This guide is intended for the reader with no prior knowledge of early manuscripts or music of the medieval period, but it will also assist experienced scholars to begin to find their way around the digitised version.

New Zealand’s oldest complete manuscript, a treatise on music, is one of a small number of medieval and early renaissance manuscripts held at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand. It contains the works of two authors bound together: *De musica* by Boethius (beginning on f.1v, or image 6 in the digitised version), and a collection of four works by Guido of Arezzo (beginning on f.81, image 165).

Both authors were from the part of the world now known as Italy, and both were very influential during the Middle Ages and were extremely important to the development of Western music.

Figure 1. Detail of Boethius, *De musica*, f.14v [image 32]. [natlib.govt.nz/records/23144623](natlib.govt.nz/records/23144623)
Creating the manuscript

The works of both authors were copied in ink by the same scribe, probably in England, in the second quarter of the twelfth century. The pages were first ruled up in plummet, a lead alloy introduced in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Before this time most manuscripts were ruled with blind lines scored with a stylus or the back of a knife, known as drypoint. The plummet ruling is visible on some pages (fig. 2).

![Figure 2. Detail of f.81 [image 165]. Pages were first ruled up in plummet.](image)

The text is written in Latin, the language of scholarship at the time. It is copied onto vellum (also called parchment), an animal skin that has been soaked in lime and water, scraped, stretched, and dried under tension. Paper did not reach northern Europe until the fourteenth century. During the preparation of the vellum, the knife used for scraping could sometimes accidentally cut through the skin leaving a small gash which would then expand into a hole during the stretching process. An example occurs on f.85 (fig. 3), and in this instance the scribe has worked his way around the hole.

![Figure 3. Detail of f.85 [image 173]. The scribe has worked his way around the hole in the skin.](image)

Holes can also be the result of flaws in the skin. If noticed early enough holes were stitched up, but this was not always successful as the stitching could still pull apart during the stretching process.
The number of holes in this manuscript suggests that it was probably copied for a monastery by a monastic scribe, as monasteries could not afford to be so particular about the skins they used for their own books. If a wealthy client had commissioned the manuscript, the skins with holes would have been discarded.

Scribes were usually very good at their job, but sometimes they missed some lines of text which then had to be inserted into the margin.

After the text was completed the decoration was added. The page layout was planned beforehand so that the scribe knew where and how much space to leave for the illustrator. Boethius, *De musica*, the more elaborately-decorated section of the manuscript, has, in addition to its smaller two- to three-line initials, five larger decorated initials introducing each of the five parts (see ff.1v [image 6], 19v [image 042], 35v [image 074], 50v [image 104], 72v [image 148]).

Each larger initial has a different colour scheme and includes some gold leaf. Gold was applied before the colours so that it would not smudge or damage existing paintwork. Gold does not otherwise feature prominently in this manuscript, as its use was rare before about 1200 in works intended for general use. One theory put forward is that until that date many manuscript painters worked in monastic cloisters open to the wind, and gold leaf is an extremely fine material which needs to be worked away from air currents.

The illustrator did not always get around to doing his part, and as you can see in this manuscript (fig. 6), there is a space still waiting for its illustration.
The authors and the content

The author of the first work, *De musica*, is Boethius (c.480–c.524), and the four shorter works in the second half of the manuscript, *Micrologus*, *Regule Rithmice*, *Prologus in Antiphonarium*, and *Epistola ad Michaelem* are by Guido of Arezzo (b c.991–2; d after 1033).

Both Boethius and Guido wrote during what is now called the Middle Ages (c.500-1500 AD), Boethius near the beginning, and Guido about half way through. Both wrote about music but from different angles; Boethius from the purely theoretical and philosophical, and Guido from the practical.

Boethius, a writer and statesman, was born about 480 into an aristocratic Roman family. He was well educated and very active in the political world. He wrote a number of works, but his treatise on music was one of his earliest, written probably in the first decade of the sixth century. It is essentially a Latin translation and commentary on the writings of earlier Greek philosophers, especially Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, as transmitted by Ptolemy and Nicomachus.

Boethius was not interested in the musical practice of his time; for him, the performer of music was merely a servant. The real musician as far as he was concerned was the person who studied the theory and philosophy of music. The main focus of his treatise, therefore, is the mathematical basis of music, and the beautifully-drawn diagrams in this manuscript with their graceful arches illustrate the various mathematical ratios that make up musical intervals.
After it was written, *De musica* more or less disappeared from circulation, re-emerging as an important work in the ninth century with the renewed interest in education. Interestingly, it was still used as a textbook at Oxford University as late as the eighteenth century.

The author of the other part of this manuscript, Guido of Arezzo (b. 990s), was a monk and music theorist but also a teacher and choirmaster. He was writing much later than Boethius – his four works were written between 1026 and 1033. Guido was more concerned with how to perform music, and in fact he wrote that Boethius was “not useful to singers, only to philosophers.” By Guido’s time, Boethius was beginning to be classified as a philosophical theorist rather than a practical theorist.

Guido’s first and most substantial work, *Micrologus* (beginning on f.81, image 165), was written as an instruction book for choirboys. Here Guido explains the sorts of things boys would need to know in order to sing chants. And, probably for the amusement of the boys, he begins with a verse riddle, although the illustrator has not added the essential letters in this manuscript (see fig. 8).

The missing letters at the beginning of each line are: [G]imnasio… [U]t…. [I]nvidiae….. [D]ira….. [O]rdine. The last line of the riddle translates as: “I who composed the carmina have written my name in a row at the beginning”. Thus the letters GUIDO spell the author’s name.
One of the most interesting aspects of the Micrologus from the historical point of view is Guido’s description of early polyphony (part singing). On f.91 [image 185] there are a number of examples of two voices moving independently – oblique motion to avoid the tritone, and convergence at the conclusion of a line – thus illustrating that two voices do not have to move in parallel motion all the time; something that had previously been the accepted custom.

Guido’s second work Regule Rithmice (Rhythmic Rules) begins on f. 92 [image 187], line 14 with the same verse riddle that opened the Micrologus. This work is music theory transmitted in verse, covering the tonal system, intervals, mode, and notation. The third work which begins f.96 [image195], line 6, the Prologus in Antiphonarium (Prologue to an Antiphoner), is an introduction to Guido’s now lost Antiphoner, a liturgical book containing the chants for the Divine Office.

The fourth work, beginning f.97v [image 198], line 15, is a letter from Guido to his friend Brother Michael. In this letter, Guido tells Michael how successful his new sight-singing method is proving to be, and in it he says that he is now able to teach his choirboys to learn a new chant in three days instead of the usual many weeks. The secret of his success, he continues, is the chant, “Ut queant laxis”, which he has written out on f.99.
Here each phrase begins on a note one step higher than the previous: Ut…, re(sonare)…, mi(ra)…, fa(muli)…, sol(ve)…, la(bii)…. For those readers who recall the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The Sound of Music* and the song ‘Doh a deer a female deer, Re a drop of golden sun, Me a name I call myself…’; it was nothing new – the idea had been around for nearly 1000 years and originated with Guido.

Next to Boethius’ *De musica*, Guido’s collection of works was the most copied and read instruction book on music in the Middle Ages.

**Past owners of the manuscript**

There are several indications of provenance: the manuscript contains a bookplate and various inscriptions, as well as a binding with an armorial and initials, all of which help to trace previous ownership.

Among the inscriptions added over the centuries is the small symbol at the top left corner of f.1v.

This tells us that the manuscript was held in the library of Christ Church Cathedral Priory in Canterbury, England in the twelfth century. How do we know this? Fortunately, a fragment of the mid-twelfth century catalogue of the Christ Church Priory library still exists, and it is just the bit that we need. The catalogue is written in two columns with lists of titles; each title with a unique library symbol in front of it. Two copies of Boethius are listed and the symbol in front of the second matches the symbol in the Turnbull Library copy. The catalogue fragment also tells us that the Boethius was bound in boards at this time: “Musica Bo[ethii] i[n] as[seribus]”.
The manuscript was probably still at Canterbury in the fifteenth century. On f.102v there is an inscription from Psalm 124 in red in a fifteenth-century hand: “De Claustro Cantuarie, Adiutorium nostrum in nomine domini, Qui fecit” (From the Cloisters of Canterbury, Our help is in the Lord, who made [heaven and earth]). The erased inscription above this has not yet been deciphered.

In addition, at the front of the book on the recto of the front flyleaf is a partly erased fifteenth-century inscription in Latin that reads ‘Alexander Staple monachus huius ecclesie’ (Alexander Staple, monk of this church). Extant records confirm that an Alexander Staple was a monk at Christ Church, Canterbury in 1437. The manuscript probably remained at Canterbury until the dissolution of the priory community in 1539 during the reign of Henry VIII.
In the sixteenth century the book was in different hands: William Tally and Adam Shakerley. On f.102v (see above, fig. 13) there is an English verse in a sixteenth-century hand that may be a reference to the quote from Psalm 124 written above. It begins: “[Syng] I wolld and I cannott / I nay and willnot / & wherefore shall I nott / do as I wolld / I thyngke & I thyngke nott …”. After this the verse begins to make less and less sense and the final two lines are still a puzzle. The verse may have been written by Adam Shakerley who has written on the opposite page “I Adam shakerley / wrot this”. And it may also have been Adam Shakerley who crossed out the name of another sixteenth century owner: “This is Wyllm [Wyllm is over a red erasure] tallys booke / god Save the kyngke / Amen”.

By the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century the volume was in the hands of the owner who had it bound in its current binding. This English calfskin binding over pasteboards with a gold-tooled fillet border includes a gilt rose and crown stamp in the centre of the upper cover and the initials “I. B.” on either side of an inner fillet frame. The volume has been rebacked at some time with its earlier spine laid on, and the text edges are gilt.

The Tudor rose with crown was one of the badges used by Queen Elizabeth I, suggesting that the owner of this volume was a follower, or in the employ of Elizabeth I. The initials ‘I B’ may be those of the musician John Bull (1562-1628), a leading keyboard player and composer, who was a court musician to Elizabeth I.

The next piece of evidence is on the verso of the front flyleaf [image 6], where an eighteenth-century owner has written in Latin:

*I have carefully compared this most accurate manuscript codex of Boethius with the book On Music, published among the Works of Boethius at Basle A.D. 1570 and not elsewhere printed separately, and I have everywhere noted in the margin the variant readings.*
Unfortunately he does not sign his name, so we do not know who he was.

By 1900 the manuscript was in the hands of the London book dealer, Bernard Quaritch. A letter dated 15 June 1900 from Quaritch to Alexander Turnbull of Wellington lists a number of medieval manuscripts that he is offering for sale, one of which is this volume. At the end of the letter Quaritch writes: “Also a volume containing Boethius de Musica, and the Micrologus of Guido (de Arezzo) written in England in a minute and beautiful semi-Gothic about AD 1150. … The price is £150”.

Alexander Turnbull (1868-1918), one of New Zealand’s major early collectors and the founder of the Alexander Turnbull Library, has marked this and another manuscript in the letter in his customary coloured pencil. The final piece of evidence that he purchased the Boethius is his bookplate on the upper pastedown.
Figure 17. [Image 2]. Bookplate of Alexander H. Turnbull

Dr Ruth Lightbourne
Curator Rare Books and Fine Printing
Alexander Turnbull Library
References and Further Reading

The fully digitised version of this manuscript can be viewed at http://tapuhi.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/spydus/NAV/GLOBAL/OPHDR/1/157342

Further information on the manuscript


Boethius in translation


Guido in translation


Facsimile of the catalogue fragment of Christ Church Library

*The ancient libraries of Canterbury and Dover: the catalogues of the libraries of Christ church priory and St. Augustine’s abbey at Canterbury and of St. Martin’s priory at Dover, now first collected and published with an introduction and identifications of the extant remains*, by Montague Rhodes James (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1903).

Alexander Staple