

Mensura and the Rhythm of Medieval Monodic Song

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At least up to c. 1350, monodic music played a larger and more important part in European life than polyphony. Gregorian chant is still a living force among us, but what of the vast body of non-liturgical song? From time to time one can hear performances of troubadour and trouvère songs, although there is an unfortunate tendency to perform only the same few anthologized pieces, while (for instance) the Italian *laude* and the Spanish *cantigas* remain, as far as modern audiences are concerned, mere names in the history books. A wider selection of monodic song ought to be available, in print and in performance; but any responsible attempt to achieve this end is made more difficult by the fact that the notation of the songs, in most cases, gives no indication of the rhythm.

For anyone whose interest in the songs is purely historical, the problem is quickly dealt with. He has merely to enumerate the various scholarly theories, add some comment, and present the would-be transcriber with a choice between several forms of modal rhythm on one hand, and free rhythm on the other. For him, historical scholarship has gone as far as it can with an insoluble problem, and it is useless to discuss the matter further: are not the histories of music written?

But anyone concerned with the culture of the past as a vital reality in the present will have a more serious, more intelligent, interest in the songs; he will insist on the importance of *experiencing* the songs through performance. He simply cannot accept that two quite different methods of transcribing a given song are equally good, and he may feel unable to commit himself to either. The modal theory has, from the start, been admittedly based on assumptions rather than facts, and it is impossible to apply the methods it recommends without at least some misgivings. For instance: even if it is an appropriate method of transcribing French and Provençal love songs, can it be used for, say, English songs, or religious, but non-liturgical, songs in Latin?

One is therefore very grateful to Dr. Hendrik Vanderwerf, who has recently reopened the question. In two articles, which are best read together (1965 and 1967), he considers the trouvère songs in light of the knowledge that many of them were orally transmitted, and points out that the variants which are found whenever a song is preserved in more than one source are not all to be written off as scribal errors in an attempt to establish a supposed "original version"; they are rather necessary consequences of the culture to which the songs belong, and must be taken into account in deciding what rhythm to adopt in transcription. On this point I am in total agreement with

Dr. Vanderwerf (and gratefully acknowledge the influence of his view on my own work) but his second major conclusion, that "the rhythm is free in two ways: first, accented and unaccented tones and syllables may come at irregular intervals, and second, there is not necessarily a simple relation between the duration of one tone and that of another" (1965: 67), cannot go unquestioned.

"Free rhythm" is an attractive expedient for the transcriber, who merely has to write a melody in stemless neumes, or to represent single notes as quarter notes and ligatures as groups of eighth notes; but it leaves the performer with an uneasy choice between a plainsong-like rendering and his own invented rhythm—in other words, between two methods which have equally slender chances of approximating what might have been a medieval singer's version. Even assuming that the choice of rhythm was originally left to the performer, it is, surely, an editor's duty to minimize discrepancies between medieval and modern choices, by choosing on behalf of the performer a rhythm likely to have been chosen by his medieval counterpart.

The choice need not, indeed must not, rely on strict principles, applied without variation to every song. Each song must be treated on its merits, considering the internal features of its notation and the external evidence of medieval notation in general. Nevertheless, the paleographic evidence is often inconclusive or contradictory, and the transcriber will need some guidance as to the broad lines on which to work. For this he will turn to Johannes de Grocheo, the only medieval writer to discuss secular monody. I have in preparation an article which deals at length with the paleographic side of the matter; at present I wish to make a semantic point about Grocheo's terminology, which seems to call for a reinterpretation of several previously known facts.

Passages from Grocheo have often been cited in support of the free rhythm theory. In a work which contains much of value on the subject of rhythm, we find the following, part of which is quoted with approval by Dr. Vanderwerf:

Indeed, when we recur once more to the most important theoretical source of the time, there is not a single allusion to either binary or ternary time in Grocheo's lengthy treatise. What this keen observer states is, on the contrary, that *musica mensurata comprises exclusively polyphonic works like conducts and motets but neither Gregorian chant nor any monophonic secular music*, and that the latter type, a *musica non ita praecise mensurata* is sung *totaliter ad libitum*.

Does this leave any doubt?

Monophonic music, far from being subject to the *modi*, had the privilege of free rhythm.

(Sachs 1953: 176. The italics are not mine.)

It is not easy to see how this statement could come from anyone who had read Grocheo attentively. His treatise is by no adult standards lengthy, and if he mentions neither duple nor triple time, it is because he is a post-

Franconian and does not aim to discuss notation and rhythm. As for "doubt," it is bound to arise, as soon as one sees that phrase *totaliter ad libitum* in its context. Here is the whole passage, which occurs in Grocheo's account of the various methods of classifying music:

Alii autem musicam dividunt in planam sive immensurabilem, et mensurabilem, per planam sive immensurabilem intelligentes ecclesiasticam, quae secundum Gregorium pluribus tonis determinatur. Per mensurabilem intellegunt illam quae ex diversis sonis simul mensuratis et sonatibus efficitur, sicut in conductibus et motetis.

Sed si per immensurabilem intellegunt musicam nullo modo mensuratum, immo totaliter ad libitum dictam, deficiunt, eo quod quaelibet operatio musicae et cuiuslibet artis debet illius artis regulis mensurari. Si autem per immensurabilem non ita praecise mensuratum intellegant, potest, ut videtur, ista divisio remanere.

(Others divide music into plain, or non-mensural, and mensural. By "plain or non-mensural" they mean plainchant, which is classified, following Gregory, in several modes. By "mensural" they mean music made from different notes measured and sounding at the same time, as they do in conductus and motets. But if by "non-mensural" they mean music that is in no way measured, still less performed completely freely, they are wrong, since any performance of music (or any art) must be measured by the rules of that art. If, however, they mean by "non-mensural," "not thus precisely measured" this division can evidently stand.)

(ed. Rohloff, p. 47)

It is not true that Grocheo lumps plainsong and secular monody together as opposed to polyphony. His tripartite division is more subtle: *musica simplex* (or *civilis*, or *vulgaris*), *musica composita* (*regularis*, *canonica*, or *mensurata*), and *musica ecclesiastica* (ed. Rohloff, p. 47). The second and third categories, polyphony and plainsong, do not directly concern us here, but it is worth noting that Grocheo implies that the liturgical sequences were performed in a regular meter, in contrast to the main body of the chant (ed. Rohloff, p. 65).

Several of his remarks about the music which falls under his first heading warn us that the phrase *non ita praecise mensuratum* does not mean what it at first appears to mean. The instrumental *ductia*, he says, is measured with appropriate percussion, *cum decenti percussione mensurata* (p. 52), since it is a dance form. Again, he tells us that the *cantus coronatus* was performed with instrumental accompaniment (p. 50). Both these facts are difficult to reconcile with "free rhythm" as it is generally understood, but a third fact turns the difficulty into an impossibility. Grocheo helpfully cites a number of French songs to illustrate what he has to say about monodic song forms (for the most part he comments on the effect various forms are intended to produce in the audience), and four of these songs are extant. Of the four, three are found in the Chansonnier Cangé, written in a notation which, although pre-Franconian as to ligatures, clearly uses longs and breves for single notes: *Ausi com l'unicorne*

(Spanke 1955: 2075), *Chanter m'estuet, quar ne m'en puis tenir* (1476), *Quant li rossignol* (1559), are all given as examples of *musica non ita praecise mensurata* (ed. Rohloff, p. 50; for the songs see Beck 1927: I, ff. 1, 22^v, 110^v and 117, and the transcriptions in Vol. II). The phrase can hardly be taken, therefore, as evidence for "free rhythm."

What, then, does Grocheo mean? Perhaps the best way of finding an answer is to consider the different senses of the word *mensura* as used by other theorists in the tradition to which Grocheo made so notable a contribution.

For Johannes de Garlandia, whose work was known to Grocheo, *musica mensurabilis* was *organum* (polyphony) which is, he says, a generic term for all mensural music:

Habito de ipsa plana musica, que immensurabilis dicitur, nunc est pre-sens intentio de ipsa mensurabili, que organum dicitur, quantum ad nos prout organum generale dicitur ad omnem mensurabilem musicam.

(Coussemaker 1864: I, 175)

Lambert, author of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Tractatus de Musica*, makes a similar distinction. His three categories of *musica mensurabilis* are all polyphonic forms: discant, hocket, and *organum* (Coussemaker I, 269). The distinction here is between plainsong and polyphony, for in common with all theorists earlier than Grocheo, neither Lambert nor Garlandia take account of secular monody; we cannot therefore conclude *ex silentio* that the rhythm of non-liturgical monodic songs was that of plainsong. Indeed, it is clear that the word *mensura* meant to the theorists something more than it means in modern scholarship. In his discussion of the rhythmic modes (Coussemaker I, 97-104), Garlandia describes the third mode, by its very nature mensural in our sense, as *ultra mensuram*. Nor is he alone in this; the *Discantus positio vulgaris* even states that any note of more than two beats or less than one is *ultra mensuram* (Coussemaker I, 94).

These statements, puzzling at first sight, suggest two conclusions: firstly, *musica mensurabilis*, in the medieval sense, is synonymous with polyphony, and secondly, that *mensura*, when it refers to rhythm, denotes a strict modal pattern; thus the author of the *de Musica Libellus* virtually identifies *mensura* with *modus*:

Modus in musica est debita mensuratio temporis, scilicet per longas et breves; vel aliter: modus est quidquid currit per debitam mensuram longarum notarum et brevium. Notandum quod quidam modus dicitur rectus; alius dicitur in ultra mensuram, qui scilicet excedit rectum modum sive rectam mensuram.

(Coussemaker I, 378)

The key words here are *rectam* and *debitam* (regular and proper), both of which qualify *mensuram*. It is not difficult to imagine a *mensura* which is not, in this extremely strict sense, regular; consequently rhythmic patterns which to the modern scholar are mensural could be regarded by the medieval

theorist as *immensurabilis*. When we take into account the additional fact that *mensura* does not necessarily refer to rhythm in every case, it will be realized that *mensura* has a strong qualitative, as well as a quantitative, force.

It is with this in mind that we must reconsider the significance of what Grocheo has to tell us. For him, the qualitative force of *mensura* is uppermost, and he uses the term in contexts which have nothing whatever to do with rhythm, as in his statement that the church (melodic) modes do not necessarily govern all music:

Cantus autem iste per toni regulas forte non vadit, nec per eas mensuratur.
(ed. Rohloff, p. 60)

We recall his statement, already quoted, that "any performance of music (or any art) must be measured by the rules of that art." Grocheo's synonyms for polyphony are, from this vantage point, extremely revealing: *musica regularis*, *canonica*, *mensurata*. The association of *mensura* with *regula*—both qualitative terms—is significant; the connotations of both words are propriety, reason, regularity, and order (cf. *rectam* and *debitam*). This important meaning of *mensura* is familiar outside musical scholarship, and we have a vernacular example in Langland's recurrent phrase "measurable hire," which means "proper, reasonable wages." This sense has not entirely been lost in modern English, for one can still hear, occasionally, something described as "all right in measure," which is practically synonymous with "within reason." To carry the analogy further, one might reflect that *regula* means both "rule" and "ruler," and that the chief use of a ruler in the Middle Ages was not to measure distances (quantitatively) but to ensure that the line drawn was straight, i.e. qualitatively.

The purpose behind Grocheo's threefold division of music is evident. Polyphony is *mensurata* because it is written in accordance with the rules of composition; it is regular, ordered, and logical. Plainsong, though *immensurabilis*, has its own kind of order, provided by the rules of the melodic modes or *toni*. Secular monody differs from both. Though measured (in the modern sense) as to rhythm, it is not written according to the rules of composition; hence it is neglected by most theorists who are concerned with codifying rules. Its rhythms need not conform to strict modal patterns. It is therefore *non ita praecise mensurata*, the *ita* possibly referring back to the rules of composition. Monodic song answers the description well; its frequent melodic sixths, its flexible structures, and relatively wide vocal compasses, are not characteristic of 13th-century polyphony. Rhythmically, too, the songs in mensural notation—those in the Chansonnier Cangé and the later additions in the MS *du Roi* (facsimile in Beck 1938), in both cases written about the same time as Grocheo's treatise—often depart from exact modal patterns. The evidence of Grocheo suggests that it is to these sources, rather than to modern theories of rhythm, that we should look for guidance in transcribing non-mensurally notated songs.

These observations, offered in the hope of provoking discussion, show that

there is no justification for "free rhythm" in Grocheo or any other medieval theorist; but we have no proof that it never existed. We must be content with the best explanation of the facts that can be devised. "Free rhythm" is not such an explanation. How can we accept that "the use of a rhythmically noncommittal notation in times when a metrical script was available indicates a free or optional rhythm" (Sachs 1953: 178), when examples abound of motets and conductus in non-mensural notation? Anonymous IV tells us that such pieces were read "by the understanding alone, by saying, 'I take this note as long, and that one as short' . . ." and on the evidence available there is no reason to suppose that a similar practice was not applied to monodic songs in non-mensural notation.

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Concerning the Measurability of Medieval Music

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I am very grateful to Neal Zaslaw for his invitation to add some commentary to J. E. Maddrell's article printed above. Understandably I am also very appreciative of Mr. Maddrell's acknowledgment of having been influenced by some of my writings, and I am happy to respond to some of his "observations, offered in the hope of provoking discussion." I welcome this opportunity especially since Mr. Maddrell directs attention to medieval theory, a source of information I have not touched upon in my publications in journals, although I have not at all ignored it in my research.

I am very much intrigued with Maddrell's evaluations of some of the medieval statements in relation to rhythm and meter in medieval music, but