To talk about the Middle Ages in front of a freshman (i.e. first-year student) class, in an epoch that seems to deny the usefulness of knowing about the past, is bound to be a frustrating prospect, in many ways. We cannot, however, ignore the fact that without knowledge of our musical tradition, which was built throughout centuries of history and civilization, it is impossible to arrive at a correct comprehension of the music works of the past (the more they are far from us, the more exotic they sound). Besides this, the younger generations would lack a precious tool that allows them to interconnect several domains of knowledge (the arts, literature, mathematics, scientific disciplines). This is why the study of music history remains the main way to follow for the development of musical culture.

Our journey starts in the early Middle Ages, when the invention and large-scale use of music writing brought about a radical change in the creation of music, and marked the beginning of “music history” itself. The appearance of music notation is a key chapter in our discipline, for both its domain-specific and cultural content, but it is also one of the most exposed to criticism for allegedly producing superficial, dry knowledge, because it presupposes the study of many technical aspects. In order to describe the earliest non-diastematic neume notation techniques, or to explain the ensuing introduction of staff notation, we not only need a basic knowledge of music theory, but also notions and methodologies borrowed from paleography and philology. Of course, if we limit ourselves to the technical-theoretical aspects, our discussion will sound abstract and not particularly stimulating. But we can change this perspective completely, and generate productive didactic ideas, if we establish a connection between the introduction and development of notation in the transmission of Gregorian chant and the political factors and cultural implications behind its development. Students will find this much more realistic, immediate, and attractive than a solely technical and theoretical discussion.

So the purpose should be to combine a chronologically organized list of facts with some of the procedures that specialists (in our case, historians) employ in their work, in particular the use and study of documents. This approach is especially suited for undergraduate courses, since it encourages students to reconstruct history through a rigorous critical method.1

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1 See M. R. DE LUCA, “Constructing Music History in the Classroom”, this issue, pp. 113-121; see also C. DAHLHAUS, “Che significa e a qual fine si studia la storia della
In my Medieval music history course, when I get to talk about Guido’s introduction of the staff, I do not limit myself to present this essential, early 11th-century technical innovation as a product of the genius of the monk from Arezzo, for this would be reductive and historically inaccurate. In fact, the staff was not an “invention” in the true sense of the word. The contribution of Guido consisted in perfecting and systematizing a practice that was already under way towards the end of the 10th century, in the writing of Southern France and Southern Italy (Aquitanian and Beneventan notation). Already a few decades before Guido, the monastic scribes of these regions used to carefully arrange the neumes over the text words, so that they could reproduce, with some degree of approximation, the interval distances of the melodic line – hence the current definition of ‘imperfect diastematic notation’, because without the staff and the keys, the pitches remain uncertain. In other words, it would be possible to trace staffs on these pages simply by connecting the notes of the same pitch to each other (provided that we know their pitch from other sources; Fig. 1).

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Fig. 1 – Facsimiles of the two manuscripts: Benevento, Biblioteca capitolare, 33, f. 82r (Gradual 10th-11th century) and Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 776, f. 13r (Gradual from Gaillac, 11th century). I have added two thin red lines in order to highlight the option described above.

In our case, the reference is the Beneventan notation, which was also employed in Tuscany, although in forms that were simpler than the Campanian model at the time of Guido. So, because he apparently built on specific local conventions, which he only fine-tuned to make them more efficient, the myth
of Guido as a genius is somewhat debunked, in favor of the idea that artistic creation in the Middle Ages was ultimately a collective effort, strongly based on tradition rather than on the creative act of an isolated individual. This conclusion has a clearly positive impact in terms of education.3

The writings of Guido, however, contain information not only about the technical details of his innovation, but also about the cultural, social and political mechanisms behind it. So on the one hand, he explains how his system works:

Therefore, pitches are so arranged that each sound, howsoever much it is repeated in a chant, is always found in one and the same row. In order that you can better distinguish these rows, lines are drawn closely, and they make some rows of pitches on the lines themselves, some between the lines, that is, in the space between the lines. Thus, however many sounds there are on one line or on one space, they all sound similarly. And so that you can understand, moreover, how many lines or spaces involve one sound, certain letters of the monochord are affixed to certain lines or spaces, and even colors are added. From which it is given to be understood, that in the whole antiphoner and in every chant, however many lines or spaces have one and the same letter or the same color, thus they sound similarly in every respect, just as if all had been on one line. Because just as the line indicates the identity of sounds, so the letter or color indicates the identity of lines in every respect, and through this also of sounds (Prologus in Antiphonarium, 44-49).4

On the other hand, he stresses that it is the only way to put an end to the confusion in the liturgical practice of his time, and thus to attain the ideal of standardization in prayer that had been a general aspiration since the Carolingian age:


Who does not bewail that also, which is so grave an error in the holy Church, and so dangerous a discord, that when we celebrate the divine office, we are seen often not to praise God, but to vie among ourselves. In short, scarcely one agrees with another, not the pupil with the teacher, nor the pupil with his fellow pupils. From which it follows that the antiphoners are by now not one nor even a few, but so many as there are teachers in the separate churches, and now commonly the antiphoner is called not Gregory’s, but Leo’s or Albert’s, or anybody else’s (Ibid., 30-33).

But Guido also does not fail to emphasize the undisputable advantages offered by his method, which gives singers an otherwise unattainable autonomy: “For, in such a way, with the help of God I have determined to note this antiphoner, so that hereafter through it, any intelligent and diligent person can learn a chant, and after he has learned well part of it through a teacher, he recognizes the rest unhesitantly by himself without a teacher” (Ibid., 40-41).

Behind these considerations, however, hides what was a much greater concern for monks and Medieval religious life in general: to reduce the enormous waste of time needed to study chants in an oral tradition system: But wretched singers and pupils of singers, even if they should sing every day for a hundred years, will never sing by themselves without a teacher one antiphon, not even a short one, wasting so much time in singing that they could have spent better learning thoroughly sacred and secular writing. And what of all evils is more dangerous, many canons and monks neglect the psalms and sacred readings, and nocturnal vigils with purity, and others works of piety, through which we are summoned and led to everlasting glory, while they pursue by a most unremitting and most foolish effort the science of singing, which they can never master (Ibid., 21-29).
As the musicus explains in another work, this goal, which seems unattainable, becomes really easy when melodies are read from a book in which neumes are reproduced on a staff: “… I undertook, among other things, to teach music to boys, … and some of them, trained by imitating the steps of the mono[chord], with the practice of our notation, were within the space of a month singing so securely at first sight chants they had not seen or heard, that it was the greatest wonder to many people” (Micrologus, Prol., 32-35).  

Given the character of this paper here I will not address the problems that Guido had to face in his personal life, which had to do with the fact that his innovation challenged the privileged status that singers enjoyed within the monastic community, as the keepers and undisputed authorities of the musical tradition. The clashes that broke out in Pomposa as a result of this led him to abandon the abbey, and find hospitality at Tedaldo of Canossa, bishop of Arezzo (we have an impassioned account of this in Guido’s letter to his brother Michele).

With my students, however, I always stress the fact that Guido’s theological and pastoral considerations are in keeping with the aspirations to a religious life that had to be more consistent with the message of the Gospels, as advocated in the same epoch by Pier Damiani and the Camaldolese monks, who paved the way for the reform of Pope Gregory VII, aimed at bringing order in the Church’s structure. Indeed, very few people know that the monk from Arezzo can be included among the forerunners of the Gregorian Reform: while a clue to this may be his collaboration with the bishop of Arezzo, the uncle of Matilda of Canossa, who was the most stalwart supporter of Gregory VII, conclusive

11 See GUIDO D’AREZZO, Le opere cit., p. LXXIII f.


musical writing clearly imported from Tuscany, i.e. with the neumes written on a Guidonian staff (including the red line of F and the yellow line of C).\textsuperscript{14}

Fig. 2 – Pages of two manuscripts: Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, 123, f. 142v, and Modena, Archivio capitolare, O.I.13, f. 159v, which allow to contrast two versions of the same introitus to a mass written in honor of two typically Bolognese saints, the martyrs Vitale and Agricola: the first version uses non-diastematic neumes; in the second the same neumes are written on a staff.

I am convinced that, for an effective didactics of music history (not only medieval, but of other epochs as well), it is always profitable to combine the analytical description of technical and theoretical phenomena with considerations about the historical facts behind them. If we search for the reasons that led the men and women of such a distant time to adopt a certain innovation, or conversely to hold on to a specific tradition, we will be able to give a vivid picture of historical processes that might otherwise seem inexplicable or abstract.

\textit{cesarino.ruini@unibo.it}