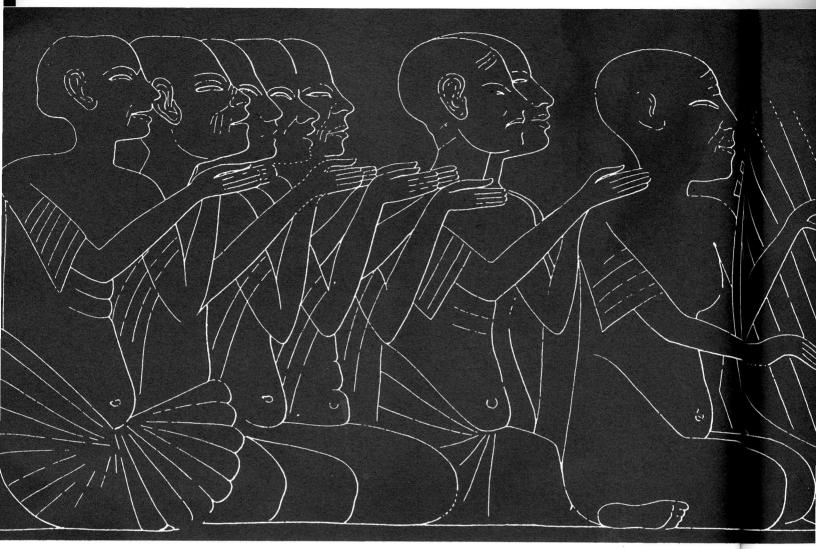
AMARNA LETTERS



Symbolic transference of food offerings

## MUSIC AT COURT OF THE ATEN

by Lise Manniche

he sources which allow us to obtain an idea of the music of ancient Egypt are numerous: reliefs and paintings on the walls of tombs and temples with representations of performing musicians; texts containing songs or references to musical practices; and the

instruments themselves which have survived the millennia. Sacred as well as secular music is represented and testifies to the importance of music not only in the daily life of the Egyptians, from royalty to ordinary mortals, but also to the significance of music in funerary rites—after all, this is the reason that so much of the

evidence has been passed down to us.

The twenty-five years or so of the reign of King Akhenaten (c. 1378-1362 BC) and his immediate successors are but a short interlude in the 4,000 years of pharaonic history. Nevertheless, the "Amarna period" has captured the imagination of the world, especially when personified by such characters as Nefertiti and Tutankhamen. Literature dealing with this particular episode of Egyptian history has grown to surprising proportions. So far it has largely centered on the artistic and religious ideas of Akhenaten. But, during the course of the last decades, a substantial amount of new material has appeared, and recent years have seen the publication of documentation which was previously known only to a limited number of scholars. Akhenaten built vast monuments to the Aten, the sun-disk and sole god at the time, not only at El Amarna, his newly founded capital, but also at Thebes, which had been the country's religious center for centuries. The temples of the Aten were dismantled by subsequent rulers and re-used as core-material in later buildings. Now tens of thousands of these decorated blocks have come to light. Those found at Thebes, carved out of sandstone, were among the first such finds to be catalogued by computer in the 1970s, some of the results being now available in published form. The blocks from El Amarna, sculpted in limestone, were published in 1969.

Although works on ancient Egyptian music have made reference to some of the scenes represented on these

blocks depicte a more has on The su are mo time, f as rep interm not sp the Atyou, e

you, e
The
in his j
ancilla
This g
ordina
accom
the to
efforts
shave
them
the ha
The

different which Amar semi-wigs,



of

od"

lly

d

ar

g

ic

rse

rial

ion

at

y's

ten

as  $^{\mathrm{ls}}$ 

g

ted

ade

se

d

to

Blind harpist and male choir, after N. deG. Davies's drawing of a relief in the Tomb of Merire at El Amarna; from The Rock Tombs of El Amarna I (London, 1903), the Egypt Exploration Society.

blocks from the temples to the Aten and to scenes depicted on the walls of the tombs of officials of the time, amore detailed study of the music of the Amarna period has only recently been attempted by the present author. The subjects depicted on the walls of tombs and temples are more closely related at this period than at any other time, for in both instances they focus on the king's person as representative of the sun-disk on earth, an intermediary between the deity and the people. Was it not specifically expressed thus in the famous hymn to the Aten?: "You (Aten) are in my heart. No one knows you, except your son Akhenaten.'

The artists of El Amarna depicted not only the king in his palace or visiting the temple, but also the multiple ancillary activities which went on in the new capital. This gives us unprecedented insight into the life of ordinary people, including some of their musical accompaniment to festive processions. On the walls of the tombs we meet temple musicians dedicating their efforts to the Aten. They are men of a certain age, with shaven heads and intricately pleated garments. Most of them are blind. They chant, clap their hands and play the harp, and occasionally the lute.

The ensembles performing in the royal palace are quite different. Some of them are reminiscent of the groups which we meet on the walls of private tombs before the Amarna revolution: groups of women wearing long semi-transparent garments and unguent cones on their wigs, playing the large boat-shaped harp, long-necked lute, lyre and double pipe; or we find male ensembles and the same lutes and harps. The large boat-shaped harp was otherwise a female instrument. But at El Amarna there appears to have been a general trend to efface the difference between the sexes. Men and women often wore identical garments; the contours of their body were rendered identically, adapting to the female; and the conventional way of representing men with red complexions and women with yellow ones was not upheld: At El Amarna they are all of a uniform red.

Although in the small scale representation of the blocks, and especially in the porous sandstone, the double lines indicating the presence of a double pipe in an ensemble may easily escape notice, it would seem that Amarna-period music emphasized strings. This becomes particularly apparent when we look at some ensembles which had developed their musical style away from Egyptian soil. Like his father, Amenhotep III, Akhenaten had maintained close relations with foreign countries, especially the city-states of Western Asia. The diplomatic correspondance has survived to provide us with a wealth of details, and foreign princesses were present at the Egyptian court. It is possible that these ladies brought musicians from their native countries to their new home. In order to be represented in such abundance on the monuments, they would have had to

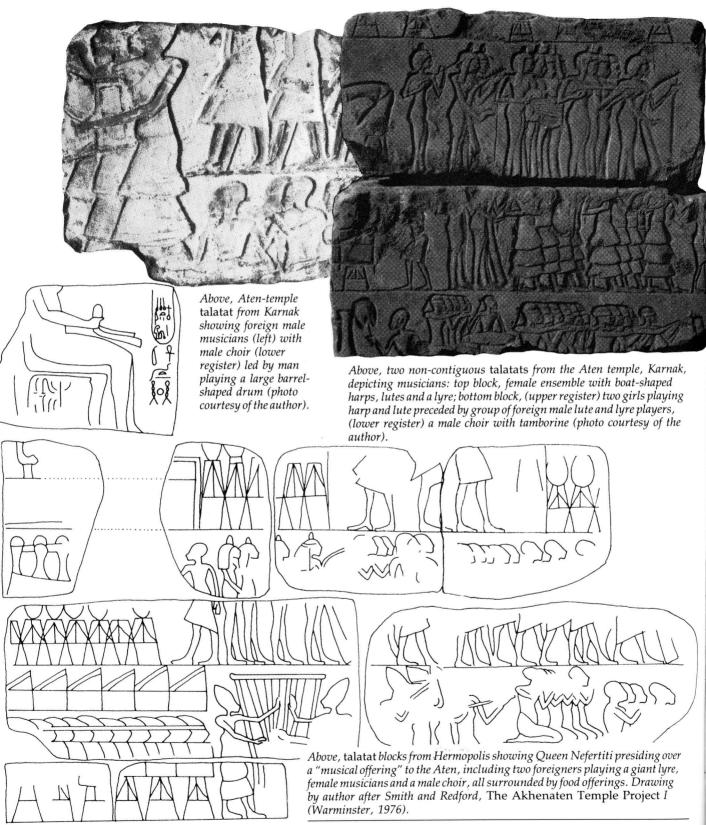
have been sanctioned by the king.

The male musicians are easily recognizable in their skirts reminiscent of a "ra-ra" skirt, long narrow sleeves and pointed caps. Unfortunately, the inscriptions reveal nothing of the identity of their native country, but they probably came from an area near Syria or Palestine. They play lyres and long-necked lutes, instruments already well established in Egyptian music, having been imported earlier in the Eighteenth dynasty. But the El Amarna court musicians have a novelty to offer: a giant lyre. This instrument was played in a vertical position to allow two players to stand on either side of the instrument and play together, a most unusual practice. Some of these instruments are but a huge-scale version of the ordinary lyre, having a rectangular soundbox and strings numbering between five or six and fifteen. Others appear to have a more circular sound-box.

The presence of this giant lyre offers a new range of available notes in addition to those of the lute and the smaller lyre. But we are faced with an interesting problem concerning the actual technique of playing. When performing on the small lyre, the musician would spread out the fingers of one hand over the strings, deadening the sound of the strings except the one from which he or she detached the finger. When hitting all the strings with a sweeping move of the plectrum held in the other hand, the musician would obtain a clear resounding note only from the string which was left intact, the remainder providing a muffled background accompaniment. The lyre was held in close contact with the player's chest, thus achieving added resonance from

<sup>1.</sup> Music and Musicians in Ancient Egypt, British Museum Publications (to appear fall 1991), 84-96.

<sup>2.</sup> See L. Manniche, "Symbolic Blindness," Chronique d'Égypte LIII, No. 105 (1978), 13-21.



group their l

This music shows their contest instruction association associated unused the grace accomplished the grace accompli

It is music They when princ has be but it repre does: a syn temp far fr

interp

As mus shov stela har per was act (te mι pe re bc in m ir

W

his or her body, preferably, it seems, with the instrument in a horizontal position.

64

But the giant lyre rested on the ground, with the strings positioned vertically. The musicians appear to pinch the strings in the manner of a harp. It would be interesting to know whether they plucked the strings simultaneously or one after the other, and whether the strings were tuned progressively from one end of the

-- thus enabling them to play in

unison at double force. This might well have been necessary, for with the instrument resting on the ground, the player's body would not have been available to reinforce the sound.

Be this as it may, the musicians must have rehearsed their piece beforehand, for with both hands tied up playing they would have no way of communicating by signs, especially since their eyes were blindfolded by means of a white band. They shared this with yet another

65

group of musicians: the Egyptian male choir clapping their hands, assisted by a large barrel-shaped drum.

This choir was an unusual feature of ancient Egyptian music, unique to the Amarna period. One representation shows no fewer than sixteen male musicians clapping their hands, accompanied by a drummer. In other contexts, the barrel-shaped drum was an outdoor instrument, and, along with the trumpet, especially associated with the military scenes or festive processions. To add to it the clapping of hands and male voices was unusual, to say the least. Occasionally a lutenist joined the group, perhaps to add a few more notes to the accompaniment. It is tempting to imagine that these male choirs chanted one of the hymns to the Aten. We have no proof of this. But as we have singers without a song, and substantial hymns without music, such an interpretation would seem inevitable.

It is interesting to be introduced to these blindfolded musicians at this particular period of Egyptian history. They occur neither before nor since. This is the time when conventions were revised and some important principles of Egyptian representation upset. Amarna art has been called realistic to the point of being caricature, but it must be kept in mind that above all it is the visual representation of a new ideology. A blindfolded person does not only correspond to an actual situation. It is also a symbolic representation, which demonstrated a temporary loss of sight, applying to given circumstance,

far from terminal, irreversible blindness.2

As in other civilizations there was a tradition for blind musicians in Egypt, personified in the "blind harpist," shown with his song in a number of tomb paintings and stelae. It should be mentioned, though, that a great many harpists in similar circumstances were represented with perfectly normal eyesight. In the Amarna period there was to be no doubt: Male musicians depicted during the act of performing have either clearly defective eyes (temple musicians), or else are blindfolded (palace musicians). The latter wore the blindfold only while they performed on their instrument or sang. When their recital was completed, they pushed up the blindfold and bowed to the king and his entourage. Hence the interpretation that the blindfold served to prevent the musicians from looking at the ladies present is clearly invalid. In any case, other men present, such as servants,

were not subject to the blindfold. Music appears to have been performed in the

n

to

rsed

up

ting by ed by

round,

proximity of large quantities of food, piled on offering tables or stored in huge pots. Either the rays of the sun reach down to touch these offerings, or the names of the Aten or those of the king are written next to them

in temple and tomb representations. These are obviously not ordinary banquet scenes, but performances of a ritual act. The victuals were presented to the god or to the king, who was divine, and the musicians played an

essential part in the ceremony. In the palace they are as much in the divine presence as their colleagues in the temple, and during their performance they are not allowed to see the god. In addition, their temporary

blindfold was their protection, for the power of a god was potent enough to render a mere mortal permanently blind. A solar-god like the Aten, the luminous sun-disk

itself, was an extreme case in point. During the performance, the musicians communicated with the deity, no doubt by means of chanting its praise. Not only did the blindfold protect them from the burning power of the god, but it also rendered them invisible. This is essential, for, as we have seen, only the king was allowed to communicate directly with the Aten.

Women were in a different situation. They had always been permitted in the company of the gods. Some even became "divine consorts" of a god and commanded important positions not only in the temple, but also in the political affairs of the country. A queen was allowed to "see" the god in his dynamic and sexually potent form. At El Amarna the female musicians had this perogative. They were the only ones allowed to see the Aten and the king while he transmitted the food offerings.

When studying the subject matter of Amarna art—not only the wall reliefs in the tombs of court officials, but especially the endless areas of wall decoration displayed in the temples to the Aten—one finds that the principal theme remains food offerings to the god. Such offerings were of crucial importance in the cult of any deity, but especially that of the solar-disk. In view of the particular physical manifestation of the Aten, the situation becomes almost ironical. Previously Egyptian gods and goddesses had been represented either as zoomorphic, anthropomorphic or a combination of both, that is to say, beings who could somehow be visualized as partaking of the offerings (though in actual fact the offerings were consumed by the temple staff). The sundisk was obliged to resort to different means of absorbing the offerings made to it. Music had previously been employed to symbolize this process, but during the Amarna period it became essential. It is possible that invisible essence (sound) emanating from the tangible object (the musician or his instrument) was interpreted as symbolic of the immaterial substance transferred to the deity from the actual food offerings presented in the temple or the palace.

The presentation of food, and its acceptance by the deity, was essential, for only then would the life cycle continue indefinitely: God had created the world for the king to return it to him in the form of an offering. This act was exemplified in the portrayal of the king offering a figurine of the goddess Maat (Truth or Balance) to the Aten, and in turn receiving the sign of life from the god. In the solar-cult of the Aten, the only non-royal persons taking part in this rite were musicians, who always stayed close to the offerings. It is often the Amarna period that provides the clues which suggest an explanation to obscure practices in Egyptian religion. The importance of music and musicians find no better raison d être than at this particular time in history.

(Editor's Note: A version of this paper in French was published in Les Dossiers d'Archéologie No. 142, November 1989, pages 24-31.)

About the Author: Dr. Lise Manniche is associated with Christ's College of Cambridge University. She has published numerous scholarly articles and is author of the popular books City of the Dead: Thebes in Egypt (Chicago, 1987) and Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt (London and New York, 1987).