

# An assessment of the Notre Dame repertory

David Collins

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## 1 Introduction & Background

Twelfth-century Paris was an important social and political arena. As Marion Gushee explains, it ‘was deep in the process of becoming the international capital of Europe’ [Gushee, 1990, p. 157]. As an important centre of scholarly learning—both theological, and in the humanities—Paris attracted fine intellects from many regions. Craig Wright suggests that the significance of Paris in musical history pertains not only to the ‘great aesthetic value of Parisian music’, but also to the ‘favored position that Paris then enjoyed’ [Wright, 1989, p. 235].

Amongst the most valuable legacies of this vibrant culture, of course, was the music. Aspects of this repertory which I will attempt to discuss include: 1. sources of information (Anonymous IV, etc.); 2. note-against-note (discant) vs. melismatic chants (organum); 3. the *Magnus Liber Organi*; and 4. the rhythmic modes, and deviations from these.

### 1.1 Precedents to the Notre Dame repertory

The Notre Dame repertory merits comparison with that music which survives from the region of Aquitaine from around this period. Unlike that of Notre Dame, the Aquitanian repertory was not entirely liturgical. Many of the poly-

phonic compositions were based on religious—albeit non-liturgical—Latin poetry. Another important precursor to Notre Dame polyphony was the Codex Calixtinus from Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain. According to Sarah Fuller, this repertory, ‘with both sacred poems and the chief melismatic chants of Mass and Office represented, duplicates in miniature the constitution of Parisian polyphony in its initial stages’ [Fuller, 1990, p. 542].

## 1.2 Manuscripts

Three important manuscripts which have preserved the music of this repertory are [Knapp, 1990, p. 559]: 1. the manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana, Pluteus 29.1 (F); 2. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog-August Bibliothek 677 (W<sub>1</sub>); and 3. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek 1206 (W<sub>2</sub>). F is the largest of these. According to Janet Knapp, ‘[a]ll three of the central manuscripts present the organa in much the same way: the Office responsories come first, in proper liturgical order, followed in separate fascicles by the Mass pieces’ [Knapp, 1990, p. 565].

So which of these manuscripts constitutes the most authentic representation of the Notre Dame repertory? Scholars disagree on this question. While Heinrich Husmann believes that ‘the compositions common to W<sub>2</sub> and F are very close to the original *Magnus liber organi*’ [Husmann and Reaney, 1963, p. 314], Craig Wright offers a different perspective. He suggests, rather, that the ‘true *Magnus liber organi*’ is represented by the Florence manuscript [Wright, 1989, pp. 269–70]. The two other manuscripts were subject to selection and filtering according to the needs of the relevant locale—a process which explains their diminished size, and which Wright refers to as a ‘sifting of the repertoire’ [Wright, 1989, p. 270].

Furthermore, while Prof. Husmann believes that ‘there were several centers of composition [of the *Magnus liber organi*] within Paris’ [Husmann and Briner,

1963, p. 202], the conclusion of Craig Wright is that ‘this collection of organa [the *Magnus liber organi*] was composed solely for Notre Dame’ [Wright, 1989, p. 257].

### 1.3 The *Magnus liber organi*

The contents of the *Magnus liber* have been attributed primarily to Perotin and Leonin. These organa were composed for liturgical use in Notre Dame cathedral. Although there is debate as to the dates at which the contents were composed and revised, it seems that most of the pieces were composed at the end of the twelfth century. Composition of the organa in the collection is considered to have begun *c.* 1170, shortly after commencement of construction of the Cathedral.

### 1.4 Other sources of information

One of the most important writers on the musical practices at Notre Dame Cathedral in late twelfth and early thirteenth century is a man who has become known as Anonymous IV. He is believed to have studied in Paris before returning to England. Haines regards Anonymous IV as having been ‘an exceptional writer’—one ‘deeply engaged with the revival of Aristotelian learning in the 13th century, whose terminology and conceptual framework owed to his strong connections to the university environment at Paris’ [Haines, 2006, p. 381].

Another valuable source of information is the treatise *De mensurabili musica*, which Rebecca Baltzer describes as ‘the earliest comprehensive theoretical discussion of the polyphony of the Notre Dame epoch’ [Baltzer, 2010]. It provided a systematic outline of the rhythmic modes, for example. Some believe that the author may have been Johannes de Garlandia, a renowned French music theorist of the period.

## 2 The Repertory: Characteristics & Interpretation

The organa in the Magnus liber are characterized by two contrasting styles of polyphony: 1. ‘organum purum’, a ‘two-voiced composition based on a chant melody’, and 2. ‘a passage or “clausula” of discant, in which the chant voice moves more quickly to approximate the motion of the new one’ [Knapp, 1990, p. 566]. Marion Gushee referred to the Notre Dame repertory as ‘a melodically, horizontally conceived art, in which . . . each added voice eventually achieved its own rhythmic and melodic characteristics’ [Gushee, 1990, p. 163].

The author of the *De Mensurabili musica*, seems to have ‘understood the overall movement of the duplum to have been short, relatively fast notes, interrupted from time to time by longer notes, chiefly at points of structural importance’ [Knapp, 1990, p. 576]. This accords with Anonymous 4’s writings, which describe a music in which ‘notes are short except when otherwise indicated by the figure, the position in the phrase, or the harmonic context’ [Knapp, 1990, p. 576].

**Definition 1** *musica mensurabilis*: ‘measured music’, as exemplified by the sort of polyphonic music that emerged in Paris around this period

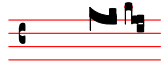



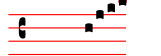

Organum could refer to two things: 1. polyphony in general; or 2. polyphony in which the *vox organalis* exhibits a greater degree of movement than the *vox principalis*. It can, according to its second meaning, thus be contrasted with ‘discant’—in which the two voices exhibited a note-against-note relationship.

### 2.1 Rhythmic interpretation

Although not central to this assessment, a discussion of rhythmic modes merits brief consideration. Although the extent to which their theorising reflected the actual musical practice is not entirely certain, theorists posited six different

rhythmic modes. (The more commonly-used ones are illustrated in Table 1.) Modes 1 and 5 are believed to be the oldest.

Table 1: Common rhythmic modes

No.	Original	Transcription	Ligature pattern
1			3-2-2-...
2			2-2-2-...-3
5			1-1-1-...

Not all of these modes were necessarily used regularly in practice. Gushee mentions, for example, that mode IV is ‘rarely if ever discernible in the sources’ [Gushee, 1990, pp. 160-161]. Certain writers of the period — Anonymous IV for example — make reference to irregular modes, beyond the original six [Gushee, 1990, p. 161].

Unsurprisingly, musical practice was a lot more complex than could be described according to these patterns alone. Compositions regularly deviated from these ligature patterns—often of necessity. Edward Roesner explains, for example, that ‘[s]ince a ligature cannot have more than one syllable of text, the mode-conveying ligature patterns are clearly evident *only in a melismatic context*’ [Roesner, emphasis mine]. Janet Knapp explains that ‘such interruption of ligatures becomes the norm in the wordier categories of conductus and motet’ [Knapp, 1990, p. 571]. Furthermore, repeated notes simply couldn’t be notated within ligatures, which made expression of the rhythmic mode through ligature pattern impossible.

**Definition 2 *currentes*:** *diamond-shaped running notes, ‘most often found over penultimate syllables of the text phrases’ [Gushee, 1990, p. 161]. Precise metric values were not indicated in this context. All is understood is that these notes were to be sung relatively fast [Gushee, 1990, p. 162].*

The modes are usually interpreted by modern scholars as forming the basis of a meter which is analogous to the modern day 6/8. Thus, the musicians of this time are believed to have employed mainly a duple meter rather than triple meter [Gushee, 1990, p. 160].

### 3 Other possible venues in Paris

There is disagreement between scholars as to whether some of the compositions in the *Magnus liber* originated in areas of Paris other than the Notre Dame cathedral. As Craig Wright explains, ‘[p]recisely how much of the Parisian character of the *Magnus liber organi* was a product of the influence of Notre Dame and how much was a result of liturgical practices at other churches in the city is a question that until now has not been fully answered’ [Wright, 1989, p. 247]. This issue has been examined closely by Prof. Husmann [Husmann and Reaney, 1963, Husmann and Briner, 1963], who has suggested that institutions other than the Cathedral were relevant to the polyphonic practices in Paris. Craig Wright, however, disagrees with Prof. Husmann’s suggestions that institutions on the Left and Right Bank of the city had a significant role [Wright, 1989, p. 247].

Was there more to the musical culture of Paris at this time than merely that which existed at the Notre Dame Cathedral? According to Craig Wright, there is little or no mention of polyphonic practice anywhere else in Paris during the period. Anonymous IV, for example, ‘mentions the collection only in connection with Notre Dame’ [Wright, 1989, p. 257]. Furthermore, ‘among the surviving archival records for Parisian churches, only those of the cathedral contain documents that point to the patronage and performance of polyphony’ [Wright, 1989, p. 257].

The conclusion of Craig Wright is that both the original composition and the ongoing revision of the *Magnus liber organi* were carried out for the purpose

of liturgical service in Notre Dame Cathedral. Notre Dame is the only venue which Anonymous IV makes reference to when discussing this repertoire.

## 4 Conclusion

In one sense, Paris in the late twelfth century might be regarded as the time and place in which sacred polyphony began to flourish. What makes the Notre Dame repertory so special is, not only the aesthetic value of the music, but the comprehensivity of the endeavour to systematize and record for posterity, a musical practice which was heretofore largely improvisatory. It represented, in one sense, a shift from a performance-based practice to a composition-based practice.

Craig Wright reminds us of the widespread influence of the Parisian polyphony. Although the Notre Dame Cathedral may have been the venue for which the music was composed, it ‘was not the only place where it was heard’ [Wright, 1989, p. 268]. Furthermore, with Paris being the centre of learning that it was, ‘when masters and scholars returned to their native lands’, ‘many took with them the model of Parisian polyphony’ [Wright, 1989, p. 236].

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Craig Wright.