Why Music and Magic in the Middle Ages?

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If we define magic and music in their broadest possible sense—magic as encompassing both demonic and natural practices condemned by the Church, and music as both learned speculation and everyday performance—then we might well begin, not with the title question of this article, but with a related one: why not music and magic in the Middle Ages? That is to say, why do we find little to no research on the interaction of these two major arts during the longest historical period of Western Civilization? It is important to answer this question first, since the reasons for the scholarly neglect of magic and music can ultimately suggest helpful directions for future work on this important dyad, which is a goal of this article. This article is addressed to both musicologists—originally philologists (e.g. Pierre Aubry) and historians (e.g. Friedrich Ludwig) with a peculiar interest in medieval music—and non-musicologists alike. For it is only through the concerted effort of historians of all kinds crisscrossing the artificial barriers of modern academic disciplines that a deeper appreciation of magic and music can be achieved, two medieval arts that were fully inter-disciplinary in the modern sense.

One of the reasons for the neglect of music and magic in the Middle Ages is the relatively new status of medieval magic as a legitimated, mainstream academic domain within the historical sciences. Readers of this journal are well acquainted with Lynn Thorndike’s foundational eight-volume work *The History of Magic and Experimental Science* (1923–1958), the first four volumes of which span the Middle Ages. Thorndike was writing at a time when little of a scientific nature had been written on the topic in English-speaking lands.

1. On defining medieval magic, see Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8–17. I would like to thank an anonymous reader for their helpful critique of an earlier draft of this essay.


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As he noted in the preface to the first volume, the historical study of magic was “a rather new field.” Throughout his work, Thorndike implicitly stressed the importance of music in this new field by referring to it in various contexts. He wrote of the occult power of numbers and its connection to the music of the spheres with learned writers such as Macrobius, this writer being the inspiration for a great deal of Neo-Platonic thought in the High Middle Ages. Elsewhere, in the area of performance practice, Thorndike implicitly referred to music in his frequent discussion of medicinal incantations, for instance.

Although Thorndike’s History of Magic and Experimental Science raised many possibilities for the study of magic in the Middle Ages, medievalists were relatively slow to respond, in contrast to Renaissance specialists. The major works of Frances Yates and D. P. Walker on Renaissance magic (to cite only two major figures) are well known. Renaissance writers such as Ficino, including his important testimony on music, received a great deal of scholarly attention from Thorndike onwards; but not so for major medieval writers on magic such as Adelard of Bath and Roger Bacon—until recently, that is. With notable exceptions such as Richard Kieckhefer’s 1976 book on late medieval witch trials or the 1991 history of magic in the early Middle Ages by Valerie Flint, it is only in the last decade or so that the study of magic has made its presence felt in medieval studies, with the founding of the Societas Magica in 1994, the “Magic in History” book series at Pennsylvania State University Press four years later, and the Salomon Latinus series published by Sismel, whose first volume appeared only a few years ago.

5. Thorndike, History of Magic, 2: 445; for more references to incantations, see this word in the general index at the end of each volume.
8. Richard Kieckhefer, European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and
Even as this chorus of magic studies has grown louder, music historians have stubbornly refused to join it. To date, the only available study of music in medieval magic is Jules Combarieu’s *La musique et la magie* (1909); in fact, only a dozen scattered pages of this book are devoted to the Middle Ages.\(^9\) The primary reason for the dearth of research on medieval music and its relationship to magic lies in something of a musicological aversion to the topic. In the twenty-eight volumes of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, there is not a single entry for the word “magic” or related expressions.

If we move outside the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, we are fortunate to find Gary Tomlinson’s landmark 1993 book that brought magic into mainstream musicological discourse.\(^10\) Tomlinson’s book has done little for the cause of magic in medieval musicology, however, for two reasons. Firstly, Tomlinson assumed a revival of magic in the 1500s from its near state of oblivion in the Middle Ages, an idea inspired by the work of older scholars on Renaissance magic such as Walker and Yates.\(^11\) This concept does not hold up to the historical evidence that presents us instead with a continuous tradition of magic from antiquity on. Richard Kieckhefer recently questioned the assumption of a Renaissance revival of magic.\(^12\) The inference of the “Renaissance magic revival” view for music is that magic played virtually no role in medieval music and is thus unworthy of musicological enquiry. Secondly, Tomlinson’s highly theoretical book bears the distinct stamp of post-modern approaches then just emerging in musicology. Scholars of medieval

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\(^11\) Tomlinson writes of “the inescapable decline in occult thought from the Middle Ages on” and magic in the Renaissance “attaining a prestige lost for over a millennium” (Tomlinson, *Music in Renaissance Magic*, 45 and back cover).

music, as Judith Peraino pointed out a few years ago, have resisted post-
structuralism more than specialists in any other historical period. So by plac-
ing the field of magic squarely in the postmodern camp, Tomlinson’s book
may well have ensured that few medieval musicologists would think of wan-
dering into magical territory newly earmarked for post-modernity.

For another, more fundamental explanation of the musicological resistance
to medieval magic, one needs to inspect the musical repertoire most pervaded
by magic in the Middle Ages, the one historian Friedrich Ludwig called over
a hundred years ago the largest and oldest body of medieval music: liturgical
chant. As Ludwig pointed out then in his survey of scholarship, the study
of chant has often been conducted under the auspices of the Catholic Church
and to a certain extent dictated by ecclesiastic concerns. Ludwig’s examples
of this range from the post-Tridentine Editio Medicaea (1614–15) to the Paléo-
graphie musicale and the Editio Vaticana then recently initiated in 1904, the
latter two with the heavy participation of the influential monk-scholars of
the abbey of Solesmes.

A certain preconception of chant has influenced its study, from its earliest
scholarship to the present day. Chant is typically envisioned as a large, unified
body whose ideology and purpose conforms to those of the medieval and
modern Church, the latter two being implicitly the same entity—a historical
quandary if there ever was one. In general, the medieval Christian liturgy
and its chant are both seen as a single harmonious puzzle into which fit all of
the many surviving notated pieces for office and mass. It is significant that
the little extant published work on the historiography of plainchant, such as
Katherine Bergeron’s maligned Decadent Enchantments (1998), has come
mostly from outside the circles of chant scholarship.

Let us take a recently published prestigious collection of essays on the
office as a representative example of the prevailing perspective on plainchant.
In this 2000 publication by Oxford University Press, essays by leading musi-

Solesmes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jann Pasler, review of the
works on the reception of chant in the nineteenth century are cited in John Haines,
Eight Centuries of Troubadours and Trouvères: The Changing Identity of Medieval Music
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cologists explore a variety of topics on the medieval liturgy, organized as follows: the pre-Carolingian office, manuscript studies, the late Middle Ages and hagiography. \(^{17}\) Virtually all topics of historical enquiry on medieval chant in this eclectic volume are dictated by official ecclesiastic books, councils, and authorities; they are limited to the space between “the fixed local liturgy and the rules of its everyday adaptation,” as one contributor puts it. \(^{18}\)

To be sure, such traditional scholarship is laudable for both its rigor and thoroughness. Indeed, it is indispensable when one considers the abundance and complexity of extant liturgical sources with music. Yet the near monopoly of this source-centered and sometimes anachronistic approach for over a century of scholarship on liturgical chant has pushed out other historical perspectives that might complement this view of chant and flesh out our understanding of the total religious life in the Middle Ages. There is little room in the currently accepted historical matrix for chants that neither fit into the official mass and office cycles nor conform to the theme of Christian worship—especially if these pieces do not survive in notated form. It is not my intention here to condemn the traditional view, but simply to advocate more than one way of studying medieval religious music. It is fair to say, I think, that the traditional view implicitly discourages a study of the interaction of magic and liturgical music, and more specifically, of the use of chant in magic contexts as discussed below.

And yet, abundant evidence for music and magic survives for the Middle Ages and awaits future study. In the following pages, I would like to show how the landmark work of historians of magic in the last few decades has paved the way for a musicological entry into the field of magic. Their work suggests several fruitful areas for future research. In the area of music theory or speculation, certain key concepts such as “property” (\textit{proprietas}) and “figure” (\textit{figura}) show a marked tendency towards esotericism and magic; or in the realm of astrological science, as especially seen in the concept of celestial music (\textit{musica mundana}). As for the domain of practical music making, it too has potential for the study of magic, and includes hitherto neglected but important musical genres that relate to magical practices. The most significant of these is the incantation, a genre that displays the close relationship between Christian liturgy and magic in the Middle Ages. Given these multiple avenues of study, the need for musicological work in medieval magic is long overdue.

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\(^{18}\) László Dobszay, “Reading an Office Book,” in \textit{The Divine Office}, 56.
musicological ranks such as Charles Burnett have already initiated the study of music and magic in the Middle Ages and pointed the way for much needed future work.

**MUSICA SPECULATIVA**

Medieval writers on music typically divide the study of music into the practical and theoretical or “speculative” (*musica speculativa*). It is useful to begin with the latter in our enquiry into music and magic. I would like to single out two instances of the interaction between magic and *musica speculativa*; these are not the only two possible avenues of research, but good places to start nevertheless. The first instance is that of the music of the spheres and its relation to astrology as found in the works of twelfth-century scholar Adelard of Bath and in some of the Arabic works Adelard translated. Here I will draw on the important work of Charles Burnett. Adelard’s writings and translations do not belong, strictly speaking, to the corpus of music theoretical works, but my second instance does. Medieval music theory treatises have received much scholarly attention for over two centuries, yet these same treatises contain language and concepts closely related to magical ones that have received virtually no attention until now. Of special interest are theoretical works from 1200 onwards. These emerged under the aegis of the university and were heavily influenced by Aristotelian works, as recent musicological research has shown. Beyond Aristotelian authorities, however, we can also see in certain cases the influence of non-university, esoteric works such as the *Ars notoria* that reveal a significant connection between medieval music theory and magic.

We begin with the concept of *musica mundana* and astrology. In the Middle Ages, churchmen frequently condemned astral knowledge since it ultimately originated in pagan sources. The practical applications of astrology in medieval life were many, in areas ranging from agriculture to medicine. Now, the concept of *musica mundana* was condoned by most Christian music writers of the Middle Ages from Boethius onwards. But this same concept of the harmony of the spheres and its influence on human activities owed much to an astrological tradition going back to antiquity, as James Haar and Joscelyn Godwin have demonstrated. *Musica mundana* thus had a precarious status.

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20. The standard study on the music of the spheres is still James Haar, "Musica
Although widely accepted in the Middle Ages, it had a dubious pagan pedigree that only became more obvious with the translation and dissemination of Arabic astrological works beginning in the twelfth century.

Few specialists of medieval magic have done more than Charles Burnett to show how speculative music concepts such as *musica mundana* relate to a broader intellectual sphere that includes magic and astrology. Learned discourse on music almost always occurred in the context of the seven liberal arts, including astronomy or astrology, the two being nearly synonymous in the Middle Ages. In the wake of late medieval Arabic translations and their reception, many learned men directly linked music and the liberal arts to such things as necromancy, as Burnett has pointed out. Thus learned conversations surrounding music expanded in the twelfth century to include the topic of magic.

In an essay published in 1987, “Adelard, Music and the Quadrivium,” Burnett has brought up an important anecdote. In his letter to his nephew, Adelard of Bath at one point turns his attention to music. As Burnett demonstrates, this passage betrays the influence of Boethius’ famous treatise. When Adelard turns to “that symphony which is said to be in the heavens,” he first cites the beneficial effects of the music of the spheres (*musica mundana*) following the standard discussion from Boethius. Music can heal, Adelard claims, just as Boethius had written that celestial music improves and calms human beings, following Plato. But Adelard follows up this theme with a...
discussion that breaks dramatically with Boethius. In the following sentences, he takes up the malefic effect of music:\footnote{Burnett, “Adelard, Music and the Quadrivium,” 71; and Adelard of Bath, 
Conversations with his Nephew, 53; I cite the latter translation which differs slightly from the first.}

But even in mute animals the same force [of music] has a not inconsiderable effect. Among the English the very fish are driven into nets by the sweet sound of a bell floating on the surface of the water. Among the Parthians the songs of men themselves force the deer to be dissolved into sleep, so there is no need for nets. One cannot doubt that birds are led into snares by songs. I have heard even you, while you were disputing about music’s force, make that claim, saying that you made a wild hawk—which you could not tame in any other way—docile by playing a musical instrument.

The importance of this passage from Adelard’s On the Same and the Different lies in the extent to which he suggests something quite divergent from Boethius and other music writers, something likely influenced by astrological Arabic works Adelard knew intimately for having translated them himself.\footnote{Adelard of Bath, Conversations with his Nephew, xi–xviii; Thorndike, History of Magic, 2: 19–43.} This something is the power of song to effect evil. Boethius and later music writers following him had long ignored this aspect of the music of the spheres, but the modern twelfth-century Adelard informs his reading of \textit{musica mundana} with a knowledge of magic and astrology gleaned from his “Arabic masters,” as he calls them elsewhere.\footnote{Adelard of Bath, Conversations with his Nephew, xxix.} In looking for early medieval precedents of this, we find a remarkably similar theme to that of Adelard five centuries earlier in the eighth book of Isidore of Seville’s \textit{Etymologies}, devoted to heresies and magic. Concerning the songs of magicians, Isidore writes that they “shatter the elements, disturb the minds of men, and, without drinking a special potion, cause much destruction through the violence of song.”\footnote{Isidori Hispalensis episcopi \textit{Etymologiarum sive Originum} \textit{libri} XX, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 1: 324, lines 16–19: “Magi sunt, qui vulgo malefici ob facinorum magnitudinem nuncupantur. Hi et elementa concutient, turbant mentes hominum, ac sine ullo veneni haustu violentia tantum carminis interimus.”} Isidore also discusses the songs or charms (\textit{carminibus}) of witches that can change the course of planets, as well as incantations and their harmful art (\textit{ars noxia}).\footnote{Lindsay, \textit{Etymologiae}, 1: 323, lines 25–27 and 324, 1: 13–15 and 20–21.} I am not suggesting that Adelard borrowed from Isidore’s disquisi-
tion on evil song, although this would certainly not be out of the question for someone as well read as Adelard. Rather, these two passages five centuries apart share a common theme that medieval music writers seldom if ever discuss: the power of song to harm. Thus Adelard’s remarks flesh out the standard Neo-Platonic discussion of the spheres by revealing the nefarious power of music and by suggesting a relationship between magic and music.

To find a possible inspiration for Adelard’s comments in his work On the Same and the Different, we must once again rely on Burnett’s work. The theme of the ambivalent force of music and its connection with the stars occurs more than once in Arabic astrological works first translated by Adelard of Bath and others in the twelfth century. Most notably, it comes up in a work Adelard translated, The Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology by Abū Ma’sar, “the best-known astrologer of the Middle Ages,” as Burnett has put it in his collaborative edition of this work. Abū Ma’sar gives in the fifth chapter of his astrological primer the traits and influences of each planet. “Venus,” we read, “indicates . . . love of entertainment . . . dancing, playing wind instruments, moving the strings of lutes, songs.” Further on, we learn of Mercury’s inclination towards “rhetoric, poetry, the art of writing,” which Adelard paraphrases as “a composer and writer of music” (musice repertor et scriba). The importance of music in astrology occurs in another of Abū Ma’sar’s works also edited and translated by Burnett and a collaborator, On Historical Astrology. If Venus associates with music and dancing, Abū Ma’sar writes, its influence varies depending on its proximity to other planets. If Saturn, then its music turns into wailing “and the melodies of construction workers”; if Jupiter, the “melodies of recitation which the religious use”; if Mars, those of “schemers and vagabonds”; if the sun, those of the lute; if Mercury, those used with poetry; and if with the moon, “the songs of sailors in ships and boats.”

In sum, Abū Ma’sar and his translator Adelard clarify the vital relationship of music and astrology, thereby fleshing out the standard discussion by medie-

val music writers of the *musica mundana*. The music of the spheres, a concept found in music writers from Boethius onwards, had become by the late Middle Ages fertile ground for music and astrology.

We now move onwards from twelfth-century astrology to medieval music theory of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, where we find hitherto unstudied connections between music and magic. Parting ways with the Boethian Platonic tradition of music and number, thirteenth-century theorists follow Aristotle by focusing on material concerns such as the graphics of measured notation (e.g., Franco of Cologne) or the categories of musical performance (Johannes de Grocheio).\textsuperscript{35} The apparently idiosyncratic language of late medieval music theorists originates in a broader intellectual context that has only recently come under scholarly scrutiny. For example, a recent study has shown how Grocheio owes the entire framework for his new division of music to Aristotelian zoological works newly revived in the thirteenth century.\textsuperscript{36} Another thirteenth-century writer, the so-called Anonymous IV, makes explicit that he has read widely for his inspiration, from Jordanus of Nemore’s *Arithmetic* to Johannes Sacrobosco’s *Treatise on the Sphere*.\textsuperscript{37}

Beginning with the landmark work of Jeremy Yudkin in 1990, musicologists have begun to explore the broader context for key terms used by medieval music writers.\textsuperscript{38} It is clear that when music writers use expressions such as *proprietas* and *perfectio* to describe notational figures they are simply adopting these terms from other, non-musical contexts. But their sources are not limited to general academic writings such as the anonymous *Book of Causes* or Bartholomew the Englishman’s *Properties of Things*, as argued in a recent study, and here is where we eventually encounter magic.\textsuperscript{39} Anonymous IV, for example, betrays the inspiration of the Fachliteratur or how-to manuals of his day in parts of his treatise. In both form and content, he mimics practical...


\textsuperscript{36} DeWitt and Haines, “Johannes de Grocheio,” 82.


treatises on alchemy, medicine and other trades. Anonymous IV has taken in Euclid’s *Geometry* and uses Arabic loan words going back to Adelard of Bath’s translations, as Charles Burnett pointed out over twenty years ago. The practical world of scribes evoked by Anonymous IV and other writers such as Franco of Cologne also includes a monastic subculture devoted to medicine, alchemy, and esoteric writing, as we shall soon see—all areas in some way connected to magic. Thus the wider realm of inspiration for music writing ultimately included magical works and not just university texts.

While musicologists have edited and commented upon most of the major extant music treatises, none, to my knowledge, have explored the relationship of music to magic in these writings. A connection between music and magic emerges in the thirteenth century, and then more clearly in the fourteenth century with a marked theme of esotericism. An interesting parallel development can be traced in learned writing on magic, as Jean-Patrice Boudet has recently demonstrated in his magisterial survey. Boudet describes the thirteenth-century standardization and codification of magic that follows its revival in the twelfth century; this codification process continues during the next two centuries. The graphic codification of musical repertoires in the High Middle Ages, less a practical measure than an extension of the traditional speculative intellectualization of music, mirrors the developments studied by Boudet. For polyphonic music writing, the thirteenth century was a period of codification; the new “mensural” writing codes became the basis for further refinements during the next two centuries. The same could be said to a certain extent of plainchant sources and music theory, to single out two other musical examples.

I would like to review the emerging rapprochement of music and magic in medieval music theory by looking at some inter-textual connections in three manuscripts (table 1). In what follows, I shall point out the presence of general themes such as cryptic writing codes, as well as specific concepts such as *proprietas*.

Table 1 lays out the contents of three books dating from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. The medieval music treatises found in them are marked in bold letters. They are, from left to right, Pseudo-Odo’s *Dialogue*,


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the treatises of Anonymous IV, V and VI, Jean de Murs’ *Speculative Music,* and the *Ars nova* once attributed to Philippe de Vitry. As seen in table 1, the manuscripts surround these music treatises with magical works. I would like to argue that compilers brought these texts together because of the presence of themes common to magic and music.

The first manuscript (table 1, left column) is a collection of works apparently used at the abbey of Saint Martial. Among its magical works we find the Pseudo-Roger Bacon’s *Critical Days* (left column, number 2) where the following quote from the Arabic astrologer Māshāʾ allāh occurs: “the health [or waning] of the moon is the health of all things.”43 Other magic works in this book include formulas, rituals, and esoteric writing from the abbey of Saint Martial studied by Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny (number 10).44 The monks of Saint Martial may have brought these texts together with the Pseudo-Odo’s *Dialogue on Music* because all of these activities, whether magic ritual or chant recitation, functioned as “monastic recreations,” to quote d’Alverny.45 Another possible thread binding these works together is the theme of an esoteric and difficult art, be it magic or music. Various objects throughout these texts, from the black-handled knife used in one of these rituals to the monochord discussed in Odo’s work, help the initiate to better access the art. And writing codes such as musical notes and cryptic magic formulas are often vital in this process of initiation.

The importance of special writing codes to a difficult art was clearly a unifying concept in the next manuscript, a collection of works from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, compiled by Henricus de Kirkestede in the 1380s and used by the monks at Bury Saint Edmunds (BL Royal 12 C VI; table 1, middle column).46 The collection brings together three of the

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45. d’Alverny, “Récitations monastiques.”

best-known magic works of the Middle Ages: the Secret of Secrets, Prester John’s Travels, and a special redaction of the Ars notoria related to writing that heads up the manuscript (middle column, numbers 1, 4, and 5). With its theme of esoteric writing, this Ars notoria scribendi neatly links to the three works on music writing that close the collection—Anonymous IV, V and VI (numbers 9, 10, and 12). This unique branch of the Ars notoria focuses on a method of shorthand revealed to the author in a vision by Thomas Becket. Presented first in epistolary form and then in dialogue format, this hermetic work toys with the reader by giving only short glimpses of the author’s proposed shorthand method. In fact, the anonymous author never reveals his method fully, referring instead to a long lost three-volume exposé of it.47

There is a striking similarity between the compact signs and figures of the Ars notoria scribendi and the musical notes expounded in the music treatises found in the same manuscript. The notae of the Ars notoria scribendi are mostly vertical lines with appended strokes; the principal notae of mensural music, too, are vertical lines with various attached strokes. For Henricus de Kirkestede, the compiler of manuscript BL Royal 12 C VI, the connection between these two writing codes appears to have been clear. Both the author of this Ars notoria and music writers like Anonymous IV, writing around the same time, provide an exegesis of a cryptic writing method comprised of figurae or notae, as they call them, made of lines and strokes.48 For the notary as for the music scribe, these innovative, compact writing codes present new ways to master time by capturing sound as rapidly as possible, to “write as fast as the tongue can move,” as the Ars notoria scribendi puts it.49

The exponents of these different writing codes emphasize that figures and their properties are paramount to the transmission of a given art (ars or scientia). The figura acts as a door to the esoteric room of knowledge, whether musical or magical. And proprietas or property is a figure or thing’s quality that makes it special to the art. In the new mensural writing codes of thirteenth-century music, the figura refers to the written note itself and proprietas to the property of a musical note or groups of notes. The property of a note varies depending on how the scribe alters the shape of the figura.50


50. Haines, “Proprietas and Perfectio” (as above, n. 39), 5.
recently been pointed out, music theorists’ discussion of the *proprietas* of a note owes much to the new Aristotelian jargon widely disseminated in thirteenth-century university circles.\footnote{Haines, “*Proprietas* and *Perfectio*,” 13–18.}

But the notion of *proprietas* as the special property of a graphic figure that can be subtly varied and manipulated in order to give it a greater or lesser degree of potency, precisely the sense intended by music writers, can also be found outside the university. Indeed, the concept of *proprietas* is fundamental to magic during this same period, and especially to natural magic. The *proprietas* of objects was indispensable, for example, in everyday medical proceedings, as Francis Brévart has recently pointed out in his study of medieval German drug literature on mugwort (*artemisia vulgaris*).\footnote{Francis Brévart, “‘Mother of All Herbs’: The Magical Plant Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris L.*) in Medieval German Wonder Drug Literature,” in “*Er is ein wol gevründer man*’: Essays in Honor of Ernst S. Dick on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, ed. Karen McConnell and Winder McConnell (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2009), 43–72, at 55, 59, and 62. My thanks to Francis Brévart for pointing this article out to me.} Physicians needed to acquire a “knowledge of *proprietares*” in order to rise from the status of a “vulgar” healer to that of a “learned” one, as Arnau de Vilanova puts it.\footnote{Michael McVaugh, *The Rational Surgery of the Middle Ages*, Micrologus’ Library 15 (Florence: Sismel, 2006), 64.} Elsewhere, the different properties of stones (as seen in their size, color, and other features) needed to be understood if one wanted to put them to proper use, as Albert the Great reminds us.\footnote{Albertus Magnus, *Book of Minerals*, trans. Dorothy Wyckoff (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), 36–54.}

My third manuscript is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France lat. 7378A (table 1, far right column), a fourteenth-century compendium containing the famous *Ars nova* music treatise whose status as a single work by Philippe de Vitry was questioned by Sarah Fuller over twenty years ago.\footnote{See Sarah Fuller, “A Phantom Treatise of the Fourteenth Century? The *Ars Nova*,” *Journal of Musicology* 4 (1985): 23–50. On this manuscript, see also Pascale Duhamel, “L’enseignement de la musique à l’Université de Paris d’après le manuscrit BnF lat. 7378A,” *Acta musicologica* 79 (2007): 3–29.} Until now, the common ground of magic and music in that most ancient science of astrology has been implicit: implicit in the music of the spheres discussed by Boethius and subsequent writers; implicit in column B, with the juxtaposition of the Pseudo-Bacon’s *Critical days* or the *Secret of Secrets* in a collection also containing musical treatises. In the fourteenth century, the astrological link between magic and music becomes explicit. The earliest two astrological works in lat.

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\footnote{51. Haines, “*Proprietas* and *Perfectio*,” 13–18.}  
\footnote{52. Francis Brévart, “‘Mother of All Herbs’: The Magical Plant Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris L.*) in Medieval German Wonder Drug Literature,” in “*Er is ein wol gevriunder man*’: Essays in Honor of Ernst S. Dick on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, ed. Karen McConnell and Winder McConnell (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2009), 43–72, at 55, 59, and 62. My thanks to Francis Brévart for pointing this article out to me.}  
7378A are from the heyday of Arabic astrology in the eleventh century: number 5 in table 1, the *Twilights* or *De crepusculis* by Ibn Mu'ahd, and number 14, the *Astrolabe* by Al-Zarqāli. From the early fourteenth century come Jean de Lignières’ *Canons* or astrological tables (number 8). Astrology and geometry go hand in hand in the fourteenth century, as seen in our manuscript’s opening *Practical Geometry* and in the work on triangles by the Paris mathematician Jordanus of Nemore (number 6). Astrology, mathematics, and music come together here in one man, the famous Paris master Jean des Murs, or Johannes de Muris. Our manuscript contains his *Musica Speculativa*, a work that follows Boethius. Jean’s name also comes up later in the manuscript, in the collection of Predictions (number 11). He, along with several others, predicted the famous conjunction of planets in 1345. For many, this conjunction was an astrological warning of the great plague a few years later.57

As mentioned at the beginning of the last paragraph, this same manuscript contains the most famous music treatise of the fourteenth century, the *Ars nova* (number 10). We have already noted general resemblances between the methods and purposes of thirteenth-century music treatises and the *Ars notoria* found in manuscript BL Royal 12 C VI. In the fourteenth century, with the ongoing transmission of the *Ars notoria* and the unprecedented complexity in music writing introduced by the *Ars nova*, parallels between magical and musical *figurae* become even clearer. The close relationship between the *Ars notoria* and *Ars nova* is evident. These two treatises share common elements: an inclination towards the liberal arts, including astrology; an obsession with specialized and esoteric writing whose power is brevity and whose mastery is time; an emphasis on the power of the *signa*, *nota*, or *notula*, with special attention to its *forma*, and on the symbolism of square and circular shapes. Most importantly, the two works share the same name; the *Ars notoria* is sometimes called *Ars nova*.58 To sum up, the similarity of themes in these two treatises, as in several other ones in the three manuscripts just discussed, confirm the extent to which both the *ars musica* and the *ars magica* partake of that most ancient art of observing the stars, astrology.

**MUSICA PRACTICA**

The mention of astrology directly above neatly connects learned musical discourse to practical music making. Astrology, and especially lunar astrology,
pervaded everyday medieval life, from interpreting birthdays to predicting the weather. As Richard Kieckhefer writes in his *Magic in the Middle Ages*, “popular astrology was perennial.”

We have already seen that learned medieval writers take their cue from the humdrum music of daily routines, as in Adelard on the songs of English fishermen or Abū Ma’sār on those of construction workers and vagabonds. One of the few modern historians to have paid attention to the musical and astrological link in daily medieval music making has been Madeleine Pelner Cosman in an 1978 essay entitled “Machaut’s Medical Musical World.”

Cosman discusses a wide range of music performed in Machaut’s day related to medical needs. Related activities ranged from eating to wedding celebrations, not to mention the diagnosis and treatment of diseases, both physical and psychological. As she points out, knowledge of astrology related directly to all of this music and to the medieval planning of daily events in general. All belonged, in Cosman’s words, to “God’s great scheme.” As she puts it in her conclusion, the learned doctrine of the music of the spheres had a very practical application as the divine, astrological music to which all human music needed to synchronize. As Roger French has put it in a chapter devoted to astrology in medieval medical practice, astrological knowledge was not only sacred, it was necessary and useful to daily life.

The field of practical music making is large, with many areas relating to magic as yet unexplored. It cannot be overstated at present that the vast majority of music performed in the Middle Ages either has not survived in notated form or was never written down in the first place. Modern histories understandably tend to focus on the surviving notated pieces of music, especially the pieces exhibiting literary or polyphonic sophistication. Historians

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have particularly favored the repertoires of Latin chant, sacred polyphony and late medieval vernacular song. More often than not, these repertoires were committed to parchment anthologies either because of their exceptional sophistication or because of their association with a prestigious institution that also controlled writing centers. The most obvious example of this would be repertoires written by and for the Church such as the polyphonic organa composed for the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. Yet a more responsible history of medieval music must take into account a multitude of less sophisticated repertoires used in a variety of daily contexts. These neglected repertoires included magic incantations. Its music lies somewhere between recitation and full out song.

This important musical genre, the incantation, has received virtually no musicological attention until now. Incantations and other magic melodies were often performed in liturgical contexts. We have already encountered this phenomenon in the “monastic recreations” from Saint Martial mentioned earlier. Over a hundred years ago, Jules Combarieu suggested that music and magic frequently came together in liturgical practice, in the many rituals characterized by “rigorous symbolism and formalism.” What can be known about these rituals and their contexts, and consequently about the practical performance of magical music in the Middle Ages?

The groundwork for the answer to this question has been laid by medieval historians, chief among them Richard Kieckhefer. Over the last few decades, Kieckhefer has put into sharp focus the liturgical context of a great deal of magical activities, including music performance. In his important history of magic in the Middle Ages cited earlier, Kieckhefer has now famously argued that magic often took place in a “clerical underworld.” As he points out, the average medieval cleric possessed only rudimentary training in Latin and the liturgy. And many members of the lower clerical orders especially were active as tradesmen outside the church, as Kieckhefer argues. These medieval churchmen easily participated in a host of popular and quasi-liturgical rituals ranging from healing ceremonies to necromantic invocations. These rituals, although mostly condemned by the church, were both deeply rooted in antiquity and widespread among the general medieval population.

It should not surprise us, therefore, that most surviving medieval magic texts emanate from ecclesiastic or monastic milieus. We have seen this most clearly in the case of the “monastic recreations” in Paris, Bibliothèque natio-

64. Combarieu, La musique et la magie, 109–10.
nale de France, lat. 3713, studied by d’Alverny (table 1, left column). Another such case is the outstanding manuscript transmission of the popular *Ars notoria*, including the recension devoted to shorthand writing found in manuscript Royal 12 C VI and discussed above. The widespread *Ars notoria* was a treatise of Solomonic ritual magic containing prayers and special figures or *notae* for the rapid acquisition of knowledge, in particular the seven liberal arts. As Julien Véronèse has put it in his recent edition cited earlier, the *Ars notoria* “was born from Christian hands,” as the ample Biblical and liturgical references found throughout make clear.\(^66\) Marie-Thérèse d’Alverny traced its origins to twelfth-century monastic communities.\(^67\) Arguably the most celebrated name in recent scholarship attached to the *Ars notoria* is that of Jean de Morigny, a monk from northern France who composed his “branch” of this magic work in the early fourteenth century. For Jean as for many practitioners of the *Ars notoria*, religious devotion was integral to the efficacy of the art. As related in a famous passage from the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, Jean required that the reader of his so-called *Book of Visions of the Blessed and Undefiled Virgin Mary* prepare himself adequately with prayers and fasting.\(^68\)

We come directly to music performance and incantations with yet another case of the monastic milieu of magic, a fifteenth-century German necromancer’s manual edited by Kieckhefer.\(^69\) This magic book is a collection of prayers and conjurations for a variety of purposes: illusionism, psychological experiments, and, of course, the exorcism and conjuration of demons. As with most medieval practices, this is late evidence of a much older activity that, as Kieckhefer points out, was hardly peripheral in medieval society.\(^70\) Indeed, the proximity of these prayers to those of the mainstream medieval liturgy is striking. Many specify which chant should be imitated; others borrow liturgical chants wholesale; some even prescribe the recitation of a mass.


\(^{70}\) Kieckhefer, *Forbidden Rites*, 10.
The latter, of course, implies that the operator is a cleric. Named mass and office chants include the Kyrie, Sanctus, and Asperges me.

Example 1: Asperges me chant

If we find it difficult to imagine how a chant like the Asperges me might have migrated out of its liturgical context into a magical one, some assistance comes from vernacular literature, and in particular animal stories. In animal stories, the symbolism of a given animal is crucial to its narrative role. Certain animals traditionally considered Satanic in bestiaries and elsewhere have a similar diabolical role to play in vernacular animal romances. The fox and the ass are especially prominent as Satanic or malevolent characters in late medieval romances. These two animals feature prominently in two important romances for the study of music, Renart le nouvel (ca. 1300) and the Roman de Fauvel (ca. 1315). In the former, the ass Timer represents a corrupt ecclesiastic, probably an archbishop. When Timer the archbishop-ass intones chant, therefore, he does so satirically. Near the end of Renart le nouvel, Timer sings the Te Deum that is notated in several manuscripts of the romance. The context for this chant drips with satire, as Timer the archbishop has just lifted the excommunication over the evil Renart; with this chant he opens a meal held in the fox’s honor. Earlier in the romance another cleric—a human this time—sings the Asperges me chant (example 1), which is also noted in the

71. E.g., Kieckhefer, Forbidden Rites, 9.
72. E.g., Kieckhefer, Forbidden Rites, 202 and 225.
75. Roussel, Renart le nouvel, line 6946.
manuscripts. This too is a satire of authentic liturgical performances. Renart has just falsely confessed his evil deeds to save a sinking ship, and the priest follows this up by sprinkling the ship with holy water and singing the Asperges me. The performance here clearly parodies a standard liturgical one of the Asperges me.

This is the very same chant cited in the fifteenth-century German necromancer’s manual edited by Kieckhefer. That the same chant occurs in such diverse contexts attests to the flexibility of liturgical song. From its satiric and parodic role in Renart le nouvel, a century or so later the Asperges me chant has waded further out into the decidedly non-liturgical waters of the necromancy manual. In both cases, we find liturgical chant where we are unaccustomed to seeing it, in places well outside the typical narrow perimeters of mass and office favored by modern scholarship, as discussed earlier. Both cases attest to the close relationship between magic and liturgical song throughout the Middle Ages.

What distinguished magical chant from its conventional liturgical counterpart? Since the pitches and words of chants were apparently often little changed in magic rituals, how then did a magical performance of, say, the Asperges me differ from its standard liturgical one? It is likely that the difference lay in the manner of performance and in the sound or timbre of the voice. The topic of “the sound of medieval song,” to borrow the title of Timothy McGee’s important book, is a surprisingly poorly studied topic, partly on account of medieval music writers’ relative apathy towards it. Luckily, however, one unusual testimony on the sound of incantations does survive, as Béatrice Delaurenti has recently stated in her study of late medieval scholarly debates on incantations. In a series of writings spanning the 1350s and 1360s, Nicole Oresme discusses what incantations sound like. In one particularly vivid passage, Oresme describes the performer of incantations as changing in countenance, and appearing “as if half-dead.” He mixes animal cries with other sounds of nature, Oresme reports; “an unfitting and almost trumpet-like cry resounds.”

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76. Roussel, Renart le nouvel, line 5304.
80. Clagett, Nicole Oresme, 368–369, Delaurenti, La puissance des mots, 467.
Example 2: Anonymous fourteenth-century song, opening (Oxford, Corpus Christi College Library 233, fol. 150v)\textsuperscript{81}

Hopefully, future research will uncover similar passages that will further elucidate the sound of medieval magical song and other aspects of practical music making related to magic. As for music that is explicitly magical, more discoveries remain to supplement the sources identified some fifty years ago by Wolfgang Irtenkauf as containing astrological melodies related to computus study.\textsuperscript{82} I recently discovered one outstanding anonymous fourteenth-century melody on a badly mutilated folio at the end of the miscellany Oxford, Corpus Christi College Library 233 (example 2). The form of this

melody is reminiscent of a liturgical sequence, the ornate song performed in between scripture readings during mass; it follows a paired phrase structure (AABBCC). The text of this song, however, describes a distinctly non-liturgical gathering. The first strophe mentions the “secret ones” who come together. The second strophe states that the lead singer should be “mad with the muse,” and the fourth mentions “the single path to the Lower World.” The song goes on in its fifth strophe (not given in example 2) to mention a “strange deity” (peregrina deitas).

CONCLUSION

Why music and magic in the Middle Ages? To sum up my arguments in this essay, magic inhabits both speculative and practical music. In the speculative tradition, magic shows up not only in music treatises but also in works not specifically devoted to music. As an example of the latter, we have looked at discussions of astrology and music in the works of Adelard of Bath and some of his Arabic sources. In treatises strictly on music of the thirteenth and fourteenth century, we find generalities—such as esoteric writing codes and the importance of astrology—and specific concepts—such as nota and proprietas—that clearly connect these treatises to contemporary magic works such as the Ars notoria. In relation to this, I will also single out the theme of esoteric writing that has come up several times in this essay. In music, this theme shows up in the complex graphic codes of the fourteenth century, those of the Ars nova and the so-called Ars subtilior. Concepts associated with music notation such as nota and figura also belong to the broader magic theme of a difficult and esoteric art. As for practical music making, the important musical genre of the incantation shows up in various medieval quotidian contexts, from medicinal procedures to para-liturgical rituals. From healing songs to ritualistic instrumental performances, a great deal of magical music performed in the Middle Ages must have shared characteristics with liturgical chant, but also differed from it in fundamental ways.

Given the abiding relationship between music and magic in the Middle Ages, it is difficult to agree with the argument that musical magic needed to be resurrected in the Renaissance. As I have argued here, the extant evidence has still much to offer us concerning the many ways in which music pervaded the magical arts of the Middle Ages, from writing to healing rituals. This relationship between music and magic was not new; it had been present long before the medieval period and would endure well after it. When, in

the fifteenth century, Marsilio Ficino speculated about magical song and its relationship to demons, he was not offering a brand new thought. Ficino was merely pursuing ideas that had fascinated many others long before him, and contributing in his own way to the well established relationship between two of the greatest arts in history: magic and music.
