



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Transcribing mensural notation I

[Matteo Nanni] In this exercise step, you will learn how to transcribe a composition from the 13th century. For this purpose, I have selected a three-voice Ars Antiqua motet from the Codex Montpellier, H 196. Mediaeval motets are characterised by two simultaneous texts. This work presents some notational difficulties that will be discussed and resolved in this step.

The first question that arises is: how are the three voices displayed on the manuscript?

You find on the bottom of the page the tenor, which is drawn across the pages.

[SINGING]

On the right side, you see the middle voice, duplum, or motetus.

[SINGING]

On the left, you see the upper voices, the so-called triplum.

[SINGING]

The composition ends, then, on the next pages, with the same layout.

[SINGING]

The next crucial aspect we should consider is that this composition follows the so-called pre-Franconian rules. As you may remember, the ligature rules are, in that case, slightly different than the rules Franco of Cologne formulated, whereas, the perfection and alteration rules are already valid. A table with the pre-Franconian ligature rules can be found in an earlier step of this week.

After having settled the three incipits, as here, we should begin with the tenor. Remember that the tenor, in pre-Franconian pieces, is not yet completely mensural. The ligatures, rather, follow modal patterns. Therefore, we need to transcribe the three-note ligatures here as the first mode: long-short-long.

You may realise that we decided to avoid bar lines. And therefore, in this transcription, there are no measures. The reason is the following: meter, in mensural music, doesn't correspond to modern bars, but it rather depends upon the division of the time units. However, in order to help legibility, it is also possible to transcribe this music in a three-quarter time.

The following question concerns the upper voices. How should we transcribe them? The basic rhythmic feature is the sequence of longa and brevis. In the motetus voice, we observe some shorter note values that are interposed in this pattern. At the beginning, they appear in form of a plica, in the next segment as a ligature. Please remember that here, the pre-Franconian ligature does not follow the visual logic of the mensural notation, but is derived from the modal notation, and therefore must be transcribed like this: quaver-quaver-crotchet. Please take also note that the short dash after G shouldn't be read as a rest, but is a breathing pause, the so-called suspirium.

The triplum voice finally bears no further difficulties. It should be transcribed like this.