Music throughout History
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Introduction

We are going back in time for thirty-six lessons. We are going to explore different eras of time and the music that made up that period. We will be studying famous composers and composers you’ve probably never heard of. We are also going to be studying hymn writers and how music in America has changed and developed over time. We will tie it all together and talk about how you can compose your own original musical composition.

Lesson 1: Medieval Era (c. AD 500–1400)

The medieval period, or Middle Ages, begins with the fall of the Western Roman Empire during the fifth century and ends around the fifteenth century. The music was mostly liturgical, or church music; the church heavily influenced musicians, many of whom were trained there. The Catholic Church regulated the use of the music. There were strict rules placed upon it, and even the chanting of prayers. Chanting of this time era is called plainchant or Gregorian chant. It’s referred to as Gregorian chant because Pope Gregory regulated it for the liturgy. The monks were typically the ones who chanted.

The monks sang in unison. The style of the chants was monophonic, or of a single melody line, without any harmony or instrumental accompaniment. The plainchants show the calm and meditative atmosphere of the prayers of the church.

The earliest transformation of monophonic plainchant was heterophonic. “Heterophony is the performance of the same melody by two different performers at the same time.”1 Another easy form of heterophonics is when singers sing the same melody, but one person sings the melody at a higher or lower pitch. During the late medieval era, polyphony was developed. Polyphony is when many individual melodic lines are sung at the same time.

Organum added upon plainchant melody using an accompaniment row, sung at a certain interval, away from the main melody. This results in an altering form between polyphony and monophony. It involves more than one voice. Léonin and Pérotin, who were French composers, added motets to the music. Motets are church songs with many vocal parts with varying texts.

Church music was not the only form of music during the medieval era. Around late medieval times, the music started to move from the church to a more secular setting. French poets called troubadours and trouvères were among the first people to write secular music. Secular songs were normally about a man’s love of a beautiful woman. There were also people who traveled around performing music in castles, taverns, and town squares. They were a source of information and news for the towns they visited.
There were many instruments during the medieval era. The flute and recorder were made of wood. The pan flute was very popular during this time. Musicians used many string-like instruments such as the lute. The lute is similar to the guitar. Other stringed instruments were the mandore, gittern, citole and psaltery. These were all plucked. The lyra was used by the Byzantine Empire; it is similar to the violin. The sackbut was also used.

There were many composers during this time. We will learn about a few of them. We are going to break them down into early, middle, and late medieval times.

**Early Medieval Composers (born before AD 1150)**

**Saint Romanos the Melodist** is said to have been one of the greatest Syrio-Greek hymnographers. A hymnographer is a person who writes hymns. It is said he composed 1,000 during the first half of the sixth century. The hymns were about the lives of the saints, different festivals, and other subjects important to the church. He was born around 490 and died around 560.

**Saint Yared** was highly influential in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He was an Ethiopian musician who invented the sacred music tradition and the musical notation system used by the church. He is responsible for creating the Zema, which is a traditional chant of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. He was born in 505 and died in 571.

**Guido of Arezzo** was an Italian music theorist. He is believed to have invented modern musical notation—staff notation. It indicated pitch by its placement on the staff, and its duration by its shape. His treatise, *Micrologus* was widely distributed during the medieval era. It outlines rules for the Gregorian chant and discusses polyphonic music. He was born c. 991 and died c. 1033.

**Hildegard of Bingen** composed the *Ordo Virtutum*. It’s an early model of liturgical drama. Her music is labeled as monophonic. She composed many liturgical songs that were made into a series called the *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*. She was born c. 1098 and died c. 1179.

**Middle Medieval Composers (born 1150-1300)**

**Léonin** was a composer of polyphonic organum—music with two vocal parts that aren’t just the same notes in different octaves. It is believed he may have been a member of the Notre Dame school of polyphony. He used rhythmic modes in his compositions and may have been the first composer to do so. He wrote the *Magnus Liber Organi*—a book used for the liturgy of the church that focused on the Gregorian chant, changing the rhythm between the two singers. He lived between 1150 and 1201.

**Pérotin** was a student at the same Notre Dame school attended by Léonin. Portions of his works are included in the *Magnus Liber Organi*. He introduced the styles of *organum triplum* (three-
part polyphony) and organum quadruplum (four-part polyphony). He was born c. 1170 and died c. 1236.

**Franco of Cologne** wrote *Ars cantus mensurabilis* to explain the length of rhythm and time. His proposition was that the duration of a note could be determined by its shape, irrespective of the context of the song or chant. This became known as Franconian notation. He was born circa 1215 and died in 1270.

**Philippe de Vitry** was an influential French composer, poet, and music theorist. He is credited with developing isorhythm. Isorhythm is, in essence, a single rhythmic pattern that is repeated throughout a piece. The repeated pattern can often be in a new tempo, sometimes faster. He was born c. 1291 and died c. 1361.

**Late Medieval Composers (After 1300)**

**Guillaume de Machaut** was a French poet and musician. He is considered to be one of the leading composers of the 14th century, having helped to create the motet and secular song forms. He wrote the *Messe de Notre Dame*, liturgical music performed during the Eucharist of a Catholic mass. He was born c. 1300 and died in 1377.

**Jacopo da Bologna** was an Italian composer whose songs, more often than not, displayed love lyrics. He composed when polyphonic was still in the early phases. He worked mostly on madrigals, which are secular vocal music compositions. Normally the polyphonic madrigals are not accompanied. The voices can range from two to eight. He was born c. 1340 and died c. 1386.
Lesson 1: Medieval Era (c. AD 500–1400)

Worksheet

1. The medieval period begins with what?

2. What are the two names for chanting?

3. What does *monophonic* mean?

4. What is it called when many individual melodic lines are sung at the same time?

5. What does *heterophony* mean?

6. What are motets?

7. Who added motets to the music?

8. Who were among the first people to write secular music?

9. Name three plucked string instruments mentioned in the lesson.

10. Name the only female composer mentioned in this lesson.

11. Who is believed to have invented modern musical notation?
Lesson 1: Medieval Era (c. AD 500–1400)

Worksheet Answer Key

1. The medieval period begins with what?
   The fall of the Western Roman Empire

2. What are the two names given for chanting?
   Plainchant or Gregorian chant

3. What does monophonic mean?
   A single melody line, without any harmony or instrumental accompaniment

4. What is it called when many individual melodic lines were sung at the same time?
   Polyphony

5. What does heterophony mean?
   The performance of the same melody by two different performers at the same time

6. What are motets?
   Motets are church songs with many vocal parts with varying texts.

7. Who added motets to the music?
   Léonin and Pérotin

8. Who were among the first people to write secular music?
   Troubadours and trouvères

9. Name three plucked string instruments mentioned in the lesson.
   Any three of the following: mandore, gittern, citole, lute, psaltery

10. Name the only female composer mentioned in this lesson.
    Hildegard of Bingen

11. Who is believed to have invented the modern musical notation?
    Guido of Arezzo