

# Reconstructing Western “Monophonic” Music

*Andreas Haug*

To have been invited as a specialist on Western monophonic music to a conference on “Writing the History of ‘Ottoman Music’” and to speak to an assembly of such eminent experts on that field is certainly a great honour and a pleasure. Yet, I met with one principle difficulty when preparing the present paper: I had to try to understand why, that is, based on what presumptions, and with what expectations in mind, you might have asked me to contribute to your discussions. Instead of finding answers to given questions, I felt I had to figure out the questions my contribution might be expected to provide some answers to.

I suppose your presumption was not that pre-modern Western monophonic music confronts us with cultural conditions similar to what we meet in Ottoman music, but rather, that it might confront us with conditions dissimilar to what we find in modern Western music. Thus, my task should be to describe and to discuss these dissimilarities, in order to problematize the musical paradigms of modern Western culture as a model for a philological, historical, aesthetical, and artistic reconstruction of music from cultures that do not conform to modern Western conditions. By doing so I hope to supplement the considerations offered by my colleague Ralf Martin Jäger in his article in this book.

In the first section of the present paper I wish to point out some of the basic dissimilarities between the pre-modern culture of Western monophonic music and the modern culture of Western music. After having outlined the historical circumstances of Western monophony in the paper’s second section, in the final section I wish to talk about some of the consequences these dissimilarities may have for a reconstruction of Western monophonic music in philological, historical and artistic terms.

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Western monophonic music has to be historically reconstructed: (a) without falling back on modern Western categories as “composer”, “composing”, “composition”; and hence (b) without falling back on the category of “improvisation” as the opposite of “composition”; (c) without the modern privileging of “novelty” and “innovation”; (d) without the concept of a “written work”; and (e) without a diametric opposition between “oral” and “literal” transmission; (f) without relying on the modern Western distinction between “monophonic” and “polyphonic” music; and even (g) without a concept of “music” equivalent with the Western modern one. To be sure, none of these concepts and oppositions seems to have been entirely absent from the culture of pre-modern Western music. Most likely these concepts were altogether current, but without being either privileged or preemi-

nent, without either the implications or the emphasis of a modern Western point of view, and without being evaluated as an identifying characteristic of this culture, as its cultural “self”. Let me illustrate these points through some examples from the period between circa 800 and 1100, which – arguably – are both the most productive period within the realm of Western monophonic music and a formative period of Western musical culture.

(a) Regarding the notions of composer and composition, there is early evidence for the idea that single persons invent and shape individual musical products that are to be remembered exactly and repeated without alteration. In a text from circa 1030 we find the statement that around the year 900 a monk, whose name was still remembered, had shaped melodies with features so distinctive that more than one hundred years later, anyone capable could tell that they were made by him and not by others. Nevertheless, a closer look at the context of that passage shows that this is perceived by the storyteller as a phenomenon of local knowledge: The melodies, as well as the name of their maker, are subject to local memory, and their distinctive features set them apart from other contemporary creations of the same monastery, without turning their maker into a composer.<sup>1</sup> In the same text we find a story about two Roman singers who, around 800, created text-less melodies to be sung in church during the Mass. Here we encounter such expressions like *fecerat* (he made), *excogitavit* (he invented), and *de suo* (“all by himself” or “out of his own capacity”) for the act of music making.<sup>2</sup> These expressions have been mistaken as evidence for the notion of an “original genius” in a modern sense. Again, a closer examination of the text and of its context tells something different. The difference that is negotiated in this narrative is the (very medieval) difference between Roman music with papal authority, and “self-made” music lacking such authority, and not the (very modern) difference between mere making and composing in an aesthetically eminent sense (Haug 2005). The Latin word *componere* was used merely as a vocable, to be translated as “to put together,” not a term to be translated as “to compose”.

(b) A music culture that did not esteem the concept of composition as a privileged mode of making music, as a cultural “self”, also could not consider the opposite of composition, that is improvisation, as its cultural “other”. Bruno Nettl has once made the following suggestion: “It seems most appropriate to reserve the term improvisation for cultures and repertoires in which a distinction from non-improvised and pre-composed forms can be recognized” (Nettl 2000:95). Pre-modern Western music culture seems to be a culture where this distinction can be recognized, but the difference between modes of music making that we classify as improvisation and modes that we classify as composition was not as important to

<sup>1</sup> Ekkehard IV., Haefele 1980:104. Cf. Björkqvall & Haug 1993:119-174, and Wulf 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, 108.

pre-modern Europe as it has become to us. The term “improvisation” is a modern term. In pre-modern musical contexts we find the word in adverbial form only (there is no Latin noun such as *improvisatio* in medieval writings related to music) and as a vocable only, used in a non-terminological sense: the expression *ex improvviso* does not translate as “improvising” but rather as “unsuspectingly” or “unprepared”. For example, around 1000 the expression *ex improvviso decantare* refers to an unprepared performance from a written score – that is, to sight-reading, not to improvisation (Bandur 2002). More importantly, it does not mean that medieval musicians never improvised, as we understand the term, it only means that improvisation was not an opposite of composition. It also does not mean that medieval music manuscripts do not contain in written form countless instances of music which are not the results of composition in a modern sense, but rather of other modes of music-making with or without a very restricted participation of notation. However, we have no appropriate designations for this plurality of modes, and therefore the term “improvisation” is often used as a term for something we are unable to grasp. In examining the extant written traces of foreign modes of unwritten music production, we often cannot discern from the written record just exactly what that mode was (Haug 2008).

(c) What about the concepts of musical novelty and innovation? On the one hand we find a document from around 900 describing the musical capacities of an ideal cleric (an *incomparabilis clericus*): He knows ecclesiastical as well as secular song, he has a sweet voice, and he has the knowledge of the composition of new songs or, more accurately, of the “new composition of songs” (*nova carminum compositio vel modulatio*).<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, around 1100 we find the conflicting claim that “by now no new songs are necessary within church” (*novae modulationes nunc in ecclesia non sunt necessariae*).<sup>4</sup> Around 1000 a maker of new music disclaims that new music should be permitted to be different from the old. In contrast, he demands a *similitudo veteris cantus* for new songs.<sup>5</sup> The different statements do not contradict each other, as long as we do not consider the abstract criterion of novelty as a positive value in itself. More typically “medieval” would be an evaluation of music under more concrete criteria than novelty; criteria like aptness to function or perfection, lack of competition between the New and the Old, the coexistence of New and Old (Reckow 1981).

(d) There is early evidence, too, for the idea that notation, that is a written record, can function as a reliable connection between the intention of “the composer” of a melody and its performer. Around 900 we find the observation that notation (*nota*) without pitch-content is unable to communicate to the singer how to sing an in-

<sup>3</sup> Notker Balbulus, *Gesta Karoli Magni Imperatoris*, Haefele 1959:45.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes Affligemensis, *De musica cum tonario*, van Waesberghe 1950:116.

<sup>5</sup> Letaldus Miciacensis in the dedicatory epistle of his *Vita Sancti Iuliani*, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 139, 784.

terval “as it is constituted by the composer” (*sicut a compositore constituta est*).<sup>6</sup> What is not apparent from the context of that statement is, first, whether the term “compositor” relates at all to an empirical person or rather to the distant figure of Pope Gregory, promulgated as the legendary originator of church music by the Carolingians from the late 8<sup>th</sup> century on; and secondly, what status the written record had. The idea of reading a written record of a melody as an expression of the intentions of its maker, and the readiness of a reading singer to repeat the melody, to reproduce it, rendering its written form, does not turn the melody into a “written work”. In other words: performance as a reproduction of a pre-composed musical formulation seems to have been one possibility among others, but not a leading paradigm. Cases where notation was actually considered and respected as a normative prescription for performance were mostly due to factors other than those of purely musical value. It tells us little about the aesthetic status of the music, or about the status of notation as “prescriptive” or “descriptive”, but much about the religious or political reputation of the music or the cultural prestige of books and writing. To sum up what has been shown so far: the ideas of a single composer, of individual and unique composition, and of notation as a medium for preserving the musical intention of a composer and communicating them to a performer – these ideas were not foreign to pre-modern musicians, authors and their readers, but they were not as ideologically charged as they are now.

(e) The ambiguity of the written record is related to the absence of an antipodal relationship between “oral” and “literal”. Of course, one might identify the musical conditions prior to the emergence of music writing around 900 as conditions of “orality”. But all music of that period we know, we are acquainted with from written sources, from manuscripts containing notation of melodies, which might be products of oral composition. Whereas ethnologists can and do deal with written sources, historians cannot approach past oral traditions as long as they remain oral. And as soon as there are written sources, the primary question of the historian is not to what extent they preserve the unwritten status of music. Rather, the historian wants to understand why the written record emerged at all; what its function was within the context of an oral tradition; and how notation interacted with memory (Haug 1990). The work of Leo Treitler (1981; 1982; 1992) has contributed greatly to our understanding of the semi-oral music culture of the Middle Ages. More helpful than the common distinction between “prescriptive” and “descriptive” notation is Treitler’s understanding of notation as a kind of “vicarious performance” (Treitler 1982:49). The reading singer, who reproduces a melody, exactly rendering its written form in front of his eyes, is not necessarily performing a written work. He might be repeating another realization of that melody. Notation in this context is not “prescriptive”, because the recorded performance does not necessarily have more authority than the actual performance of the singer

<sup>6</sup> Hucbald von Saint Amand, *De harmonica institutione*, Traub 1989:62.

himself. The text is not a normative text. Nor is the notation “descriptive”, as it is not the visual rendering of a sounding performance, but a performance in itself, a silent performance by pen. The title of Treitler’s book *With Voice and Pen* (2003) refers to this model of understanding.

(f) Obviously, in a “monophonic” music culture, there was no need to distinguish between monophonic and polyphonic music, nor will such categories have a built-in opposition. Indeed, the earliest extant definition of these two terms, corresponding to our modern understanding of them as a dichotomy, is not found until 1495, as printed in the earliest Western music dictionary. What we call monophonic is defined under the lemma *cantus simplex*, and what we call “polyphonic” under the lemma *cantus compositus*. The *cantus simplex* (translated as “simple” chant) is defined as lacking “relations” (it is *sine ulla relatione*), unlike the *cantus compositus* (translated as “composite”, “compound” chant).<sup>7</sup> The “relations” lacking in monophonic music are those between the different parts (*partes*) of the polyphonic composition. On the one hand, the dictionary reflects the modern Western perception of monophony. That is, in its negative definition of monophony as the opposite of, the “other” of polyphony, the definition implies that monophonic music is non-relational or merely self-relational, a sort of one-dimensional “monomusic”, “another” music, a musical “other”, or, related to non-Western music cultures, the music of “the others”. On the other hand, at the same time the definitions of the dictionary are still reflecting aspects of an older, medieval understanding of monophony, as it states that the *cantus simplex* can be either *figuratus* or *planus*.<sup>8</sup> The first of these two attributes, *figuratus*, relates to music featuring different note values indicated by different graphic figures (*figurae*) within its notation. The second attribute, *planus*, relates to music featuring a “plain” movement; that is, with un-measured note values. Since the emergence of a “mensural” notation that differentiated the durations of pitches, in Western Europe (that is, from about 1200 at Paris), polyphonic music has been perceived primarily as a “measured” or “measurable” music (*musica mensurabilis*). Its “measurability” has been its primary criterion, not the plurality of voices per se (Reckow 1973). There was in essence no medieval term equivalent to the modern term “polyphonic”, nor a term equivalent to the modern term “monophonic”. The following conclusion can be drawn from these observations: the dissimilarity between pre-modern and modern Western music is not that pre-modern music was monophonic, whereas modern Western music is polyphonic, but that in pre-modern Western music culture the two were not diametric opposites.

<sup>7</sup> Tinctoris 1495, *sub voce cantus simplex* and *cantus compositus*.

<sup>8</sup> Idem, *sub voce cantus simplex planus* and *cantus simplex figuratus*.

(g) Even the seemingly fundamental term “music” itself deserves to be put within quotation marks when we are speaking about Western monophonic music.<sup>9</sup> During the Latin Middle Ages the term *musica* refers to a form of reflection and of speculation rather than to a form of practical music. The medieval term for what we call “monophony” was *cantus* (singing).

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Let me now turn to the second section of my paper and give you a brief outline of the historical circumstances of Western monophonic music.

As just mentioned, the earliest form of monophonic music to appear on the stage of Western music history has been called *cantus*, “singing”, in the language of the Latin Middle Ages. This term refers to the practice of singing texts, more exactly, to the singing of written texts, texts transmitted essentially in written form, primarily sacred writings, the Bible in its Latin translations. The vocal performance of their sacred texts has been a practice common to all three revealed religions (“book religions”) of medieval Europe. The members of such religions, who are “owners of a book” (in the well-known expression from the Quran, *abl al-kitab*) are, at the same time, those “who sing from the book” (*qui de codice canunt*, to use an expression from an ancient ecclesiastic context). Thus, the sacred text is present in a dual form in these religions, both as “what is written” and as what is sung. As the written word, the sacred text belongs to the book; as the sung word, it belongs to the voice.

When the word is sung, it gets attached to the tone. The musical tone is the non-verbal and non-semantic element of vocalism: It is produced by the human voice without belonging to human language. Nevertheless, a crucial concept of the Western discourse on music was the idea of a structural similarity between music and language, of an analogy between the melodic fabric of music and the verbal fabric of language. It has been inherited from antiquity and adopted by early medieval music theory. The idea of the similarity of music and text fulfilled itself in the idea of the readability of music. This idea, too, had been inherited from antiquity (Atkinson 2009).

The emergence of notation and notated books in the West can be understood as the realization of the idea of music’s readability. Notation made the melodic parameters of the vocal performance of texts visible and readable, as visible and readable as the texts themselves, and together with the text within manuscripts. The work of the voice entered into the book. That happened in the West during the 9<sup>th</sup> century, within the cultural context of the Carolingian educational reform and the political theology of the Frankish kingdom. Among the members of the three religions of the European Middle Ages based on books, only Christians adopted the practice of making the parameters of vocal performance of their sacred texts visible

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<sup>9</sup> As has been done by Max Haas (2005).

and readable by entering them into the book. Muslims and Jews did not do so. Max Haas has drawn attention to this significant interreligious and intercultural difference, a difference not easily explained. Neither the reasons for such a fundamental break of musical tradition nor its consequences can be examined here more closely. Perhaps the Western concept of composition, in the specific sense of an individual and original musical creation fixed by notation, can be seen as a response to that break, as a compensation for the loss of musical tradition caused by the introduction of notation.

The kind of notation regularly used in chant books since around 900 made music visible without making it readable. It visualized the melodic movement, aspects of the melodic articulation of the text, the action of the voice, without indicating intervals or pitches (Arlt 1987). The notation employed the so-called neumatic notation, which was a notation of the voice, a vocal notation in a twofold sense, one which was simultaneously a notation of the *vox* (the voice) and a notation of the *vocales* (the vowels). According to Latin grammar, vowels have a twofold capacity: they "sound in themselves" and they "form a syllable in themselves" (*per se sonant et per se syllabam faciunt*). The signs of the neumatic notation depict the melodic motion of the sounding vowels. Neumatic notation is a notation of the singer (the *cantor*) and of the chant (the *cantus*). It was able to support the memory of the singer without replacing it. According to a statement of Walter Ong, "writing serves to distance and to separate the knower from the known." Neumatic notation, one might say, distances the singer from the song without separating the song from the singer. Only later manuscripts, copied from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onward, present the melodies in a way that is readable to us. In these manuscripts the signs of neumatic notation are positioned on horizontal lines referring to specific pitches and thus determining the pitch content of the melody. From such a notation one could sing without having heard and learned the melody from a teacher (*sine magistro*). Neumatic notation, with or without the presence of staff lines, with or without pitch-content, was in a profound sense a manuscript notation, a notation of hand-written books, sharing and reflecting the uniqueness of the manuscript.

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The third section of my contribution will be very short. Music that was not created as a written work; music that has neither been composed nor improvised; music that exists in written records neither being simply prescriptive nor simply descriptive, but equivalent to single sounding performances; music that has survived in handwritten records and frequently in a plurality of different transmissions of the same; music that is the product of a music culture neither entirely oral nor entirely literate; music that is monophonic without conforming to the modern Western concept of monophony; music that has not been conceptualized as music, but as singing, as a mode of vocal production, as the work of the voice: As musicologists how can we respond to the conditions of such a musical reality? What conse-

quences might we draw from these dissimilarities between pre-modern monophony and the paradigms of modern Western music culture for a reconstruction of that music in (a) philological, (b) historical, and (c) artistic, i.e. musical terms?

(a) Philological reconstruction of monophonic music will result in editions meeting the demands of historical-critical editions; based on the long-term experience of the tradition of classical philology, but at the same time reflecting the new insights of the New Philology during the last two decennia (since the 1990 issue of the journal *Speculum*).<sup>10</sup> This new philology is new insofar as it intends to be a “philology in a manuscript culture” in a radical sense, a “material philology” insofar as it uncompromisingly takes into consideration the material, the codicological and paleographical aspects of the manuscript (Nicols 1997). Editions of Western monophonic music will pay attention at the same time to the conditions of a manuscript culture and to the conditions of a semi-oral music culture. Since the editor of such music does not encounter a “strong” author, he or she also favors taking a “weak” position as an editor (Gumbrecht 2002). He or she respects the individual versions of single manuscripts, avoids emendation, does not remove variants, and does not intend to construct an ideal or original text.

(b) Historical reconstruction or construction will also take into consideration that all we can ever know about medieval music is what we know from single manuscripts (Dillon 2011). It will acknowledge the singularity of the hand-written book; it will recognize the inevitable tension or contradiction between the irreducible singularity of the manuscript and the legitimate claim for generalization we make for our historical constructions; moreover, it will appreciate the deconstructive power of the manuscript, its subversive effects against the historical narrative’s tendencies to move toward generalization and homogenization.

(c) Artistic reconstruction of monophonic music and its historically informed performance, will, on the one hand, attempt to render the historical text as exactly as the philologist has reconstructed it. But it will go beyond, or rather behind that, following a model suggested by Wulf Arlt (1983). According to that model, historically informed performance is based on the reconstructed text and on a reconstruction of historical conventions, conventions that have been valid for the historical makers of the music, as far as they can be reconstructed from the written records of past performances and of related theoretical writings. Based on their knowledge of these reconstructed conventions performers learn the language of the music they perform, actively, and reaching a level of perfection where they would be able to go beyond the transmitted text, where they could reactivate the creative matrix that once produced the music they perform. If modern performers deny themselves the opportunity go beyond the text, it is because they appreciate the experience of historical restriction as an aesthetical experience, not because

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<sup>10</sup> Nichols 1990. See also Strohschneider 1997, and Cerquiglini 1989.



they claim historical truth for their performance. As the historian Valentin Groebner once remarked<sup>11</sup>: “The past is something we always have too little of.” Thus, reconstructive performances of pre-modern monophonic music will not diminish the value of the past by the use of simulations.

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<sup>11</sup> During a discussion with the author of the present paper.

