

Medieval Music 400-1400

Musical Innovations

During this period music was invented and developed, counterpoint was invented, composers discovered and began writing harmony, and musical form began to appear.

Life in the Medieval Era

The Class system was in place and dictated, for many, how their lives would play out. The first class was the *Nobility*, these were the original knights in shining armour. Next were the *Clergy* who were priests who worked in churches or monks who lived in Monasteries. The third class is where most people fell and was called the *Peasantry*. Peasants were mostly poor farmers and lived on average to age 30.

The spread of Christianity throughout Europe was especially important as church became central in the lives of nearly everyone in any class. It is because of this that most of the musical innovations that took place dealt with sacred music.

Instruments

Many kinds of instruments were used during this period (many of which are the ancestors of modern instruments). Instruments were brought from Asia & Africa.

The pipe organ, in churches, grew from one octave with no keyboard to several keyboards, which were necessary to fill the immense spaces of the cathedrals.

Soldiers returning from the Crusades brought back instruments from the East such as the Kettledrums, ivory horns (ancestors of the recorder and/or flute) and the rebec, or bowed lute (an ancestor to the viol family).

Sacred Music

Before the Medieval Era, there was no music in the church, now, the Priest and Choir sang in unison, without any accompaniment.

This was called plainsong or plainchant. Since Pope Gregory the Great played such a large role in bringing music into the churches these chants are commonly known as Gregorian Chant.

It was in the Churches and monasteries where music first began to be written down using neums. There is very little, if any, secular music from this time or any record of female composers from this time as a result.

Middle Ages – another name for the Medieval Era which is the time period 450-1450

Musical Form – The shape of a composition, similar to the rhyme scheme in poetry.

Counterpoint – the combination of two or more simultaneous melodic lines.

Harmony- When different notes are sounded at the same time to create consonances or dissonances.

Nobility – the first class, rich landowners.

Clergy – second class, priests or monks.

Peasantry – poor farmers, the majority of the population.

Sacred Music- Music written for and performed for religious purposes.

Pope Gregory the Great reigned from 590-604 and played a very important role in bringing music to the church.

Plainchant/Plainsong – a simple, single line of music with Latin text from the Roman Catholic Liturgy including the Mass.

Plainsong, Plainchant & Gregorian Chant

Descendant of religious melodies of the Greeks and Hebrews
Named in honour of Pope Gregory the Great
Simple, single-line melody without harmony or counterpoint
Usually in two-four or three-four time
Did not contain great leaps or dramatic contrasts in the melody. It embodies the ideal of pure religious expression
The music is subordinate to the text

“Pure Gregorian chant never leaves the hearer with the impression that the composer has been striving for musical effects. Everything is directed to God and to his praise.” – Thomas Merton

Organum

Around 1000 AD singers began to experiment with some singing the chants on their correct pitches and other singing them a fourth, fifth or octave above the melody. This style was called *organum*.
Organum led composers to experiment further in combining one or more melodies above the chant sung by the tenors which led to the birth of polyphony.
The art of composing organum reached its peak in the 12th Century by Parisian composers Leonin and Perotin.

Secular Music

Even though sacred music dominated the Medieval Era, secular or non-religious music became popular as well. Minstrels travelled from castle to castle singing songs, telling stories about love, life, and chivalry, and performing tricks. Their songs were simple like plainsong but were generally faster and were in the *vernacular*. Stringed or percussion instruments usually accompanied the minstrels.
Bards recited their tales to the accompaniment of the lyre or harp. Bagpipes of many kinds were used to accompany dancing, singing or marching.
The one man band of flute, or trumpet, drum and cymbals was everywhere.
In fact, by the thirteenth century there were so many wandering musicians that guilds were organized to keep them out. The guilds set standards of membership so those incompetent musicians were not allowed to work. Gradually, the Minstrels became better known for their quality of music and were more respected.

Neums – early music notation signs. Square symbols on a 4-lined staff. *The ancient Greeks had a system of notation but the system was lost and the European musicians had to invent their own.*

Organum – when fourths, fifths, or octaves are sung above the plainchant.

Polyphony – music with two or more lines of melody.

Secular Music – non-religious music

Minstrels – travelling performers of secular music

Vernacular – the common language

Guilds – groups formed to keep substandard Minstrels out of their towns.

Bard – poets, writers etc. Shakespeare was a bard.