of music, contained in that famous passage from *De rerum natura*, had no serious alternative in scholarship at that time, discounting, of course, conceptions derived from the Bible, which were beyond all discussion. Finally, also of not insubstantial significance was the quite widely perceived similarity between music and birdsong, which long constituted an argument in favour of a mimetic conception of its beginnings.

The year 1773 saw the publication of Daines Barrington's article 'Experiments and Observations on the Singing of Birds',[5] most probably one of the first attempts at a scholarly investigation into the link between birdsong and music. Barrington collected a substantial body of observations and arguments speaking in favour of the similarity between the musical behaviours of birds and people, emphasising, among other things, the capacity of these animals for assimilating melodic repertoires through learning. On the basis of his own research, he also concluded that music was certainly an imitation of the songs of birds, since the majority of musical compositions, in his opinion, employed the interval of a minor third, which can also be heard in the melodies of birds:

> Lucretius says (and perhaps the conjecture is not only ingenious but well founded), that the first musical notes were learned from birds: [...]. Now, of all the musical tones which can be distinguished in birds, those of the cuckow have been most attended to, which form a flat third, not only by the observations of the harpsichord tuner I have before mentioned, but likewise by those of Kircher, in his Musurgia. I know well that there have been some late compositions, which intro-

[2] Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers. A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Oxford, 1952), B 154, p. 106.

[3] Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. John Mason Good (London, 1851), Book V, vv. 1417–1427.

[4] See Matthew Head, 'Birdsong and the Origins of Music', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 122/1 (1997), 1–23.

[5] *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, 63 (1771/1774), 249–291.

> duce the cuckow notes in a sharp third; these composers, however, did not trouble themselves with accuracy in imitating these notes, and it answered their purpose sufficiently, if there was a general resemblance. Another proof of our musical intervals being originally borrowed from the song of birds, arises from most compositions being in a flat third, where music is simple, and consists merely of melody. [...] The music of two centuries ago is likewise often in a flat third, though ninety-nine compositions out of a hundred are now in the sharp third.[6]

The eminent English historian John Hawkins, also invoking Lucretius, as well as Athanasius Kircher, author of the first transcriptions of bird tunes,[7] who contributed a great deal to music theory, stated that people imitated the sounds of nature and learned music from birds:

> The voices of animals, the whistling of the winds, the fall of waters, the concussion of bodies of various kinds, not to mention the melody of birds, as they contain in them the rudiments of harmony, may easily be supposed to have furnished the minds of intelligent creatures with such ideas of sound, as time, and the accumulated observation of succeeding ages, could not fail to improve into a system.[8]

There exist between birdsong and music so many analogies, real and apparent, that their connection in the evolutionary history of man would seem almost certain. In spite of this, however, there has been no lack among musicographers and philosophers of sceptics who, from various epistemological positions, have expressed doubts about the actual similarity between birdsong and music, and consequently about the mimetic conception of the beginnings of music. The first was St Augustine, who in his treatise *De Musica*, comparing birdsong and the singing of man, demonstrated their fundamental distinction. The songs of birds are not music because the defining constituent of the notion of 'music' is knowledge produced by man's mind, an awareness of rules, which birds, guided by instinct alone, do not possess.[9]

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, discussion on the origins of music became a rather complicated, philosophical-theoretical discourse on the essence of music, in its simplest, most authentic manifestations.[10] Arguments began to be put forward against the imitational conception, heralding a new approach to the problem of origins. Christian Friedrich Daniel Schu-

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[6] Ibid., 269–270.

[7] Athanasius Kircher, *Musurgia universalis* (Rome, 1650).

[8] John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, 4 vols. (London, 1776), vol. 2, col. 2 (2nd edn in 2 vols., London, 1875).

[9] Saint Augustine, *On music*, in vol. 2 of *Writings of Saint Augustine*, trans. Robert Catesby Taliaferro (New York, 1947), 176–178.

[10] Alexander Rehding, 'The Quest for the Origins of Music in Germany Circa 1900', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53/2 (2000), 345–379.

bart, for example, stated that man does not need to imitate animals, as he possesses innate musical abilities:

> The art of music is as old as the world itself. According to Aristotle, man may be called both a singing and a speaking creature. Everyone is born with a predisposition for singing [...]. The idea of some ancient authors, that music was the art of imitation, is therefore completely childish and contrary to man's nature. The eternal invariability of birdsong is so tiresome that people could only by chance have imitated it occasionally for amusement.[11]

Jean-Benjamin de Laborde, in turn, was of the opinion that the songs of birds could not constitute a model for music since the intervals they contain were in fact entirely incomprehensible to humans:

> As for its origins, it is an extravagant opinion, that of Caméléon Pontique, to seek to attribute it to the singing of birds. There is no doubt that birdsong is pleasing to the ear: it is even sufficiently varied to bring pleasure to the senses; but not to the human mind, which is unable to assess the majority of the intervals formed by birdsong in theory or in practice.[12]

In Enlightenment learning, the 'hypothesis of Democritus/Lucretius' represented, on the one hand, a weighty counter-proposition to the creationist concept of the origins of music and, on the other, an archaic semblance of scientific theory. Let us add that the rationalistic and literal reading of ancient thinking gave not the slightest hope of a profound understanding and interpretation of this thinking in keeping with the spirit of the two philosophers' knowledge and imagination.

The idea that people were taught music by birds was ultimately abandoned by comparative musicology. One of its chief proponents, Curt Sachs, wrote in *Our Musical Heritage*, from 1948:

> Mythology is wrong. [...] And wrong, so far, are the many theories presented on a more or less scientific basis—the theories that man has imitated the warbling of birds, that he wanted to please the opposite sex, that his singing derived from drawn-out signaling shouts, that he arrived at music via some coordinated, rhythmical teamwork, and other speculative hypotheses. Were they true, some of the most primitive survivors of early mankind would have preserved a warbling

[11] Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart, *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Vienna, 1806; Leipzig, 1977), 35.

[12] 'A l'égard de son origine, c'est une opinion extravagante que celle de Caméléon Pontique, de vouloir l'attribuer au chant des oiseaux. Le chant plaît sans doubte a l'oreille: il est même assez varie pour faire plaisir aux sens; mais sans en faire à l'intelligence humaine, que ne peut porter aucun jugement, ni par théorie, ni par pratique, sur la plus grande partie des intervalles forms par le chant des oiseaux.' Jean-Benjamin de Laborde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1780), vol. 1, ch. 4, p. 8.

style of song, or love songs, or signal-like melodies, or rhythmical worksongs, which they hardly have.[13]

Referring to a comparative musicology centred around research into 'our living ancestors', Sachs rejected all previous theories of the beginnings of music, including the mimetic conception. The positivistic and scientistic methodological paradigm of early ethnomusicology was wholly unfavourable to reflection on the actual meaning of the ancient conception of the origins of music, the source of which may have sprung from the metaphoric-symbolic interpretations of nature — and of avifauna in particular — that were characteristic of many cultures.

In many archaic cultures, birds were the subject of complex interpretations and symbolisations. The ability to fly, colours, sensitivity to light, collaboration, family life and communication through sound distinguished the world of birds quite markedly among all the animals living in man's environment:

[Birds] are further removed from dogs than men in their anatomical structure, their physical structure and their mode of life [...] they can be permitted to resemble men for the very reason that they are so different. They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this fact, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live: birds love freedom; they build themselves homes in which they live a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means recalling articulated language. Consequently everything objective conspires us to think of the bird world as a metaphorical human society: is it not after all literally parallel to it on another level?[14]

One of the best studied examples of the metaphoric link between people and birds is the 'bird culture' of the Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea, described by Steven Feld.[15] Their attitude to birds is a complex construct based on the conviction that the human world is reflected in the ecology and the natural order of the forest. The Kaluli believe that people who have departed the seen world pass into 'that' world; they become spirits, which are represented here on earth by birds. Thus birds are the intermediaries between

[13] Curt Sachs, *Our Musical Heritage* (New York, 1948), 132.

[14] Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. Doreen Weightman (Chicago, 1966), 204.

[15] Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment. Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*, 2nd edn (Philadelphia, 1990).

worlds; as physical beings they belong to both natural and spiritual reality, representing the 'reflection of Kaluli' who departed in the moment of death and return 'in the form of birds'. The voices of birds are both the sounds of their existence in the natural world and the voices of spirits from the other world, which communicate their feelings to the living.

The belief that death changes man into bird and the representation of the soul as a bird is documented in many mythological and folk cultures. On prehistoric relics in Europe and Asia, the Cosmic Tree is depicted with two birds on its branches, most probably symbolising a Soul-Ancestor.[16] In mythologies of Central Asia, Siberia and Indonesia, birds sitting on the branches of the Tree of the World represent human souls.[17] The Ancient Chinese believed in the existence of two human souls, one of which was conceived of as a bird. Steles of the T'u-küe contain representations of birds, and a standard expression on their epitaphs is 'to fly away' and 'to become a gyrfalcon (*Falco rusticolus*)', in the sense of 'to die'.[18] The early Turks also believed that after death the human soul flew off in the form of a bird, e.g. a falcon or eagle,[19] which the Yakuts and Buryats regarded as the first shaman and called 'ruler[20]'. In ancient Egypt, man comprised various spiritual elements, which included *ba*, conceived of in the form of a bird, most frequently a falcon with a human head and sometimes also arms. *Ba* was one of the most volatile elements of personality, manifesting itself primarily after death, although we learn from some texts devoted to dreams that also during sleep *ba* could free itself and travel around the world.[21] After death, *ba* left the grave and travelled to heaven, where it fed on sacrifices and talked with other spirits.[22] In ancient Egypt, the spirit of the deceased was symbolised by the swallow[23] and the phoenix, which will be discussed further into this article. In the Sumerian Gilgamesh, Enkidu dreamt that the terrible Anzu bird changed him into a

[16] Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* (Paris, 1951), trans. and introd. Krzysztof Kocjan, ed. Jerzy Tulisow as *Szamanizm i archaiczne techniki ekstazy* (Warsaw, 1994), 474.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Edward Tryjarski, *Zwyczaje pogrzebowe ludów tureckich na tle ich wierzeń* [The funeral practices of Turkic peoples in the context of their beliefs] (Warsaw, 1991), 33.

[19] Ibid., 306.

[20] Taras M. Mikhailov, *Iz istorii buryatskogo shamanizma* [From the history of Buryat shamanism] (Nowosibirsk, 1980), 158.

[21] Kathi Meyer-Baer, *Music of the Spheres and the Dance of Death. Studies in Musical Iconology* (Princeton, 1970), 228.

[22] Andrzej Niwiński, *Mity i symbole starożytnego Egiptu* [The myths and symbols of ancient Egypt] (Warsaw, 1992), 222.

[23] Manfred Lurker, *Gods and Symbols of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1980), trans. Adam Łukasiewicz as *Bogowie i symbole starożytnych Egipcjan* (Warsaw, 1995), 105 .

dove and took him off to the world of the dead, in which all the spirits had robes made of feathers.[24]

Greek mythology is filled with tales of humans changed into birds. Among the most familiar are the Sirens, half woman, half bird, the first mention of which appears in the *Odyssey*. According to Ovid, the Sirens were once ordinary girls, companions of Persephone. When she was abducted by Pluto, they received wings from the gods, that they might seek companions both at sea and on land.[25] Also winged spirits of the dead were the Keras, which were regarded as Fates coexisting with each human being, personifying not only the kind of death, but also the kind of life that a person should choose. In the *Iliad*, in scenes of battle and rape, they represent Destiny, which befalls a hero in the moment of death. Other winged spirits of the dead were the Erinyes, fearsome goddesses which inhabited the Underworld, and Harpies, winged women or birds with a human head and sharp talons, which carried off children and souls. Harpies were sometimes depicted on gravestones, lifting the soul of the deceased up in their talons. Virgil placed them in the vestibule of hell, alongside other monsters. Changed into birds were the Stymphalides, daughters of Stymphalus and Ornis, which were killed by Heracles for refusing him hospitality. The Stymphalian Birds inhabited a great forest on Lake Stymphalus in Arcadia, whither they fled from a plague of wolves. They multiplied so greatly that they became a bane for the surrounding area.

Also familiar in Greek tradition is the dramatic and bloody tale of Aedon,[26] who won a contest with her husband Polytechnus. The vanquished spouse avenged himself by raping his wife's sister, Chelidon (Swallow), whom he also made Aedon's slave. But the sisters recognised one another and repaid Polytechnus by giving him the body of Itylus, his only son, to eat. The gods turned all the protagonists of this tale into birds: Pandareos, Aedon's father, became an eagle, Harmotoe, her mother, a kingfisher, Polytechnus a green woodpecker, Aedon's brother became a hoopoe, her sister Chelidon a swallow, and Aedon herself a nightingale, to which we shall return further into this article.

In many myths and legends, the passage to the other world, or becoming a bird, is marked by a dolorous bewailment or sung lament. In the Kaluli culture, birds constitute a metaphorical correlate of people, above all people who have already departed this world and communicate with the living via the intermediary of birds' voices. A key role in this emotional communication is played by

[24] Krystyna Łyczkowska, Piotr Puchta and Magdalena Kapełuś, *Epos o Gilgameszu* [The Epic of Gilgamesh], table VII, col. 4 (Warsaw, 2002), 34.

[25] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Brookes More (Boston, 1922), V, 560–568.

[26] Pierre Grimal, 'Aedon', in *Dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* (Paris, 1951), trans. Maria Bronarska et al. as *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej* (Wrocław, 1987), 7–8.

birds of the Columbiformes order (genus *Ptilinopus*), the sounds of which are associated by the Kaluli with death, departure and sadness. The high, falsetto and falling sound of these birds is also compared by the Kaluli to the cry of a child, especially a hungry, crying child. The most important bird in this group is the *muni* (beautiful fruit dove), the calls of which comprise two 'phrases': the first very high, consisting of quick sounds of indeterminate pitch, the second, based on several falling notes of definite pitch, more melodious and emitted more slowly. The calls of the *muni* bird are also a symbolic expression of death and a sonic metaphor of an abandoned, hungry and lonely child. These meanings are referred to by the tale of a boy who became a *muni* bird:

> Once there was a boy and his elder sister. One day they went off to a small stream to catch crabs. The boy failed to catch a single one; the girl caught many, but did not want to share them with her brother. The boy felt greatly saddened and at that moment he caught a little shrimp. He observed it closely. He spread his palm, which became all red. He gouged the flesh from the shell and put it to his nose. His nose grew bright red. He looked at his hands: they had changed into wings. When his elder sister turned around and saw that her brother was a bird, she was greatly distressed. O, *ade*, do not fly away. He opened his mouth to reply, but uttered no words, only gave out the high shrill wail of the *muni* bird, the dove. He began to fly off, still repeating the *muni*'s wail, a falling *eeeeeeeee*... Seeing him, his sister cried bitterly and called out: oh *ade* come back, take the crabs, eat them all. But in vain. The boy was now a *muni* bird and still wailing and wailing. His wail grew ever slower and more measured, until it turned into a sung lament.[27]

The myth of the boy who became a *muni* bird opens up the most apt perspective for the interpretation of 'Democritus' hypothesis', since it shows the mechanism of the metaphorisation of bird calls and their suffusion with cultural meaning. The accumulating semantic connections between the particular motifs of the myth create a structure explaining the genetic parallels between birdcalls and the music of the Kaluli. So above all myth places an equals sign between (social) abandonment, isolation, and death, or becoming a bird. The three- or four-note melody of the *muni* becomes a sonic metaphor for the feeling of sadness at loss and isolation. Thus becoming a bird points, on the one hand, to death and to the spiritual form of the deceased and, on the other, to the aesthetic codes which are the means of expressing sadness and grief and which are culturally activated by the transformation of an avian lament into the real lament of the people of a Kaluli tribe for someone who has died. The sequence of sounds emitted by the *muni* constitutes the structural axis of the laments performed by men and women of the Kaluli people. In other words, the calls of the *muni* become part of a real lament, on the

[27] Feld, *Sound and Sentiment*, 20–22.

strength of the metaphoric link between the four notes emitted by the bird and the feelings of sadness and grief. Through the intermediary of the funeral lament, the calls of the *muni* bird become the building material for singing/weeping and for the Gisalo song, which forms the core of the Kaluli's musical-ritual repertoire. The Gisalo, identical with the lament and with the four-note call of the *muni*, is suffused with deep sorrow and, performed during ceremonies, it moves others to tears. But attaining the desired aesthetic and emotional effect requires a rendition of the song that is full of drama, with expressive dancing and costume, which transform the performer of the Gisalo into a bird.[28] A man as sad as the bird transforms weeping and poetry into song.

The Kaluli's expressive forms of music arise as an imitation of the cry of the *muni* bird, but their meaning in lament, poetry and song is constituted on the strength of the link between the perception of birds' behaviour in the forest, their classification and the symbolic meaning ascribed to them. The axis of this construct is the bird (birds) perceived as the symbol of the human soul or spirit and the conception of death understood as a change into a bird. When dying, a man becomes a bird, the voice of which symbolises the bewailing of death on the path to the other world. It is worth noting here that the doves which play such an important role in Kaluli culture are not songbirds at all, emitting the cry from which the Kaluli believe their music originates.

In the culture of ancient Greece, a meaning similar to the cry of the *muni* dove in the culture of the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea was possessed by the song of the nightingale. Aedon (Gr. for nightingale), changed into a nightingale, who by mistake or out of revenge[29] killed her own son, Itylus, laments the loss of her child with song:

> As the dun nightingale, daughter of Pandareus, sings in the early spring from her seat in shadiest covert hid, and with many a plaintive trill pours out the tale how by mishap she killed her own child Itylus, son of king Zethus, even so does my mind toss and turn [...].[30]

The dolorous song of the nightingale was also mentioned by Plato in *Phaedo*, confirming the popularity of the connection between the nightingale and death among the Greeks:

> [...] no bird sings when cold, or hungry, or in pain, not even the nightingale, nor the swallow, nor yet the hoopoe; which are said indeed to tune a lay of sorrow. [31]

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[28] Ibid., 37.

[29] See Grimal, *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej*.

[30] Homer, *The Odyssey* XIX, 85, trans. George Kerr, 2nd edn (London, 1958).

[31] Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. Reginald Hackforth (Cambridge, 1959), XXXV, 85 A.

The age-old link between a bird 'singing at dusk' (lit. *luscinia*) and death was not forgotten in the poetry of the troubadours and trouvères. In works by Marcabru (c.1129–50), Arnaut de Mareuil (c.1170–1200), Jaufre Rudel (1120–47), Giraut de Bornelh (1140–c.1200) and Bernard de Ventadorn (1120–47), the nightingale is the embodiment of *joie*, a sign of True Love. According to the esoteric aesthetic of *fin'amor*, the poet's song is inspired by love, and the dying nightingale symbolises happiness at one's own death of, or for, love. The song *Li roucignous chante tant*, by Thibaut de Champagne (1202–1253), tells of a nightingale which dies deeply troubled by its song.[32] In his treatise *Ars musica* (c.1270), the Spanish Franciscan Johannes Aegidius of Zamora quotes a lengthy passage from Pliny's *Natural History*, into which he inserts his own piece about the death of a singing bird:

> The nightingale wastes little time in eating so that she can enjoy the beauty of her own song. Thus she dies sometimes from singing, and in dying sings.[33]

We find a similar description in the *Bestiary of love* by Richard de Fournival, who, like Thibaut de Champagne, identifies the poet with a nightingale, and his song with dying:

> Such is its nature that the poor creature so neglects to eat and search for food and it so delights in singing that it dies in song. And it took heed of that because singing has served me so little that to trust myself to song might mean even my self-destruction and song would never rescue me; more particularly, I discovered that at the hour when I sang my best and executed my best lyrics, things were at their worst for me, as with the swan.[34]

Referring to the swan in the context of a death-song, Richard alludes to the Greek mythological tradition, which features five heroes changed into swans and bearing the name Kyknos (lit. swan). Kyknos was King of Ligurgia and a friend of Phaeton, son of the Sun; when Zeus struck Phaeton with lightning, Kyknos so despairingly lamented the loss of his friend that after his death he was changed into a swan, which Apollo[35] gifted with a beautiful voice[36]. According to another version, Kyknos, king of the Ligyes, who lived

[32] Axel Wallensköld, *Les chansons de Thibaut de Champagne, roi de Navarre* (Paris, 1925).

[33] Johannes Aegidius de Zamora, *Ars musica*, cit. after Elizabeth Eva Leach, *Sung Birds. Music, Nature, and Poetry in the Later Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, 2007), 73.

[34] Richard de Fournival, *Master Richard's Bestiary of Love and Response*, trans. Jeanette Beer (Berkeley, CA, 1986), 4–5.

[35] Originally, Apollo was the demonic deity of the sudden death of men and at the same time (in the *Iliad*) the god of music and song. Andrzej M. Kempiński, *Encyklopedia mitologii ludów indoeuropejskich* [Encylopaedia of the mythologies of Indo-European peoples] (Warsaw, 2001), 86.

[36] Grimal, 'Apollo', in *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej*, 34.

beyond the Eridanus, sang so beautifully that on his death Apollo changed him into a swan. The legend of the death-song of Apollo's birds is confirmed by Plato in *Phaedo*, where he places the following words on Socrates' lips:

> For they [swans], when they perceive that they must die, having sung all their life long, do then sing more than ever, rejoicing that they are about to go away to the god whose ministers they are. But men, because they are themselves afraid of death, slanderously affirm of the swans that they sing a lament at the last [...].[37]

The myth of a bird singing before its death was also familiar in Arabic and Jewish literature,[38] but above all in Persian letters. In the anonymous seventeenth-century treatise *Behjat al-ruh* [Gladness of the Soul][39], we find the following tale:

> There exists an account by [a certain] sheikh that in one of the settlements of Bidj-Negarman, the arable districts of Hindustan, there lives a kind of bird of unusual appearance, which they called the Qoqnos [Gr. Kyknos, swan], long-lived and short in height. God, the Highest and Immaculate, great be [His] majesty, made in the beak of this bird, which is around two spans long, 1002 holes, some small, others larger, such that [this bird] performs an exceptionally sad melody. When two hundred years have passed in the life of this bird, he will fly to the top of the mountain, where he will settle, whilst other birds, by the Creator's absolute might, having gathered up dry twigs, bring them for him [and] build a high mound. Then the Qoqnos flies in, and having sat down on this stack, he begins to sing in a suitable tone, and to produce melodies of a pleasant harmony, and with each increasingly deep breath from every hole in his beak will emanate a wondrous melody and unusual sound, as if one were to imagine a thousand people gathered together in one place, each longingly humming in a particular key. When ten days have passed, the bird will beat his wings and raise with them a fire [which] will fall onto the pile of dry twigs. This bird will stand in the flames, and when he turns to ashes, a blue egg will appear in the first. After forty days, a baby Qoqnos will hatch and emerge in the image of the fathers.[40]

One easily notices that the swan (Qoqnos) described in the Persian legend corresponds to the figure of the phoenix, the protagonist of one of the central myths of European culture, which perishes in flames and is reborn from the

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[37] Plato, *Phaedo*, XXXV 84 E, 85 B.

[38] Amnon Shiloah, 'The Singing birds', in *Muzyka wobec tradycji. Idee-dzieło-recepcja* [Music in relation to tradition. Ideas – work – reception], ed. Szymon Paczkowski (Warsaw, 2004), 83–89.

[39] The oldest extant manuscript of *Behjat al-ruh* dates from 1627. Polish edn. as *Uczta dla ducha. Muzyka perska drugiego renesansu*, trans. Anna Bylińska-Naderi (Warsaw, 2002).

[40] *Uczta dla ducha. Muzyka perska drugiego renesansu*, 78.

ashes. In classical Greek literature, the earliest mentions of the Phoenix come from Herodotus, with many details later added by poets, mythographers, astrologers and naturalists. Among the different classical variants on the myth, particularly striking is the account of Flavius Philostratus (170–*c.*245), who in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* maintains that the dying Phoenix sings his own funeral song.[41]

The Qoqnos' bill is a gigantic flute, perforated by many holes of various size. On this proto-instrument the bird sings sad melodies, bewailing its own death by fire, which is the source and beginning of a new life. Such an account can be found in the celebrated *Manteq at-Tair* [*The Conference of the Birds*] by Farid ud-Din Attar (d. *c.*1220):

> The phoenix is an admirable and lovely bird which lives in Hindustan. It has no mate and lives alone. Its beak, which is very long and hard, is pierced like a flute with nearly a hundred holes. Each of these holes gives out a sound and in each sound is a particular secret. Sometimes he makes music through the holes, and when the birds hear his sweet plaintive notes they are agitated, and the most ferocious beasts are in rapture; then they all become silent. A philosopher once visited this bird and learnt from him the science of music.[42]

Attar's account was repeated almost unchanged by other Persian poets and musicographers. *The Joy of Mind*, cited here earlier, contains an account of how Plato finds himself in the wilderness, where he ponders the fate of the Qoqnos and hears its song. In grasping the profound sense of the bird's sacrifice, he also comprehends the tragedy and beauty of its dying lament. The melody of the lament of the Qoqnos, an envoy from the other world, revealed to Plato the music that he has made manifest, becoming its inventor, the first musician and the first scholar in this field.[43]

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We do not know what exactly Democritus and then Lucretius had in mind when writing that music was discovered by people at the beginning of time by imitating 'with their mouths the pure voice of birds'. However, on the basis of the testimonies presented here, it appears almost certain that the essence of the mimetic conception of the origins of music could not have been simple

[41] Roelof van den Broek claims that the source for Philostratus' version may have been *Manteq at-Tair* [*The Conference of the Birds*] by Farid ud-din Attar, a Persian mystic of the twelfth century. See Roelof Van Den Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix according to Classical and Early Christian Traditions* (Leiden, 1972), 201.

[42] Farid ud-Din Attar, *The Conference of The Birds: a Philosophical Religious Poem in Prose*, trans. Charles Stanley Nott (London, 1961), 66–67.

[43] *Behjat al-ruh* (see footnote 39), 78.

repetition and imitation, even of the most beautiful sounds and melodies of birds, especially if we take into account the fact that very often the birds with which, in many traditions, the origins of music are associated, are not even songbirds. Such is the case, for example, with the *muni* dove among the Kaluli, or the swan in ancient Greece. This means that the aesthetic qualities of birdsong were not necessarily the decisive factor in the forming of notions regarding the beginnings of music. Their essence is the metaphorisation of birds, identified with a materialised, seen form of man's spirituality, a manifestation of his spirit or soul; more specifically, of a soul separating from the body after death. The animal form of human spirituality would seem to correspond to the conception of the 'source metaphors' described by Paul Ricoeur, which contain the most fundamental experience of man in his discourse with the natural world around him.[44] This is the profound, inner experience of one's own duality as a physical and spiritual being, which symbolically, in avian form, transcends the level of material reality.

The metamorphosis of man into bird is accompanied by a cry, which changes into weeping, passing into lament and song. In the mythical tradition of many cultures, it is of this dramatic dying cry that music is supposed to have been born:

> When the men bearing the deceased on their shoulders began to descend the hillside on which we stood, the women began to wail: at least, what we heard at first was wailing. Then we slowly discerned that a sort of modulated sobbing was coming from their mouths, which soon turned into quite harmonious songs.[45]

The protomusical and paramusical character of lament allows us to postulate its profoundly archaic nature. Spanning spontaneous spasm, emotional speech, melodious weeping and mournful song, lament enables man to gain ritualised, rhythmised and musicalised control over the feeling of destruction and solitude in the face of death. Thus lament is emotion 'artistically formed', and this doubtless explains how it has been preserved in cultural memory as a 'song of beginning'.

Translated by John Comber

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[44] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, TX, 1976), trans. Piotr Graff and Katarzyna Rosner as *Język, tekst, interpretacja*, (Warsaw, 1989), 148.

[45] Jean-Paul Roux, *Les traditions des nomads de la Turquie méridionale. Contribution à l'étude des representations religieuses des societies turques d'après les enquêtes effectuées les Yörük et les Tahtacï par J.-P. Roux et K. Özbayrï* (Paris, 1970), 24.