

# Music Notation

## Erin Rumsey – The Invention of Writing

### Context

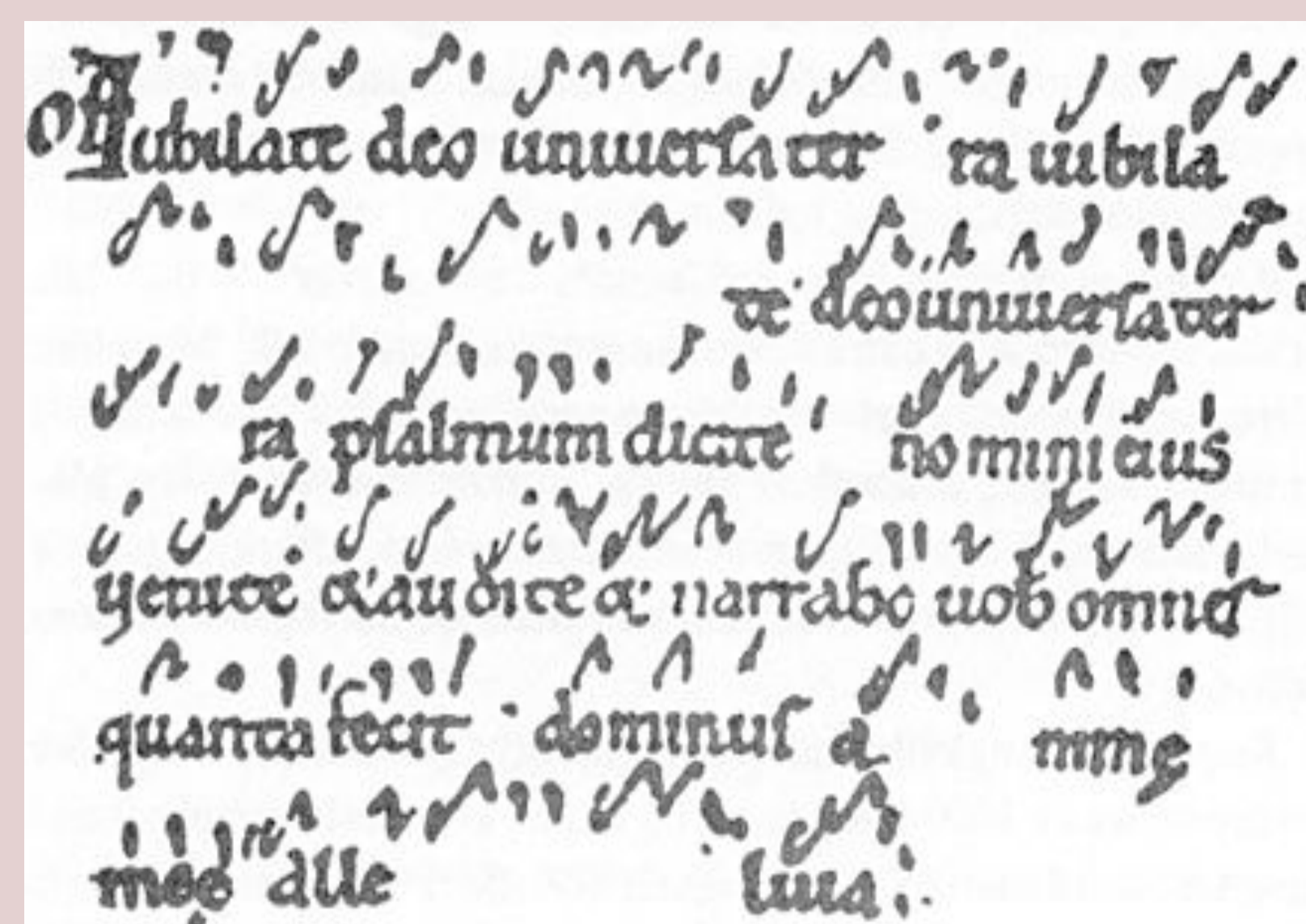
Ever since I began learning music, I have relied on sheet music. I saw notation as necessary to music. Through our class, I have learned to think more critically. Many things cannot be written down. Writing has also changed the kind of music we play, and it has affected the relationship people have with music.

### Thesis

People tend to give a lot of authority to what is written down, and they lose sight of what is not. But every notation system only notates some things and not others. There are many positives to music notation: we can preserve music over time, and we can compose much more complex pieces than before. But there are also some negatives: we are transfixed by the notation and our performances, we do not know how to perform songs from oral traditions, and we neglect all those aspects of music that cannot be notated.

Notation developed to fit the society that it was written for, but because society grew to value writing more and more, notation also developed to be more complex and distant from the oral tradition. This also enabled scholars to study music as a theoretical thing instead of something that was meant to be played. Musicians, too, have allowed themselves to become limited by what is printed on the page. It is easy to see notation as absolute truth, forgetting that another human notated that music. Musicians find themselves becoming slaves to the page and the goal of playing a piece “perfectly.” This is an unrealistic goal, and it causes them to lose the expressivity and emotion that makes music so wonderful.

Throughout music history, there have been many different notation systems. The earliest notated music we know about was in Cuneiform and dates back to two millennia BC. In the European Middle Ages, monks used “neumes” as a mnemonic tool to give an idea of whether the melody went “up” or “down,” but music was still learned orally. Today’s staff notation can notate pitch, the length of notes, rhythm, dynamics. It does not notate tone color, expression, and phrasing.



Ninth century Psalm verse with early neumes (Source: Wikipedia)

In my own experience, music is at its best when whoever is playing it truly feels the emotion of a piece and they are able to convey that emotion through their performance. There is no feeling on earth like the feeling of a piece of music being so impactful and emotional that it moves you to tears. This class has caused me to think critically about notation and has helped me realize that when writing is introduced, we allow ourselves to focus too much on what is printed and focus too little on how music makes us feel.



From the first page of Great Book of Organum (Source: Penelope Turner)

If this class has taught me one thing, it is that when we begin to write things down, society begins to change. In the case of notation, as songs began to be written down, those aspects that did not conform to the new system of writing were lost. The Western system of notation is often considered superior and no longer questioned. In schools, many children are taught to play the notes in front of them and only the notes in front of them. There is an inherent lack of emotion in playing notes written on a page in an almost robotic fashion, and this shows that focusing too much on the notation leads to a standardization of music and a mechanical performance that drains the emotion and enjoyment from it. The emotion of music is something that can never be notated. It can only be cultivated through practice and personal reflection on how a piece makes a player feel.

### Sources:

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