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When the Music Stops: Isolated Iambic Senarii in Roman Comedy

Most scholars now agree that scenes in Roman comedy in iambic senarii were in general unaccompanied, while scenes in other meters were usually accompanied by the tibia. About smaller metrical units, however, there is less consensus. In this paper I will propose that individual iambic senarii and pairs of iambic senarii, like longer scenes in senarii, were as a rule unaccompanied, and I will discuss how Plautus and Terence used this brief pause in the musical accompaniment to call special attention to the content of verses and to reinforce moments of high emotion.

Near the end of Plautus' *Stichus*, two characters persuade the tibicen to take a drink, and the meter changes from trochaic septenarii to iambic senarii (762). When the player has finished drinking, the meter changes to iambic octonarii (769). The lack of accompaniment for this passage of only seven senarii makes a *prima facie* case for silence from the tibicen in similar brief sections of iambic senarii.

Plautus and Terence did not write their own melodies, but those melodies were composed by a musical specialist. This composer was probably also the tibicen himself. He would have responded to cues from the playwright in deciding when to play or remain silent, and the primary such clue would have been the meter. Iambic senarii signaled for the tibicen to be silent. The signal would have been the same whether the senarii lasted for one line or one hundred.

The content of the isolated senarii also suggests that they were unaccompanied. Many of them have the same type of content that is evident in longer unaccompanied passages: they are "pure speech acts" expressing information rather than emotion.

The brief pause in accompaniment for the senarii would be especially effective given the nature of the tibia accompaniment. Comparison with similar folk instruments such as the Sardinian *launeddas* and references to non-stop playing by Cicero and Pliny suggest that the tibia was played using techniques of circular breathing. The tibicen did not need to stop to take a breath, so there would be no pause whatsoever of even the slightest duration until the sudden switch to iambic senarii.

Isolated iambic senarii in the text thus represent striking theatrical moments on the stage. Plautus and Terence used these moments to great effect. The sudden stop in the music can indicate that a character has a particularly urgent need that another character hear what he or she has to say (e.g., *Epid.* 24) or signal to the audience that a piece of information is of vital importance (e.g., *Andria* 486). Equally important is the use of isolated iambic senarii to underline significant emotional moments (e.g., *Heaut.* 589, *Capt.* 513, 525, 530, 532).