



From Ink to Sound: Decoding Musical Manuscripts

Video Transcript

Transcribing modal notation I

[Angelika Moths] As this is our first transcription, we would like to show you some hints that are useful not only for the transcription of modern notation but for all kinds of transcriptions. Transcribing helps to understand the relation between the voices.

Although in modern notation, we have already a kind of score order, the voices are not exactly vertical to each other. In manuscripts of later times, they might even be on different pages or in part books.

Concerning the note values, you have to take a decision. There is no right or wrong, and some scholars even prefer to keep the original values. It always depends on how close you want to stick to the original, or which is the easiest way to perform.

For modern notation, the nowadays most common way is to transcribe the longer note as a crotchet and the shorter as a quaver.

Before we start, we have to face some basic problems. Where is the actual beginning of the piece?

[Matteo Nanni] As the scribe of this manuscript used the space in a very economical way, the end of the preceding piece is on the same staff as the beginning of the clausula we want to transcribe. The beginning of the lower voice, the tenor, even hides itself in the initial "Go" but is separated by the preceding piece by a line which marks the end.

The same happens in the middle voice, called duplum. It is evident that the new piece starts here, as an accidental B-flat is applied. In both the duplum and the tenor voice, a clef at the beginning of the staff indicates the position of the note "middle C".

This information is missing at the beginning of the upper voice, the triplum. The clef only appears on the second staff of the piece.

[Angela Moths] If you want to work with your transcription at a later time, all this information might be important and could get lost if you do not note it down. Therefore, we put a so-called "incipit" at the beginning of the transcription. With the help of the incipit, it is possible to retrace your decisions. In the case of our clausula, this incipit looks like that.

In general, it is easier to read the more common treble clef, here transposed an 8th down, as we deal with tenor voices. I also put the accidental B-flat at the beginning of the duplum voice. As it might need this B-flat in the triplum, too, but it is originally not there, I should put it into brackets. These brackets indicate my addition to the original.

[Matteo Nanni] Concerning modal notation, the choice of the mode is of special interest. As you can see, the tenor has ligatures of three notes, subdivided by a line called *divisio modi*. Therefore, it is transcribed in the fifth mode with dotted crotchet and a dotted crotchet silence.

As ligatures are an important information, you should mark them by square brackets. You can also indicate the *divisio modi* with short lines, but you should not misread them as bar lines.

Now let's have a look at the upper voice. It has a repeated note in the beginning. Due to the rule that in ligatures two successive notes of the same pitch are impossible, we can deduce that it is meant as a



three-note figure. This ternary ligature is followed by ligatures of two notes. So that we are in the first mode. We can transcribe the beginning like this.

[Angela Moths] As you can see, you have to plan your transcription in advance. The upper voices need more space than the tenor.

[Matteo Nanni] As you can see in our transcription, in the end of every ordo of the upper voices, we reach the end of a phrase. Therefore, we transcribe the last two notes as dotted crotchets. Willi Apel called this changing of the rhythmical pattern *extensio modi*. He introduced this expression according to a historical term used by theorists of the time, *fractio modi*. In order to preserve the music of rhythmical monotony, while keeping the three voices coordinated, we can break off the mode by using every now and then smaller values to fill up the regular mode. In our piece a *fractio modi* is clearly marked with a ligature of four notes. In this case it does not indicate a change of mode, but it indicates that the rhythm of the *triplum* has to be adapted to that of the *duplum* by using smaller note values. Here we have two quavers instead of one crotchet.

[Angelika Moths] Another way to indicate smaller values are the so-called *conjuncturae* or *currentes*, which appear as the combination of a single note or a ligature, followed by a series of isolated notes of a descending scale. They do not always follow clear rules, but the internal logic of the music and the transcription depends on the context.

[Matteo Nanni] One more rhythmical modification is triggered by the so-called *plica*, a pleat that seems to be related to what we called *liquescence* in the neumes, a note with a kind of appendix. The exact pitch and rhythm of the *plica* is not always clear and should therefore be marked with a small note. Sometimes the meaning of the *plica* arises clearly from the musical context, as here, where it seems quite obvious that both upper voices are supposed to sing the same rhythm, although the scribe chose two different versions of writing it down. Therefore, transcriptions are very useful indeed.