

MEDIEVAL MUSIC: WHAT MIGHT IT HAVE REALLY SOUNDED LIKE?

First off, let's face it, until Doctor Who shows up on my doorstep offering to take me back in time (with a recording device in hand), we will never know for certain how medieval music sounded. Other arts and sciences have actual objects extant, but music and dance cannot. [One could make the same argument for food, but I find that less viable. We'll argue that sometime if you really wish.] Just as a freeze-frame photo cannot show the flow and grace of the dance, neither do the notes on the page truly convey all aspects of the sound. So how can we even attempt to approach it? Or do you say "If we have the pitches and the rhythm, what else do we need?" A lot, actually. But where should we start?

A good place to start is with music practically everyone in Medieval Europe heard almost every day, and certainly every week. That's right, Gregorian chant. Unless you got excommunicated, everyone went to church, unlike today.¹ And if you got an education, that was essentially from the church too.

But we all know what chant sounds like, don't we? Maybe we do and maybe we don't. Plus we haven't heard anywhere near the amount of chant people did back then. Even if you go to church now regularly, you're not hearing much chant. Our heads are full of all sorts of other music, so to our ears, one chant sounds much like another. But maybe if chant is all you hear, then you can distinguish one type from another.² And they didn't stop singing chant, just because they added other polyphonic styles, so it's still good for later years as well.

But Amelie, you say, what do you mean we may not know what chant sounded like? I'm getting to that. Since we can't travel back in time, the only next best thing we can do is 1) look at the music, and 2) read what people wrote about the music. It's not the same thing, but it's as close as we can ever get.

Disclaimer time: My focus on chant here is not because I like it, but because the treatise writers focused on it. It was something familiar to everyone, and the first thing you learned in your music education. Chances seem pretty good that vocal techniques used at church would not be radically different from vocal techniques used elsewhere. Remember that they didn't do that "separation of church and state" thing so ubiquitous to our thinking. Also, later notations grew out of chant notation, so it's a helpful place to start.

My hope is also to take this information and apply it to other secular repertoires, especially monophonic ones. It seems likely that the clerics writing secular music were

¹ Don't worry about the Jews. They went to synagogue and sang their own chant, and some Christian chant dates back to being borrowed from them.

² The way you can tell Smashing Pumpkins from U2 or Frank Sinatra from Harry Connick Jr.

probably trained on chant, so a symbol that means one thing in one place shouldn't mean something wildly different when written elsewhere.

GREGORIAN CHANT SIMPLE, OR NOT SO?

Knowing the pitches of Gregorian Chant is not difficult, but discerning nuances of rhythm is a more subtle matter. First, some note shape names:

1 square note = punctum

1 square note with down stem on right = virga

Other ones joined together = who cares, they're all neumes³

Diamond shaped notes = same as other notes

Squiggly note = quilisma

Half-sized note joined to a square note = liquescent

[A half a note at the end of a line = custos – this is just a cheat to let you know what the next pitch is – not a note to sing! Especially great when changing clefs or turning page.]

All these notes receive the same rhythm, except if there are other indications.

Which are:

Neumes are like slurs (ie stress or slight accent first, string others together).

A row of diamond notes are like neumes.

2 or 3 notes of same pitch next to each other on same sung syllable = double or triple length of note; it might also mean tremolo.

A horizontal line above a note = lengthen that note slightly

A vertical line means that note receives a slight stress. (like a little accent)

A dot following a note doubles the length of the note. (or perhaps just 1 ½.)

[Ferreira transcribed a section of chant sung by 9 different performers; every one did the rhythm somewhat differently. Some groups did all their horizontal line notes the same, others (the monks with an oral tradition) lengthened one, but not the next. There were even variations on B natural vs. B flat.⁴]

³ Okay, if you really care, see attached chart from the *Liber Usualis*, the Vatican's official book of chant, or read the preface online here: http://ks.imslp.net/files/imglnks/usimg/8/8c/IMSLP52072-PMLP29410-LU1_Introduction_Preface_et_alia.pdf

⁴ Ferreira, *Gregorian Chant and the Cantigas de Santa Maria*, article available online here: https://www.academia.edu/1214994/Bases_for_Transcription_Gregorian_Chant_and_the_Notation_of_the_Cantigas_de_Santa_Maria

Quilismas are tremolo notes, from the pitch of the previous note leading up to the next note. Or maybe it's not the pitch that is changing, but the volume!⁵

Liquescents mark a manner of pronouncing/singing; the small or liquescent note is only when there is a combo vowel or combo consonant, so as you sing that vowel or consonant, your mouth is somewhat closed, therefore makes less sound.

Above rules are basically the ones given by the Benedictine monks of Solemses, who studied the old chant manuscripts (esp. 11th or so century), then rewrote the Liber Usualis around the beginning of the 20th century.

NB: Words are important in chant, so the stress of the words should be the stress you sing. (Except for those vertical lines, called *ictus*, which seems best described by Parrish as both the start and end “like a bouncing ball.”)

In early non-diastematic chant (ie no lines for pitches), there were sometimes letters added above notes to indicate something either rhythmic or expressive. The 2 most known are *c* = quick and *t* = lengthen. Other letters are *e* = equal/same pitch, *a* = *altius* either higher or louder (but another school had *a* = *augete* or broadening)⁶, *l* and *s* are also higher (why 3 diff. letters for higher?) *l* = lighten/raise and *s* = “note climbs upward with a silibant sound”; *d* and *i* both indicate lowering the note. Notker wrote a list in the 9th c. for the entire alphabet, but you have to wonder if he wasn't making some of them up, just for thoroughness.

If his list is for real, there are some strange sounds in there. For example:

F furiously demands that the note shall be begun with a harsh sound of the sound of gnashing teeth.

G genuinely grants that a note is to be gargled gradually in the throat.

H heralds that one aspirates on the note itself in the manner that one does when pronouncing this letter.

K for the Latins has no value, but among us Alemanni it ... signifies “klenche,” that is a ringing sound.

B, according to the letters to which it is attached, signifies that the note rises or falls much further, or is held longer in a strident voice (*belgicat*).⁷

⁵ Different treatise authors explain the quilisma differently. Let's see what they say: Aurelian of Reome, 9th c. “a tremulous and ascending note”; anon. 11th c “When Guido says ‘or have tremula’, I think it should be understood as follows: the tremula is the neume we call a ... quilisma” and “The tremula is similar to a repercussed note, just as is a morula, but there is this difference, that in a morula the sounds are produced with uniform pulses of the voice, while in the tremula these same sounds are brought forth with now a greater, now a lesser impulse of the voice, as if trembling.”; author of Summa musicae, 13th c. “The quilisma is called ‘crooked’ and it contains three or more small notes, sometimes ascending and again descending, or the reverse.” McGee, pp 44, 53-54.

⁶ Parrish, p. 11.

⁷ McGee, Sound of Medieval Song, pp 32-33.

Another interesting thing about the non-diastematic chant notation is that, while it started in the 9th century, it lasted into the 13th, well past not only square notation with staff lines, but also into clear rhythmic notation. It must have served some useful purpose that the more familiar (to us) notation could not express.⁸

Also, I've long wondered what the big deal is with all the different names of the different neumes. If they simply combine different pitches and are drawn differently, I don't see why they each need an individual name, unless something about the shape tells you about how it is performed in addition to pitches. That seems to be where McGee is headed too. After wading through 45 different treatises, he feels that many of the neumes indicate some form of liquescence, and also accent ("repercussive neumes").

(Another question I had was why two different shapes for notes the same length, ie punctum & virga. Turns out before they had staff lines the 2 shapes helped tell whether each note was higher or lower in pitch than the last note.)

Now we add another problem; ornamentation. Yes, it seems that it was common accepted practice, and expected practice to ornament, decorate etc. McGee says "the amount of leeway granted to (or taken by) a performer was such that the written versions of medieval music give only a pale impression of what was actually performed or heard."⁹ He then quotes several theorists.

Here is what Johannes de Garlandia says: "*The third rule is to put colours in place of unfamiliar proportionate sounds [i.e. melodic phrases], for the more you colour it, the more the sound will be familiar, and if it is familiar, it will be pleasing. Or in place of any colour in the region put a familiar cantilena, phrase (copula) or section (punctum) or a descending or ascending instrumental phrase of some instrument, or a phrase from a lai.*"¹⁰ This makes me wonder what he means by "colour." Johannes de Garlandia says: "*Colour is the beauty of sound ... It is created in several ways: through well-ordered sound [ie selection of intervals]; through the embellishment of the sound; or by repetition of the same or a different melody.*"¹¹ So Garlandia is proposing that you throw quotes from other songs in to make it better.

McGee also cites Elias Salomonis discussing polyphonic ornamentation in a way which implies that it was very common, including having the rector whisper corrections in the singers ears, "such as that they are singing too many notes."

⁸ If you'd like to see what they look like compared to square notation, get hold of a copy of Graduale Triplex – it has the square chant notation and 2 different 11th c. notations simultaneously. (also there are many ms online now)

⁹ McGee, p. 4.

¹⁰ McGee, p. 9.

¹¹ McGee, p. 9.

Unfortunately for us, there was no standardized way to discuss these aspects of music, so each theorist could define his terms differently. This makes generalizations impossible. To really dig into this, it seems we have to go back to reading the treatise writers directly (or read McGee's excellent book, since he's read them all for us).

My take-away from it is that there is no one definition for many of these musical terms, that how music was performed varied from place to place and at different times. However, there are things they did that we are not doing. That seems clear. The big one is singing more than was written on the page, from simple trill type ornaments to entire new passages.

So how can we do these techniques if we have never heard them? One way to start is by listening to non-Western music. Some of these techniques show up in Middle Eastern, Byzantine and Indian music. Those will help with the pitches in between the notes too. Head over to YouTube and listen to Soeur Marie Keyrouz sing Maronite or Byzantine chant — it's not the chant style you're used to. It will take some daring to try it for ourselves. Also, it may be easier to add it to monophonic pieces before we are ready to tackle polyphony with these new techniques. We may need to start with chant, just like our predecessors.

So, to sum up, we can sing those notes on the page just as written, or we can 'kick it up a notch' by giving different neumes different sounds, sliding between notes, being more percussive, and throwing in whole different phrases just for fun! This newer approach will require a more open mind and some experimentation ... I'm curious to see where it may take us.

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is the norm for modern Editors. The following tables give the principal forms of these notes or neums along with their names :

			
Punctum	Virga	Bivirga	Punctum inclinatum (Diamond)
			
Podatus or Pes	Clivis or Flexa	Epiphonus	Cephalicus
			
Scandicus	Salicus	Climacus	Ancus
			
Torculus	Porrectus	Torculus resupinus	Porrectus flexus
			
Pes subpunctis	Scandicus subpunctis	Scandicus flexus	Climacus resupinus
			
Strophicus	Pes strophicus	Clivis strophica or Clivis with an Oriscus	Torculus strophicus or Torculus with an Oriscus
			
Pressus	Other Pressus or apposed neums		Trigon
			
Quilisma		Longer or compound Neums	

To avoid all error and doubt in the interpretation of the above notation, the following observations are to be noted :

1. Of the two notes of the *Podatus*, the lower one must be sung before the upper note immediately above it.

