

Music and Dance

You are at a public festival, where musicians and dancers are performing.

Music and dance were very popular in ancient Egyptian society and were performed on many occasions. Wealthy people hired musicians and dancers to entertain when they held great feasts at their homes. Musicians and dancers also performed at public festivals, religious festivals, and for royal occasions, such as the crowning of a pharaoh.

Musicians played a variety of instruments. These instruments fell into three groups: strings, wind, and percussion. The harp, lyre, and lute were the main string instruments. Flutes and oboes were the wind instruments. For percussion instruments, the musicians used tambourines, rattles, and drums. Musicians played their instruments by memorizing musical sounds rather than by reading written music. Some children of wealthy families were taught to play instruments just for pleasure.

Many musicians, dancers, and other performers, such as acrobats, magicians, and storytellers, were supported by the royal court and nobles. Other performers worked in groups and could be hired for public or private occasions. Most musicians and dancers were women. Dancers often started their training when they were very young. All of these performers were considered professionals, but their status in society was much lower than that of other professionals, such as scribes.

Discussion Questions: When were music and dance performed in ancient Egyptian society? Who performed them? What types of instruments were used in performances?