

How music made peace



The Ancient Romans, like the Ancient Greeks, told stories that helped them to understand the world around them. This story from Ancient Rome is about Mercury. It explains how it came about that, after meeting Apollo (the god of music and poetry), Mercury became the messenger of the gods.

Mercury, walking in the fields, came upon a tortoise, and from the bush came a voice saying, "Here is Chelone, the nymph changed into a tortoise because she was late for Jupiter's wedding."

Mercury, the youngest of Jupiter's sons, took up the little creature, whose grinning face and ugly paws made him exclaim, "Poor, pretty nymph! Nobody will ever invite you again! Yet give me your fine shell and never shall there be a feast without you."

Mercury filled the shell with stems and reeds and slender strings, which sweetly resounded at the slightest touch. The lyre was invented, the melodious lyre that was to celebrate weddings and victories down the ages of time.

Mercury ran with his new toy through the meadows, gathering flowers, but most of all he longed for the herds Apollo tended for King Admetus. Apollo, absorbed with his flute, looked neither to the right nor to the left while Mercury headed quietly up the hill with fifty heifers out of the herd.

Apollo, laying down his flute, missed his stolen herd, and while looking for it, met a peasant. "If it isn't a dream," said he, "I have seen a child pass by leading fifty heifers up the hill." Apollo hastened up the hill and found the heifers in the cave; and he would have hurled the bold Mercury to the bottomless abyss but that, as he stretched out his arm, his hand struck the lyre that Mercury was hiding.

At the sight of a new musical instrument Apollo forgot everything else. "What is this lovely music?" he cried in his delight. "It looks like something that would be worth fifty heifers."

Emboldened, Mercury handed Apollo the lyre, saying, "Take it; a shepherd's pipe will do for me."

So music was a peacemaker for the first time in the world. Apollo and Mercury were reconciled and became great friends. As they moved down the hill two serpents were fighting on the edge of a wood. Apollo threw his wand between them, and the snakes entwined themselves around it. Mercury, amazed, seized the marvellous rod and took it as his wand, the Caduceus, the emblem of peace; and later he added wings to it and to his head and sandals. Now he grew up to be a messenger for the gods, for he could fly swifter than the wind.

From the *Children's Encyclopaedia*
Arthur Mee

Glossary

- heifer a young cow that has not yet had any calves
nymph a creature that is half-girl and half-goddess,
often living in woodland or rivers
reconciled made friends again after an argument