

Aristophanes *Clouds*:  
A Musical Reconstruction

John Curtis Franklin

forthcoming in  
E. Hickmann and R. Eichmann (ed.),  
*Archäologie früher Klangerzeugung und Tonordnungen*.  
Serie Studien zur Musikarchäologie, Orient-Archäologie  
(Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Berlin,  
Orient-Abteilung, Berlin, 2002).

## ARISTOPHANES *CLOUDS*: A MUSICAL RECONSTRUCTION

John Curtis Franklin

The music presented here was composed for a production of *Clouds*, directed by Daniel Robb, which was staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the summer of 2000. The show was revived by myself and director David Mowat (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts) for a series of performances in Rome during July 2001 at the American Academy and the Museo Nazionale, Palazzo Altemps; it is from these that the recordings come.

### THE MUSIC

The score presents both a reconstruction of the choral songs as well as incidental lyre music (an anachronism).

For the choral lyric I wished to capture the simple character of the archaic, “Terpandean” music which is allied to the old values of Right Argument and, on one interpretation, the Cloud chorus itself; this entailed a mixture of enharmonic and diatonic tunings, with simple and infrequent modulations between the adjacent *harmoniai* of the diatonic cycle.

In the incidental music, however, I wanted to evoke the controversial techniques of the New Music, as for example when Strepsiades uses Wrong Logic to rout his creditors. Besides less orthodox modulation, I employed microtonal tunings documented in Ptolemy’s *Harmonics* and elsewhere (in some cases dating to the time of Archytas in the early fourth century BC). These were obtained by editing the intonation table of a Kurzweil K2000 sampler, on the assumption that the ancient measurements represent resonant relations actually in use rather than mere mathematical niceties. The range of each piece is an octave or less.

The sources are notoriously vague as to the instrumentation of dramatic choral music. It is generally believed that the aulos—a double-reeded wind instrument with typically conical bore, played in pairs—was dominant. I did, however, allowed myself the liberty of including lyre and percussion for greater satisfaction of composition, and in fact I feel that the evidence should be reassessed on this point.

To simulate the double-aulos I employed a krummhornist from Oxford, Andrew Kay. Since the krummhorn is quite restricted in range, and as I had not composed the pieces with this in mind, the recording had to proceed phrase by phrase, and sometimes note by note, with Andrew switching instruments; these were then spliced together digitally.

Each melody was recorded twice to simulate the effect of the coupled-pipes, and as the krummhorn's intonation is apt to be imprecise, a wonderfully raucous effect was obtained.

The lyre began as an acoustic guitar sample, but I changed its resonant properties, added a slight pitch deviation on the attack to obtain a twang, and isolated the first overtone through harmonic filtering to simulate the effect of *syrigmos* in certain passages.

The percussion is a mixture of real and sampled instruments: drum, tambourine, hand cymbals, triangle and bell.

The composition process began from the poetry itself, in which long and short syllables are concatenated into a unique, additive metrical scheme—not unlike the rhythms of Slavonic nationalist composers like Stravinsky or Bartók. Thus, from the Invocation found in the Parabasis:

*hupsimédonta mèn theôn*  
*Zêna túrannon eis choròn*  
*prôta mégan kikelésko;*  
*tón te megasthenê triaínes tamían*  
*gês te kai halmurâs thalás-*  
*ses ágrion mochleutén;*  
*kai megalónumon heméteron patér',*  
*Aithéra semnótaton, biothrémmona pánton;*  
*tón th'hipponómman, hòs huper-*  
*lámprois aktîsin katéchei*  
*gês pédon, mégas en theoîs*  
*en thnetoîsí te daímōn*

we may extract the following rhythmic score:

uu-u-u-	uu-u-u-	uu-u-		uu-u-u-uu-	uu-u-u-
uu-u-		uu-uu-uu-uu	uu-uu-uu-uu-		-u-uu-
---uu-	u-uu-u-	---uu-			

Apart from the minor issue of tempo, there remain several obstacles to recovering the poet's original rhythmic intentions. It seems unlikely that the metrical scheme was always rendered in a continuous and regular stream, if for no other reason than the breathing of the singers. And yet one cannot always articulate the phrases according to sense breaks, for in strophic compositions it is frequently the case that these occur in

different places in strophe and antistrophe. This is occasionally complicated further when a short syllable in the antistrophe responds to a long in the strophe, or vice versa. These might represent rhythmic pauses, yet here too there is not necessarily coincidence with sense.

The situation is considerably more vague when it comes to refitting these songs with melody. Though no indication of *harmonia* has come down with these pieces, one may at least use a documented ancient tuning, whether from those of the theorists, or through extraction from one of the extant scores. From the latter we may also deduce an art of melodic composition according to the pitch accents of the poetry: see for example M. L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford, 1992), 199, adding the observation that an acute accent may mark a descent in pitch, provided that the following pitch is still lower.

Here again strophic respension causes complications. It is often assumed that the melody was composed according to the accents of the strophe, while those of the antistrophe were ignored. Others believe that a different melody was composed for the antistrophe, so that the cohesion of the two depended solely on their rhythmic identity. But since there are several ways in which each accent sequence may be interpreted without violating the observed conventions, I would offer the tentative explanation that a single melody might be devised which would fit both strophe and antistrophe. This would explain the not infrequent coincidence of strophic and antistrophic accent which I observed in recomposing melodies for the *Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus (performed at King's College London during the London Festival of Greek Drama in 1999). If this were right, then it might be theoretically possible, in the case of long multistrophic compositions like the odes of Pindar, to arrive ever more closely to the original shape of the melody. Unfortunately, there can be little doubt that the poets violated these tendencies as and when it suited their melodic sensibilities. Nevertheless, accent-melody gives us one positive parameter, and so I have adhered to the observed principles quite closely.

To capture the effect of the Aristophanic originals, I first extracted the accent contour of each song, the Invocation for example yielding:

|..´..˘^ | ^´.....˘ | ^´...´. ||´....^´...´. | ^˘..^´. | ´..... || ˘´...´...´ | ´...´....´...´. || ´..´.. | ´..^´. |

|^´...^ | ..^´. ||

I then translated each song metrically, harmonizing as euphoniously as possible the stress accents of the modern syllables with the quantities of the ancient, and superimposing the accent contour:

Loftiést ruler òf the gòds,  
Zeùs absólute, I summon tò  
Dânce with mé first, for greátness.  
Néxt to the dance I sùmmon Póseidon thé great,  
Shâker òf earth and sâlty seá,  
Guardian of the tridént.  
Ànd then our ówn, widely-known-ín-the-world fathér,  
Hóliest Aéther, who cherishes éverything líving.  
Ánd last the sún, charioteer,  
Whóse bright-shîning rays domínate  
Áll thé earth, á great force amông  
Both mortáls ánd immórtals.

Finally, choosing an ancient tuning or pitchset, I composed melodies for each strophe which for the most part did not violate the melodic shape, ignoring (for the sake of time and sanity) the antistrophic accents, and permitting myself the occasional exception. Thus:

MUSICAL EXAMPLE : SEE ACCOMPANYING GRAPHICS FILE

#### THE PLAY

*Clouds* was first performed in 423 BC at the City Dionysia festival, the chief religious and civic event of the Athenian calendar. Though he slaved over the composition and considered it his best work, Aristophanes suffered a humiliating third place, ousted by two arch-rivals, Cratinus and Ameipsias.

In retrospect, it is likely that *Clouds* was simply too innovative for a rowdy festival audience accustomed to a diet of sexual and scatological humour—the staple of what is now termed Old Comedy. This primeval comic genre was a panto-style episodic vaudeville, which originated, according to Aristotle, with "the leaders of the phallic processions"—a fertility rite involving scurrilous invective, obscene songs, and 10-metre long phalluses. These roots were still evident in Aristophanes' day, when by convention every comic actor, regardless of his role, sported an oversized member. Aristophanes proudly claimed that *Clouds* was "chaste and pure ... the first to come on stage without stitching on a dangling red-headed bit of leather". Here the poet protests too much, for the play is rife with sexual and scatological humour—and not a few phallus jokes.

Nevertheless, its innovations are still more evident, for *Clouds* is the first extant comedy which has a plot constructed carefully enough to satisfy Aristotelian requirements. It tells of Strepsiades, a rustic codger driven deeply in debt by his son Pheidippides' mania for chariot-racing with the lads. The old man has hit upon "an outstanding and heavenly" solution: he will acquire Wrong Argument, a spin-doctoring perversion of truth and justice taught—for a price—at Socrates' Thinkery. The unshod, bug-ridden pedants who haunt this institution have cast aside the traditional Olympian gods, worshipping Clouds and other meteoric phenomena as they pursue the latest developments in science, philosophy, and rhetoric. Yet these nebulous deities remain aloof from Socrates and his disciples, until, with growing hostility, they exact the vengeance of Zeus upon the Thinkery for its perversion of the natural order they represent.

*Clouds* thus ends with a rough justice alien to the festive spirit of Old Comedy, and this may have contributed to its failure. Indeed, the tone of the play—and of the choral passages in particular—is often closer to tragedy. We know from Euripidean melodrama that the two genres were beginning to converge at this time—as epitomized by the comic coinage "Euripidaristophanization". Interestingly enough, Plato's *Symposium* portrays Socrates and Aristophanes in drunken debate about whether the same playwright could compose both tragedy and comedy. This friendly vignette discourages us from seeing the dark finale of *Clouds* as mere moralizing by the playwright. It is only by comic license that Socrates is made to stand for the troubling intellectual developments of the late fifth century: we may imagine the great philosopher in the audience, joining in the laughter. To be sure, Socrates was notorious for his unkempt appearance, absent-mindedness, and satyrish libido. But the Athenians seem to have felt a grudging fondness and admiration for the eccentric thinker. Despite his pedagogic association with Alcibiades and other revolutionary figures, his eventual execution on the charge of corrupting the youth and importing foreign gods was due as much to his own stubbornness and integrity as lack of concern and offers of help from his fellow citizens.

Like the best political cartoonists, Aristophanes excelled at presenting two sides of an issue in counterpoint—epitomized in this play by the debate between the Right and Wrong Arguments—to reveal the valid and ludicrous aspects of both. The remarkable blend of low humour and weighty social content makes the play difficult both to watch and perform; but the enduring relevance and strangely modern note of *Clouds* is more remarkable still.

