



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Measuring musical time

[Matteo Nanni] Welcome to the fourth week of the course From Ink to Sound. Musical notation, as we have grown accustomed to, is based on the idea that the shape of the notes visualises pitches and rhythm. However, as we have learned during the last weeks, this is not always the case in early medieval notations. The most neumatic families cannot display pitches. Modal notation doesn't embody rhythms in the shape of the notes, but represents it by combining single notes and ligatures. In that case, rhythm is codified in the concept of number. During the second half of the 13th century, a new way of measuring musical time was established. The music theorist Franco of Cologne refers to this historical development in his treatise *Ars Cantus Mensurabilis*. Therefore, the early mensural system of noting music, also called *Ars Antiqua* notation, is commonly known also as Franconian notation. Mensural notation came up after 1260 and was the first attempt not to provide rhythm through the concept of number, but to outline it in the written signs themselves. Rhythmic values were notated and visualised by the shape of the single notes. As for example the longa, the brevis, the semi-brevis or by the way of ligatures brevis-longa, or for example brevis-brevis. With mensural notation, a fundamental shift from rhythm as numerus to rhythm as figura was enforced. The notational signs were infused with a new semiotic charge. The duration was legible in the shape of the figures. As we can see here, comparing two pieces, the upper is one clausula Go from the manuscript Firenze Pluteo 29.1 and written in modal notation. And the lower one is the motet *Agmina miliciae* from the manuscript Bamberg 115 written in Franconian notation. We can easily recognise that the modal piece is in the first mode which is based on the pattern longa-brevis, longa-brevis. And the first mode is encoded in the sequence of ligatures for a ternary followed by binaries. So, in our transcription, the rhythmic structure consists in the alternation of crotchets and quavers. Looking at the Franconian motet, we can see that also here the rhythmic structure is composed from the alternation of longa-brevis. But the most important thing is that this rhythmic pattern is directly legible from the notational signs.