‘Technology’ for composers has evolved from the use of quill and parchment, through fountain pens and pre-printed manuscript paper, to the late twentieth-century phenomenon of notation software. The technological trajectory of monastic musicians parallels that of the secular world, with computer-based technology now playing a crucial role in the production and commercial distribution of a considerable body of compositions not only in chant genres but also in folk- and pop-based idioms. When experienced aurally, the effect of the music is independent of the means of notation, but its visual impact – through the choice of certain fonts and scripts for both words and music – has a profound effect on the evaluation and reception of this music, especially when the music is published commercially on the open market.

This interdisciplinary paper, illustrated with both written scores and recorded examples, uses ethnographic evidence to explore issues of notational encoding and ambiguity, the aesthetics and associations of the musical artefact, and the resulting subliminal messages transmitted and received through its physical representation. As Elizabeth Eva Leach has stated in Sung Birds, the notational process “informs and shapes compositional endeavour” and the use of software may itself limit the possibilities for notating the unmetered or metrically flexible compositions favoured by monastic composers. The advantages and disadvantages of general purpose programmes (e.g. Sibelius) and specialist neume-based fonts (e.g. Meinrad) are therefore briefly examined in the light of both the potential effect on the compositional process, and of the recipient's ultimate perception of the musical product.

This paper is situated within a cross-disciplinary theoretical framework which utilises the literature in musicology (such as Treitler, Kivy and Gelbart), reception and composer–function (Everist, Foucault, Citron) and aesthetics (Cook, Johnson) to inform the argument, and to draw conclusions about the power of notation software to influence both composer and recipient.