



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

How to read an early score

[Matteo Nanni] After the consolidation of the pitch quality, due to the introduction of staff lines, the question that arises around 1200 is the representation of temporal quality: duration. As we learned last week, the discrete pitch is based on the analogy of high and low and can be easily depicted graphically on the parchment. The musical rhythm, however, has no visual equivalent. As we will see, in the modal notation of the 13th century, rhythm is codified in a special manner. For the first time in music history, it is inscribed in notational signs. In this step, we will learn to recognise and decode these signs. Learning how to read an early score means, first of all, distinguish between different signs. Here is a picture of an early 14th century fragment from the Basel Library with modal notation. What do we see here? What are we able to read? At first, we see a parchment with four staffed line systems, each with 15 lines. We also see a page filled with musical notes and little portions of text. This helps us to recognise the number of the voices. They are three. We also recognise a score notation with the three voices, one above the other. Maybe a bit more difficult is to decode the single signs and distinguish the notes from the clefs. Actually, we can see here the beginning of the verse, two C clefs and one F clef. Musical notes are written in two different ways, as single note, *nota simplex*, or ligature, *nota ligata*. There are two-note ligatures, as here, and there are three or more ligatures, as here. The shape of these square notes originates in the neumes. This figure, for example, comes from the neume called *pes*. This figure is drawn from the *clivis*. This three-note ligature comes from the *porrectus*. And finally, this ligature comes from the *torculus*. In order to read this early score, we have to get acquainted also to the different little lines that can assume distinct meanings. The vertical lines can be interpreted in different ways. They can be, in some cases, just short rests, as here. In other cases, they are not only rests, but they mark the ending of an *ordo*, like here. *Ordo* indicates a rhythmic metrical unit, as here. Finally, a line can mark formal parts of the composition as, for example, here.

[SINGING]