



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Cutting the quill

[Angelika Moths] The University of Basel was founded 1460. Today, the building called Old University still proudly overlooks the Rhine, for 555 years a venue of teaching, learning, and research. Just a stone's throw away, Andreas Schenk carries on a craft that also goes back many centuries: the art of calligraphy. We are indebted to its tradition in Mediaeval monasteries, as it gave birth to the manuscripts so central to this course.

Andreas Schenk tells us in his own scriptorium why he finds his trade fascinating, even in the 21st century.

[Andreas Schenk/Voice over] The field of calligraphy is many-faceted, and involves a broad range of knowledge from literature to painting. It is a cultural technology that bears upon every artistic practice.

[Angelika Moths] A technology the scribes used also as they wrote down musical notations. Obviously, they wrote with quills.

[Andreas Schenk/Voice over] I always wondered why they raised peacocks in medieval cloisters. The reason is, their quills are best suited for calligraphy. Second best are goose quills. Those were for the commoners who could write. For writing quills, you use the four biggest pinions that grow smaller on one side. It is important to use feathers the bird has shed, and never those you gain from quilling, since the last ones are too soft to be fit for writing purposes. After having selected a quill, you harden it. You either store it long enough, or put it first into water, and stick it then into red hot sand. Then it is ready to be cut into a quill pen. Ink corrosion sometimes became a problem. Through the centuries, some inks might corrode the paper. This happened, for instance, with certain original scores by Mozart. Where there supposedly was a line before, you now just see a hole. The paper has been destroyed.

[Angelika Moths] Now, it might be not a very good idea for you to start cutting quills, especially if you are a musician still in need of your fingers. The knives are very sharp, and to cut a quill is not easy for the untrained. But you might want to find an existing quill and use it to copy some notes. Remember, for reason of the physics involved in the ink flow within a quill, medieval scribes used to write on rather steep surfaces. Maybe you shall love this experience as Andreas Schenk does.

[Andreas Schenk/Voice over] What, to me, is absolutely fascinating is how little material you need. You need a pen, some ink, and a paper. This you will find almost anywhere. And that is one of the beauties. It is an art you may practise everywhere.