

## How to Sing a 1000-year-Old Song

You have on the example sheet a detail taken from a single leaf from a manuscript that is nearly 1000 years old. The signs that you can see added above the words are a medieval form of musical notation known as ‘neumes’. Using this worksheet, you will learn how to read these shapes and recreate for yourself a 1000-year-old song.

The song that you are about to reconstruct comes from one of the most widely read books of the Middle Ages. *On the Consolation of Philosophy* was written in the sixth century by Boethius, a prominent politician and scholar who was thrown into prison on false charges of conspiring against the Emperor. In this semi-autobiographical work, Boethius enters into dialogue with Philosophia (Lady Philosophy), who joins him in his cell and seeks to restore him to his rightful mind by reasoning with him in prose passages and engaging him in thirty-nine songs presented in the text as interspersed poems. Over the course of five books they discuss fortune, free will and the ways of God, during which Boethius gradually regains his composure.



Boethius and Philosophia  
Utrecht, University Library  
MS 1335, f. 178bis v. (1470)

### RECONSTRUCTION




The image on the example sheet is extracted from a mid eleventh-century manuscript leaf that used to belong to a collection of Latin songs now known as the Cambridge Songs (the full leaf, Cambridge, University Library Gg. V. 35, fol. 442 recto, can be viewed on the project [website](#)). This leaf, which was copied at the abbey of St Augustine’s Canterbury shortly before the Norman conquest, contains the poems alone from Boethius’ *On the Consolation of Philosophy*. An early form of musical notation known as ‘neumes’ was added only to the poems copied on the front side of the surviving leaf. Neumes such as these were added to over thirty surviving manuscript copies of *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, dating from the ninth through to the eleventh centuries, mainly at abbeys and cathedral schools famed for their learning.

What can we know about the music on this leaf? At first sight, not much. The neumes are a mnemonic form of notation that works by reminding the reader of a melody they already know. The signs do this by conveying information about overall melodic contour: its ups and downs broadly correspond to the shape of the signs on the page. As the oral traditions that supported these melodies have died out, we might think that the melodies are lost forever. But the notations also contain a series of clues: by examining each set of signs closely, by spotting patterns, by trying out solutions and by applying what we know about the wider musical context, we can gather enough information to attempt reconstruction.

Let’s focus on a single example. The song given on the example sheet is *Quisquis composito*, the fourth song in book 1. This song is sung by Philosophia, encouraging Boethius to master his emotions in order to begin philosophical reflection.

The musical signs or neumes added above the text provide a series of clues:

- 1) *all the signs used indicate one note only - this is a simple melody such as used for hymns;*
- 2) *there are three different signs with distinct meanings;*

	a relatively high note in the scale – NB: the longer the extension upwards, the higher the pitch in relation to those around it
	a relatively low note in the scale
	the upper step at the semitone step in the scale – in this case 'F'

- 3) *the disposition of the signs on the page indicates their relative pitch height: higher notes in the space above the text are generally higher in the scale, lower notes are usually lower, and signs placed at an equal height imply equivalent pitches; but look out for descending strokes from the text line above disrupting the heighting and appearance of signs!*
- 4) *look out for patterns of repetition in the melody, e.g. the neumes at the openings of lines 2 and 3. Can you see other repeating patterns?*  
A set of pitches has been selected for you, i.e. a scale or 'mode' (for further information on modes, it is best to consult a respected source such as *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*). This is one of eight modes used in the Middle Ages and was known as mode 1: it is sometimes also called the 'Dorian' mode or the authentic mode on D. Three initial pitches are given and in working out your melody you are encouraged to follow stylistic conventions for simple melodies of the time, so:
- 5) *try not to exceed the range C to A;*
- 6) *try to finish poetic lines on appropriately strong notes: D (the 'final', which is usually the last note and has a role in some respects similar to the tonic in modern scales) is the most emphatic note to finish on, followed by A, G and lastly C.*

Your task is to follow the rules summarized above and create a melody for the given poem on the example sheet. Write out the melody on the staves if you are familiar with modern musical notation. Since there is no indication about rhythm in these neumes, you may choose to record your melody in a rhythmically neutral fashion by writing note heads without stems. Alternatively, you may prefer to write out the letter names of notes above the staves.

As you work out the melody, try singing it through to yourself. Are there other options within the rules provided? Do alternatives sound better or worse? Can you say why? When you are content with your version, you might like to compare it with ours as given on the Solutions sheet. You can also hear a version on Spotify (simply search for 'Quisquis composito') and hear an extract in a [video](#) on our website, in which Hanna Marti also explains why she sings the song to a harp accompaniment (song from 1:54 onwards).

## FURTHER QUESTIONS

1. The reconstruction that you undertook can be thought of as a kind of musical archaeology, reconstructing lost songs from fragmentary evidence much as someone might reconstruct a lost instrument or items of clothing from pieces long buried in the ground. *What are the pros and cons of reconstructing music of the past in this way?*

In considering this question, you might like to read about the two very different attempts to reconstruct the Sutton Hoo lyre now prominently displayed in the British Museum, as described in this [article](#). You may also be interested in this [report](#) on reconstruction techniques employed by the harpist-singer Benjamin Bagby as part of his attempt to recreate the sounds of Icelandic Edda

2. *How much we can trust reconstructions as historical evidence?*

This apparently simple question prompts many others about what we are trying to do in any reconstruction of music of the past. A first set of questions might focus on what is being reconstructed. Are we trying to reconstruct a work or a performance? Are we trying to reconstruct an ideal object or what happened at the time? What if historical performances were themselves very different from each other? Are we interested in what people thought and experienced at the time or what we might think and experience now? Do attempts at historical reconstruction say more about us than the music of the past?

A second set of questions might focus on issues of ‘trust’ and ‘historical evidence’. What are the ethics of reconstruction? What do we owe to listeners in making claims for the historical accuracy of reconstructions? More broadly, how might we balance aesthetic and historical issues in thinking about music history? Does music sounding in the present bear witness to the past? Do we need music history in order fully to appreciate performances of past music?

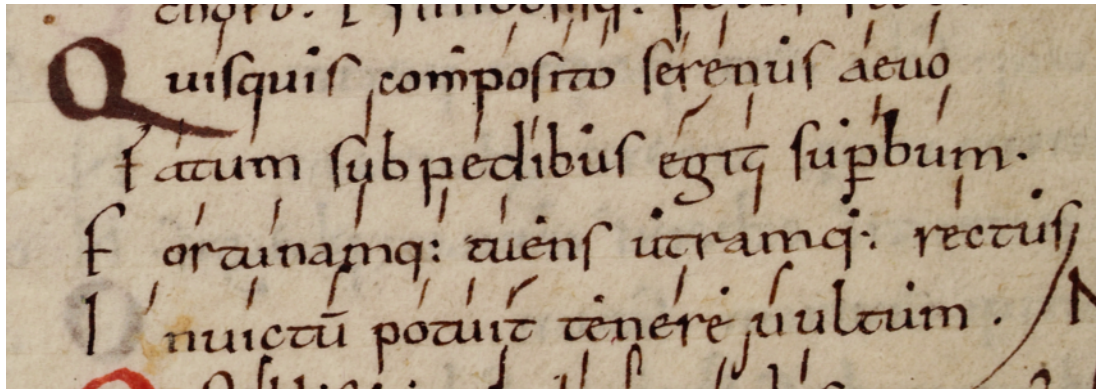
For reflection on some these issues in relation to Boethian songs in particular, see my [article](#) on the reconstruction process, especially the closing pages (pp. 291-293). For broader reflection on questions of historical authenticity and the types of claims made for historical performance practice, try this [article](#) by Richard Taruskin on the limits of authenticity.

## FURTHER READING

A range of further information about lost Boethian songs can be found on the project [website](#), which includes introductions to all aspects including manuscript images, reconstructions, explanatory videos and much more.

For a concise and approachable introduction to Early Music that features medieval music, have a look at Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Early Music: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2011) (available on Google books). To learn more about early forms of notation, consult Thomas Forrest Kelly, *Capturing Music: The Sound of Notation* (W. W. Norton, 2015). For an introduction to debates about authenticity and historical performance, try dipping into the essays collected together in Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music Performance* (OUP, 1995), and the response in John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (CUP, 2002).

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Quisquis composito serenius aevo  
 Fatum sub pedibus egit superbum,  
 Fortunamque tuens utramque rectus  
 Invictum potuit tenere vultum,

He who has ground proud fate beneath his heel  
 Calm in his well-ordered life  
 And has looked in the face good and ill fortune  
 Still able to keep erect his unconquered head,

Mode 1

Use only the pitches C to A for this exercise.