Hearing Sappho

"Because once I've learned it, I can die." So said Solon the Wise, the great Athenian lawmaker of the sixth century B.C., when asked why he wanted to be taught a certain poem by Sappho. His extravagant admiration for her hotly yearning lyrics was shared by most literate people in the ancient world: from Plato, who called her the Tenth Muse, to the Roman poet Catullus, who, five centuries after she died, adapted a famous song of hers about erotic frustration into Latin.

And yet today so little of her poetry survives—only one complete poem and a handful of substantial fragments—that the rave reviews of two millennia ago can be more frustrating than inspiring. What was all the fuss about?

Even when we have the words themselves, much is missing. Music, for one thing. For the Greeks, the "lyric" in "lyric poetry" was literal: the verses were composed to be sung to the accompaniment of a lyre. The ancients referred to her as, simply, "the Poetess," but today the term is likely to give the wrong impression: a life spent cramped over a desk or a laptop; sparsely attended readings in small cafés; Iowa. What Sappho really was was a singer-songwriter. Like Joni Mitchell or Bob Dylan, she wrote her music as well as her lyrics, and performed her songs in public. Ancient authors loved to quote lines of her work, but for all we know when they did so readers were hearing certain famous melodies in their heads as well as registering the words. (Think of what goes on in your mind when someone mentions the song "Let It Be.") Unfortunately, although ancient musical papyri have turned up, and classicists are increasingly confident about what Greek music might have sounded like, Sappho's melodies, like ninety-nine per cent of her lyrics, are lost.

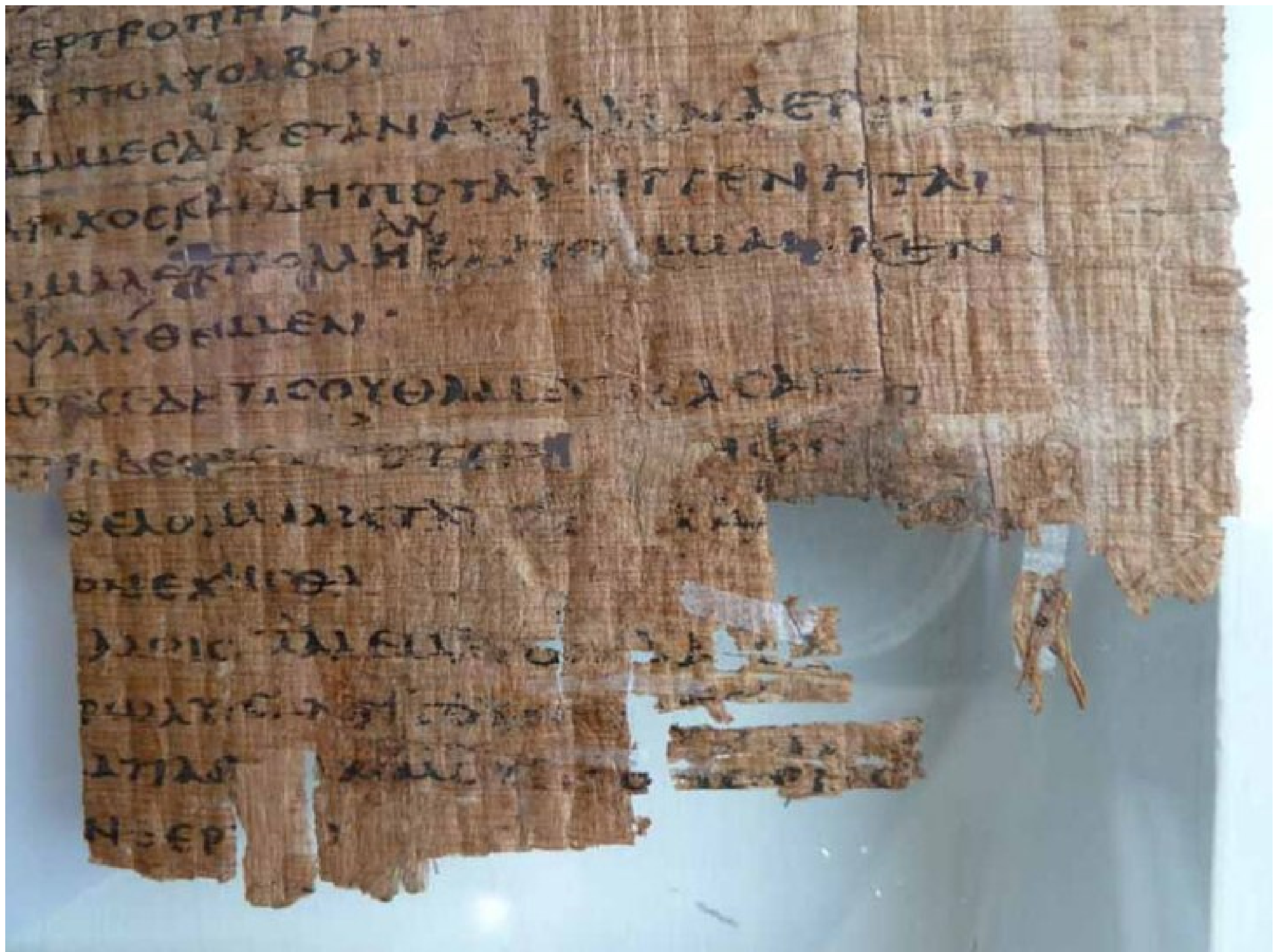
Still, given Sappho's dazzling reputation, the temptation to reconstruct what her lyrics may have sounded like in performance has proved difficult for classicists to resist. The late Stephen Daitz, a professor of classics at City College and the *CUNY* graduate center, devoted much of his career to studying how ancient Greek epic, lyric, and drama sounded in performance.* (And, indeed, in the privacy of one's own home: silent reading was virtually unknown in the ancient world.) Among the texts that Daitz recorded before his death, last June—a list that included the Iliad and the Odyssey in their entirety—was the poem that classicists know as Sappho Fragment 1. The only work of hers to have come down to us intact, it's a slyly charming riff on a formal hymn to the goddess of love, Aphrodite. In it, the speaker appeals to the divinity for assistance in "yet another" love affair with a lovely girl. You can listen to it below.

But, before you do so, a few things. First, metre. The poem is composed in a rhythmic scheme that Sappho is said to have invented called the sapphic stanza: each four-line stanza consists of three metrically identical lines eleven syllables in length, followed by a shorter fourth line of five syllables. In the schema just below, long syllables are represented by horizontal dashes, short syllables by the letter "u"; an "x" indicates a syllable that can be either long or short. ("Long" and "short" refer to the "quantity" of the syllable: a long syllable simply takes longer to pronounce than a short syllable does. Think of a long syllable as a quarter note and a short syllable as an eighth note.)

> *— u — x — u u — u — —*
>
> *— u — x — u u — u — —*
>
> *— u — x — u u — u — —*
>
> *— u u — u*

When you practice a little, you may be surprised at how jaunty the line is, with its strong syncopations: BUM-bah-BUM BUM BUM bah-bah BUM bah BUM BUM. You can only imagine what the music was like.

The second thing about Daitz's recording of Fragment 1 that might seem a bit odd is the singsong quality of the performer's voice as it rises, plunges, and yowls around the musical staff. That's because Ancient Greek was a pitch-accented language, a bit like Chinese is today: an accent indicated the relative pitch at which you pronounced a given syllable and not, as in English, the stress (emphasis or loudness) that you put on that syllable. Below, you'll see three texts of Sappho Fragment 1: the original Greek, a transliteration, and then an English rendering by Diane J. Rayor, whose new book-length translation of most of the known fragments of Sappho was published last autumn, by Cambridge University Press. Take a look at the Greek text: however inscrutable the characters themselves, you'll notice accents hovering over certain letters: acute (´), grave (`), and circumflex (ˆ). These markings—which were, in fact, invented by a scholar working at the Library of Alexandria who wanted to help readers of Greek texts know what to do with their voices as they read aloud—indicate tone: where the voice is meant to go up, down, or up-and-then-down. (And where the voice went up and down made *all* the difference. In the late four hundreds B.C., during a performance of a play by Euripides, an actor created a fiasco by pitching the last syllable of the word *galen'* as an up and then down instead of a simple up. As a result of that one literally false note, a line that was supposed to mean "After the storm, I see a calm once more" ended up as "After the storm, I see a weasel once more." The audience collapsed into laughter, and tragedy became farce.)



Courtesy © Imaging Papyri Project, Oxford

The difficulties facing anyone who tries to reconstruct what Classical Greek sounded like are enormous because of a peculiar complexity of languages, like Greek, in which the length of a syllable and its accentuation were two separate issues. Take, for instance, the last word of the first line of the poem, the name of the goddess to whom Sappho appeals: Aphrodite. (*Ahh-phroh-dee-tahh*, as people from Sappho's island, Lesbos, pronounced it.) If I represent the name with respect to the "quantity" of the syllables—longs in capitals, shorts in lowercases—it looks like this: AHH-phroh-DEE-TAHH. But, whereas the English speaker instinctively wants to stress those capitalized syllables, in Greek the accented syllable was, in fact, the second one, "phroh"—a short syllable that was not stressed as we think of it but, rather, pitched higher than the other syllables in the name.

It's all very tricky: the fact is that when you learn Classical Greek as an undergraduate today you tend simply to stress the accented syllables and leave it at that. But, however tentative reconstructions such as Daitz's may be, they remind you that Greek had a natural music to it. Those quarter notes and eighth notes, the soprano acutes and baritone graves, the Margaret Dumont curveball of the circumflex: even without her lyre, Sappho *sings*.

> *Ποικιλόθρον', ἀθάνατ' Ἀφρόδιτα,*
>
> *παῖ Δίος, δολόπλοκε, λίσσομαί σε*
>
> *μή μ' ἄσαισι μήτ' ὀνίαισι δάμνα,*
>
> *πότνια, θῦμον·*

> *ἀλλὰ τυῖδ' ἔλθ', αἴποτα κἀτέρωτα*
>
> *τᾶς ἔμας αὔδως ἀΐοισα πήλυι*
>
> *ἔκλυες, πάτρος δὲ δόμον λίποισα*
>
> *χρύσιον ἦλθες*
>
> *ἄρμ' ὐποζεύξαισα· κάλοι δέ σ' ἆγον*
>
> *ὤκεες στροῦθοι περὶ γᾶς μελαίνας*
>
> *πύκνα δινεῦντες πτέρ' ἀπ' ὠράνω αἴθε-*
>
> *ρας διὰ μέσσω.*
>
> *αἶψα δ' ἐξίκοντο· τὺ δ', ὦ μάκαιρα,*
>
> *μειδιάσαισ' ἀθανάτῳ προσώπῳ,*
>
> *ἤρε', ὄττι δηὖτε πέπονθα κὤττι*
>
> *δηὖτε κάλημι,*
>
> *κὤττι μοι μάλιστα θέλω γένεσθαι*
>
> *μαινόλᾳ θύμῳ· τίνα δηὖτε Πείθω*
>
> *μαῖς ἄγην ἐς σὰν φιλότατα, τίς σ', ὦ*
>
> *Ψάπφ', ἀδικήει;*
>
> *καὶ γὰρ αἰ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,*
>
> *αἰ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ' ἀλλὰ δώσει,*
>
> *αἰ δὲ μὴ φίλει, ταχέως φιλήσει*
>
> *κωὐκ ἐθέλοισα.*
>
> *ἔλθε μοι καὶ νῦν, χαλεπᾶν δὲ λῦσον*
>
> *ἐκ μεριμνᾶν, ὄσσα δέ μοι τελέσσαι*
>
> *θῦμος ἰμέρρει, τέλεσον· σὺ δ' αὔτα*
>
> *σύμμαχος ἔσσο.*
>
> ***Transliteration***
>
> *POI-kih-LÓH-throhn' AH-thah-náht' AH-phróh-DEE-TAH,*
>
> *PAI di-OHS doh-LOH-ploh-keh, LIHSS-oh-MAI SEH,*
>
> *MAY m'ah-SAI-sih MAYD' oh-nih-AI-sih DAHM-NAH*
>
> *POT-nee-ah, THUH-mon*
>
> *AHLL-ah TWEED' EHLTH', AI poh-tah KAHT-eh-ROH-TAH*

> *TAS eh-MAS OW-DASS ah-ih-OY-sah PAY-LOY*
>
> *EH-clue-EHS PAH-TROHS deh doh-MOAN lih-POI-SAH*
>
> *KHRU-si-on AYL-thehs*
>
> *ARM' hoop-AHZ-DYOO-KSAI-sah; kah-LOI deh s'AH-GOAN*
>
> *OH-keh-EHS STROU-THOY pe-ri GAHS meh-LAI-NAHSS*
>
> *PUK-nah DINN-EN-TEHS pter' ahp' OH-rah-NOY-theh-*
>
> *ROSS di-a MESS-ohh,*
>
> *AIP-sah DEX-EE-KOHN-toh; su d', OH mah-KAI-RAH,*
>
> *MAY-di-AI-SAIS' AH-thah-nah-TOY proh-SOH-POY*
>
> *AY-reh' OHT-tih DYOO-teh peh-PON-thah KOTT-ti*
>
> *DYOOT-teh kah-LAYM-mih*
>
> *KOTT-ti MOY mah-LISS-tah theh-LOH geh-NESS-THAI*
>
> *MAI-noh-LAI THOO-MOY; tih-na DYOO-teh PAY-THOH*
>
> *APS s'ah-GAYN ES WAHN phih-loh-TAH-tah? TIS S'OH*
>
> *PSAHPF', ah-di-KAY-AY?*
>
> *KAI gahr AI FYOO-GAY, tah-kheh-OHSS di-OHX-AY;*
>
> *AI deh DOH-RAH MAY deh-keht' , AH-lah DOH-SAY;*
>
> *AI deh MAY fih-LAY, tah-kheh-OHSS fih-LAY SAY*
>
> *KOOK eh-theh-LOY-SAH.*
>
> *EHL-theh MOY KAI NOON, khah-leh-PAHN deh LOO-SON*
>
> *EK me-RIHM-NAHN, OHS-sah deh MOY teh-LEHS-SAI*
>
> *THOO-mohs EE-MEHR-RAY, teh-leh-SON; soo d'OW-TAH*
>
> *SOOM-mah-khos EHS-soh.*
>
> ***Translation***
>
> *On the throne of many hues, Immortal Aphrodite,*
>
> *child of Zeus, weaving wiles: I beg you,*
>
> *do not break my spirit, O Queen,*
>
> *with pain or sorrow*
>
> *but come – if ever before from far away*
>
> *you heard my voice and listened,*

> *and leaving your father's*
>
> *golden home you came,*
>
> *your chariot yoked with lovely sparrows*
>
> *drawing you quickly over the dark earth*
>
> *in a whirling cloud of wings down*
>
> *the sky through midair,*
>
> *suddenly here. Blessed One, with a smile*
>
> *on your deathless face, you ask*
>
> *what have I suffered again*
>
> *and why do I call again*
>
> *and what in my wild heart do I most wish*
>
> *would happen: "Once again who must I*
>
> *persuade to turn back to your love?*
>
> *Sappho, who wrongs you?*
>
> *If now she flees, soon she'll chase.*
>
> *If rejecting gifts, then she'll give.*
>
> *If not loving, soon she'll love*
>
> *even against her will."*
>
> *Come to me now – release me from these*
>
> *troubles, everything my heart longs*
>
> *to have fulfilled, fulfill, and you*
>
> *be my ally.*

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Correction: This piece originally misstated the date of Stephen Daitz's death and his title.