



How to use a musical score

How do scores work?

Professor David Rowland:

What are the limitations of that notation?

Susan Rankin:

Well quite simply, if you don't know how to read it before you start, you can't read it. You've got to actually know what the melody is. It's a notation which belongs within a musical culture which is mainly dependent on the transfer of musical ideas through singing and through memory. And the notation is really only a support to that situation. So when you see the notation, you are reminded of what the melodic shape is. Of course, the other limitation is that this notation doesn't have precise rhythmic measurement in it. This isn't quite as difficult as it might first seem because the rhythm comes from the way the text is shaped, from the natural accentuation of the text.

And there are also subtleties of rhythmic expression actually notated in the music. So for example, our little line across the top of a neume means sing this note a little bit longer.

Eventually people decided that it was much too difficult to remember all these melodies all the time. It took 10 years for a cantor to learn all the melodies of the liturgical chant. So in the early 11th century, the idea emerged that pitch could be notated in a more exact way. And we find manuscripts which have lines, the stave, which show the exact pictures of the individual notes. Now once this stave notation had been invented, it took a cantor only three years to learn. So it really revolutionised musical education.

Professor David Rowland:

And does that notation tell us anything about the rhythm?

Susan Rankin:

No. It tells us no more about the rhythm than the older pneumatic notation told us. But in fact, as long as people were singing that kind of music, there was no problem. Because they knew what the rhythm was, and they could read the text. And they could understand the accentuation, and so on. But when the musical culture developed in a different way and composers wanted to compose music-- and for singers to sing it-- there was much more sophisticated and interlocking in a rhythmic sense. Then they really needed a rhythmic notation.

Professor David Rowland:

So where did that development take place?

Susan Rankin:

Well, that takes us to Paris and to the building of Notre Dame, which was begun in 1160-- the same building that we have today. And this was such a high, large building that it had a really new kind of acoustic, and the singers this could really do something exciting with this musically.

This is where we find the first great repertory of polyphony-- that is music that involves people singing different things at the same time. And in this situation, the composers of the music they sang really wanted to set their music down in precise ways. And when they had several voices singing different things and they want to get the rhythmic integration of those voices, they needed a much more precise way of notating rhythm. And we have here examples of note shapes and groups of notes grouped into what we call ligatures-- which is, in its own way, a kind of precise rhythmic notation. And in fact, England is very important in this story.

We have, in fact, in the British Library a manuscript-- very well-known-- from Reading Abbey, notated in the 13th century. And this manuscript has polyphonic notation for several pieces and also the famous "Sumer Canon"-- "Sumer Is Icumen In".

Here you can see how this notation works very simply, because you can see long notes-- that is square notes with a tail down on the right-hand side-- and short notes. That is notes written slightly sideways. And the long notes are twice as long as the short notes so that the music simply goes da-da-da-da. So this is actually very easy to see.