Italian Paleography Website Project
"Music"

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Music manuscripts through the centuries

This learning guide to music in the Italian Paleography Website includes five manuscripts from the Newberry Library's rich collection. Depending on your expertise on musical notation, some will look more familiar to you, while others will not. Why is that? Like text writing, musical notation has its own evolution. Since you are interested in paleography, you should know that music has a paleography as well, a discipline that studies older musical notations. Musical paleography is very helpful if you want to play or study a piece written more than three or four centuries ago, which might otherwise be inaccessible to you. The closer the piece is to us in time, the more familiar its notation usually is.

- [Ballate by Paolo da Firenze](#) (VAULT Case MS 171)
- [Sacred Poems](#) (VAULT Case MS 75.1)
- [The Vincenzo Capirola Lutebook](#) (VAULT Case MS minus VM 140 .C25)
- [Canzonette, hymns and motets](#) (VAULT Case MS 5087)
- [Ajax](#) (VAULT Case MS VM 1500 .L84a)

All of these musical manuscripts also contain text. A lot of music has lyrics, but keep in mind that words can have other functions—think of titles, instructions, tempo markings, or music theory.

Now, look at the five manuscripts in pairs or small groups and answer the following questions. Compare and contrast the different items.

1. General questions

- Do the items have a title? What can you understand from the title?
- Do they all have authors? Do you think they are the authors of the music, or of the text, or both?
- Can you read the musical notation? Which ones can you read? If not, why not? How is it different from modern notation?
- What language is the text in? Where is the text in relation with the music? Can you imagine a connection between text and music?
- Do you see music in Sacred Poems (VAULT Case MS 75.1) and in the Vincenzo Capirola Lutebook (VAULT Case MS minus VM 140 .C25)? Why do you think these are classified as "music" manuscripts? Would you have marked them as such? Why or why not?
- Do the manuscripts use different colors? Which ones? Why? What might the different colors indicate?
- What use can you imagine for the items? And what kind of performance?
- Which ones seem more interesting to you? Why?

2. Questions on specific items

Ballate by Paolo da Firenze (VAULT Case MS 171)
https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_022

- Does this manuscript contain vocal or instrumental music? How do you know? Why might it favor one type over the other?
- This late-medieval manuscript is written in so-called "black notation." While modern notation has white notes for the longer values, this ancient one only uses black diamonds with or without stems (no stems = longer values). The diamonds are placed on a staff in red ink. Can you follow the ups and downs of the melody?
- Why do you think p. 1 has two different texts under the same music?

Sacred Poems (VAULT Case MS 75.1)
https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_023

- This manuscript does not have any musical notation, but only text. Why do you think it might be classified as a "music" manuscript? (No, it's not a mistake!)?
- The title is "Sacred poems" ('Laudi spirituali' in Italian). What does it tell you about their destination or where they come from?
- What kind of music do you imagine for such texts?
- Why would one write down the text and not the music?

The Vincenzo Capirola Lutebook (VAULT Case MS minus VM 140 .C25)

https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_027

- As with the previous manuscript, this item does not have any musical notation (at least in the digitized part). What kind of function can you imagine for this text? Is it different from the previous one? How and why?

Canzonette, hymns and motets (VAULT Case MS 5087)

https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_068

- The musical notation of this item might be more familiar to you. Can you read it?
- Can you recognize the clefs?
- What voices are called for on the top of the page?
- What is the function of the text on the bottom half of the page?

Ajax (VAULT Case MS VM 1500 .L84a)

https://italian-paleography.library.utoronto.ca/islandora/object/italianpaleography%3AIP_066

- Like the previous example, this notation should be more or less readable. How many parts do you see?
- How many singers/instrumentalists would you need to perform it?
- This is the score of an opera. What act is it?
- What is the name of the character that starts singing in the first page?
- For more advanced music students: is it a Recitative or an Aria? Why?