

How the discovery of a 3,400-year-old Sumerian hymn **challenged the theories about the origins of occidental music.**



In the early 1950s, archaeologists discovered in the ancient Syrian city of [Ugarit](#) several clay tablets dating from the fourteenth century BC. On them were [cuneiform](#) inscriptions in the [Hurrian](#) language, which were later revealed to be the oldest piece of music ever discovered: a hymn dating back 3,400 years.

Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, professor of Assyriology at the University of California, tried to interpret the theory of music contained in these tablets in many articles written in the 1960s and 70s. From her work was born the CD *Sounds from silence*, made with her colleague Richard Crocker, which contains information about the ancient music of the Near East. The accompanying booklet displays photographs and translations of the tablets from which the song originates. The CD also provides a rendition of the song on the lyre harp called A Hurrian Cult Song from Ancient Ugarit. Even though this version is only available in stores, [Hurrian Hymn n°6 performed by Michael Levy according to the transcription of Professor Richard Dumbrill](#) is available on YouTube.

According to an article by musicologist Robert Fink published in the review *Archeologia Musicalis* in 1988, **these musical pieces confirm that the [7-degree diatonic scale](#) and the notion of [harmony](#) existed 3,400 years ago in Sumerian music.** But these findings went against the beliefs of most musicologists who believed that harmony was non-existent, or rather impossible to find in the Ancient World. Indeed, according to the dominant musicological community at that time, the birth of the diatonic scale did not go back as far as before the times of Ancient Greece. For Crocker, this discovery thus revolutionized the ideas about the origin of occidental music.

Sources: Josh Jones, "[Listen to the Oldest Song in the World: A Sumerian Hymn Written 3,400 Years Ago](#)", *Open Culture* [Online] July 8 2014, [Consulted] Septembre 2017 - Kilmer, Anne Draffkorn. "[The Discovery of an Ancient Mesopotamian Theory of Music.](#)" *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 115, no. 2 (1971): 131-49. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/985853> (paid access).