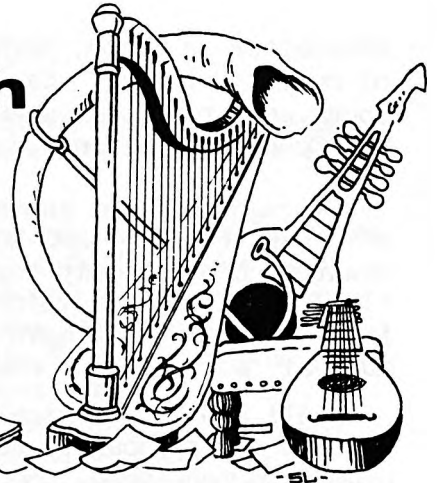


music in middle earth



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he chroniclers of Middle-earth, sensitive to sounds and their effects,¹ provided much material for building up sound-pictures of its people, places and events. Here are some thoughts on the character of the music, and whether it could have been written down.

Music was not compartmentalised into such categories as 'jazz', 'classical', 'folk', and so on, as it has been for us. It varied only according to function and the nature of the musicians themselves, each kindred having its own stamp. The *Hobbit* composers leaned towards spontaneity and folk-like qualities in music, with a religious streak: probably others would have portrayed the same things from a different angle. As it is, descriptions of music are in the background compared to poetry,² though music was a natural part of life with long-standing traditions (cf. *FotR* p.37;³ *QS* p.178;⁴ *FotR* p.77, 130; *TT* p.89³). Its transmission was bound up with remembering lore (*RotK* p.406, line 2;³ *TT* p.90, lines 16 & 18), for which there were books (*FotR* p.255, for example), and libraries (*TT* p.278), the writing of language being known to most peoples. These are good indications for the existence of written music. It may have been recorded in manuscripts but overlooked in later times, the marks being indecipherable as words — as our own ethnomusicologists have sometimes found. Admittedly, most references to music show its use for expression and relief of the needs of the moment (*TT* p.145, end; *FotR* p.44); a spontaneous variety with a transitory life.

The Dwarves wove music as a form of magic (*TH* p.22⁵). They arrived at Bag End as a string and wind ensemble operating rather like a jazz-band (and eating like one too). They built with new or traditional units, carefully planning their sounds to blend, to awaken in their words and in a timorous hobbit the sense of adventure. Had the Dwarves, especially Thorin, lived on

¹In the first 81 pages of *FotR* there are 64 references to them.

²The Entmoot (*TT* p.82-86) is an exception.

³References are to the 3 volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* (*FotR*, *TT*, *RotK*), hardback edition, 1955 and 1956.

⁴*The Silmarillion*, hardback edition, 1977.

⁵*The Hobbit*, hardback edition, new size, 1978.

thereafter in peace, perhaps we would have heard of that great disseminator of music, printing. Sauron would have found that useful! The wizards knew sound as a tool: for example, Gandalf's recital of the Ring-inscription at the Council of Elrond (*FotR* p.267).

Aragorn showed another kind of organised musical art in his chanting of a song (*FotR* pp.203-205), saying that it was in a certain 'mode'. This meant to him not only words, metres, pitches and rhythms, but also lilt and flow, expression of voice, and other things for which aural and/or traditional learning must have been involved. The poetic form gives rise to the musical, so that, for example, the terms *linnod* or *ann-themath* cover both.

All types of musical instruments are found in Middle-earth except for bellows and keyboard. Wind, plucked and bowed strings, bells, voices and drums are mentioned. So are toy instruments (for parties), professional musicians (*TT* p.142) and an historical bardic tradition. The extant Elvish religious song from this tradition, *Namárië*, is like an improvisatory plain-song for voice and (melodic) instrument; a self-contained unharmonised melody. How strange the Dwarvish ensembles must have sounded to a people used to this; and how rarefied the Elvish chants, to the Dwarves. *Namárië* is finely balanced in proportion, and held in tension between two modal scales⁶ using the reciting-note (transcribed as C#) as a pivot. Like a plainsong, too, it achieves impact through the art of musical understatement.⁷ In the early recording of *Namárië*, pitch-relationships and rhythms approximate to our more mathematical ones in much the same way as do ancient-rooted performances in our own cultures, kindled more from inspiration and memory than from anything written.

The Ents (*TT* pp.84-89) had entwined in their language a complex harmonic system within which the voice of each one could be heard and fashioned in ever-changing relationships with the others, until one concord was reached. Perhaps all the different styles of music represented different facets of the original Great Music of Creation, as did the creatures they belonged to: yet of all of them it is the music of the Ents that gives me a vision of what the *Ainulindalë* must have been like.

Looking at conditions favourable to the emergence of musical notation in our age, one of these was the repetition of quantities of music in long cycles. The Elves' lives were bound up with the stars and seasons, in their counting of years and their religion; so they may, like us, have had music to mark the passing of time. For many years another condition was also fulfilled — the existence in relative peace of people dedicated to writing and learning. The historical Western need to learn music quickly, collectively and in parts of increasing complexity, and to keep performing the pieces so learned, seems more remote from life in Middle-earth. Only the Dwarves may have had this need, and they did not appear to use copies. Maybe their

⁶The instrumental mode is like a Western descending melodic minor scale, root written as F#. The vocal mode is like a major scale, root written as A. It could be argued that this is in the same mode as the instrumental part, since the whole scale is not involved; but either way the pull between the two is present.

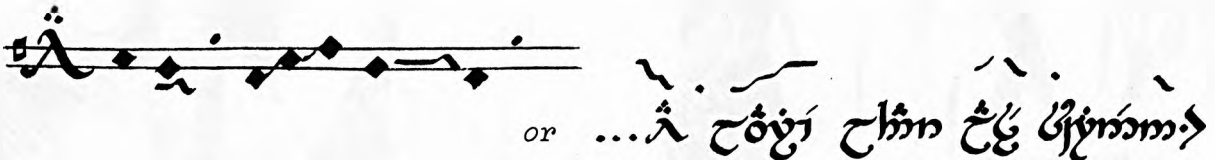
⁷The bard drives his point home by making the listener realise that the clue he has given is tiny compared to the force behind it. Hear, for instance, the effect of small but well-placed pitch changes on '*nin enquan-tuva?*'

wives kept them, in which case we will never know!

As the originators and teachers of script, the Elves may seem the most likely people to have found a musical notation. However, I think that there are two strong arguments against this.

To start with, consider Ilúvatar, the Absolute. His music was the pure expression of His imagination and will, and as such the fulfilment of the same (*QS* p.15). The Ainur had a similar quality of solid permanence from their thought, under His direction, and their music was irresistible (*QS* pp. 27 & 40: Ulmo and Manwë). The Elves were near to this:⁸ they were what other people called 'magic'. Music from an Elf was almost completely his own, and the truth from his heart was 'created' in a more tangible way than for peoples less close to Eru, since his 'magic' had an intense attunement to the nature of things. The associations and signals of some music, which can remind and command those who know what they mean, has emotional and physiological effects (*QS* p.235; *TT* pp.135, 138, 146; *FotR* p.35). In human music, some activity is sub-creation (composition) and some, interpretation of this (performance). Usually performer and composer are not the same. Therefore I feel that it is much more likely that a human should wish to capture music by writing it down, than that an Elf should wish for someone else to try to reproduce the 'magic' of his own mind.

The second argument concerns the thread, running through Middle-earth's history, of the marring discord of Melkor (*QS* p.31, 32). The Elves had learned a lesson from the corruption of the rings, and of much else to do with their kindred and language. Having left to him only the power of rejecting and twisting, Melkor would have had to wait for a notation to be devised by someone else before using it. Since music had been used to create Eä, to give him their music might have been a powerful weapon for its destruction. However the Elves may still have thought that they could safely produce a notation that would serve to 'remind' the initiated, but would be vague to anyone else; for example (like neumes),



If music was not written down in Middle-earth, it was not for lack of richness or skill or love of it. People representing most kindreds were noted for their music; among them Faramir, the Laiquendi, Thorin, and even old Bilbo. More delving into the subject would certainly be repaid.



⁸See, for example, the effect of Lúthien's singing on Beren, Morgoth and Mandos.