

Notker's Letter to Lantbertus about the *Litterae significativae*

Notker Lantberto fratri salutem. Quid singulae litterae in superscriptione significant cantilenae, prout potui iuxta tuam petitionem explanare curavi.

Notker sends greetings to Brother Lambert. In response to your request I have undertaken to explain, to the best of my ability, the meaning of the single letters written above songs.

A ut Altius eleuetur Admonet.

lift up, higher

B secundum litteras quibus adiungitur, ut Bene id est multum extollatur uel grauetur siue teneatur Belgicat

well, very much (concerning the meaning of another letter)

C ut cito uel celeriter dicatur Certificat.

quickly

D ut Deprimatur Demonstrat.

go lower

E ut Equaliter sonetur Eloquitur.

in equal fashion

F ut cum Fragore seu Frenore Feriatur eFFlagitat.

striking with a crashing or gnashing sound

G ut in Guttore Gradatim Garruletur Genuine Gratulatur.

chirping stepwise upward in the throat

H ut tantum in scriptura aspirat, ita et in nota idipsum Habitat

aspirate the note

I iusum uel inferius insinuat, grautudinemque pro g interdum indicat.

down or downward, low

K licet apud latinos nihil ualeat, apud nos tamen alemannos pro κ greca positum, klenche id est clange clamitat.

noise, resonance

L Leuare Laetatur.

lift up

M Mediocriter Melodiam Moderari Mendicando Memorat.

mediate the melody moderately

N Notare hoc est Noscitare Notificat.

pay notice

- O** figuram sui in ore cantantis ordinat. *with O-shaped mouth*
- P** pressionem uel prensionem predicat. *emphasis, pressing*
- Q** in significationibus notarum cur quaeratur? cum etiam in uerbis ad nihil aliud scribatur nisi ut sequens u uim suam amittere queratur. *[no meaning]*
- R** rectitudinem uel rasuram non abolitionis sed crispationis rogitat. *the straightening or erasing of curls*
- S** susum uel sursum scandere sibilat. *climbing upward*
- T** trahere uel tenere debere testatur. *drawing out or sustaining*
- U** licet amissa ui sua, ualde ueluti uau greca uel hebrea uelificat. *very much*
- X** quamuis latina per se uerba non inchoet, tamen expectare expetit. *wait*
- Y** apud latinos nihil ymnizat. *[no meaning]*
- Z** uero licet et ipsa mere greca, et ob id haut necessaria romanis, propter praedictam tamen r litterae occupationem, ad alia requirere, in sua lingua zitise [ζητησαι]. *inquire*

Ubicumque autem due uel tres aut plures litterae ponuntur in uno loco, ex superiori interpretatione, maximeque illa quam de b dixi, quid sibi uelint facile poterit aduerti.

Salutant te ellinici fratres, monentes sollicitum te fieri de ratione embolismi triennis, ut absque errore gnarus esse ualeas biennis, contempto precio diuitiarum Xerxis

But wherever two or three or more letters are written in one place, one can easily determine their meaning from the above explanation, especially from what I have said about b.

The Hellenic brothers send their greetings, reminding you to be careful in reckoning the three-year intercalation, so that you are able to do the two-year one without error, spurning the riches of Xerxes.

Martianus Capella on Alphabet Letters

The letters of the alphabet as described by Martianus Capella in *The Marriage of Mercury and Philology* (*De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*), written c.420.

Capella's list is appended to Notker's letter in its two earliest sources, Florence (Handout 73) and St Gall 381 (Handout 74), but is not found in later manuscripts.

[261] We utter *A* with the mouth open, with a single suitable breath.
We make *B* by the outburst of breath from closed lips.
C is made by the back teeth brought forward over the back of the tongue.
D is made by bringing the tongue against the top teeth.
E is made by a breath with the tongue a little depressed.
F is made by the teeth pressing on the lower lip.
G, by a breath against the palate.
H is made by an exhalation with the throat a little closed.
I is made by a breath with the teeth kept close together.
K is made with the palate against the top of the throat.
L is a soft sound made with the tongue and the palate.
M is a pressing together of the lips.
N is formed by the contact of the tongue on the teeth.
O is made by a breath with the mouth rounded.
P is a forceful exhalation from the lips.
Q is a contraction of the palate with the mouth half-closed.
R is a rough exhalation with the tongue curled against the roof of the mouth.
S is a hissing sound with the teeth in contact.
T is a blow of the tongue against the teeth.
U is made with the mouth almost closed and the lips forward a little.
X is the sibilant combination of *C* and *S*.
Y is a breath with the lips close together.
Z was abhorrent to Appius Claudius, because it resembles in its expression the teeth of a corpse.

After William Harris Stahl with E. L. Burge, trans., *Martianus Capella and the Seven Liberal Arts*, 2 vols. Records of Western Civilization: Sources and Studies, 84 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 2: 75.

The Marriage of Philology and Mercury is one of several famous encyclopedic books that were current throughout the Middle Ages, and that provided a *summa* of contemporary

knowledge. Like many such books, it is structured as an overview of the Seven Liberal Arts.

The Seven Liberal Arts were the bedrock of advanced education in the Middle Ages. It was the core curriculum at the University (itself a Medieval institution, going back to *c.*1200). The seven disciplines were divided into two groups of three and four, respectively:

the language arts: Grammar, Dialectic, Rhetoric

the number arts: Mathematics, Music, Geometry, Astronomy

The two groups were named after intersections of roads. Since the Latin word for road is *via*, the intersection of three roads was called a *tri-vium* or *trivium*. By the same token, the intersection of four roads, or a four-way crossing, was called a *quadrivium*.

In the Medieval university curriculum, the language arts of the Trivium came before the number arts of the Quadrivium. This gave them the reputation of being less advanced, indeed merely preparatory, a perception that gave rise to the word *trivialis* or trivial.

Once the curriculum of the seven arts was successfully completed, the student had earned the license to teach the arts himself. The word for one carrying this license was *magister*, or master. The medieval title *magister in artibus* has survived in its modern counterpart Master of Arts. The General Exam in our department is slightly more distinguished than that, for the degree to be had is MFA, Master of Fine Arts.

In the Medieval arts curriculum, music was taught as a science, a branch of academic learning, not as practical musicianship. The standard textbook, until at least the 16th century, was the *Musica* by Boethius, written a millennium previously. This book is devoted entirely to the mathematics of consonance, and spends much of its time on the calculation of pitch ratios. It is not an especially gripping read.

All this explains why every Medieval intellectuals had at least a basic grounding in the science of musical sound and hearing.