Each spring in fifth-century Athens, thousands gathered for the performance of tragedy, one of the main events of the City Dionysia. At the Theater of Dionysus, on the southern slope of the acropolis, three playwrights each presented a tetralogy, consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play. This was not simply a theatrical event: it was a musical one. Each tragedy featured, in addition to three actors, a chorus of twelve or fifteen Athenian citizens and their instrumental accompanist, the player of a double-reed pipe called the aulos. Between intervals of speech and dialogue, the chorus would regularly sing and dance, often at some length, in the orchestra, the large space between the wooden stage building (skêne) and the audience. Actors could sing and dance too, sometimes sharing in the chorus’s performance, sometimes singing just a few exclamatory lyrics, sometimes—especially in Euripides’ later plays—performing show-stopping arias of their own.

1. The majority of plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides were first produced as part of the City Dionysia (or Great Dionysia), but tragedies were performed in Attica on other occasions and at other venues too: some were produced at the Lenaea, in late January, also (at least from ca. 440 B.C.E.) at the Theater of Dionysus; some in deme theaters as part of the Rural Dionysia. Dramatic competitions at the Anthesteria probably did not begin until the late fourth century B.C.E. On dramatic festivals in Athens and Attica, see esp. Pickard-Cambridge 1968: 1–125; Csapo and Slater 1995: 103–38.

2. Sophocles apparently increased the number of choreuts from twelve to fifteen: Vit. Soph. 4.

3. On the shape of the orchestra in the fifth century (probably rectangular or trapezoidal) and the addition of the skêne (which was certainly in use by the time of Euripides), see esp. Papastamati–von Mook 2015, with further bibliography.

Greek tragedy, then, was musical theater. Yet many crucial questions about the role that mousikē (music, song, and dance) played in a tragic performance—its connection to the plot, its ability to define the characters of the protagonists, its effect on the audience’s response to the tragedy as a whole—have been mostly unanswered in modern scholarship. Left with silent texts, it has been all too easy for us to neglect tragedy’s musicality, particularly since we lack a comparable contemporary dramatic tradition in which music and dance play a regular part. Opera appears to be the closest parallel (and indeed much early opera attempted to recreate the music of classical tragedy), but it remains a rather different genre. Perhaps Bollywood or even musical television dramas may provide slightly better comparanda for the particular mix of speech, song, and dance found in tragedy. But we still lack, at least in contemporary Western European and North American society, a song culture comparable to that of fifth-century Athens, where choral song and dance frequently occurred both within and outside the theater, and most citizens within the audience had previously been choral performers themselves. It is therefore difficult for us to appreciate the musical resonance and impact of the mousikē that punctuates every tragedy, even though, for the Athenian audience, such song and dance, combined with the accompanying sound of the aulos, must have been one of the most memorable aspects of the live performance.

Aristophanes’ Frogs, produced in 405 B.C.E., provides clear evidence that a late fifth-century audience saw mousikē as a central element of tragedy. The second half of this comedy is dominated by a long and brilliant showdown in Hades between the characters of Aeschylus and Euripides, with the god Dionysus as judge. After violently disagreeing on issues of language, characters, and theme, they move on to more technical matters: the forms of their respective prologues and, finally, their music. First Euripides performs a parody of Aeschylean choral lyric, highlighting its repetitive rhythms and ponderous language, and presumably also riffing on his melodic and choreographic styles, though these are harder to...
detect in the silent script that survives. In response, Aeschylus brings out the younger tragedian’s “Muse,” a dancer with castanets called krotala (he calls her “that woman who beats with the potsherds”), and proceeds to parody first Euripides’ choral lyric and then his solo arias. Finally Dionysus tells them both to stop; he then weighs the playwrights’ respective lines on scales before deciding that instead the two tragedians should each suggest one idea for the city’s salvation. Aeschylus ultimately wins, and the play ends with him about to make his way back to the world of the living. Pluto, king of the Underworld, instructs the chorus to escort Aeschylus, “celebrating him with his own tunes and songs.”

*Frogs* gives us evidence not simply for the prominence of *mousikē* within a tragedy but for its reception in fifth-century Athens: the particular features that audiences remembered (and comedians parodied) and the corresponding reputations for particular types of music that different tragedians developed as a result. It also points to the extraordinarily significant role this type of theater could play within Athens’s self-identity and sense of stability: according to Dionysus, it is through a tragic poet that “the city may be saved and keep on celebrating choruses.” In Plato’s *Laws*, written roughly fifty years later, we find a similar idea of tragedy as central to the city’s construction: the Athenian stranger calls himself and his interlocutors, as lawmakers, “composers of a tragedy” and famously describes their politēia as “a mimesis of the most beautiful and fine life, which we say is really the truest tragedy.” In this dialogue Plato views tragedy in terms of choral song and dance—a totality called *choreia*, which he presents as vital to the city’s social, ethical, and physical fabric. As Anastasia-Erasmia Peponi writes, *choreia* here “emerges as a most effective vehicle of communal discipline, solidarity, and stability, promoting and reproducing established ideological doctrines from and for the entire dancing and singing community.”

But despite the importance of tragic *choreia* within the civic imaginary and the prominence of music performed by both the chorus and actors in fifth-century theater, subsequent critics of tragedy—at least until recently—have tended to focus elsewhere. Writing a few decades after Plato, Aristotle, the foremost ancient

---

10. τοῖσιν τοῦτον μέλειν / καὶ μολπαῖσιν κελαδοῦντες, *Ar. Ran.* 1526–27. For an analysis of this competition, especially the musical contest, see Griffith 2013a: 115–49.
scholar of tragedy, sheds frustratingly little light on what mousikē does within a play. Though he only briefly refers to music in the Poetics, he does present it as an essential element of the genre: he defines tragedy as “the mimesis of an action that is serious, complete, and has magnitude, in language seasoned in distinct forms in its sections”\(^1\); he then explains that “seasoned” (hēdysmenos) refers to “language that has rhythm and melody.”\(^2\) But he goes on to rank the musical element (melopoia) as the second to last in his list of tragedy’s constituent parts, after plot structure (mythos) or “arrangement of the actions,” character, diction, and thought; following melopoia comes spectacle (opsis).\(^3\) The relegation of melopoia to fifth place here may seem surprising, especially when compared with the considerable attention that he devotes to the potent, soul-changing effects of mousikē within education and leisure in general in the last book of the Politics.\(^4\) His focus in the Poetics, however, is on the more cerebral aspects of tragedy rather than its performance, perhaps as a result of his equal admiration for Homeric epic as a form of poiēsis.\(^5\)

In a later section Aristotle again refers to melopoia as one of tragedy’s “seasonings” (hēdysmata), using a metaphor that is commonly interpreted to imply mere embellishment of tragedy’s other, more important elements.\(^6\) Seasonings could actually be more important than we may at first assume: for a Middle Eastern meal in particular, they are absolutely crucial for giving meat a pleasing flavor.\(^7\) In the context of tragedy, Aristotle’s culinary metaphor of hēdysmata applies to the elements of tragedy that produce pleasure (hēdonē), which would be vital for a drama’s success in the theater.\(^8\) Nonetheless, Aristotle provides no other insight into how such seasonings may work with the other elements of tragedy or what function they serve.

---

3. Arist. Poet. 1450a8–b20. The term melopoia presumably includes dance, which Aristotle primarily sees in terms of rhythm: earlier in the Poetics he states that dancers represent character, emotions, and actions through “rhythms put into postures” (τῶν σχηματιζομένων ῥυθμῶν, 1447a26–28). Though he does not seem concerned with its visual aspect, we may also view dance within the category of opsis, which he ranks in sixth place.
5. Indeed he sees the power of tragedy as independent from its performance and actors (Poet. 1450a17–18), and states that the mythos should be structured in such a way that someone who merely hears the play, without actually seeing it performed, can still experience horror and pity (1453b3–6).
7. Sifakis 2001: 56–70 argues that Aristotle uses the metaphor of hēdysmata to refer to essential ingredients of tragedy, since music is a form of ethical characterization.
8. At Poet. 1462a15–16 Aristotle explicitly states that mousikē and opsis produce the most vivid pleasures (τὴν μουσικὴν καὶ τὰς ὄψεις, δὲ ἂν ἦδονα συνίστανται ἐναργέστατα), though he goes on to claim that tragedy has such vividness in reading as well as performance.
may have within a drama as a whole. As Peponi notes, “the gap between the Politics and the Poetics, then, as far as the dramatic force of melopoia ... is concerned, could have been bridged by a discussion of the way in which song and music affect the audience’s cognitive and emotional experience of dramatic structure.”

The chorus is absent from Aristotle’s references to melopoia, and indeed hardly appears at all in the surviving text of the Poetics. Given his general avoidance of the chorus’s role, then, his statement in chapter 18 that it should be actively involved in the drama comes as quite a surprise, at least to the modern reader:

καὶ τὸν χορὸν δὲ ἕνα δεῖ ὑπολαμβάνειν τῶν ὑποκριτῶν, καὶ μόριον εἶναι τοῦ ὄλου καὶ συναγωνίζεσθαι μὴ ὥσπερ Εὐριπίδη άλλ’ ὥσπερ Σοφοκλεῖ. τοῖς δὲ λοιποῖς τὰ άιδόμενα οὐδὲν μάλλον τῶν μύθων ἢ ἄλλης τραγωδίας ἔστιν: διὸ ἐμβόλιμα ἄδουσιν πρῶτον ἄρχαντος λαγάθενος τοῦ μύθου. καὶ τοῖς τί διαφέρει ἡ ἐμβόλιμα άιδεν ἡ ἐπεισόδιον ὅλον; And the chorus should be understood as one of the actors, and should be part of the whole and participate in the action [of the play] along with [the actors], not as in Euripides but as in Sophocles. In the other poets the sung parts no more belong to the plot [mythos] than to another tragedy—hence they sing interlude odes [embolima], a practice that Agathon first started. And yet what is the difference between singing interlude odes and if one were to attach a speech or whole episode from one [work] to another? (Arist. Poet. 1456a25–31)

Here Aristotle seems to wish for the chorus to have an integral role, but he does not elaborate on the extent or nature of its lyrics’ contribution to the mythos, not even within the Sophoclean scheme that he recommends. This silence regarding the chorus’s role in the Poetics, along with the description of the chorus as an “inactive attendant” in the pseudo-Aristotelian Problems, led to a common view of the chorus as marginal to a tragedy’s action. Moreover, as Aristotle makes no

23. Peponi 2013b: 25. It is possible that Aristotle expanded on this subject elsewhere, since in the Politics he refers to “[the work] on the art of poetry” (τὰ περὶ ποιητικῆς) for a discussion of katharsis as one of the functions of mousikē (1341b40). This may have been part of the second book of the Poetics or a lost portion of the Politics: see Halliwell 1986: 190–91; Kraut 1997: 209; Sifakis 2001: 54, 166 n. 1.
24. As Peponi 2013b: 24 notes, Aristotle’s division of tragedy’s quantitative elements (prologue, episode, exodus, chorikon) in terms of choral presence at Poet. 1452b13–24 could be read as an acknowledgment of the chorus’s key role within tragedy or alternatively as a relegation of the chorus to “a mere punctuation device in the sequence of dramatic action.” Some editors regard this section of the Poetics to be non-Aristotelian, or at least as representing a strand of thinking altogether different from the rest of the treatise: see Halliwell 1987: 121.
25. Cf. Halliwell 1986: 242: “the Poetics taken as a whole supplies no compelling reason for preferring a Sophoclean chorus to no chorus at all, and the passage at the end of ch. 18 is left suspended in something of a theoretical vacuum.”
reference back to his earlier comments on *melopoia*, we are left wondering what his prescription here regarding the chorus’s role within the drama may mean for its music: if the chorus is part of the whole, how should its music be related to the *mythos*?

**MOUSIKÊ AND MYTHOS**

The question of the relationship between a tragedy’s *mousikê* and *mythos* lies at the heart of this book, which focuses on the integration of musical imagery and choral performance within a group of plays from the last fifteen years of Euripides’ career—that is, from around 420 B.C.E. until the posthumous production of *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Bacchae* in 405. Traditionally, however, Euripides’ tragic *mousikê*—by which I mean above all the singing and dancing of his choruses, along with their instrumental accompaniment—was thought to be increasingly irrelevant to the dramatic narrative. This view can in large part be traced back to the same passage of the *Poetics* that I discussed above (1456a25–31). Aristotle’s preference for the chorus to be part of the whole apparently comes as a reaction against the recent trend of *embolima*—choral songs that are just “thrown in,” without any particular relevance to the dramatic context. Although he attributes this practice to the younger poets, his remark “not as in Euripides but as in Sophocles” nevertheless suggests that Euripides’ choruses, unlike those of Sophocles, tend not to be immediately engaged in the action of a play, or at least not in the right way.27 Following Aristotle’s brief comment here, it was often argued in nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on tragedy that the chorus becomes more and more irrelevant in Euripides’ plays and that several of the choral odes in his later work are representative of the sorts of *embolima* that Aristotle criticizes.28 Euripides’ tendency to compose choral songs that begin with only an indirect connection to the previous episode and that often include extensive mythic and narrative sections also causes his choruses to seem more withdrawn from the dramatic action.29


The argument for increasing choral irrelevance became part of a narrative of gradual decline in the chorus's role and significance toward the end of the fifth century B.C.E. and into the fourth. From the mid-420s onward, fewer lines are assigned to the chorus, the stasima tend to be shorter, and actors’ song begins to be more prominent instead as they become increasingly professional and specialized, in contrast to the more amateur chorus.30 We can clearly see such a trend if we compare, for example, Aeschylus’s *Suppliants* (the date of which has been much debated, but at the latest end is in the 460s) with Euripides’ *Hecuba*, produced in the 420s;31 in the older drama the chorus is the protagonist and sings more than half the lines; in the later one *choreia* and actors’ song each take up a tenth of the entire play.32 The absurd parodies of Euripidean monody in Aristophanes’ *Frogs* also demonstrate that by 405 elaborate solo songs were a well-known feature of his tragedies.33

But the standard narrative of choral song steadily giving way to that of the actors is misleading, in part because, compared with a play like Aeschylus’s *Suppliants*, the surviving work of both Euripides and Sophocles shows a much lower percentage of lyric overall, whether choral or solo. Although there is an uneven but steady rise in the amount of actors’ song in Euripides’ tragedies from the late 420s onward, these plays also show a slight increase in the total number of sung lines, so that the percentage of choral song does not significantly decrease as a result. Moreover, the sharp increase in the amount of *choreia* in *Bacchae* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*, produced a year after Euripides’ death, cannot be explained away simply as part of his archaizing in Macedonia, particularly as the extraordinary focus on musicality in these plays suggests a continuance of his newer, more experimental tendencies no less than a return to traditionalism. It is also unlikely that Euripides was forced to rely less on highly skilled actors in Macedon and therefore focus more on the chorus: though professional choruses were probably available, Archelaus must have drawn to his city the great actors of the day too as he transformed it into a cultural center.34 Finally, as we have already seen in the case of Plato’s *Laws*, in the fourth century tragedy continued to be understood in

---

30. On these changes, see Csapo 1999–2000: 409–12; Hall 1999, 2002. An increase in lyrics assigned to actors is evident in Sophocles’ work too, though his plays contain very little unmixed actors’ song and recitative (as opposed to *amoibaion*-style delivery with the chorus).
31. Almost all scholars up until the 1960s regarded *Suppliants* as a very early work of Aeschylus. For a summary of the old view and the argument that it is in fact a later play, dated perhaps to the 460s B.C.E., see Lloyd-Jones 1964; Garvie 1969.
32. For percentages of choral and solo song in Euripides’ plays, see Csapo 1999–2000: 410. The percentage of choral song in *Hecuba* increases to 15% if we include recitative verse.
terms of choreia. However much limelight actors gained during this period, then, tragedy could still be viewed as an essentially choral genre.

Despite these problems with the narrative of choral decline, more recent scholarship on the mousikē of Euripides’ tragedies has often perpetuated the assumption that choreia in his later work has little to do with the dramatic narrative. As we shall see in chapter 1, the surviving plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles contain numerous moments of metamusicality—that is, references to song and dance that engage with the live musical performance. Nevertheless, we find a marked explosion of musical language and imagery in Euripides’ tragedies from the end of the fifth century, above all in his choral odes. Eric Csapo drew our attention to the (meta)musicality of Euripides’ later work in two seminal articles on tragic mousikē. As a result, Euripides’ experimentation with different forms and images of mousikē is frequently viewed in terms of the so-called New Music—the umbrella term used by modern scholars to encompass the changes in musical style, language, and performance through the fifth century and into the fourth. The New Music is usually linked above all to the dithyramb and kitharodic nomos, and the famous fragment from Pherecrates’ comedy Chiron demonstrates that some of the figures most associated with musical change were indeed composers of these genres: the character Music lists the musicians who have ruined her with their excessive number of strings and increased modulation, starting with the dithyrambists Melanippides and Cinesias, and then complaining about the kitharodes Phrynis and (worst of all) Timotheus. This musical movement also, however, flourished in other dramatic genres besides the dithyramb—in tragedy, satyr play, and comedy. The many references to mousikē in Euripides’ later tragedies (along with the jibes at his new styles in Aristophanes’ plays) suggest that he was at the forefront of this cultural movement in the late 400s. But while Csapo’s work has been a welcome prompt in directing us toward the performative aspects of Euripidean plays, it can continue a sense of the disengagement of tragic mousikē from its dramatic context by linking it primarily to extradramatic trends within Athens’s broader

35. On the chorus in fourth-century tragedy, see Jackson forthcoming.
36. On tragedy as a choral genre, see Bacon 1994; Gagné and Hopman 2013b: 19–22.
38. On the origins of this term, see D’Angour 2006: 267.
40. See Csapo 1999–2000: 405–7. Following Kranz 1933, older scholarship has tended to date the beginning of Euripides’ musical innovations to 415 B.C.E. as a result of the chorus’s claim to ”new songs” (καινῶν ὕμνων) in Trojan Women 512.
sociocultural landscape. The question of its intradramatic significance continues to be neglected.41

Although the dithyramb was not the only site of musical experimentation and novelty in the fifth century, certain types of performance and language associated with this genre seem to have been especially prominent features of the New Music. The choral odes in Euripides' later tragedies have in particular been linked to the dithyramb, ever since Walter Kranz in 1933 labeled ten of them dithyrambic, largely because they seemed to be self-contained, independent narratives (“völlig absolut stehende balladeske Erzählung”), as dithyrams apparently were.42 Csapo has shown that, like dithyrams, these odes often include vivid descriptions of musical performance with a distinctly Dionysiac flavor, emphasizing in particular the aulos, circular dancing with vocabulary like helissein and dineuein (both meaning “to whirl”), and archetypal choral performers like dolphins and Nereids; the latter tend to be fifty in number, just like a dithyrambic chorus.43

But, like the focus on the New Music, the tendency to connect musical discourse and performance in Euripides' work to the dithyramb continues to look for relevance beyond the plays themselves. The question then remains of how these elements may be integrated within the dramatic plot. The Dionysiac, dithyrambic character of some of his self-referential choral passages can bear witness to his experimentation with new musical trends and at the same time point to a metatheatrical engagement with his tragedies' performance context within the City Dionysia. If considered in isolation, however, this feature cannot in itself shed much light on how mousikē functions within a play as a whole—except perhaps in the case of Bacchae, in which Dionysiac choreia constitutes the chorus's primary activity and identity.44 The labeling of certain Euripidean stasima as dithyrambic on account of their apparently freestanding character more explicitly continues the idea that his choral odes become increasingly divorced from the mythos in his later plays—“dithyrambic” becomes virtually a synonym for “embolimon-like.” Csapo himself warns us against characterizing Euripides' choreia in this way, claiming that “the criterion of self-contained narration perpetuates the notion that drama's participation in the 'New Music' consisted largely in the insertion of extractable, irrelevant, and often meaningless, musical interludes which performed a purely aesthetic function at the cost of the drama's integrity.”45 Yet the

focus on the New Musical and dithyrambic character of Euripides’ choral odes tends to separate the plays’ musicality from their dramatic context and so to strengthen the idea that the lyric element is at most a seasoning, having little connection with the dramatic structure.

The recent surge of interest in the New Music has also overshadowed both a long tradition of innovation in archaic and classical *mousikē* and the more traditional aspects of Euripides’ own musical compositions. “New Music” as a term for musical change in the late fifth century is misleading, since such change occurred neither suddenly nor in a cultural vacuum. Indeed, the figure of Music in Pherecrates’ *Chiron*, in her litany of complaints about various musicians, goes as far back as the dithyrambist Melanippides, who was probably active in the early fifth century, sixty or seventy years before Euripides’ own period of marked musical experimentation.46 And as we shall see in chapter 1, Euripides inherits various forms of both musical imagery and metamusical play between words and performance that are already evident in surviving archaic lyric as well as in older tragedy. Some of these effects may be deemed New Musical, but such a classification can mask one of the central characteristics of Euripidean tragedy in the last two decades of the fifth century: namely its adaptation of traditional forms and images of *choreia* for the tragic stage.

This is not to say that the presence of established lyric traditions in Euripides has previously gone unnoticed. Laura Swift has traced the influence of choral genres like *partheneion* (maidens’ song), *hymenaios* (wedding song), and *epinician* (victory song) in a selection of tragedies by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.47 But she is not concerned with the musical performance of such lyric within the tragedians’ works, nor does she discuss how allusions to these genres function on a dramatic level as opposed to an exclusively thematic one. This sort of focus on the vestiges of traditional types of song in Euripides’ work, like scholarship on his New Music, can also lead us to underappreciate the mix of old and new—and of different lyric genres in general—in his choral odes. One of the central arguments of this book is that such a mix is crucial to the dramatic impact of much of his *mousikē* and is an important part of his musical innovation in general.

In emphasizing the dramatic relevance of *mousikē* in Euripides’ later tragedies, I do not, however, overlook the undeniably aloof and often bizarrely detached character of many of these songs. When the chorus sing of Achilles traveling to

47. Swift 2010. Dithyramb (not discussed by Swift) was also a traditional choral genre, but the extensive employment of dithyrambic imagery and even styles of performance in tragedy seems primarily to have been a late fifth-century phenomenon. See Battezzato 2013 on the relationship between dithyramb and tragedy. On the incorporation of traditional styles and motifs within a display of musical innovation, see LeVen 2014: she demonstrates how the New Musical poets combine old and new in constructing their position within a lyric tradition.