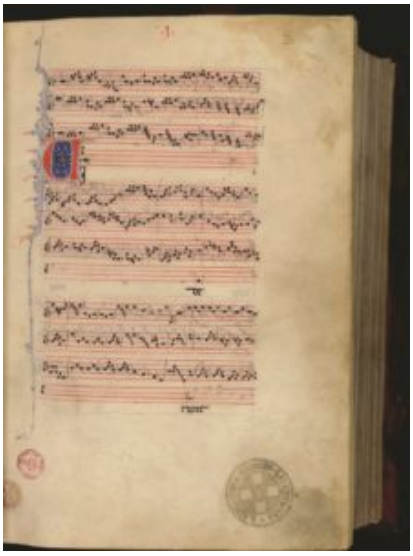
Viderunt Omnes: A New Era Has Begun

Enrico Correggia, musician and writer.

Florence is wonderful. Especially first thing in the morning, with the scent of cappuccino and pastries filling the air while all around me appear incomparable works of art. In front of me stands the Palazzo Vecchio, to the right the Uffizi Gallery: any art history enthusiast would pay the earth to be in my shoes!

Taking a walk of impressive intellectual delight, I pass the house of the Poet Supreme, Dante Alighieri, and the magnificent cathedral, finally arriving at Borgo San Lorenzo and the famous Laurentian Library[1]. Here I am surrounded by a priceless collection of writings, dating from the 5th century until today: manuscript works by Petrarch and Boccaccio, Justinian's *Digest**[2]***, the *Codex Amiatinus**[3]*** and many other wonders.

However, there is only one text that I am interested in at present; and there it is, as I expected. *Pluteus 29.1*, known to most as *Magnus Liber Organi**[4]***. The manuscript is open, on a table, placed there by the experts. My heart in my mouth, my knees shaking. I finally manage to touch it … and as Dante wrote, *caddi, come corpo morto cade*: I fall to the ground as if dead.



A page from the 'Magnus Liber Organi de Gradali et Antiphonario', Firenze, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Pluteus 29.1

I pick myself up, hoping that no one saw me faint. Luckily I fell on to something soft. How strange: I did not expect to find snow inside the library … snow?!? Not only am I no longer in Florence, but to judge from what I see around me, from the clothes and the expressions of the people, I am actually in another age!

*Paris, 1198 A.D., the 18th year of the reign of Philip II**[5]**, the first of Pope Innocent III**[6]**.*

Just as I pick myself up and find my feet, I am knocked down again by a horde of children playing and chasing one another. A gentleman helps me to my feet and takes me into the warmth of a tavern, giving me some money to buy something hot. He explains that soon he will have to leave me because he has to go to Mass: it is Christmas. A spark lights up my mind: perhaps I know why we are here. "Absolutely not!" I say. "I'm coming too".

And so we begin to walk towards Notre Dame Cathedral. Just in time to see the start of a fight in our inn; a customer has just lost everything at dice and is trying to avoid paying his debts. The church is very different from the one we know today. It is a huge building site. The sanctuary is complete, as is the ambulatory; it is not even twenty years since the altar was consecrated[7]. The choir and the eastern part of the transept are accessible and a temporary wall has been erected in the western part, so that liturgical services can take place undisturbed by the building work. The aisle is not yet complete.

My new friend and I take our places just as the bells begin to ring. The Mass has begun. I see the "new" Bishop of Paris, Eudes de Sully[8], make his processional entry, dressed in pontifical robes, while the choir sings *Puer Natus**[9]***. Pinnacles of incense rise up towards the arched roofs until they reach the keystone of the magnificent cross-vaulting. And so, between *torculus* and *salicus,* between *scandicus* and *porrectus**[10]***, the choir comes to the end of the Introitus and continues with Kyrie *Cunctipotens**[11],*** and Gloria soon after, while the Bishop softly recites Psalm 42 and the Confiteor, with the deacon and the sub-deacon, as they proceed to cense the altar[12].

As the singing comes to an end, the sub-deacon reads the Epistle of St. Paul to the Hebrews in a clear, ringing voice.

I tremble. I know what is about to happen. I look anxiously towards the choir. A cantor in his forties, presumably the *succentor**[13],*** gives me a big smile. It is him, the great *Magister Perotinus**[14],*** one of the most prominent figures of the school of Notre Dame. One of the figureheads of medieval music. He is there, right in front of my eyes, just one step away from my ears. What happens in the next few moments is history.

Listen to Pérotin, 'Viderunt Omnes'

A pause which seems to last a lifetime follows the epistle. Then comes a great explosion of joy. The gradual *Viderunt Omnes*. In a setting – for the first time – for four voices. I see a hint of a smile on the Bishop's face: his instructions have been observed[15].

After a small pause on the fifth, the other voices float and sway on the long bourdon of the tenor. The "Vi" is dreamily lulled, like a small boat on a slightly choppy sea, in a small but definite crescendo towards the "de". The heavens open in glory to allow the voices, now darker, to reach up to the "runt". The great mystery of the incarnation is now revealed in an almost troubled manner. On the "Om", mankind once more finds certainty and is carried away in a whirling vortex, in a great *jubilus**[16]*** which grows and grows, reaching its peak in the final "nes". How wonderful! The rest of the gradual is now sung in Gregorian monody, up to the verse.

But it is not over yet.

*Notum fecit Dóminus salutáre suum: ante conspéctum géntium revelávit iustítiam suam.**[17]***

The four voices are once again embracing and intertwining. The astonished expression on the faces of the people sitting next to me clearly expresses the uniqueness of the piece. The music flows towards the buttresses, filling the rafters with harmonies. Nothing like this has ever been heard before. As

the neums follow one another the music becomes more and more aggressive, underlining the key concept: *"Revelavit".* And, from there, the fire dies down in a monodic finale which, being so unexpected, emphasises still more the essence of divine " *iustitiam".* And now I understand what John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres, meant when he wrote[18]:

"When you listen to the sweet harmonies of the different singers, those who sing the high notes and those who sing the low notes, some anticipating the music and some following behind, still others with rests and interludes, you might think you were listening to a chorus of sirens rather than humans, and marvel at the power of voices… not even the singing of the most tuneful birds can match it. Such is the ease with which the voices fly up and down the scales, so wonderful the shortening or multiplication of notes, the repetition of phrases or their emphatic expression: the shrill high notes are so well blended with tenors and basses, that your ears have lost their power of discernment. When this is done to excess, it is more likely to arouse lust rather than devotion, but if it is kept within the limits of moderation, it relieves the soul from the cares and anxieties of life, gives joy and peace and rejoicing in the Lord, and carries the soul into the company of the angels."

Just as the Alleluia (*Dies Sanctificatus**[19]***) is about to be sung and the Deacon prepares to pick up the Gospel, I see everything disappear in a swirl around me. The pleased smile of Perotinus, the walls of Notre Dame, the members of the congregation … everything dissolves into a …"splash"!

There he stands, in front of me: Perotinus, in a jacket and tie. The badge pinned to his lapel reads: "*Pietro – Laurentian Library*".

A puddle of water surrounds my head.

"I'm sorry, I poured water on you: I couldn't wake you up," he

says.

I apologise for my embarrassing behaviour and promise to return later, when I hope to be more emotionally stable, then I decide to return to my hotel. Did I dream it all?

On the way back, I think about everything that has happened and slip my hand into my pocket. Inside I find a coin from the time of Philip II of France …

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[1] The Laurentian Library, based on a personal collection belonging to the de' Medici family, was created at the behest of Pope Clement VII, who commissioned Michelangelo to design it. It is one of the most important libraries in the world.

[2] A legal work in fifty books commissioned by Emperor Justinian.

[3] The oldest surviving version (late seventh century) of St Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible (known as the Vulgate).

[4] The *Magnus Liber Organi de Gradali et Antiphonario pro servitio divino* is a collection of medieval choral music (called *organum*) from the School of Notre Dame in Paris. The only two known authors, made famous by the so- called "Anonymous IV" [the writer of an important treatise on medieval music theory, probably English, who was attached to Notre Dame Cathedral around 1270/1280 – translator] are Leoninus and Perotinus. The *Pluteus* dates back to about the middle of the 13th century and was copied and illuminated in the workshop of Jean Grusch in Paris.

[5] Philip II, known as Augustus, of the Capetian dynasty. He reigned from 1180 to his death in 1223.

[6] Born Lothar of Segni, Pope from 1198 until his death in 1216.

[7] Consecrated in 1182 by Henri de Château-Marçay, Papal Legate, attended by Bishop Maurice de Sully. The choir was completed a little earlier, in 1177.

[8] Brother of Henry de Sully, Archbishop of Bourges. He was Bishop of Paris from 1198 to 1208. It became an archbishop's see only in 1622.

[9] Gregorian Introitus for the third Mass of Christmas day

[10] Names of neums, signs that made up the medieval notation system.

[11] The fourth order of the Gregorian Kyriale. The name, Cunctipotens, is given by the trope, a text that was added in medieval time changing the piece from melismatic to syllabic.

[12] In the ancient Catholic rite, the celebrant and the choir proceed independently of each other.

[13] "He who sings second". This is usually a minor canon, hierarchically inferior to the Precentor. He had an important role in the choir and sang psalms, prayers and responses.

[14] Born circa 1160 and died about 1230. He was referred to by Anonymous IV as "Perotinus Magnus", but it is still not certain who he really was. The most popular theory is that he was a "Petrus" who was Succentor at Notre Dame from (at least) 1207 to 1238.

[15] […] Hoc addito, quod responsorium et Benedicamus, in triplo vel quadruplo, vel organo poterunt decantari; […] [Furthermore, the Responsory and Benedicamus may be sung by three or four voices or "in organo".] (Ex Chartulario illustrissimi domini Joannis Baptistae de Contes, decani Ecclesiae Parisiensis. Charta 156, 1198)

[16] A long melisma indicates a sense of joy.

[17] The Lord hath made known his salvation: He hath revealed his justice before the sight of the Gentiles.

[18] *Policraticus, sive de nugis curialium et de vestigiis philosophorum,* 1159

[19] Alleluia of the third Mass of Christmas Day.

Translated from the Italian by Louise Wiseman, UK

Edited by Gillian Forlivesi Heywood, Italy