



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Decoding the signs

[Matteo Nanni] We live in a civilisation of written words and signs. In our daily life we are exposed to script and signs in very different situations: reading the newspaper, a book, but also looking at an advertising leaflet or a street sign. In this video we will introduce you to the question, how do signs create meaning? How does musical notation relate to that world of encoding and decoding signs?

[Angelika Moths] Sometimes signs explain themselves. They relate to an object by depicting it. Some signs can, on the other hand, be read because conventions exist. They are symbolic and are often quite abstract. In that case they are confusing and need some more explanation. In our world signs are still in development and are to be understood sometimes only by a group of people. This is particularly evident in the case of different script traditions. The Arabic alphabet, for instance, differs from Latin in the way that if you do not learn it, you aren't able to distinguish the single letters. Identification of difference is one of the central principles of reading.

[Matteo Nanni] Alphabet signs have a precise meaning, which as Nelson Goodman has pointed out, is separated from graphic font. We can read these three letters also if we use different fonts. But we can easily recognise that some signs, as here "A" and "D" are differentiated just by a little detail. The little line on the right side is just a bit longer. We find this kind of visual semiotic segmentation also in musical notation. A crotchet differs from a quaver just by the addition of a flag on the right side as you can see here. During the history of musical notation many systems of representation were carried out as for example here an early example of alphabetic notation or here with neumes, an early notation for liturgical chant from the ninth century. As you will learn during the next weeks different notation represent different efforts to visualise music. The historical differentiated visual quality of notated music finally is based on a specific way to encode and decode notational signs.

[Angelika Moths] Let's give an example. The neumes, as one of the oldest ways to write music down, are signs which give us a visual idea of a melody. For example, there are signs that represent one single note as here the so-called virga and the tractulus. There are also signs for two bound notes as here the pes for an ascending interval and the clivis for a descending interval. The neumes, however, cannot display the exact pitches. You can see here a melody you probably all know by heart. But without a text you may not recognise it or sing it. And here is the solution. [SINGING]