LeVen, P.

This much awaited monograph on the late classical melic poetry bears a riddling title. As the author herself explains in the Epilogue, the image of the Many-Headed Muse aims to capture the diversity of the late classical melic poetry and to encompass the character of the so-called New Music that looks both backward and forward in the poetic spectrum. A valuable contribution to the currently growing scholarship on the New Music, the book is to date the sole publication that collects the poems of the late classical period (430-323 BC) and examines them in their own terms. LeVen outlines clearly in the Introduction her three aims: to re-evaluate the texts of late classical melic poetry, including inscribed poems, and to analyse them as a complete whole; to locate this poetic production within a larger historical, cultural, religious, political, and artistic context; and to study the forms of ancient reception of the late classical lyric poetry.

Chapter 1 is devoted to the surviving corpus and presents the reader with two impressive tables: Table 1 on the late fifth- and fourth-century instrumental performers, and Table 2 on poets who were successful in dithyrambic competitions. The tables justify LeVen’s claims over the diversity of material attesting to song-activity: fragments are found on papyri; songs are inscribed on stone; literary sources preserve quotations, names, and biographical information. They also bring forward the generic diversity of the corpus and the geographical mobility of its representatives. LeVen further analyses the processes through which the corpus survives, in order to conclude that where survival was based on conscious selection, this was ultimately influenced by biases and agendas that reflected conservative ideology.

Chapter 2 is complementary to Chapter 1 in its attempt to encourage scholarly focus on the artistic products of late classical mousikē rather than on its criticism. The chapter discusses how the representation of the New Music in antiquity is framed by a socio-political discourse relevant to the decadence of society, while it is judged in moral and ethical terms. Old Comedy is the main source of information for the manner in which the novel features of the New Music are depicted, and LeVen goes through a number of passages where the New Musicians are a subject of parody. This presentation is coupled by a close reading of Timotheus’ Persians, where it becomes evident that the rhetoric of the New Music itself offered the main key-terms for its criticism and its own reception (e.g. kainotomia, poikilia).
Chapter 3 deals with the anecdotal life of the New Music. The anecdotes, which reveal a profound engagement with the poetic text, deal in particular with moral norms, with the poet’s position in society as well as with the evolution of lyric practice. The data about a poet’s life are registered according to three biographical strategies: duplication of the poetic persona due to mutually contradictory information, narrativization in order to connect the poets into a large narrative framework about the evolution of mousikē, and condensation, where contradictions in tradition are condensed into a single person. The chapter focuses in particular on Philoxenus, and the discussion analyses his Deipnon and a number of anecdotes that present him in various social, economic, and aesthetic contexts.

Based on Aristophanes’ parody of the rhetoric and style of the New Music, Chapter 4 discusses the language of the New Music, which, as LeVen argues, displays a high level of awareness of the poetic tradition. Its elevated and heightened diction is centred on compounds, periphrases, epithets, neologisms, and metaphors and resembles the linguistic experiments of the sophists. Based especially on an analysis of Timotheus’ diction (Cyclops and Persae), LeVen concludes that the combination of traditional and innovative language activates the audience’s imagination and creates an experience that relies on defamiliarization. The creation of an unfamiliar image forces the audience to engage in the process of recognition and identification. This relationship between audience, language, narrative world, and mimēsis is further explored in Chapter 5. Focusing on Timotheus’ Persae and on Philoxenus’ Cyclops, LeVen shows how intertextuality with other poems increases the engagement of the hearer and how it constructs a new type of the “subjectivity of the audience” (p. 192).

Chapters 6 and 7 draw attention to poems that have not been extensively discussed in scholarship and focus predominantly on issues of genre, narrative voice, and performance context. LeVen looks at Philoxenus’ Deipnon (PMG 836), Aristotle’s Hymn to Virtue (PMG 842) and Ariphron’s Hymn to Health (PMG 813) to argue mainly in favour of the performative adaptability of songs to various cultural settings, including the theatre and the symposium (Chapter 6). Chapter 7 deals with four cultic songs that were inscribed in sanctuaries: the paean to Asclepius and Dionysus by Isyllus and Philodamus of Scarpheas respectively, and Aristonous’ hymns to Hestia and Apollo. LeVen examines the narrative strategies through which the songs reflect on their materiality as objects without abandoning the conventions of oral poetry, the manner in which they associate with their occasion and performance setting as well as engage with religious and social ritual.

The reader will be impressed by the detailed analysis of the poems as well as by the insightful engagement with other sources. LeVen explores a number of