

# An Introduction to Melodic Reconstruction

## O stelliferi conditor orbis (I:5) – VAT 3363

*O stelliferi conditor orbis* is the fifth poem in the first book of the *Consolation of Philosophy* (for text and English translation, click [here](#)). It opens as a hymn sung by Boethius in praise of the creator of the starry orb who harmoniously orders the universe (lines 1-24), but the tone changes around the mid-point to a complaint about Fortune governing human affairs (lines 25-48), closing with a prayer to the creator to intervene and establish divine law on earth (lines 42-48).

A melody was recorded for *O stelliferi* in an early ninth-century copy of the *Consolation* now held in the Biblioteca Apostolica in the Vatican (Vat lat. 3363). The musical notation takes the form of signs known as neumes added between the lines of the text, whose axis and morphology indicate that they were added in France, most likely in the region of the Loire valley, where the manuscript was originally copied.

The musical notation conveys information about melodic direction through the formation of individual signs, their disposition on the page, and additional letters. Signs are constructed from a number of basic elements whose meaning is established by comparison to similar neume scripts with securely reconstructable repertoires. Early neumed melodies are typically read alongside manuscripts copied from the eleventh century onwards, a number of which indicate pitch through a consistent relative heighting of neumes across the page, and some of which employ staff lines marking the upper note of the semitone step (*c* and *f*). A particularly useful guide is provided by the eleventh-century Montpellier codex, which transmits chants notated in both French neumatic notation and alphabetic notation, thereby providing a clear indication of the melodic signification of most neumes (see, further, the bibliography provided in [Reading Neumes](#) and especially Hiley, *Western Plainchant*, 341-5).

The first line of *O stelliferi* in VAT 3363 may be taken by way of introduction to the principles involved in reading early neumatic notation – the following description is best read in conjunction with the image on fol. VI<sup>v</sup>, which may be viewed [here](#). The dots and dashes placed over the opening two words, *O stelliferi*, indicate single pitches. Two notes descending are represented either by vertically aligned dots (as at the last syllable of *stelliferi*) or by a forward-leaning *n* shape (as found on the second syllable of *conditor*). Two notes ascending are signalled by a tick shape with a horizontal first stroke (as over the first and third syllables of *conditor*). More extended melodic movements are created from these basic elements; for example, the dash followed by a *n* shape on the second syllable of *caelum* outlines a low-high-low melodic contour. The following neume over the first syllable of *turbine* is a dash followed by a curved tick shape that curls round to end in a *n* shape signifying low-low-high-low.

The placement of individual signs is not regulated consistently across the page; instead, the neumes are for the most part placed broadly on a level with each other

within the available space between the text lines. Even so, the more compact signs for single notes are at times placed at clearly differentiated heights, as over the first three syllables of *O stelliferi* and *Rapido caelum*. The care taken to distinguish the heighting of the single-note signs implies an intent to signal relative pitch through disposition.

A number of lightly drawn letters were added alongside the neumes. There is a faintly drawn *s*, which indicates *sursum* ('upwards' or 'on high'), placed before the beginning of line 2 (*Qui perpetuo...*). The immediately following slightly higher mark is less clear but seems to be *l* for *levate* ('raised up'). The intent appears to be to indicate that the second line begins at a relatively high pitch in relation to the previous line. At the beginning of the third line (*Rapido...*) there is a *q* indicating *equaliter* ('equally' or 'at the same pitch'), and the same sign is added before the neume over the fourth syllable (*caelum*). The initial *q* in this line appears to serve the function noted above of indicating relative pitch at the beginning of a new line. The second *q* seemingly clarifies pitch level at a point where a neume had to be drawn at a lower height than the previous one to avoid running into the words written on the line above. At the opening of the poem there are faint traces of what may be a *h*, standing for *humilis* ('low'). If this is correct, then an indication is being given to begin in a low register before the higher register that opens the second line. The additional letters therefore provide a series of cues about relative pitch, clarifying pitch relations especially between lines when melodic continuity and to some extent relative heighting of signs is interrupted by a new beginning in the poetic text.

As has been seen, a substantial amount of information about melodic contour is conveyed by the notation, but reconstruction can proceed only once a mode has been established. In this case, the neumes of lines 1 and 3 are instructive in tracing similar melodic contours in the sequence of signs and their disposition. In particular, the gapped rise at the opening (*O stelliferi*) and the sequence of two-note rises and falls after the caesura of the first line (*conditor orbis*) brings to mind elaborate formulae used for rendering psalms. Tone 8 as recorded in a ninth-century treatise on Office psalmody (*Commemoratio brevis de tonis et psalmis modulandis* or *A Brief Review of the Modes and Psalm Singing*) is especially close and is taken as a guide in the reconstruction below.<sup>[1]</sup>

Hints about how the melody continues beyond the opening line are provided by the letter *s* and perhaps *l*, implying that the melody moves into a higher register. The simplest solution is to begin the line a tone higher on *d* and then follow the implications through within the normal expectations of a melody with a G final, thus exploring *d-e-f* as a secondary area. Further guidance in realising the cadence at the end of line 2 is provided by the *q* for *equaliter* (the same pitch) that precedes line 3. The neumes for the intonation in line 3 follow the same pattern as line 1; the melody may be assumed to begin in a similar way on G. Working backwards from this point, line 2 must end on a G to make sense of the *q* sign. With this goal in mind, the number of options in descending from the upper tetrachord of the mode back to the final for the cadence to line 2 is limited.

The similarity in the disposition of neumes in line 3 to line 1 is supported by the insertion of a *q* before the two-note rise on the fourth syllable, which clarifies that the melody remains on the local recitation tone despite a relatively low placement of the

neume due to a lack of space. In the second half of line 3 (*turbine versas*), decisions need to be made in the absence of further guidance from significant letters. Two assumptions may be made: first, that the melody cadences on the final; secondly, that the melody proceeds without significant changes of register that might otherwise have been signalled by significant letters. The realization given for the final half-line thus connects the previous local centre of *c* to common cadential formulae for mode 7.

Tone 8  
CB

*h [?]*

O stel - li - fe - ri con - di - tor or - bis,

*sl*

qui per - pe - tu - o ni - xus so - li - o

*q*

ra - pi - do cae - lum tur - bi - ne ver - sas

It is important to note that the reconstructed melody could be realized differently in several places. What is presented is a hypothetical reconstruction since the mode, intonations, and cadences provide a framework for realization, within which a number of solutions remain possible.

Having reconstructed a melody for the opening three lines, questions remain about how to continue. The poem comprises forty-eight stichic lines, i.e. poetic lines that are not organized into strophes but proceed in series. The simplest solution is to parse the whole into eighteen strophes of three lines. Half of the main clauses accord with a division of the whole into three-line strophes; that is, 5 out of 10 sense units or *sententia* close at the end of a strophe. The fact that strophic return and sense units are not aligned is not particularly unusual in strophic song repertoires; indeed, it could be said that the onus falls on the performer and listener to make sense of the text across the patterns of melodic return. Syntactical division is most easily recognised by performers through punctuation, which in the versions presented here follows Moreschini's edition since the practice in individual manuscripts is inconsistent.

A second issue to be faced in continuation is how to handle the variation in syllable count per line. The background of the proposed melody in psalmic recitation provides flexibility, allowing tones to be inserted or deleted with relative ease around local recitation tones. At the opening of the second line, for example, the repeated tone can simply be omitted where there is one fewer syllable in the line. At other places, such as those marked with a note in brackets, an additional pitch on the local recitation tone can be inserted to allow extra syllables to be delivered. Elsewhere, repetition of a pitch within the reconstructed melody has been taken as an occasion to insert an extra syllable where required, i.e. the repetition of *c* in line 3 of the strophe. In addition, account needs to be taken of rhetorical devices; in particular, a decision needs to be made at the only half-line in the poem (line 36), where Boethius complains about the

persecution of the just by evil men. Rather than smooth over the early end of the strophe, in the version given here the half line is left on the secondary centre of *c* at what would have been the caesura of the third line. The effect is intentionally dramatic: the sentence and strophe closes, but the melody and the voice is left hanging on an unresolved tone.

The reconstruction of the whole provided below is divided into two parts, corresponding to the division between praise and complaint, for ease of reading.

[O stelliferi Parts I & II VAT 3363](#)

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[1] Terence Bailey (ed. and trans.) *Commemoratio brevis de tonis et psalmis modulandis: Introduction, Critical Edition, Translation*, Ottawa, 1979, p. 45 (Ex. 16). Psalm tones 2 and 8 are equivalent in design; in this case, the continuation of the melody for *O stelliferi* in line 2 suggests a mode with a G final.