



Origins of Western Music 450 - 1300

A short study in the major developments of medieval music

by Tristan d'Avignon



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* The musical appendix is available as a separate download on the page shown above.

Origins of Western Music 450 - 1300

A&S Class, As Presented At Canterbury Faive 2007

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INTRODUCTION

For the purposes of this class, we are studying the music of the Middle Ages, being the period between the Classical era and the Renaissance. The modern term "Middle Ages" is derived from the humanist Latin "medium aevum", which was a derogatory term for the 1000 years after the fall of the Roman Empire. But despite this, the musical theorists of the period made substantial progress in the practices of documenting and preserving music, and giving it a theoretical grounding. The first notation systems were developed during this period, and enhanced to the point where they may be read and understood by today's musicians, though many of today's conventions are not present here.

Since the monks are the only part of the medieval community which possessed the universal ability to read and write, they consequently possessed the only literate tradition for music in the early Middle Ages. It is not until the late 13th century that manuscripts of music by secular composers, e.g. troubadours and trouvères, become common.

THE ORIGINS OF PLAINCHANT

When most people think of church music from the Middle Ages, they automatically think "Gregorian chant". Unfortunately the truth in this matter is much less clear cut. We know, for example, that the Jewish people used *ta'amim*, also known as ephonic notation, to dictate the melodies to their scripture, and that the late Romans and Byzantines used an early form of notation in their Christian manuscripts. We also know that singers already understood the concept of pitch, and that musical scholars knew of Pythagoras' mathematical achievements with relation to sound. Though Gregorian chant did become the standard practice of the Catholic Church, we know that Ambrosian, Beneventan and Mozarabic chant played a significant role in the development of plainchant as a whole. Though we can see traces of these genres in the chants we know today, we cannot be certain of how much they affected the Gregorian repertoire overall. For now, we must set these genres of chant aside as footnotes to history.

According to Frankish legend, a dove of the Holy Spirit visited upon Pope Gregory the Great (590 – 604) and inspired him to begin to sing praises to God. Upon receiving this inspiration, the Pope ordered one of his scribes to sit outside his booth of prayer and write down the sacred chants as he sang them directly under the guidance of God. Charming though this legend may be, it seems that the Gregorian repertoire began to develop around the time of Pippin III (751 – 768) and Charlemagne (768 – 814), Kings of the Franks. Pope Stephen II had visited Pippin in 754, singing Mass using the Roman style of chant. In order to strengthen his ties with Rome, Pippin ordered that the local Gallican rites be abolished and replaced with the Roman chants. Thirty years later, when Pope Hadrian I sent a sacramentary of Roman chant to Charlemagne's court, the chants were slowly altered and modified in accordance with the local traditions Pippin had tried to outlaw. The modified chant, permeated with a series of new chants for the Mass and the Office, was named "Gregorian", most likely with the intention of honouring Pope Gregory II (715 – 731). Later historians seem to have attributed the honour to Pope Gregory the Great instead, and the legend of Gregorian chant was born.



The new style of chant swept through the Western monastic community, assisted greatly by Charlemagne upon his ascension to Holy Roman Emperor in 800, and it became virtually the only standard in the Christian church at the beginning of the 10th century. The Roman Church refused to

submit entirely to the popular changes until well into the 11th century, and continued to teach its own chants through the oral tradition as long as it could. The belief that Gregorian chant is the authentic and original plainchant of Rome persists to this day.

THE EIGHT CHURCH MODES

The founding principle of plainchant is the principle of the eight church modes, sorted by the pitch class of the “finalis” and sorted again into “authentic” and “plagal” variations. These modes were most likely imported from the Byzantine church and later refined, but its origins prior to this are unclear. A chart of the modes is provided below.

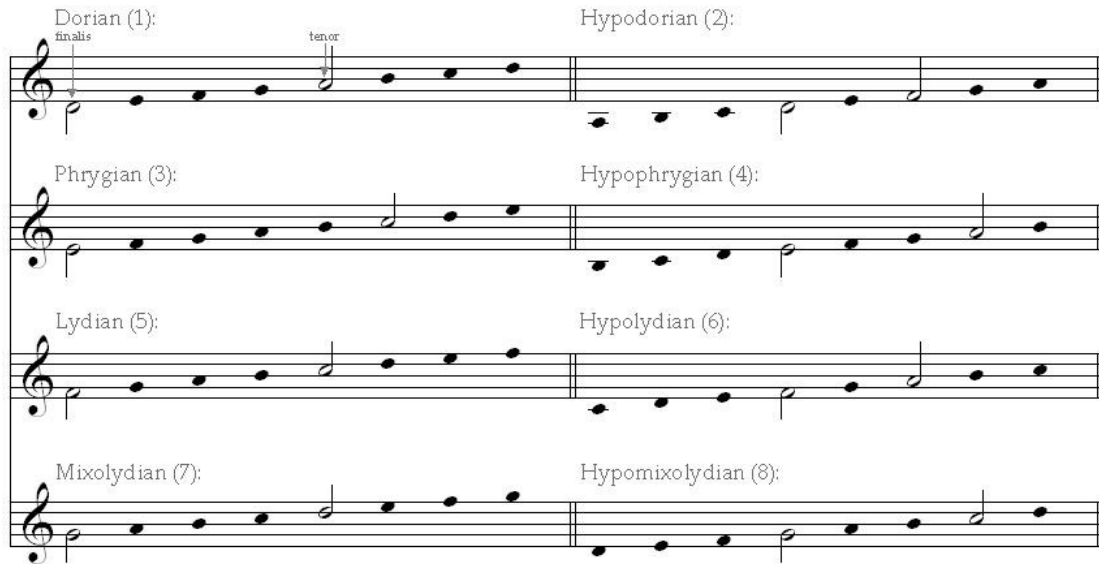


Fig. 1: Modal octave species in Gregorian chant

As far as we know, all chant music was composed using these eight modes. Consequently, most modern editions of chant music, such as the Liber Usualis, print the corresponding number of the mode the chant is composed in at the top of the first staff. If the mode of a chant is not given for some reason, or you are reading from a manuscript, you should be able to work it out by:

- Determining what note the chant finishes on; this is known as the “finalis” or “final”
- Assessing the range of the chant; if the piece drops below the “finalis” by any significant amount, it is likely the chant is in the plagal variation of the mode; if not, it is likely the chant is in the authentic variation
- Determining which note is most commonly used in the chant; this is a last resort and does not always work, but in a majority of cases this note should be the “tenor”

EARLY MEDIEVAL MUSIC THEORY

The two most important musical theorists of the early Middle Ages were Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, a Christian philosopher of the early 6th century, and Hucbald of St Amand, a Benedictine monk of the late 9th century. Though perhaps more famous as a philosopher than a musical theorist, Boethius is partially credited with the transmission of the Byzantine modal system to the medieval West, and also the tetrachord concept that forms a simple scale.

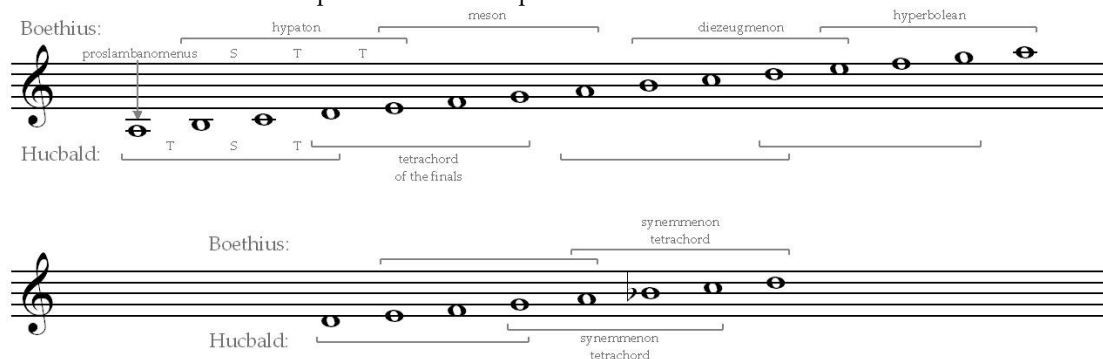


Fig. 2: The concept of the tetrachord and the Greater Perfect System, as presented by Boethius and Hucbald

The idea behind the tetrachord is simple: a set of three intervals is used to determine the relative distances between four notes; this set of intervals is repeated upwards in a “synemmenon” or conjunct tetrachord, in order to form a full seven-note scale. The system starts again at the next octave, bypassing the interval between the seventh and eighth notes. In his treatise “De Institutione Musica”, Boethius identified the interval pattern “semitone-tone-tone” between four notes, starting on B and finishing on e. He noted that, if the pattern is repeated upwards from e to a as a synemmenon, it formed a seven-note scale from which the pattern could be repeated again. The scale he formed is the set of notes we now know as the Locrian or Hypophrygian mode, running from B to a in order, all natural notes. Recognising that a great deal of chant actually descends to the A below B, and that the A was also the lowest note of the original Greek “Greater Perfect System”, he added a “proslambanomenus” on A to complete his musical theory.

Hucbald used a very similar principle to Boethius in his musical manuscript “De Musica”, but instead chose to use the interval pattern “tone-semitone-tone” for his tetrachords, running from A to g. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, Hucbald also gives credence to the church modes by giving a tetrachord of the finals, clearly showing how the modes, and therefore the scales, were to be used in compositional practice. Secondly, the new intervallic pattern he used enabled him to justify the presence of b-flat in some of the modes by way of the new synemmenon tetrachord resulting from it. Hucbald was also the first to name the church modes by their Greek names, which are the names we know them by today, as presented in Fig. 1.

THE DEVELOPMENTS OF GUIDO D’AREZZO

In the early 11th century, musical theory took a giant leap forward, thanks to the teachings of the monk Guido d’Arezzo. Noting the difficulties that his fellow singers at Pomposa had in remembering the melodies for their specified chants, and lamenting the fact that they were required to learn them by heart through oral tradition, he devised several systems to assist with chant performance.

Firstly, he developed the “solfeccio” (or “sol-fa”) system and thereby the hexachord, which defined all the relationships between each note in the medieval gamut. To do this, he assigned each note in his hexachord a “name”, by using the first verse of the chant “Ut queant laxis”, where the first note of each phrase begins with a note in the hexachord.

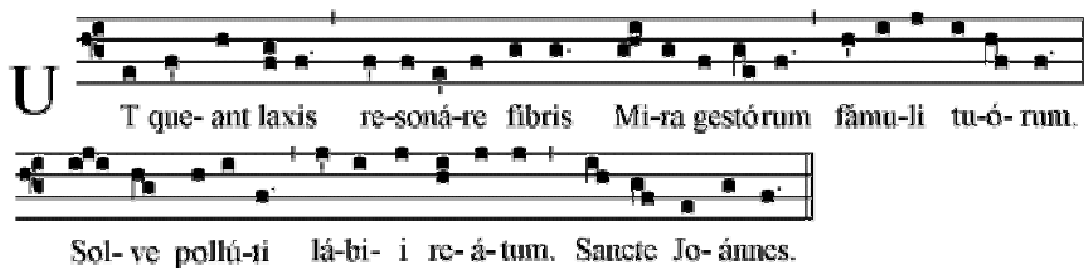


Fig. 3: The first verse of the hymn to St. John the Baptist, “Ut Queant Laxis”.

By taking only the first note from each of the first six phrases, a hexachord results:



Fig. 4: The hexachord that results from Guido’s theory

Although the note name “ut” has been replaced with the more singable “do” (perhaps used for being the first syllable in the word “Domine”), the scale has remained the same ever since.

Ah, but where is “ti”, no-thanks-I’ll-have-a-beer, you ask? Take a look at the last phrase in the chant in Fig. 2: “Sancte Ioannes”. When the hexachord became outdated some centuries later, a name was needed for the note above “la” to create a complete “major scale”. The initials “S.I.” were taken from “Sancte Ioannes” and became “si”, which in tum became “ti” in the English-speaking world. In continental Europe and East Asia, “si” is still used. Remember that the hexachord, and consequently the gamut, was the predominant theoretical system in use right up until the time of J. S. Bach, so “ti” did not become a factor in Western music until much later than the period we are studying.

The hexachord is significant because it facilitated the development of the eight church modes in a way that expanded on Hucbald's theories of the matching tetrachord which he pioneered two centuries prior. A hexachord may be started on F, C or G, and may always feed into one of the hexachords above it on the medieval gamut, as shown here.

The diagram shows a musical staff with a bass clef and a treble clef. The notes are labeled with letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, a, b, b, c, d, e, f, g, a, bb, bb, cc, dd, ee. Brackets above the staff indicate hexachords: F (soft) hexachords, using b; C (neutral) hexachords, no alteration required; and G (hard) hexachords, using b.

pitch classes: (G) A B C D E F G a b b c d e f g a bb bb cc dd ee
 F hexachord: ut re mi fa sol la ut re mi fa sol la
 C hexachord: ut re mi fa sol la ut re mi fa sol la
 G hexachord: ut re mi fa sol la ut re mi fa sol la

Fig. 5: The medieval gamut, from Γ (lowest G in brackets) to ee, and the hexachords that apply to each set of notes.

This meant that, while the singer learned the melody of a chant in solfeggio in order to commit it to memory, they could change into another relevant hexachord with ease as the melody moved higher or lower. It also gave theoretical legitimacy to the flattened b, as it was now a clear part of the hexachord based on F. This may not seem like much of a development, especially since many chant composers had used the b-flat in past years, but it was nevertheless a major step forward for the theory of music. A b-flat was now written as a rounded b, while the b-natural (in the G hexachord) was written as a square b.

But by far the main advancement Guido contributed to music theory was his use of a line to denote a set pitch. Although attempts had been made by other musical scholars to regulate and set pitches at fixed intervals by way of theoretical intervention, none proved so simple or as effective as Guido's system. Initially, the simple yellow line to denote c was used in conjunction with the old cheironomic neumes, allowing a singer to gauge the pitch of the notes they were to sing by the relative height of the neume to the line. A red line was added shortly afterward denoting F, allowing for easier reading of lower-sounding neumes. These lines eventually grew to become the four-line staff for which "square" notation was used, which consequently the most popular method of transcribing music.

MELODIC COMPOSITION OF CHANT MUSIC

There are three possible types of chants with relation to melodic composition: syllabic, neumatic and melismatic.

Syllabic chants use very few of the neumes in the above chart; they normally use one punctum at a time for each syllable, and normally cadencing on a simple series of neumes to complete any phrase of text. This encourages performers to experiment with a degree of rhythmic freedom in the text, giving accents where accents would be due in the course of normal speech. The psalm recitation following an antiphon is the clearest example of this in chant music.

The word "melisma" is the term used to describe a combination of multiple neumes given to a single syllable of text to give it extra expressive quality. Hence, melismatic chants feature an array of melismas on certain syllables. Chants like the Kyrie, Alleluia and Tract commonly fall into the category of melismatic chant; the Alleluia at Fig. 8 and the Tract at the end of this paper bear this out.

A neumatic chant typically uses a wide range of neumes as it proceeds through the text. These types of chants are not syllabic, in that they do not commonly use one punctum per syllable of text, but also do not use a great deal of melismatic movement, if any. Here, neumes are simply used in a decorative manner throughout the text.

Though this may all seem like unimportant information, these terms will help you to understand more about the next parts of the class.

MEDIEVAL MUSIC NOTATION

Cheironomic Neumes

From about the 8th century, all genres of chant were notated in "neumatic" form. This means that a series of symbols was used to denote the melodic direction of the chant. In the earliest extant sources of

chant, this is done using “cheironomic” neumes, which are thought to relate to the hand symbols used during this time by choirmasters to assist the other singers in remembering the melody for a chant.



Fig. 6: Detail of a Gradual written using cheironomic neumes, “Viri Galilei”, dating from the mid-10th century.

The cheironomic neumes shown in this manuscript are not “heightened”, as was the practice in the early 11th century for a short period, meaning that much of the details about pitch and structure must be very carefully and painstakingly worked out. A tremendous amount of resources and study has gone into deciphering these neumes and discerning their modern equivalent, but only some of the chants written in this style of notation have since been published in modern books of chant using the conventional style of notation used for plainchant, known as “square” notation. Currently, there are very few people in the world who can read cheironomic notation in this day and age, and those who can are sought after right throughout Europe and the US for their expertise.

Square Neumes

As we have already observed, the system of heightened cheironomic neumes was used for a short time, following on from the developments of Guido d’Arezzo, but was soon replaced by the “square” notation system, around the mid-11th century. This meant that pitches could now be read as absolute, which consequently makes for much easier reading today. For example:

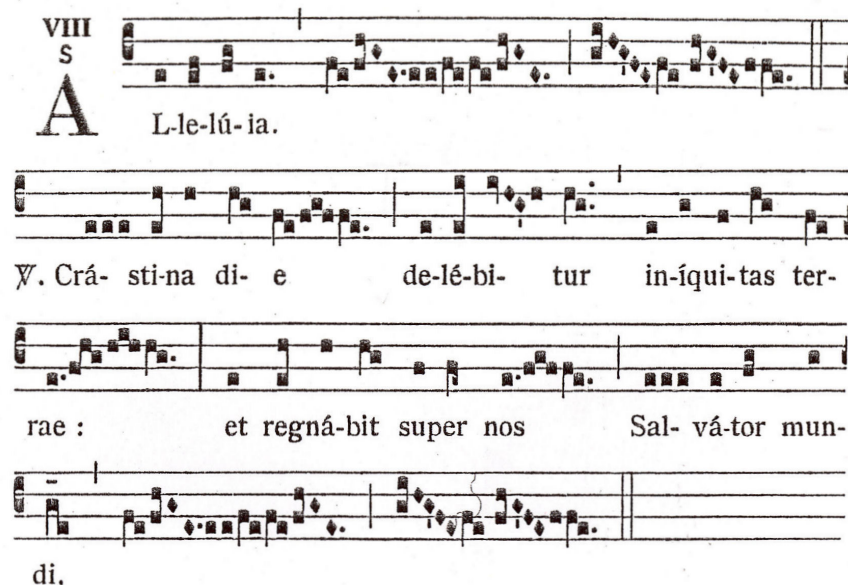
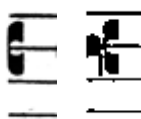


Fig. 7: An Alleluia for Christmas Eve in the Hypomixolydian Mode (8)
Translation: Tomorrow the iniquity of the earth will be wiped out; and the Saviour of the world will reign over us.

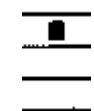
All modern editions of chant music are now written in square notation for ease of use. By the late 12th century, the composition of new chants had been completely abandoned in favour of newer musical forms, possibly due to a mandate from the Catholic Church.

With some basic understanding about what each of the symbols mean, the Alleluia on the previous page becomes a very easy piece to sing. Note that this chant contains motivic repetition, an idea which had its beginnings in plainchant, and has persisted in almost every facet of Western music ever since. As with cheironomic neumes, there are no set rhythmic values attached to any of these neumes that we know of, so the singer is free to choose how the piece will be sung. The general consensus is that the text should be clearly enunciated according to the accents shown in the Latin, but that the performer is otherwise free to do as (s)he wishes with the notation in terms of length and expression.

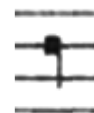
The basic symbols are as follows:



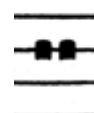
These are two of the most important developments of Guido d'Arezzo: the concept of the clef. The figure on the left is a C clef, meaning that middle C applies to all notes placed on the line it is shown on, and all notes on the four-line staff must therefore be discerned relative to this clef, e.g. a note in the space below is equivalent to the B below middle C. The figure on the right is an F clef, and dictates that all notes placed on the corresponding line should sound at the F below middle C, and other pitches should be discerned in a relative manner from it. These are shown at the beginning of all lines of music in a manuscript, and sometimes in the middle of a line where appropriate or necessary to indicate a change in vocal range.




A punctum, or single note. These are normally found in areas of syllabic chant, such as Notker's sequences, or when needing to churn through a lot of text. A punctum can also be used to denote no stress or accent on the syllable it applies to.




A virga, also a single note. These are normally found in areas of melismatic chant in conjunction with other types of neumes. They are sometimes used to indicate a slight stress or accent.



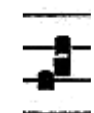
A string of puncta on the same pitch indicates repercussives. There is a great deal of debate as to the precise meaning of this, but the most common practice is to extend the held note, using a quick "tremolo" to indicate passing from one neume to the next. Repercussive neumes can occur any number of times in a row, but it is unusual to see more than five on a single syllable. They commonly occur on F or C, regardless of the mode or form of the chant.




A divis, or flexa, is a simple neume showing a fall from one pitch to another below it, while holding the same syllable. The fall in pitch is typically anywhere between a second and a fifth.



A podatus, or pes, is the reverse of a divis, and shows a rise from one pitch to another above it, while holding the same syllable. The rise in pitch is typically anywhere between a second and a fifth. Be careful: the lower of the two pitches is always sounded first in a podatus.



A scandicus is a basic three-note neume indicating two rises in pitch on the same syllable. The one shown here demonstrates two rises of a second each, but either of these rises (but usually not both) could be as much as a fifth.



A dimacus is the reverse of a scandicus, and indicates two falls in pitch on the same syllable. This neume shows two falls of a second each, but either of these falls could be as much as a fifth. The diamond-shaped notes may be taken quicker than the first note if so desired.



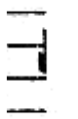
A torculus indicates a rise in pitch followed by a fall on the same syllable. This neume shows a rise of a second and a return to the original pitch. As with all the other neumes, any of the intervals herein could be as much as a fifth.



A porrectus indicates a fall in pitch followed by a rise on the same syllable. This neume shows a fall of a second and a rise of a third. Again, any interval here can be up to a fifth. Remember to never sing all the notes between the start and the end of the line; only the two pitches at the start and the end are to be sung.



This note is read as a B-flat. In chant, flats only ever occur on B. Sharps do not appear in any music until much later.



A custos appears at the end of every line of music, and tells the singer what the next note is in relation to the current clef. This is important, as sight-reading singers cannot readily anticipate a change of clef position in the following line while reading from a manuscript. A custos is essentially an additional failsafe against making a mistake when crossing from one line to the next.



A mora is a dot that can be affixed to any note in a neume, essentially doubling the sounding length of the corresponding note in relation to others. Even when a mora is not marked for the final note in a phrase, it is usually sung as if one was present.



These markings, known as episemae, have no universally accepted meaning. The vertical episema, below the third note on the left, is most commonly thought to indicate a subsidiary accent on a normally weaker note in a melisma. The horizontal episema, above the notes on the right, is usually thought to mean a slight lengthening of all the notes it covers.



Liquescent neumes are common in chant, but are also the subject of some debate. These typically occur on syllables with consonant endings or diphthongs, so the small note is commonly thought to mean an annunciation of the consonant or second vowel, slightly shortened and slightly weakened. For example: the syllable "con" on a liquescent D-C would be sung "co-n", with "co" on the D and "n" on the C. Liquescents can occur in either direction, but are rarely seen beyond a fourth or fifth.



The most contentious of all the neumes is the quilisma (the squiggly slanted one in the middle). The Solesmes interpretation of this neume is that the note preceding the quilisma should be lengthened, but today it is commonly accepted to also shorten the quilisma itself.

Try to find as many of the above neumes or markings as you can in the Alleluia shown in Fig. 7. Now try singing it. How do you find it so far? Remember, practice makes perfect! Be aware: the Alleluia is sung antiphonally, so remember to repeat it after you finish the verse. Also, the lines between certain areas of neumes are not "barlines" per se, although they do imply the taking of a breath, with the length of the lines usually denoting how large the breath should be. Anything less than a full bar implies a short, quick breath, while a full-length bar implies a deep breath. A "tick" bar is meant to be only a short pause, but if you have time to snatch a breath, make sure that you do.

There is a Tract for Palm Sunday dating from around the 8th century presented in the Appendix at the back of this paper; once you've mastered the Alleluia, have a go at that one too. I have also scratched out the mode number for the Tract; even if you don't feel like singing all the way through it, try to work out what the mode of the chant is from the chart at Fig. 1. As you begin to sing more chant music, you will notice that chants in different modes have different characteristics, both in terms of the general sound quality and the motivic cells used for them.

Franconian Notation

As more and more paraliturgical forms began to develop, especially during the late 12th century, many of the newly-formed musical genres adopted rhythm as their driving force. Under previous systems, each neume in the square notation system was given a set rhythmic value, possibly with some small additional detail in order to further denote its meaning. This did not prove entirely practical, and by the late 13th century, Franco von Cologne had developed a system of notation that made it possible to discern clear differences between rhythmic values, and consequently to sing a piece with a clearly defined rhythm. This new system of transcription is quite rightly named “Franconian” notation.

Franco outlined the principles behind his new concept of notation in his treatise “Ars Cantus Mensurabilis”:



A maxima is the longest possible note value. It is the equivalent of two longs.



A long is the standard method for scribing notes that take up a whole beat. It is usually measured at one half of a maxima.



A breve is the standard method for scribing short notes, and is typically measured at half or one-third of a long, depending on the rhythmic context of the piece, known as the “rhythmic mode”. We shall learn more about the rhythmic modes during our overview of Pérotin and his work.



A semibreve is the shortest note possible in the Franconian system. It is measured at half or one-third of a breve, again depending on the rhythmic mode.

Petrus de Cruce would develop this system even further, adding the “minima”, later known as a “minim”, which was measured at half the length of a semibreve, and the “fusa” or “semiminima”, which was half again. Both of these features came into wider use during the 14th and 15th centuries, and the system became known as “black mensural notation” overall.

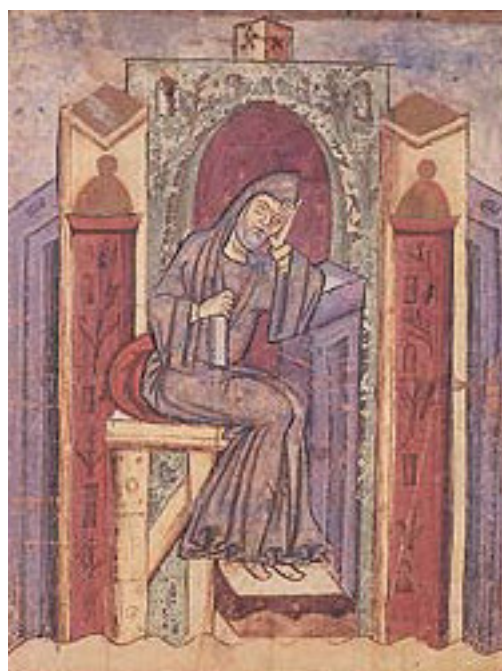
MUSICAL PIONEERS

Notker Balbulus

Throughout the Middle Ages, there were a number of major pioneers in musical composition that drove music forward to become more than just a reason to keep the novice monks alert at Mass. The first of these that we shall learn about today was Notker Balbulus, “the stutterer of St Gall”, whose syllabic sequentia proved an instant hit with people both inside and outside the church.

Ekkehard of St. Gall described Notker in his writings as:

“frail in body, though not in mind, a stammerer in voice but not in spirit; lofty in divine thoughts, patient in adversity, gentle in everything, strict in enforcing the discipline of our convent, yet somewhat timid in sudden and unexpected alarms, except in the assaults of demons, whom he always withstood manfully. He was most assiduous in illuminating, reading, and composing; and (that I may embrace all his gifts of holiness within a brief compass) he was a vessel of



the Holy Ghost, as full as any other of his own time.”¹

Notker is best remembered as the pioneer of the “*sequentia*”, or sequence, a syllabic style of composition that became so popular that it worked its way into the Mass, despite containing no text directly from the Bible. This was the first widely recognised compositional form to use couplets, using metre and rhyme. In addition, his works could potentially cover an enormous range by comparison to most chant music.

In 884 Notker completed a collection of his sequences, compiled them in a codex named “*Liber Hymnorum*”, and dedicated them to Bishop Luitward of Vercelli. In his dedication of the codex, he notes that he had always had trouble remembering the “*melodiae longissimae*”, or the long melismas that permeated certain chants, so he had developed the sequences partially as an aid to remembering these melismas for later.² He describes his sequences as “short, aparallel” compositions, but the truth is that they were very well thought out and extremely effective.

The basic structure of a sequence is as follows:

- The first and last lines are singular
- All other lines are in matched couplets, with each melody (or melisma) repeated once
- The texts are entirely new compositions
- The lines of text for each melody are almost always of equal length in terms of syllables, and may also rhyme

Notker’s sequences proved so successful that they were adopted in St Gallen as a standard feature of the Mass following the Alleluia, and subsequently took the monastic world by storm. His work is “*prosa*” sequence, in that it rhymes very little, but as time went on, more emphasis was placed on rhyme in each couplet, and the sequences of later centuries became incredibly poetic compositions. It is perhaps not unreasonable to say that Notker’s work may even have had an impact on the music of the troubadours and trouvères some three centuries later for his emphasis on poetry. See the Appendix for an example of Notker’s work.

Duke William IX of Aquitaine

No study of medieval music could really be complete without an overview of the music of the troubadours and trouvères, and the man who set the tradition alight was hardly a wandering minstrel or a colourful jester type, but a noble of great standing: Duke William IX of Aquitaine. Twice excommunicated from the Church (and twice readmitted), he was a fraudster, a womaniser and a kidnapper, and yet he remains one of the most important musical figures of the early 12th century. An anonymous 13th century biography of him describes him thus:

“The Count of Poitiers was one of the most courtly men in the world and one of the greatest deceivers of women. He was a fine knight at arms, liberal in his womanizing, and a fine composer and singer of songs. He travelled much through the world, seducing women.”³



His excommunications are fascinating stories unto themselves. He was first disowned from the Church for tax fraud. When present at his excommunication, he drew his sword at the neck of Bishop Peter in a fit of rage, demanding absolution and swearing to kill him if he completed the final passage of the deed. The Bishop pretended to retract his words, but as William sheathed his sword in satisfaction, the Bishop calmly completed excommunicating him, tilting his head to one side, exposing his neck and inviting William to strike. William considered hacking him down for a moment, then simply declared, “No, I don’t love you enough to send you to paradise.”⁴

¹ Coulton, G. G. (ed.): “*A Medieval Garner*”. Constable, London, UK, 1910. p. 18

² Internet resource: http://www.groveonline.com/share/view/article.html?from=search&session_search_id=799159699&hitnum=1§ion=music.20128. Accessed 30th January 2007.

³ Internet resource: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_IX. Accessed 30th January 2007.

⁴ Ibid.

He was married twice, principally to Philippa of Aquitaine, who bore him seven children. However, he appears to have not been satisfied, and “kidnapped” the Viscountess Dangereuse from her husband Aimery I, Viscount of Châtellerauld in 1115. If certain private records are to be believed, Dangereuse was actually a willing victim. For this he was excommunicated a second time. But it appears that he and Dangereuse were madly in love, and they spent the rest of their lives together, despite the machinations of his former wives to dispose of her.

William had heard the chansons de geste, but while he had great admiration for the crusading knights, he obviously wished that people would write songs about more important things, like women, love and his own sexual prowess. He wrote his musical poetry in Occitan, the language of Provençal, and though his songs do not seem to have been very well-received in the high courts, he was an immediate hit with musicians all around Provence. He immediately set the standard for troubadour poetry at a very high level, utilising extremely effective metre and rhyme schemes in all his extant songs. Take these two verses from his song “Ben vuelh que sapchon li pluzor”:

- | | | |
|----|--|---|
| 1. | Ben vuelh que sapchon li pluzor
D'un vers, si-s de bona color
Qu'ieu ai trag de mon obrador,
Qu'ieu port d'ayselh mestier la flor,
Et es vertatz,
E puesc en traïr lo vers auctor,
Quant er lassatz. | I would well like most people to know
whether this verse is well crafted.
I produce it from my workshop,
since I am really the champion of this art
and it is true
and I bring as a witness this verse itself
when it is done. |
| 6. | Qu'ieu ai nom "maistre certa":
Ja m'amigu'anueg no m'aura
Que no-m vuelh'aver l'endema!
Qu'ieu suy d'aquest mestier, so-m va,
Tan ensenhatz
Que be-n sai gazarhar mon pa
En totz mercatz. | Since I have for a nickname "Infallible Master":
never will my mistress have me one night
and not wish to have me the next day!
Because in this trade I am (and I freely say it)
so expert
that I can earn my living
in every market. |

Note that, in this and other similar songs, the rhyming syllable of the fifth and seventh lines remains the same throughout the entire song of ten verses. In addition, the other five lines all rhyme with each other within the same verse. This kind of rhyme scheme proved extremely difficult to emulate, and the duke was in a league of his own for many years until the dawn of the troubadour age in the mid- to late 12th century.

Later troubadours, such as Peire Vidal and Peirol, followed very closely in the spirit of the womanising duke, strutting and bragging of their feats in their songs, presumably as a means of solidifying their reputation, both through the brilliance of their poetry and the size of their egos.

Hildegard von Bingen

Perhaps the single most influential figure of the mid-12th century was in fact a woman, by the name of Hildegard von Bingen. Her melismatic and highly unorthodox approach to church music captivated audiences right throughout the monastic community, and she was soon recognised as a voice of God on earth.

Hildegard was an immensely powerful woman. After having her holy visions ratified by Pope Eugenius III in 1147, she was consulted by the Catholic Church, by emperors and by bishops, and by lay people from all walks of life, for her advice on matters of all descriptions. In her time she was recognised not only as a musician, but also a scientist, an author, a healer, a theologian, a prophet and a significant political force. She frequently wrote to communities throughout the Christian world, advising them in their ways or slamming them for their ungodly behaviour. Her advice and her words were heralded as the voice of God by many, and her wrath was feared by all.

But by all accounts, Hildegard was also a tortured soul. Her life was marked with episodes of seizures, migraines and depression, and there are numerous reports of her experiencing horrendous pain in connection with some of her visions.⁵ Fortunately, all this served only to motivate her more to record her visions and music, and the results can be found in her collected works: the Dendermonde manuscript and the Riesenkodex.

Her chants, composed for the nuns of her abbey near Rupertsberg, are incredibly virtuosic compositions; they make frequent use of long, winding melismas, and seem to continually search for celestial perfection. See the Appendix for one such example; this chant ascends to a high aa on the gamut, and descends as far as a low D, all within the space of eight words, and is clearly meant for a singer of no mean ability. Note also the presence of Guido's yellow and red lines to clearly mark c and F respectively.

By far her greatest musical achievement in terms of musical form is the "Ordo Virtutum", or "Ritual of the Virtues". This sixty-minute masterwork is the first-ever morality play, and follows the trials and tribulations of Anima, the soul, in her journey through the world, with the Virtues and the Devil in a constant struggle to claim her as their own. With works of this depth and passion, it is easy to understand why Hildegard remains one of the most popular composers of the Middle Ages to this very day.



Pérotin

At the turn of the 13th century, Master Pérotin was at the height of his power. He had been in charge of re-transcribing and rewriting the polyphonic music of the Notre Dame Cathedral, known as the "Magnus Liber Organi", originally scored by his old tutor Léonin, and in so doing had managed to produce a series of pieces unparalleled in theoretical scope.

We know very little of Pérotin's life, or even his work beyond his rewriting of Léonin's work, but his work alone is enough to make him a significant figure in the annals of music history. He wrote cohesive and melodious works in as many as four parts, a feat not to be repeated for more than a century afterwards, and devised the six "rhythmic modes" for interpreting square neumes with rhythmic effects.

Pérotin was most proficient in the composition of organa, conductus and clausulae. The Notre Dame organum was a piece of polyphony designed to embellish pre-existing chant. The old chant would occupy the position of tenor, and be drawn out significantly, in the manner of a drone-bass, to allow the organum part(s) to perform an elaborate series of movements over the drawn-out chant. In the conductus, all parts move in equal rhythm according to the specified rhythmic mode, usually singing a paraliturgical text. Clausulae are optional modifications to existing pieces of chant that can be taken in place of the original conclusion to the chant, if the choirmaster deems it appropriate.

The rhythmic modes that Pérotin devised are displayed on the following page. All are meant to be timed within a bar of six beats.

⁵ Internet resource: <http://www.answers.com/topic/hildegard-von-bingen>. Accessed 30th January 2007.

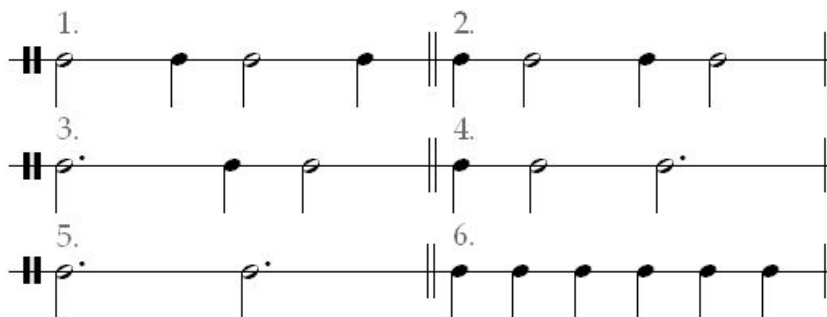


Fig. 8: The rhythmic modes, as discovered and taught by Pérotin

Depending on the number of the rhythmic mode called for at the start of the piece, the square neumes would be interpreted accordingly throughout the entire work. The regulation of rhythms for all parts singing different melodies was the first real step forward in the development of polyphonic music.

Upon hearing parts of Pérotin's work on the "Magnus Liber", the philosopher John of Salisbury wrote:

"When you hear the soft harmonies of the various singers, some taking high and others low parts, some singing in advance, some following in the rear, others with pauses and interludes, you would think yourself listening to a concert of sirens rather than men, and wonder at the powers of voices ... whatever is most tuneful among birds, could not equal."⁶

See the Appendix for an "organum quadruplum", or "organum in four voices", named "Viderunt Omnes", taken from the Codex Montpelier, one of the premier extant sources of Notre Dame music.

THE CHANSONS DE GESTE AND THE SONG OF ROLAND

The predominant courtly poetry of the late 11th and early 12th centuries was known as the "chanson de geste", or "song of heroic deeds". The lyrics of these songs usually concerned tales of great battles from the 8th and 9th centuries interspersed with elements of fantasy, and involved characters such as Charlemagne, Guillaume d'Orange or Garin le Loherain. These were epic compositions of up to three hundred stanzas in length, using any manner of rhyme and metre scheme.

The most famous and enduring of all the chansons de geste is the Song of Roland, a poem based on the battle of Roncevaux Pass, fought in 778, and resulting in Roland's defeat by the Basques. It is written in ten-syllable lines, which each line rhyming with all the others in the same stanza. The Song follows the trials of Roland and the army of Charlemagne, pitted against the lord Marsilion and his Saracen horde, as well as the traitor knight Ganelon. Roland wins a victory in death over Marsilion, withstanding one onslaught from the Saracen army despite being hopelessly outnumbered, and then cutting off Marsilion's hand in single combat. Charlemagne returns to the scene, and inspired by the tale of Roland's bravery, orders his best knights to crush the Saracen lord's home city of Sarragossa. With over four thousand lines of poetry, the Song was a mammoth undertaking for any minstrel, and performances of it could often be spread across several days. But due to its overwhelming popularity, it was well known amongst the jongleur community.



For a modern jongleur wanting to sing a chanson de geste as opposed to reciting it, there are only two extant melodies available, but they are both functional and serve the text well. They are present in Adam de la Halle's pastoral play "Le Jeu de Robin et Marion", and in Thomas de Bailleul's "Battaile

⁶ Internet resource: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/P%C3%A9rotin>. Accessed 31st January 2007.

d'Annecin". It is nevertheless believed that one line of music is all that is really necessary, and that the formulas for manipulating the melody according to one's place in the text were extremely simple.

Ultimately, with the scant musical resources we have left to perform them, the chansons de geste are probably best remembered more as poetry than as music per se, although their tradition is without doubt a worthy and logical predecessor to the troubadour and trouvère tradition.

THE TROUBADOURS AND TROUVÈRES

The first great vernacular tradition of song and showmanship was that of the troubadours, hailing overwhelmingly from the Provençal region in the south of modern France, and singing in the language of Occitan, as their predecessor William IX had done before them. They usually worked in the court of a nobleman, earning a living while attempting to seduce the women of their court. They were not simply wandering minstrels who travelled the countryside in search of employment, as was supposed in the 19th century; they were in fact well-educated, usually of noble birth, and courtly in his deportment. They could not afford to be nearly as frivolous or as womanising as William, even if they gloated about such deeds in their songs to enhance their reputation, for they could easily be thrown out of a nobleman's court for attempting to woo the wrong woman. To gain success, in matters of business and of love, a troubadour was expected to be "cortes et enseignatz", courteous and accomplished, in all things.

The principal idea of the troubadour poetry is that of "fin' amors", or "ideal love". As a result of the pursuit of fin' amors, the troubadour appears enlightened through his poetry, occasionally joyous in the winning of his lady, but more often in a state of deep depression from losing her. There was virtually no other significant subject in troubadour poetry; since love was the source of all goodness, almost all of the major troubadours felt bound to the pursuit of its purest incarnation.

The basic structure of a troubadour song is usually as follows:

- The songs are strophic, meaning that every verse is of a similar length (between six and ten lines), and the melody of each verse is always the same
- The rhyme scheme remains constant throughout the song, eg. ABABCDCD, and if the poet is very good, the syllables of the rhymes may also be consistent throughout
- The metre scheme also remains consistent; this is important because the lyrics of all the verses must conform to the given melody
- The songs are generally syllabic, with occasional flourishes on words of expressive importance
- Songs are often through-composed, but many make use of melodic repetition during each verse
- The song ends with a tornada, a repetition of the final two or three lines using a closing remark

One of the single most popular troubadours of all time is Bernart de Ventadorn. His *vida*, or unofficial biography, tells us that he was born into a poor family, the son of the baker for the Ventadorn castle, but that he proved highly skilled in matters of music and poetry. As a "courtly and educated" man, he is reputed to have loved the Viscountess of Ventadorn, and later Eleanor of Aquitaine, both times being shut away from them by other men, with the latter being taken as a wife by Henry II.⁷ In terms of musical output, he is easily the most thoroughly documented of all the troubadours, and forty-five of his songs are extant. See the Appendix for the first verse of his most well-known work, "Can Vei la Lauzeta Mover".



Peire Vidal is perhaps the most logical successor to the poetic tradition of William, as his poetry continually espouses his greatness, both in knightly accomplishments and wooing fair maidens. His *vida* tells us that he was a brilliant singer, but a madman to boot; apparently he had even had his tongue cut out by a jealous knight when he had bragged of being his wife's lover. Later in his life, he fell in love with a woman claiming to be the niece of the Emperor of Constantinople, and soon afterwards he

⁷ Internet resource: <http://www.brindin.com/poven000.htm>. Accessed 31st January 2007.

declared himself Emperor, with her as his wife, and went to claim the great city for his own. His biographer simply states, "He worshipped all lovely women that he saw, and was fooled by all of them".⁸ Fool that he was, he was nevertheless an incredible poet, and the twelve extant songs we have of his testify to his extraordinary musical ability. He even experimented with a kind of medieval copyright by incorporating his own name into the rhyme scheme of some of his poetry. In other cases he is known to have used gossip as a weapon against his enemies through his songs.

At some point around the turn of the 13th century, the troubadour tradition seems to have diminished substantially, perhaps contributed to by the Albigensian crusade against Cathars in the region. The tradition was re-ignited in the north of France by the trouvères. Occitan was no longer the singular language of the poets, and all manner of dialects proved popular in their songs, with the regional dialects of Champagne, Picardy, Normandy and even England standing out. The trouvères made a point of continuing the tradition of "fine amour" in their courtly compositions, but also turned their attention to the continuing crusades, lending their vocal support to the Christian cause, and pursued issues of politics and business in other songs.

The most famous of all the trouvères is unquestionably Adam de la Halle. Though we are fairly certain that he was born in Arras around 1245, virtually all other information about him is debatable. Most of what we can discern is based on his autobiographical play named "Le Jeu d'Adam ou de la feuillie", written in approximately 1276, from which we learn that he spent a great deal of his life in Arras, but also studied intermittently in Paris. Almost everything else we learn from this play is ambiguous, and gives no completely trustworthy information on Adam's life. For example, he tells us in his play that his wife is Maroie, but this could be one of two women, depending on the exact date of the composition of the work. Even the date of his death is far from certain.

His works are some of the best documented of the period. His extant works include thirty-four chansons, seventeen jeux-partis (a song which poses a theoretical debate with an "opponent"), sixteen rondeaux, five isorhythmic motets and five plays. Of these, his most significant musical work is "Le Jeu de Robin et Marion", a forty-minute pastourelle in which he takes great pleasure in sending up both the upper and lower classes. See the Appendix for the most famous song from this work, the opening chanson of Marion, entitled "Robins m'aime". Note that this edition of the work uses mostly Franconian notation, as we have already discussed, but that the slanted notes with stems at the top left are in fact "cum opposita proprietate" ligatures, which in simplified language means that the notes they represent should be taken as semibreves. The slanted ligature in the third line with its stem to the bottom left represents two breves.



CONCLUSION

Unfortunately this crash course in 850 years' worth of music is far from comprehensive, and there is a great deal of important contributions to music that I have had to skip over, but I hope that something in this class has piqued your interest. I encourage you to look through the Musical Appendix, and have a go at deciphering or singing any of the pieces that you feel comfortable with. If you feel suitably encouraged by what you have learned, have a listen to some CDs of music by these composers, perhaps with a view to learning more about them in the future. I look forward to perhaps working with you on any future musical endeavours you might devise.

(7,930 words)

⁸ Internet resource: <http://www.ast.keeds.ac.uk/~phywmdw/Vidal.html>. Accessed 31st January 2007.