

INSECT MUSIC



The cicadas used to be human beings who lived before the birth of the Muses. When the Muses were born and song was created for the first time, some of the people of that time were so overwhelmed with the pleasure of singing that they forgot to eat or drink; so they died without even realizing it. It is from them that the race of these insects came into being; and, as a gift from the Muses, they have no need of nourishment once they are born. Instead, they immediately burst into song, without food or drink, until it is time for them to die. After they die, they go to the Muses and tell each one of them which mortals have honored her.

Plato, *Phaedrus* 258e-259d

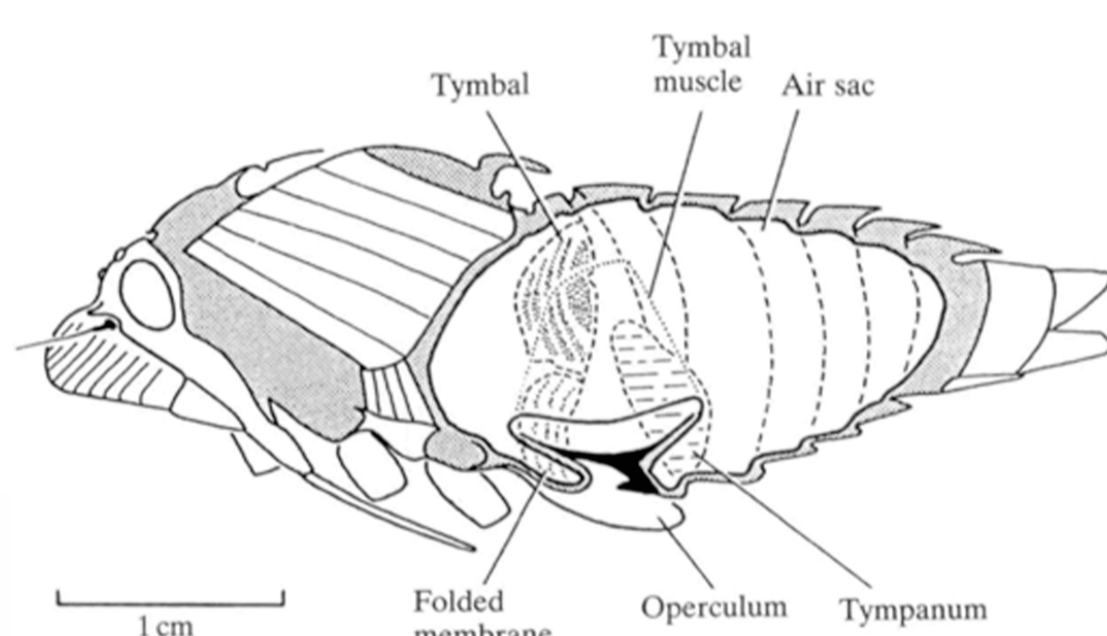
From Homer onwards, ancient writers show a great fondness for the musical ability of insects, particularly the cicada and the grasshopper or locust. Following Plato's tale of the cicadas as mediators between the Muses and humans, these animals seemed to be predestined for the representation of *ars poetica*, if not the poets themselves.

Since the advent of Hellenistic poetry, the real anatomical differences between the cicada, the locust and the grasshopper have been ignored, so that these species were in effect all rolled into one, their sweet and continuous chirping indicative of a bucolic setting.

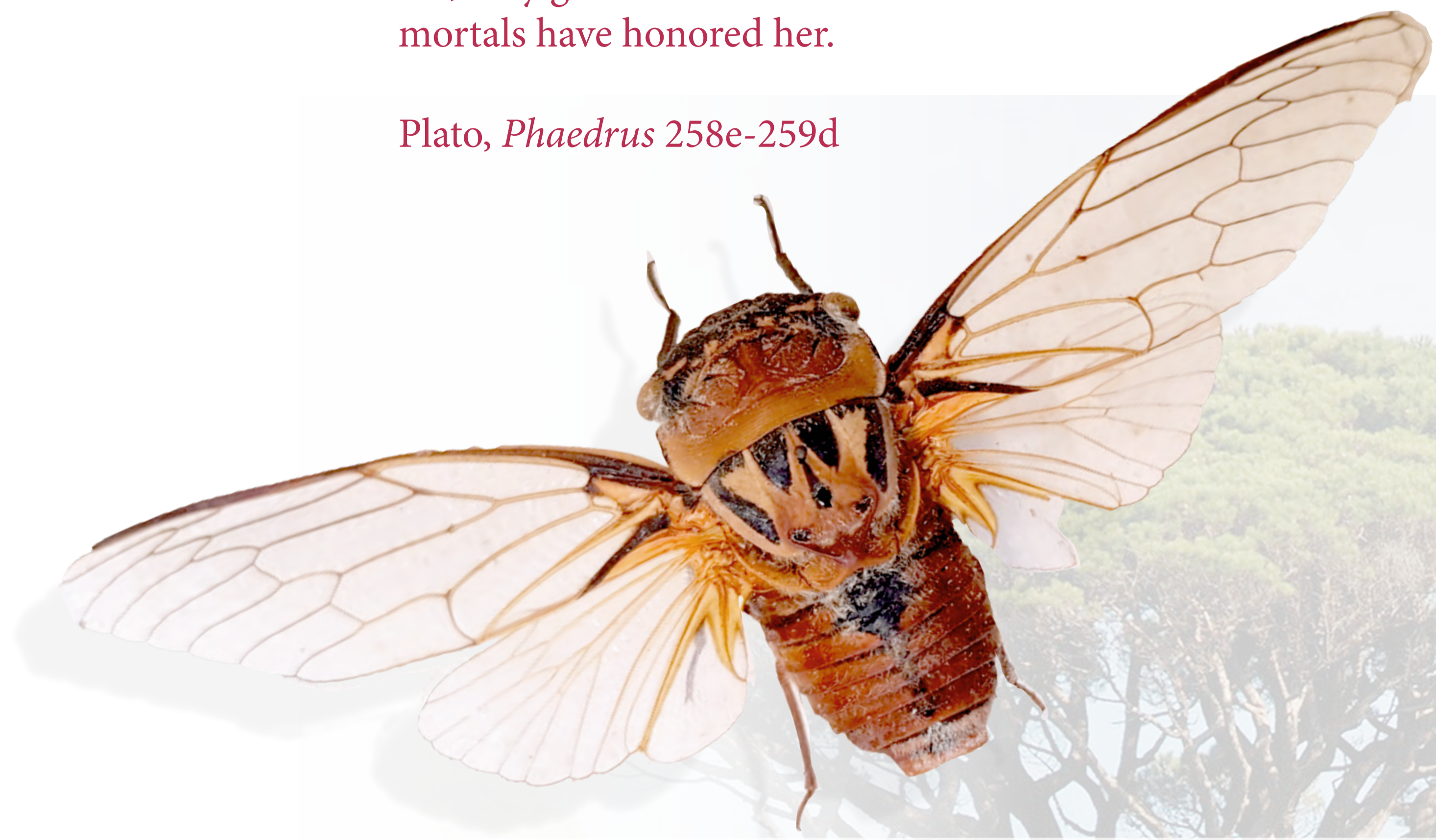
HOW DO INSECTS PRODUCE SOUND?

For ancient authors, their sound-producing mechanism affords the sole criterion to distinguish between locust, grasshopper or cricket. The former two species *stridulate* by scraping with the hind leg on the wing. A file on one wing of the cricket, on the other hand, is rubbed by a scraper on the other wing.

Two silver medallions in Munich (2nd century BC), that previously formed the inner part of a cup supposedly from Nihawand/Iran (ancient Persia), depict a locust/grasshopper (*akris*). The insect is sitting on a vine-branch eating the blossom of the grapevine. Beneath the harming character of the insect the image also reveals an arresting visual detail: the depiction of the *stridulatio*, as the hind leg with spines is raised to the wings. Further we see in these silver reliefs not only a very close representation of two qualities of the animal, but even a specific iconography for music: the very moment when the insect produces sound.



In contrast to the *stridulatio* of the grasshopper (*orthoptera*), the cicada produces sound by the vibration of the so-called tymbal in the anterior abdomen, using the largely hollow abdomen as a sound box.



The Anacreontic poem 34, in all probability stemming from Late Antiquity, contains all the attributes for which the cicada (*tettix*) has been traditionally praised; correspondingly her popularity among modern poets is not surprising.

“We count you blessed, cicada, | when on the tree-tops,
having drunk a little dew, | you sing like a king:
you own everything | that you see in the fields,
everything that the woods produce. [...] You are honoured by mortals | as the sweet prophet of summer.
The Muses love you | and Phoebus himself loves you
and has given you a clear song.
Age does not distress you, | wise one, earth-born, song-lover!
You who do not suffer, | you whose flesh is bloodless,
you are almost like the gods.”



The popularity of the sound-producing cicada in Hellenistic poetry makes it unsurprising that it outnumbers the grasshopper in ancient depictions.

But how did artists represent the—invisible—sound production of cicadas? Beside a direct juxtaposition of cicada and instrument on some gems the ancient artists solved the problem with the anthropomorphisation of the cicadas. On several gems the cicadas play instruments of human musicians: *auloi*, *cithara* and *trigonon*. In two further cases, a cicada plays the *Phrygian aulos* next to a column with a sundial on top.

The anthropomorphisation of the cicada—and the *akris*—in fact provides enticing parallels with the comparison of ancient poets with these insects. The relevant gems are very illuminating, considering the ancient epigrams. Just as could be observed in the anthropomorphising iconography, their music is, in line with ancient literature, equal to that of the Muses and real human musicians.



TITHONOS AND EUNOMOS

A mythological connection with the cicada is forged through the story of Tithonos. Eos who had fallen in love with the mortal Tithonos obtained immortality for him from the gods. Having failed to request eternal youth, she had to see her lover becoming an old man. Finally she transformed him into a cicada. Ancient artists typically visualized only one episode of the myth, the amorous pursuit of Tithonos by Eos. Of Eos' two beloved youths, Tithonos and Kephalos, she is been pursuing, Tithonos is depicted with a lyre. Arguably, one can sense here also a hint for the musicality of Tithonos and his human afterlife as a cicada.

The relevance of the musical ability of the cicada becomes even more apparent in the story of the Locrian Kitharoidos Eunomos, for whom has been set up a statue at Locri with a cicada sitting on his cithara. During a musical agon, one string of his cithara snaps, and a cicada supplies the missing note with her sound. With the help of the insect, Eunomos defeats Ariston of neighbouring Rhegium.



Two Silver Medallions, Munich, Staatliche Antikensammlungen, SL 661a/b
Photo: R. Kühling

Sard, London, British Museum 1923.0401.323.
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H. C. Bennet-Clark, D. Young: A Model of the Mechanism of
Sound Production in Cicadas
<https://doi.org/10.1242/jeb.173.1.123>

Sard, London, British Museum 1814.0704.1447.
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