1  Repertories, Chronology and Style

The Conductus: Poetry and Music

A conductus is a song. It consists of a Latin poem of a non-liturgical nature, with monophonic or polyphonic music composed in either a through-composed or strophic fashion. Cultivated across Europe between the middle of the twelfth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries, the genre contrasts with almost all other kinds of monophonic and polyphonic music. A genre that apparently depends on little or no shared musical material, the conductus stands apart from those that borrow from liturgical chant and its accretions and from vernacular song. As an identifiable form of Latin song, it seems to emerge at the same time – around 1160 – as the chant-based Parisian two-part organum on which the related genres of motet and clausula are based and appears to continue to be composed, perhaps only sporadically, until the middle of the thirteenth century; it was clearly cultivated – recopied, modified, rearranged – until the beginning of the fourteenth century at least. Together with the song of the langue d’oil and the langue d’oc, the conductus represents the first coherent and sizeable repertory of music – one with works that share a range of characteristics in sufficient numbers to make them identifiable – composed independently of liturgical chant in the history of music. The end of the conductus tradition is as opaque as its beginning. Of course, settings of Latin rithmi continued to be made after 1300, especially in the domain of the rhymed office and sequence; what seems to have fallen into decline after 1300 was the complex, polyphonic work that has claimed scholarly attention as the conductus, and this marks a logical point of historiographical and scholarly repose.

To claim that the conductus is a ‘song’, however, risks invoking a number of anachronistic ways of thinking about the relationship between words and notes, poets and composers. And it is complicated by the fact that

---
1 The term is declined as second, fourth and both second and fourth by medieval authors. See Leonard Ellinwood, ‘The Conductus’, The Musical Quarterly 27 (1941) 169–170. It is taken as second declension here, following the majority of medieval usages.
medieval Latin song sits alongside vernacular traditions with their own canons and their own historiographical traditions. A view of medieval song that consists of poetry and melody, or words and notes, alone does not do justice to the wide range of engagements with musical and poetic materials that have survived to the present day. Even to talk about ‘setting’ a song is problematic.\textsuperscript{2} For example, when a named poet — Philip the Chancellor, say — is credited with the words of a \textit{conductus} — ‘Beata viscera’ perhaps — whose music is attributed to Perotinus, can it be certain that Perotinus is ‘setting’ a text by Philip? The latter very likely also wrote a large number of Latin \textit{contrafacta} — new Latin poems to pre-existing melodies with French or Provencal words, so the idea of writing words \textit{after} the composition of the melody cannot be ruled out. And although the number of \textit{contrafacta} that affect the \textit{conductus} repertory is small in comparison with other genres (the motet in particular), the overall penetration of intertexts within the \textit{conductus} is larger than its physiognomy — as a repertory of songs with little or no borrowing of pre-existent material — is great.

The nature of \textit{conductus} poetry — \textit{rithmus} — that is discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 very much gives the impression that it is designed to be sung, whether or not it survives with music. The focus on number — of stanzas, syllables, rhyme and end-accent — aligns the poetry with musical delivery in ways that will become clear. And this helps with understanding the creative process in the \textit{conductus} as something other than a ‘setting’ of a pre-existing lyric.\textsuperscript{3} The idea of a medieval ‘song’ — whether a Latin song like the \textit{conductus} or a \textit{trouv\`{e}re grand chant} — needs to be conceived as something much more flexible: where the roles of poet and composer are considered as significantly more permeable than in the cases of Schubert setting Mayrhofer or of Berio setting e. e. cummings.

Not only is the question of the relationship between word and note in the \textit{conductus} one that requires interrogation but the genre is enmeshed in the history of other polyphonic genres in the long thirteenth century. The tale of chant-based polyphony is thought to be well known and easily

\textsuperscript{2} But the terminology is the common coin of the study of medieval song (although not of the motet or other genres). See, for example, Susan Rankin, ‘Close Readings: Some Medieval Songs’, \textit{Early Music} 31 (2003) 327–344: ‘the musical setting of Latin lyrics’ (ibid., 327); ‘monophonic settings of lyric songs’ (ibid.); ‘setting an exceptionally virtuosic lyric text’ (ibid., 342); ‘setting learned and elegant lyrics’ (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{3} While explaining — and attempting to resolve — the question in terms of ‘interdisciplinary dialogue’, as suggested in Emma Dillon, ‘Unwriting Medieval Song’, \textit{New Literary History} 46 (2013) 595–622, finds great sympathy in \textit{Discovering Medieval Song}, it is perhaps so evident — and a way of working that is by now so venerable — that it hardly needs restating.
told. Individual notes of the plainsong served as the contrapuntal basis for polyphonic music that by the late twelfth century was beginning to divide into two main compositional resources: sustained-tone organum in which single notes of the liturgical chant serve as the basis—the tenor—for a rhapsodic, freely composed upper voice in two-voice writing or for metrically organised upper voices in three- and four-part composition; and discantus in which all voices were metrically conceived, including the chant-derived tenor. Sustained-tone organa were usually used for the solo—syllabic or neumatic—sections of the liturgical chant, whereas discantus was employed for solo melismatic passages. Discantus then served as the basis for the motet via the exchange of clausulae between different works in a complex history that is still in the process of being written but that involves the addition and subtraction of texts and voices, with experimentation with voice combinations and manuscript formats.

---


Repertories, Chronology and Style

Although the biographies of named poets of the langue d’oc – the so-called troubadours – suggest that the earliest exponents of the art were active significantly earlier than their northern colleagues – the trouvères – the zenith of composition in both languages is largely coterminous with that of the conductus: from the middle of the twelfth to the beginning of the thirteenth centuries.

There are examples of overlaps between the conductus repertories and those of organum, clausula, motet and vernacular song. Some conductus share their music with both French and Provençal song in a process of what is known as contrafactum, although the direction of travel – from Latin to the vernacular or from the vernacular to Latin – is often difficult to determine (Chapter 8). The overlap – in the very earliest phases of the motet in the first third of the thirteenth century – between the motet and the conductus is slight but revealing (discussed in Chapter 7) in a late thirteenth-century world where experimental combinations of word, note and format were appearing and disappearing with some regularity.

But the key connection between the conductus and other genres lies in the domain of discantus. The clausulae that played such an important role in the history of organum and motet consisted of polyphony in two or more parts, based on a liturgical tenor fragment, that was governed by a combination of the rhythmic modes. One of the principal discursive modes in play in the polyphonic conductus – the cauda – has much in common with the clausula in that it consists of polyphony in two or more parts governed by a combination of the rhythmic modes; the difference is that the tenor in a conductus cauda was freely composed and not based on chant, and this has implications for the different types of repetition and

---

6 The songs of the troubadours have been edited in Hendrik van der Werf, The Extant Troubadour Melodies: Transcriptions and Essays for Performers and Scholars (Rochester, NY: Author, 1984), and discussed in Elizabeth Aubrey, The Music of the Troubadours (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). The music of the trouvères is edited in Hendrik van der Werf (ed.), Trouvères – Melodien 1, Monumenta monodica medii ae vii 11 (Kassel etc.: Bärenreiter, 1977); van der Werf (ed.), Trouvères – Melodien 2, Monumenta monodica medi iae vii 12 (Kassel etc.: Bärenreiter, 1979). Van der Werf’s pathbreaking study on vernacular monody notwithstanding (The Chansons of the Troubadours and Trouvères: A Study of the Melodies and Their Relation to the Poems [Utrecht: Oosthoek, 1972]), a study of the music of the trouvères to match Aubrey’s is still awaited.

The very few examples of overlap between the *conductus* and other repertories—such as *clausulae*—with numbers of examples rarely exceeding single figures—need to be set in the context of the dimensions of the repertory as a whole, which in turn depend on how it the repertory is identified and what is included. Eduard Gröninger’s 1939 initial census of the genre⁹—largely followed by Robert Falck in 1970¹⁰—took a fairly narrowly defined view, largely based on the contents of what were then considered ‘central’ or ‘Notre-Dame’ manuscript sources. Gordon Anderson’s catalogue, dating from after Falck’s but probably compiled largely at the same time, widened the scope of the enquiry,¹¹ and the works that he included in his subsequent edition of the repertory enlarged its scope still further.¹² The most recent assessment of the *conductus*, the online database ‘*Cantum pulcriorem invenire*’, documents this scope and determines the field of enquiry for the present study.¹³

The repertory of the *conductus*, as defined here, consists of 957 poems of which 867 are furnished with music. Of these, 439 are monophonic, 236 for two voices, 136 for three voices and 11 for four voices. The remainder

---

8 The terms ‘counterpoint’ and ‘contrapuntal’ are used throughout this study in the full knowledge that the contemporary terms *discantus* and *contrapunctus* are also available. The wider range of meanings inherent in the modern terms is helpful in this discussion, and the ambiguity in the multiple meanings of the term *discantus* is important to avoid.


12 Gordon A. Anderson (ed.), *Notre-Dame and Related Conductus: Opera omnia*, 11 vols. [Institute of Mediaeval Music] Collected Works 10 (Henryville, Ottawa and Binningen: Institute of Mediaeval Music, 1979–) [all but vols. 7 and 11 have appeared]. Some of the supplementary material in the edition is also recorded in Anderson’s own annotated copy of his ‘Notre-Dame and Related Conductus: A Catalogue Raisonné’, now preserved in Prof. Gordon Athol Anderson, private library, housed in the Library of the University of New England, without shelfmark.

6 Repertories, Chronology and Style

includes monodies that form the basis of canons, some works that mix monophonic and two-voice writing, the five ‘variable-voice’ conducti, that consists of sections for three and four voices, and a large number of pieces where stave lines were prepared for notation that was never entered (these exist for works for one, two and three voices).

One fundamental distinction needs to be drawn between monophonic and polyphonic conductus repertories, between what medieval theory called musica cum littera and musica sine littera, and what is today termed syllabic/neumatic and melismatic music. For both polyphonic and monophonic conducti, the syllabic sections – musica cum littera – are always notated in unmeasured notation, and any performer, editor or scholar needs to establish a coherent position on how to handle the rhythm of these sections (this is discussed in Chapter 3). For musica sine littera, the position is different in polyphonic and monophonic conducti: as has already been outlined, musica sine littera – the cauda – in a polyphonic conductus has much in common with the rhythm of clausula or motet: notated in modal rhythm, its transcription and performance are not open to significant dispute. For the monophonic conductus, however, the position is different insofar as the melismas (no medieval theorist describes melismas as caudae in monophonic works) are copied in the same unmeasured notation as the cum littera sections and are therefore subject to the same interpretational latitude as exists in the syllabic sections of those pieces.

Monophonic and polyphonic conducti exhibit two forms: a first type in which the entire piece is made up of musica cum littera and a second that consists of a combination – often an alternation – of musica cum littera and musica sine littera. These are referred to by the perhaps misleading shorthand ‘syllabic’ and ‘melismatic’ conducti, respectively: the term ‘syllabic’
The Conductus: Poetry and Music

Table 1.1 Relationship between stanzaic structure and number of voice parts in the conductus repertory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voice parts</th>
<th>Monostanzaic</th>
<th>Stanzaic with refrain</th>
<th>Through composed</th>
<th>Through composed with refrain</th>
<th>Undetermined</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>212</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To describe a conductus that consists entirely of musica cum littera is clear; what needs to be remembered is that a ‘melismatic’ conductus will also consist of sections cum littera and sections sine littera (caudae). The balance of syllabic and melismatic varies according to number of voices. For example, in three-voice compositions, syllabic and melismatic are almost equal in number (54 of the former, 72 of the latter); for the two-voice conductus, however, there are nearly double the number of melismatic works as syllabic ones (152 as opposed to 84). In the case of the monophonic conductus, the balance is tilted even more in favour of syllabic works with 311 examples as opposed to 90 melismatic works.

The conductus repertory is divided according to the way in which strophic/stanzaic poetry relates to the music. Broadly speaking, the stanzaic structure of conductus poetry falls into three groups: simple strophic poetry (in which the structure of each stanza is identical); through-composed poetry (in which the stanzas are different) and structures based on paired lines based on the sequence on Latin lai. A fundamental compositional question is posed at the very beginning of the process of composition: is the music to repeat for each stanza, or is there to be new music for all stanzas in the conductus? Table 1.1 sets out the proportions of the repertory for conducti in one, two and three voices and prompts a number of observations.

First of all, the totals in the right-hand column do not quite match the overall numbers of monophonic, two-voice and three-voice works. As noted earlier, this is because these figures take account of works exclusively with these numbers of voice parts and exclude canons, mixed monophonic and two-voice writing, the ‘variable-voice’ conductus and so on; the larger figure that takes account of these other works is given in

parentheses. The striking point of variance here, however, relates to the balance between stanzaic and through-composed works. In the case of the three-voice conductus, there are more or less equal numbers of each. In the monophonic conductus, stanzaic works outnumber through-composed ones by more than two to one, but the reverse is the case for two-voice conducti, for which twice as many pieces are through composed as are stanzaic.\(^{18}\)

A final qualification of the opposition between the terms ‘syllabic’ and ‘melismatic’ is important. These terms are used in a generic sense to distinguish between different kinds of conductus, as the preceding paragraph make clear, but they also identify different relationships between word and note. Conventionally, ‘syllabic’ means one note to a syllable, whereas ‘melismatic’ means more than one note to a syllable. The inadequacy of this opposition is clear when we examine a single piece. Consider the first stanza of the anonymous monophonic conductus ‘Omnis in lacrimas’, given here in facsimile and modern edition (Figure 1.1; Example 1.1).

This piece is found in two of the best-known sources for the conductus repertory: Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Pluteus 29.1 (hereafter I-Fl Plut. 29.1) and Oxford Bodleian Library, Add. A. 44 (hereafter GB-Ob Add. A. 44 [its poetry alone]).\(^ {19}\) In the former it is copied among other monophonic conducti, and in latter among other poetry without music. The piece is classed in catalogues of the repertory as syllabic (without melismas) and through composed (new music for each stanza).\(^ {20}\) In fact, ‘Omnis in lacrimas’ is one of a group of pieces in which each pair of stanzas is given the same music, so the facsimile gives the words and notes to the stanza beginning ‘Omnis in lacrimas’ and ending ‘solem Campanie’ but also the poetry alone to the second stanza (beginning ‘O dies funebris’ and ending ‘exsolvit debitum’). The third (fully notated), fourth (poetry alone) and the beginning of the fully notated fifth stanza are also visible on the facsimile. All the music in ‘Omnis in lacrimas’, then, is what medieval theorists would call musica cum littera, and its notation is unmeasured, as may be seen from the facsimile. The modern edition here provisionally assumes that the unmeasured notation carries no rhythmic significance.

\(^{18}\) The large proportion of monophonic stanzaic conducti with refrain is largely a result of the inclusion of the Latin rondelli in the eleventh fascicle of I-Fl Plut. 29.1. What is also significant is the large proportion of monostanzaic three-part conducti (about 14 per cent of the repertory, as opposed to 8 per cent of the monophonic repertory and 6 per cent of the conducti for two voices).

\(^{19}\) I-Fl Plut. 29.1, fols. 415v–416; GB-Ob Add. A 44, fol. 130r.

Figure 1.1 ‘Omnis in lacrimas’: facsimile, I-Fl Plut. 29.1, fol. 415v
Repertories, Chronology and Style

Example 1.1 'Omnis in lacrimas' stanza 1 edition and facsimile; I-Fl Plut. 29.1, fol. 415v. Translation: 'In tears / Overflowing / Let every eye be loosed / And may both clergy and people / Equally pour out in abundance / Gasps of dismay; / Let sorrow be equal to the cause; Death openly daring too much / With a cloud of sorrow, / Has cleft the lands / When from us it snatched / The sun of Campania'

and is accordingly presented in unstemmed noteheads. Comparison of the edition with the facsimile shows how conventional diacritical marks are used. Ligatures are indicated by a square bracket (the first syllable of 'est'), and conjuncturae – descending rhomb shapes usually preceded by a square are indicated by dotted slurs (the middle syllable of 'paria', for example). Plicae are indicated by small notes with a slur to the notated

---

21 For an explanation of the noncommittal approach to the transcription of the cum littera sections of the conductus, both monophonic and polyphonic, see Chapter 3.