

**Review of: *A Newfound, Ancient Perspective of Rhythm in Greek Music* by Thomas J. Mathiesen**

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In his 1985 article “Rhythm and Meter in Ancient Greek Music,” Thomas J. Mathiesen contributes to the influx of scholarly interest surrounding ancient Greek music.<sup>714</sup> Mathiesen is an American musicologist with interests in “textual criticism, editorial technique, bibliography, and codicology,” and was a professor of music at Brigham Young University as he wrote this article.<sup>715</sup> He claims that music historians have written very little about Greek rhythm and criticizes the accuracy and depth of what has been published. Mathiesen emphasizes we cannot view early Greek music from a modern theoretical perspective, as most of his fellow researchers do, because there existed an entirely different conceptualization of how rhythm and meter functioned in antiquity. Therefore, he seeks to rectify previous scholars’ erroneous analyses of ancient Greek rhythm by exploring ancient Greek music treatises along with surviving musical examples; he utilizes two early fragments from Euripides’s *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Aulis* as well as two later excerpts, the epitaph of Seikilos and the first hymns of Mesomedes. His article requires that readers have a background understanding of ancient music studies along with that of modern rhythmic theory so as to comprehend the argument he attempts to develop. While he succeeds in refuting previous scholars’ work through logical development of support, he fails to offer an innovative claim in return. Mathiesen’s article lacks the linguistic confidence and cohesion necessary to connect his ideas about rhythm in ancient Greek music together into a unified, substantial conclusion.

Mathiesen builds and supports his argument by contextualizing ancient discussions of rhythm through a rational and effective writing structure. He begins by drawing upon ancient theorists’ understandings of rhythm and meter then explains the distinct differences that set apart the two concepts, affirming rhythm as the focus of his analysis. Following the presentation of each theorist’s ideas, he synthesizes their definitions to illustrate how they build upon each other chronologically and to demonstrate the similarities between theories, which provides a convincing context for his argument. He also offers an explanation of the Greek alphabet, syllables, and verse. This helps readers not accustomed to the Greek language and literature understand his larger discussion of arsis and thesis, the two parts of a foot that fundamentally create rhythm. As further support, he references select theorists and provides diagrams to visually complement his claims.<sup>716</sup> The same trajectory of development is utilized to explain the importance of rests amidst audible rhythm, which provides a thorough backdrop for his subsequent analyses of ancient Greek music fragments—two early pieces directly from the period and two respectively later excerpts. By continually referencing and building upon previous ideas and by previewing upcoming topics to anticipate his musical analyses, Mathiesen logically structures his background of ancient Greek rhythm.

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<sup>714</sup> Thomas J. Mathiesen, “Rhythm and Meter in Ancient Greek Music,” *Music Theory Spectrum* no. 7 (Spring 1985): 159-80.

<sup>715</sup> Paula Morgan, “Mathiesen, Thomas J.,” in *Oxford Music Online*, accessed April 19, 2015, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/46977>.

<sup>716</sup> Mathiesen, “Rhythm and Meter in Ancient Greek Music”, 166.

Mathiesen employs convincing evidence that demonstrates effective research decisions. While modern scholars “do not deal with actual musical fragments” and “ignore the testimony of the ancient and early treatises,” a surprising tendency for scholars working within an historical framework, Mathiesen bases his argument on primary documents from ancient Greece.<sup>717</sup> He quotes extensively from Aristides Quintilianus’s *On Music*, which he posits as “the most complete of ancient musical treatises,” and offers translations of Bacchius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Augustine, and Longinus as well.<sup>718</sup> With each of these theorists, he shares a brief biography to explain their significance in relation to ancient Greek rhythm, which serves to build Mathiesen’s credibility as a well-researched writer. When Mathiesen presents his later analyses of musical fragments, he recalls their theories to ensure that he supports his observations with the ancient, not twentieth century, understanding of rhythm. Mathiesen also acknowledges exceptions and limitations of his argument. For example, he includes Aristoxenus’s definition of rhythm even though it contradicts the other theorists’ ideas; similarly, before analyzing the music selections, he explains the inevitable constraints against acquiring fully accurate ancient Greek manuscripts. These points of recognition account for gaps that knowledgeable readers may find in an otherwise thoroughly supported argument.

Conversely, the acknowledgement of these shortcomings undermine the very support he sought to build. It weakens the tone of his article through language use and argumentation that suggests a lack of confidence in his own claims. An example of poor language use is his reliance upon phrases such as “of course” and “it is clear” that commit the reader to agreeing with his ideas; in fact, the words “clear” or “clearly” appear over twenty times throughout the article. While Mathiesen presumably employs these interjections to affirm his claims as obvious truth, their incessant repetition obscures his ideas. If the claims were clear to the reader, they would not require explicit reminders, so Mathiesen’s word choices actually harm his overall reliability as a writer. This sense of overt justification progressively increases as the article reaches its conclusion. In the musical analysis section, the earlier pieces function as sensible choices for inclusion, but the later selections require lengthy explanations to validate their value within his argument. The written texts of these latter pieces are highly ambiguous, but Mathiesen claims the precision in musical notation compensates for the loss. He rationalizes that “every symbol is clear and easy to read; thus, there can be no doubt about the interpretation of the notation.”<sup>719</sup> However, as he synthesizes his analytical observations during the conclusion portion of the article, he counters this exact claim by doubting the clarity of the passages; he states, “it is probably impossible to reconstruct the rhythmic character of much verse...that is preserved today”.<sup>720</sup> His vague language demonstrates doubt about this specific example as well as a lack of confidence in his overall conjectures.

The promises of Mathiesen’s initial thesis ultimately remain unfulfilled as he fails to offer a definitive, overarching claim that connects his ideas. Essentially, his musical analyses show that the two earlier pieces have similar rhythmic complexity while the later pieces entailed comparatively simpler, straightforward rhythms; he accounts for this difference by positing that “the earlier pieces seem to have provided the subject the rhythmic theory attempts to address” in the later excerpts.<sup>721</sup> However, this potentially conclusive claim is never supported with details such as the impact of earlier rhythmic qualities or evidence of how that relationship evolved, which

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<sup>717</sup> Mathiesen, “Rhythm and Meter in Ancient Greek Music”, 159.

<sup>718</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>720</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

could have explained why the connections “seem” important. The statement lacks effective power and consequently becomes lost amongst a crowd of projections. Mathiesen references other works that could potentially offer support and proposes ideas for further research, but his weak language is again detrimental to these suggestions. Phrases such as “question that must remain unanswered” and “probably impossible” destroy the readers’ confidence in him and credibility as a researcher.<sup>722</sup> However, the weakest choice Mathiesen makes is to end with an extensive block quote from Augustine.<sup>723</sup> He provides no explanation of its relevance, which denies readers any conclusive, synthesizing impact from his own voice.

Despite the promising set-up of support, Mathiesen’s lackluster article offers nothing more than the modern scholars he initially criticizes—he devotes more attention to discrediting their ideas than formulating any of his own. The summarizing statement of his conclusion states that “the key to understanding Greek lyric verse is the discernment of the rhythm in all its complexity and flexibility, not the perception of artificial metric patterns based on fixed quantities,” which is simply a repetition of his opening claim.<sup>724</sup> Mathiesen fails to work through this newfound perspective to develop his argument and produce any innovative conclusions concerning rhythm in ancient Greek music.

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<sup>722</sup> Mathiesen, “Rhythm and Meter in Ancient Greek Music”, 178.

<sup>723</sup> The quote from Augustine’s treatise *On Music* is a fundamental explanation of how musical rhythm should correspond with the linguistic stresses of text and how this relationship may become complicated in composition.

<sup>724</sup> *Ibid.*