



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Cantus and discantus

[Matteo Nanni] With the upcoming of musical notation in late Carolingian times, the practice of polyphonic singing was developed in different parts of medieval Europe. These compositions for two, three, or four voices were called discantus or organum and were in both cases based on a liturgical chant melody. Polyphonic music is transmitted in sources from different parts of Europe starting from the ninth century onwards: Werden, Germany; Winchester, England; Arezzo, Italy; Limoges, France; and finally, Paris. This is an early example of polyphonic notation. The reason of that musical evolution should not be searched in the artistic intention of medieval composers, but rather in the purpose of embellishing the liturgical chant during important festivities like Easter or Christmas. The embellishment thus emphasised the solemn character of these liturgical performances. During the second half of the 13th century, a historical, significant practice of polyphonic music was developed in the newly constructed cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. This repertoire was copied in the different stages into the so-called Magnus Liber. In this collection, a new type of notation that was apt to fix rhythmic patterns was established. During this week, you shall learn to read and to transcribe that type of notation. In Paris, specific parts of the plainchant were put in a non-rhythmic polyphonic setting. Later, these parts were replaced by new passages specifically called clausulae that used the rhythmic notation: the modal notation. During the period of the Notre Dame school, polyphonic versions of the same piece were reworked in different steps. The starting point is always a plainchant melody.

[PLAINCHANT SINGING]

Let's take as example the mass chant *Benedicta et Venerabilis*, a gradual on which different melismatic clausulae on the syllable 'go' of 'virgo', were set by the musicians of Notre Dame.

[SOLO SINGING 'VIRGO'] [ORGANUM SINGING]

With the new modal notation, a more complex type of polyphony was possible. Also, three voice versions were released.

[ORGANUM SINGING]

In a further step of this reworking process, a new text was added to the upper voice. This voice was called motetus. A new genre was born. As you can see here in the motet, *O Maria mater pia*, which is based on the clausula 'go', the three voices being moulded after the older clausula setting.

[PERFORMING , "O MARIA MATER PIA,"]