Viderunt Omnes By Magister Leoninus Essay, Research Paper

Magister Leoninus

Viderunt Omnes

When George Gershwin wrote “I Got Rhythm,” he knew that, for generations to come, listeners and performers alike would have a good idea of what he meant. After all, there would be recordings and piano rolls of his actual performances of the piece. Not to mention a standardized notation system to guide future performers. Alas, no such musical preservatives were available to Magister Leoninus in the last half of the 12th century, presuming he would have wanted them even if they had existed. What were his sonic intentions? We’ll cover some of the possibilities using two very different recordings of his version of the Gradual, from the Mass Proper, “Viderunt Omnes.” One interpretation, by the EMCL (C. 1975), utilizes a strict metrical rhythmic structure, while the other example, by the Ensemble Organum (C. 1990), features a much freer rhythmic approach. These will be referred to as “metric” and “free” respectively.

The metric version has a Western feel that would seem more “correct” to ears of European leaning (or learning). Much as we tend to view the past through the prism of today, those who eventually set these ancient chants in standardized notation saw them through an equally tainted gaze. The Benedictine monks left most ornamentation out of their chant settings (C. 1900) because they viewed it as an 18th Century tradition.1 This bias, along with a need to have an easily learnable piece of music, tended to simplify, rather than embellish, the standardized arrangement. True, it could be argued that the text has a certain rhythmic lilt (conspectum gentium . . . ); however, only one writer from the period, around 1300, noted any parallel between the rhythmic modes and poetic meter.2 Hardly a case for common practice. To my ears, this metric version sounds stilted and stoic. Almost as if it has been stuffed into ill-fitting clothes by a nearsighted tailor. I find the addition of a bell, reinforcing certain downbeats, insipid at best. For people who had yet to be enslaved by the clock, this is too square.

The free version sounds much more organic to me; flowing and cascading like a winding river. Could this be more in line with what Leonin intended? Composers of early polyphony were still using a horizontal (additive) method in which each line was its own entity. This would not impart strict rhythm as the later vertical (simultaneous) method of the renaissance would. Regardless of the composer’s original intentions, he must have known that this particular piece would be performed with varying gusto and attention throughout the year depending on the occasion. Yes, it could be argued that the discant sections use the very Western concept of sequences; however, I believe it is the Eastern practice of centonization at play here. Keeping that in mind, the more Eastern practice of melodic mordents, trills, and frills is not as conducive to strict rhythmic performance as a stark plain melody would be. Marcel Peres believes a lot of these chants were performed using ornamentation that is still living in Byzantine, Syriac, or Coptic pieces.3 Above all, this piece just sounds more spiritual to me. Immediately the ambience struck me as more church-like. Steady rhythm is for dancing, and no one was dancing to this chant. I think.

I’m convinced that music evolved according to the surroundings in which it existed. As music became used for more secular purposes, it moved out of the sonic sanctuary of the Gothic churches and into the light. Without the stoney layers of natural reverb to meld entrances and changes in pitch into a wash of sound, I belive composers and musicians became more aware of precision and the need for it in new surroundings that were not so forgiving of sloppiness. This particular piece remains rooted in the sloppy age. Rhythmic notation was an emerging craft as was polyphonic composition. In lieu of this, I would not expect singers in the 13th Century to be consistently skilled at their execution. Personally, I think the original intention of Leonin was somewhere between the two versions we’ve dicussed. Once again, I’m assuming Leonin had a specific intention. Like a few 20th Century composers, he might have been merely creating a loose framework, knowing the piece would evolve and change with each performance. Back to my take – I believe the melismatic organum sections were to be performed in an ad-lib free manner. Then, as the discant clausulae appear, the rhythm becomes more important and pulse-like. The next section, the copula, would then serve as a way to unfurl that rhythm into the nebulous organum of the beginning. Leonin was, after all, starting down this path of polyphony without a map. By taking taking the old and adding to it (troping), he could bring about new textures without abandoning the old. He was playing with polyphony and discovering the rhythmic variation it offered. Melodic variation of the time (tuning, 1/4 or 1/3 tones) would require another paper to discuss. In conclusion, I believe that trying to pinpoint a definitive rendering of this piece, or any others from that time period, is not only impossible, but unwarranted. Even today, one can find examples of fairly new tunes that are played differently in different places on different occasions. Thelonious Monk’s “‘Round Midnight,” within a decade of its release, was already being played with “East Coast changes” or “West Coast changes.” Things would have been much more diverse before mass communication. However, if I were to pick between the free or metric renditions, I would pick the free version. It just sounds more authentic to my modern ears. Besides, an internet search tells the score: Peres 12, Morrow 0.