

# Grocheo and The Measurability of Medieval Music: A Reply to Hendrik Vanderwerf

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The pleasure I had in discovering that Dr. Vanderwerf had found my article on *Mensura* (*Current Musicology* 10:64–68) worth replying to was somewhat diminished by the realization that he had not recognized its purpose. My article clearly reveals that I do not rely on treatises for my information on medieval music. The suggestion I made was that a scholar transcribing monody might need non-paleographic guidance in evaluating the often inconclusive evidence of musical notation. There can be no question of relying on “treatises” (in the plural) since Grocheo’s is the only work to discuss secular monody. Excerpts from other treatises were quoted because they had a bearing on my semantic discussion of the term *mensura*, except for my brief citation of Anonymous IV’s remarks on the interpretation of non-mensural notation. My conclusion was that, while there is no theoretical evidence for “free rhythm,” our methods of transcribing monody should take full account of the *Chansonnier Cangé* and the later additions to the *MS du Roi*—neither of which, I might add, supports a strictly modal method of transcription. The main significance of the article, however, was the proof that *mensura*, for Grocheo and other theorists, did not primarily mean quantitative measurement.

A full discussion of the *Chansonnier Cangé* would, therefore, have been hardly appropriate, even if it could have been contained within the limits of a single article. The fact that the *Cangé* scribe did use longs and breves for single notes, however erratically, is not to be explained away by saying that he was influenced by motet notation; nor does it argue for “free rhythm,” although it may imply the use of non-modal fixed rhythms.

As for the practical value of Grocheo’s treatise, it is hardly good scholarship to dismiss a source merely because it does not support one’s own view. The only evidence Dr. Vanderwerf adduces in support of his extraordinary opinion that Grocheo is of questionable value as an authority is a paragraph of generalization, vague in expression as in thought (“many treatises,” “in many instances,” “such treatises,” “learned authors,” but not a single concrete instance), about a distinction between *Musica* and music. If by “treatises about *Musica*” Dr. Vanderwerf means philosophical treatises in the Boethian tradition of *musica speculativa*, treatises that were not concerned with practical music, then one can only marvel at the eccentricity of a view which would associate Grocheo, of all theorists, with the speculative tradition—Grocheo, whose avowed intention was to avoid speculative theory and concentrate on the music of Paris as performed in his own day!

Dr. Vanderwerf questions my interpretation of passages from Grocheo dealing with the instrumental *ductia* and the *cantus coronatus*. I cited the former

because it is by nature a form in fixed rhythm, yet Grocheo included it with monodic song as “music not precisely measured”; the conclusion is either that Grocheo was a half-wit or that *mensuratum* has a meaning distinct from the modern sense of quantitative measurement. The passage about the *cantus coronatus* is hardly so obscure as Dr. Vanderwerf claims. The “crowning” can refer only to accompaniment or to ornamentation of the melody; I now think ornamentation by the singer to be more likely. In any case, it cannot mean “crowned in a contest,” since it would be the singer, not the song, that was crowned.

I am surprised that Dr. Vanderwerf should believe that Anonymous IV was referring to polyphony in free rhythm in the passage quoted at the end of my article. Anonymous IV in this section of his treatise is preoccupied with methods of reading ligatures and single notes, and it is obvious from the context, to say nothing of his use of such mensural terms as “cum proprietate” and “cum perfectione,” that he has regular rhythms in mind. Besides, any system which deduced rhythm from the ligatures must have had fixed rhythms. I am equally surprised that Dr. Vanderwerf should feel that if all the trouvère songs were sung in fixed rhythm, some theorist “would have amply described it.” I regard this as an *argumentum ex silentio*, one of the classic errors in logic.

Perhaps Dr. Vanderwerf will publish the evidence on which he bases his view that in an ideal performance of a song the text would have “the undivided attention of performer and listener alike,” whereas the melody would be only “simple and unobtrusive.” Ideal from what point of view? And is one justified in assuming that medieval taste in the relation of text to music was that of any other period—the 16th century, for example, or the 19th?

Happily, I can welcome at least the spirit of Dr. Vanderwerf’s closing remarks on the importance of ethnological evidence, which has thus far not received sufficient attention. The real question, after all, is not which kind of evidence—paleographic, theoretical, ethnological—should carry the most weight, but how one can best use all three kinds together.