

Conclusion

(Fazit translated by Rob C. Wegman)

Semi-mensural notation appears as a brief phenomenon towards the end of the thirteenth century. Modern scholarship has viewed it as a transitional type of notation between the old ‘rhythmless’ square notation, on the one hand, and on the other, the full-blown mensural notation which measures all tone durations in mathematical terms, and which marks the beginning of our modern notation. Semi-mensural notation introduces a distinction between long and short (*longa* and *brevis*) for *simplices* (single notes carrying one syllable each), but for ligatures (multiple-note figures corresponding to one syllable) it retains for the most part the signs of ‘rhythmless’ square notation.

Semi-mensural notation has been viewed almost exclusively through ‘modal eye-glasses’, and from this perspective has tended to be qualified as “inconsistent,” undependable and error-prone. In the successions of *longae* (L) and *breves* (B), the principal focus of inquiry has been the patterns of the six rhythmic modes, which are the foundation of the system of contemporaneous polyphony. For example, the pattern BL BL indicates the second mode, LBB LBB the third. Yet in monophonic song the results of this approach turn out to be confusing. Some of the tunes in semi-mensural notation do indeed show patterns of this kind, though with extensive irregularities, but others do not show them at all. When a modal pattern is discernible, the song will typically be classified among the “mensurally” notated ones. But when there is no hint of regularity in the *longa/brevis* distributions, then the piece remains in an undefined grey zone [2 b, c].

Discernibility is a subjective criterion, however, and percentages vary considerably in the scholarly literature. In the most important semi-mensurally notated manuscript, the chansonnier Cangé (*trouvère* manuscript *O*), Hans Tischler identifies 40% of the melodies as recognizably “mensural,” whereas other scholars discern only 30%, 18%, or “very few” pieces of this kind – in any case, a minority [2 d].

Still, from 1907 on, the theory of “modal interpretation” became predominant. According to this interpretation all medieval songs – even those in ‘rhythmless’ notation – are conceived in one or another of the modes or (exceptionally) contain a mixture of two or three modes [2 b]. A competing theory appeared in the 1960s, which held that pieces in mensural-modal notation are

actually rare exceptions. As a rule, the melodies were now to be interpreted as “free-declamatory”, without metric structure. To this day the two theories stand irreconcilably opposed. Both invoke the problematic evidence of semi-mensural notation. Meanwhile the problem of rhythm has come to be regarded as unsolvable [2 c].

However, when we consider the melodies in *O* without ‘modal eye-glasses’, new avenues appear to open up. Proceeding from a more precise understanding of Hendrik van der Werf’s definition (1967), we regard as semi-mensural all monophonic pieces that incorporate the longa/brevis distinction into the system of traditional square notation; occasionally one also encounters other mensural signs [2 d]. Since the 334 monophonic melodies in *O* always distinguish between longa and brevis, without exception, they all qualify as semi-mensural. Certainly the notator had an effortless command of the mensural system of rules; we can tell this from the only polyphonic piece in the chansonnier, a two-voice motet. The irregularities in the monophonic melodies do not therefore require us to assume incompetence on his part. Rather, they raise the all-important question of his intentions [3 b].

The song *Quant li rossignols jolis* offers fundamental insights in this regard. It represents a rare case of triple semi-mensural transmission of a melody (two different versions in *O*, and a contrafact in *V II*) [3 a–c]. It is immediately apparent from a comparison that the notators did not, in the first instance, intend to use the longa/brevis distinction as a means to clarify the metrical structure or one of the modes. In fact, the placement of L and B seems to follow the principle of a simple “tone-duration function”. L and B distinguish syllables in each version that are either ‘more long than short’ or ‘more short than long’ [4 b].

On the other hand, metrical patterns (that is, two or more equal L/B combinations in succession) are rare. They tend to appear mostly as ‘accidental’ by-products of the tone-duration function. Notators evidently treated the “metric function” (which to modern scholarship has appeared of sole importance) as subsidiary, surely because contemporaries knew the principles and finesses of metric organisation from practice anyway. In *Quant li rossignols jolis* different patterns appear in an irregular mixture, one that is dependent on the tone-duration function. This mixture contains, besides LB-, BL- and LL-patterns, also the BB-pattern which is unknown in polyphony. All four patterns are quantitative two-syllable verse feet; the piece thus operates in a continuum of ‘indifferent’ two-syllable feet [5 c].

The three lais in *O* yield further insights. One might expect that the sparsely ornamented melodies of this rhythmically tight genre would be un-

ambiguously notated in the rhythmic modes. Yet the only piece of which this is true is Lai 3 (first mode). In Lai 1 there appear, beside the basic LB meter (first mode), a number of deviating verse feet, including once again BB. Lai 2 alternates between the basic meters BBB and LBB (sixth and third modes); among the deviating feet we encounter LBL and BLB, which are unknown in the polyphonic mode system [6 a–d].

What is the relationship between semi-mensural notation and the six modes of polyphony? Both phenomena owe their existence to the reception of ancient quantitative grammar, which began in France around 1200. Two teaching manuals were particularly influential in this regard. Eberhard of Béthune described the four two-syllable and the eight three-syllable verse feet, along with their names, in his *Graecismus*: LB (trochee), BL (iamb), LL (spondee), BB (pyrrhic), and so forth. The longs and breves have the relationship 2:1. From these twelve verse feet, the Parisian *magister* Alexander de Villa-Dei selected the most important six. In the *Doctrinale*, his manual for the elementary education of *pueri*, he confined the discussion to LB, BL and LL as well as LBB, BBL and BBB [7 a, aa].

The architects of Parisian polyphony adapted these six verse feet for musical purposes, and remodeled them into the system of the six rhythmic modes. The ‘odd’ metric feet (LB, BL and BBB) retained their triple nature in polyphony. The ‘even’ grammatical four-tempora feet (LL, LBB and BBL) were extended to six-tempora ones (L^3L^3 , L^3BL^2 and BL^2L^3), so as to allow combinations in polyphony. Semi-mensural notation, on the other hand, stands in a direct relationship to grammar: the tone-duration function allows all twelve verse feet to be expressed in musical notation. There is no need for complicated extensions, since L and B are read more broadly as ‘long rather than short’ and ‘short rather than long’ [7 a, cc].

That is why semi-mensural notation has a code of its own, independent of the system of the modes. It is not surprising that the written appearance of semi-mensural patterns occasionally resembles that of modal notation, as the latter was derived from the six most frequently occurring verse feet in grammar. Yet the numerous deviations and variants are a characteristic of monophony. There is thus no justification for dismissing semi-mensural versions as incompetent or even failed attempts at notating songs according to mensural rules. The ‘hunt for modal patterns’ proceeded from invalid premises [7 a, dd].

By casting aside those premises, we have been able to arrive at findings that could serve as the basis for a ‘cartography’ of the semi-mensural spectrum [7 b]. Between pieces that have continuous patterns and those that have

no patterns at all, the chansonnier *O* presents a broad middle field with ‘indifferent’ meters and two-three-mixtures. Two things turn out to be helpful in the analysis, especially when the L/B distribution gives only unsatisfactory information about verse feet. The first is the close consideration of distinguishing strokes, which tend to be carefully placed [7 b, aa]. The second is a precise knowledge of the movable Romance speech/song accent (*accent flottant*) [5 a] and its corrective through ‘longwords’ [5 b].

Melodies of the *cantilena* type are mostly notated in clear patterns. Yet songs of the *cantus* type represent a more complicated case. In these the notator often tends to write only few longas. The examples analysed so far permit the conclusion that he was not primarily concerned with the notational fixation of one version, but rather with the musician’s freedom to sing different declamatory renditions. Declamation on the basis of verse feet (that is, not “free declamation” in the sense of Van der Werf) involves spontaneous metrical mixtures and variants that have their part in the singer’s phrasing (*Timing*). From a modern perspective, the semi-mensural notation in pieces of this kind could well appear deficient. Yet it is just this finding which delivers the decisive clue: the ‘unclear’ notation indicates a *cantus* type with ample declamatory room and variable verse feet [7 b, ee–ff].

Up to now we have spoken only of the macro-rhythmic level of syllable durations, verse feet, and metrical patterns. It was the peculiar innovation of semi-mensural notation that it implanted that level in the notation of monophonic songs, by means of the L/B differentiation of the simplex. But why did the consummately professional notator of *O* hold on to traditional ‘rhythmless’ ligatures on the micro-rhythmic level? Although he had a precise working knowledge of the new mensural figures, he still used the traditional signs in more than 97% of the cases. Yet upon closer analysis it is apparent that these ligatures are by no means ‘rhythmless’. They indicate relative tone durations with precision, and even distinguish between three ‘descending speeds’ – without requiring mathematical-proportional measurement [Anhang 2].

In terms of their graphic appearance, all ligatures are generated and ordered according to a standardized system. We are effectively dealing with a separate branch of chant notation, which reveals several specific features, and may be called ‘classical thirteenth-century song notation’. The micro-rhythmic relationships in duration can be recreated in “structural transcription” [id.].

The understanding of classical ligatures is a precondition for macro-rhythmic analyses. None of these multiple-note figures – which never exceed seven tones – ‘breaks’ the value of the syllable and the verse foot. The liga-

tures can stand for a ‘brevis’ or a ‘longa’ (at most ‘L³’), but never imply ‘melismatic’ over-extension. The melodies reveal themselves rather as ‘ornamented syllabic’, and in this way they make possible the determination of their metric architecture [id., b].

The few mensural ligatures in *O* (they point towards a pre-Franconian stage) are found predominantly in rhythmically tight pieces – never exclusively so (except in the motet), but always in connection with traditional (classic) ligatures [7 c]. The advantage of the latter for monophonic songs lies precisely in their non-measured nature. They need not begin ‘on the beat’, and are flexible as to the values of their respective syllables. This makes them particularly suited for melodies whose rhythm is less tight; classical ligatures can be integrated more freely in the *Timing* of declamatory shaping [6 d].

Let us take our leave of the monolithic theories of thirteenth-century rhythm! The semi-mensural findings firmly contradict them [cf. 4 c]:

The “modal interpretation” projects the rhythms of polyphony on monophonic song. In actual fact semi-mensural notation does not represent modes, but diverse grammatical verse feet whose tone durations have the virtue of being approximate. Only a minority of the songs look like they might involve modes, though their patterns tend to be fragmentary and are interspersed with irregular verse feet. To impose the uniformity and exactitude of modal rhythm upon all semi-mensural melodies is problematic already from a methodological standpoint, and requires innumerable ‘corrections’ in transcription. Imposing such uniformity and exactitude even upon melodies with ‘rhythmless’ notation is a further projection, unprompted and unwarranted by the available evidence. The only bottomline consensus with the semi-mensural findings is the fundamental assumption of this theory that monophonic song melodies are organized according to verse feet, and that in this context the musical accent may shift relative to the speech accent (*accent flottant*).

Van der Werf’s “free-declamatory” theory projects a neo-Gregorian aesthetic on monophonic song. It denies verse feet and *accents flottants*, and ignores the differences between strophic song and Gregorian prose. The euphemism “free” means that all tones should have more or less equal duration (equalism). This postulate is irreconcilable with the hundreds of semi-mensurally notated melodies which distinguish invariably between longas and breves. It is also inconsistent with insights regarding the micro-rhythm of classic ligatures. Yet the theory also has notable strengths, particularly the turn to textual rhythm and the notion of declamation. No less valuable is its removal of the constraints of measured and bar-lined modern notation. Yet

neutral transcription is not the *ultima ratio*. It cannot convey micro-rhythm, and the identically shaped black note-heads carry the visual implication of equalism.

The isosyllabic ‘sister theory’, according to which it is not the tones, but rather the syllables that should have equal duration, is likewise contradicted by the longa/brevis differentiation in semi-mensural notation.

This book has offered a different approach. Our principal objective was not a monolithic comprehensive interpretation. Rather, we started out with single analyses, from which we were able to deduce more general conclusions, each varying according to the group of cases. Can these conclusions also be applied to songs in ‘rhythmless’ notation? Van der Werf postulated a “new style” which manifested itself in semi-mensural versions, and had allegedly been imposed on older melodies. What he referred to was modal-mensural rhythm. His objections were directed against the “modal interpretation”, yet they reveal themselves as invalid for the same reasons as that interpretation itself (see above). The notators draw concrete rhythmic portraits of single song versions that do not imply a normalized scheme. Versions in ‘rhythmless’ notation had simply refrained from indications of syllable duration; this dimension becomes visually apparent with the semi-mensural L/B distinction [4 c].

In soloistic song performance one undoubtedly sang one syllable shorter and another longer, even before the reception of ancient grammar made the quantities of verse feet an object of school studies. That is why the semi-mensural findings do not indicate a “new style”. On the contrary: this notation is ‘conservative’ insofar as it refuses the straitjacket of the measure. It does so macro-rhythmically through L/B durations that are approximate, and micro-rhythmically through the retention of the old ligatures. On both levels mathematical quantification of time is avoided in favor of a ‘breathing’, text-oriented rhythm. This notation is not semi-mensural so much as anti-mensural; it represents the last stronghold in the defense of old oral freedoms.

With the combination of the two levels, monophonic song rhythm and meter step onto the stage of notational history in concrete singing versions – for the first and also the last time. This is why semi-mensural versions are, as far as rhythm is concerned, the most valuable witnesses to the actual performance practice of the thirteenth century. Like most other *trouvère* manuscripts, *O* contains many songs which reach back into the ‘golden age’, a repertory that will soon disappear from the transmission. What we are able to transfer to the versions in ‘rhythmless’ notation are not their individual portraits so much as their group profiles: is it twos that are represented, threes, mixtures, upbeat?

Are the patterns clear, fragmentary, indifferent or not in evidence? Which genre, which type of song is manifest in each profile? In this book we have analysed only thirty songs from *O*, less than one-tenth of a single manuscript. However, the groups that emerged in the chapter “Patterns” [7 b] could be helpful by serving as orientation for further studies which are likely to add new aspects to the cartography of the song spectrum. As our experience has shown, one should always reckon with surprises.

The microscope-level analyses in this book are pursued not just with notational history as an aim in itself. Rather, it is hoped that our sound image of medieval song will change, perhaps even decisively, when the results are applied to modern performance practice.

In the end, the semi-mensural phase lasted no more than two or three decades. Then the paradigm changed forever. By 1300, the dominance of the mensura had extended to the monophonic song, and quickly pushed it to the edge of scriptuality. For us, every semi-mensurally notated piece is a message in a bottle, promising valuable new information. Are we curious enough to open it?