

Open letter to David Crookes

Dear Mr Crookes, in 2011, you published a book laboriously entitled ‘*The Lord shall count being not only a discursive treatise on mathematics, music, and cryptography in the Bible but also a book about literature and an introduction to several disciplines*’. That is some impressive title in which I regret the absence of a cookery section, a manual on exorcism and a guide to best practice in appendisectomy among others that I would have suggested in this display of your phantasmagorical modesty. I take advantage of these lines to congratulate the courage of your publishers. But pray, what has the ‘Lord’ to do with mathematics, music, cryptography, literature and several other disciplines, should one be an atheist? Do you mean that your lines only apply to the ‘Chosen Ones’ and that the others can rot in hell? This is such an outrageous standpoint. Mr Crookes, the historical authenticity of the Bible only applies to those who believe in God. There is no evidence of Abraham, Moses, Jesus, etc., having ever existed, so please, stop lecturing me about proof of harmony, and other things in the Bible. I would never have permitted myself to insult you about your beliefs, so please have the decency to respect mine.

For those who have had the pleasure of not reading your work, I quote the page in which you have excelled yourself in magisterial stupidity:

Ignore any author who tells you that harmony was unknown in the ancient world. Likewise, ignore any author who makes oracles out of his own notions, whether or not he wears a lot of scholarly apparatus. In *The Archaeomusicology of the Ancient Near East* (Trafford Publishing, 2005), 32, Richard J Dumbrill considers a piece of iconography, and says, ‘.....two blind harpists are playing the same giant frontal symmetric lyre each plucking strings with both hands.....’ Dr Dumbrill goes on to say in a footnote, ‘.....one must not jump to the conclusion that harmony was practised at that time. It is not because we see four hands on that instrument that it means that (sic) the four hands were plucking different strings at the same time. The artists of the past could not freeze action in terms of tenths of a second as one can do nowadays with a photographic camera. They would only have caught the general posture of the musicians. On the other hand, different notes other than those of the octave must have been heard sounded together more than once in a concert of the period, accidentally or not. However, whether they (who?) intended them to be, or perceived them as, harmony is another matter. It is all a matter of teleology. They would not have used harmony because they did not need it and would not have invented it because they felt no creative necessity for it as they would not have had, in any case, the ability to understand it. Harmony appears only very late in the history of music, not before the second millennium AD.’ Dr Dumbrill presents his mere opinions as if they were undeniable axioms. The artists of the past were able only to catch the general posture of their subjects, because he says so. Unspecified people would not have used harmony, because he says so. These people did not need harmony, because he says so. They would not have invented harmony, because he says so. They felt no creative need for harmony, because he says so. Having failed to evolve sufficiently, they would not have had the ability to understand harmony, because he says so. It is all a matter of the ludicrous word *teleology*, because he says so. Harmony appears only very late in the history of music, because he says so. Oh, dear! What did Poe declare in ‘*The Fall of the House of Usber*’?

Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.

‘.....A PASSIONATE DEVOTION TO THE INTRICACIES.....’

Don’t imagine that scholars who study the music of antiquity are Unimaginably Learned Persons, or that they ride about in Ancient Assyrian Chariots. These scholars deserve no special status. (The same goes for ancient Assyria.) A man who investigates any area of the musical past will address himself to music, to musical texts, and to musical things. If he wants to study music,

he must know what musicians can do. If he wants to read texts which are written in a language other than his own, he must be a good linguist. If he wants to explicate difficult texts, he must be an accredited explicator. If he wants to interpret iconography, he must know how scribes and painters and sculptors represent what is real. If he wants to examine particular musical instruments, he must be expert in the pertinent technology. Whether the music that he studies belongs to 1600 AD or to 1600 BC is worse than trivial: my last six sentences apply to him. A certain area of Solomon's chariot was 'paved with love', but scholars are not at liberty to pave areas of uncertainty with their own predilections. Imagine that Dr Jadwiga Herchen studies the music of ancient Rujukistan. Dr Herchen is fascinated by the Mayan number 1366560, by ancient fertility rites, and by halfway-house forms of musical temperament. Whenever Dr Herchen's field of study confronts her with an evidential gap, she brings one or more of her darlings on to the pitch. Beware of any numerical 'finding' which is not rooted in the competent study of an original text. Beware of the superstition that antiquity was largely occupied with religion and the procreative faculties. Beware of scholars who torment a piece of ancient text on the rack of some rickety theory. Finally, beware of any musicologist who is not chiefly interested in real music. Anglophone archaeomusicology is presently palsied by three things: a witless obsession with tuning-systems, a woeful ignorance of the Bible, and a belief in its own bombastic propaganda. (In 2009 the website blurb of one well-known archaeomusicologist proclaimed 'his vast knowledge of ancient music'.) Already a lodge manual of silly axioms is beginning to compile itself. These axioms are bound to hinder the work of students who would otherwise approach informative pieces of iconography with unfettered minds. (Axiom 1. Any ancient Rujuk musician who touches his neck or his thorax with one hand is a singer modifying the sound of his own voice. Axiom 2. The musical system of the ancient Rujuks must be apprehended in terms of such-and-such a number of notes. Axiom 3. The ancient Rujuks always made the soundboards of their lyres from leather, because wood decayed so quickly in the climate of ancient Rujukistan.) Few musical instruments have survived from antiquity, and the value of musical iconography is limited by several factors, so the main business of an archaeomusicologist must be the reading of texts. But texts are literature, and literature is the business of literate persons. A bit of lame lexical linguistry, grafted on to a degree in music or social anthropology, will not do. Anyone who presumes to explain a difficult piece of ancient literature needs to have a literary track record. Once archaeomusicology is healed of its palsy, it must do three things. First, it must recruit scholars whose relationship with ancient literature is solidly founded on the study of Latin and Greek. (If you don't know about the boxwood aulos in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* XII. 158 [= *tibia buxi*], you're only fooling about.) Secondly, it must entrust the replication of musical instruments to experienced makers, rather than to voluble theorists. Thirdly, it must produce the kind of academic work that the great university presses will be unafraid to publish. Let us wait for real charioteers to appear. Nothing obliges us to accredit the incredible. We cannot accord the status of a hippodrome to a skateboard park.

My turn now. I have left you enough lines to make an ass of yourself. How dare you teaching us Assyriologists anything and assume our ignorance while boasting your flawed polymathia! *La culture*, remember, *c'est comme la confiture, moins on en a, plus on l'étale*¹. Thank you Mr Crookes, you have amused me for a few moments.

Richard Dumbrill, August 2019

1 Culture is like jam, the less you have, the more you spread it.