



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Find yourself between perfection and ambiguity

[Matteo Nanni] Around 1280, the principal music theorist of mensural notation, Franco of Cologne, describes the notion of perfection. Musical notation is based on a threefold entity of a time unit.

Franco of Cologne writes: "This unit is called perfect because it is measured by three tempora" We can keep in mind that the perfect unity consists of three parts. The rationale of this assumption is based on the theological concept about the status of perfection of the number three. Franco of Cologne points out that the ternary number is the most perfect number because it takes its name from the Holy Trinity, which is true and pure perfection.

Three tempo units - that is three breves - yield one perfection. If three breves make one perfection, what value has a longa? Actually, it is not possible to give a definitive answer. Learning mensural notation means to face the problem of ambiguity of notational signs. The temporal duration depends on the context. A longa for instance, can assume a value of two or three breves. There are a couple of rules that help us to know how to read this notation. Those rules are formulated by Franco of Cologne.

[Angelika Moths] The first basic rule says that a longa remains perfect if it is followed by another longa. This rule in Latin is called *similis ante similem perfecta*. Thus, if there is no further note, we cannot determine if a longa is perfect or imperfect.

A second rule implies that a longa is also perfect if it is followed by two or three breves.

A third rule that Franco mentions describes the concept of imperfection. A longa becomes imperfect or is imperfed by the shorter value of the breves. In this example, this happens by a following note: a *parte post*, as it's expressed in Latin. Here, the same happens by a preceding note: a *parte ante* in Latin.

The fourth rule defines the relationship between the breves. If in a frame of two longae there are two breves, the first longa must be perfect (rule 2). Because the time laps between the two longae has to fill up a *perfectio* - a threefold time unit - but there are just two breves, the second will be doubled or altered. Finally, if between the two longae there are three breves, there will be no alteration.

[Matteo Nanni] The perfection and alteration rules by Franco of Cologne you learned in this step represent one essential feature of the mensural notation from the 13th until the 16th century. As we go further, you shall also learn the rules about ligatures that describe the combinations of two or more tones. If you know the perfection and alteration rules as well as the ligature rules, you will be able to read and transcribe mensural notation of the 13th century.