

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 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. A list of (possibly) new words will be provided to help you understand the lessons.

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

Definitions:

- Plainsong – chants used in Western Church liturgies
- Liturgical – used in public worship; customary observances
- Monophonic – with a single melodic line; no additional parts or chords
- Polyphonic – two or more parts, each with its own melody
- Notation – use of symbols to represent musical notes
- Organum – a single sustained line of music working in conjunction with other rapidly moving parts
- Neumatic – two to six notes per syllable
- Melismatic – each syllable has six or more notes connected to it
- Pitch – quality of sound based on vibration that creates it; how high or low a note is
- Rhythm – timing of the notes
- Secular – having no religious basis
- Troubadours – itinerant poet-musicians from southern France
- Trouvères – itinerant poet-musicians from northern France
- Itinerant – traveling from place to place
- Solfège – singing exercise using sol-fa syllables (do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti)
- Motet – sacred music that is usually polyphonic and unaccompanied
- Counterpoint – as harmony lines up with the melody, counterpoint is opposite the melody
- Madrigal – secular song comprised of complex polyphony that is unaccompanied

We will begin our discussion with the medieval period, which begins with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in AD 476. The only music that has survived before the 800s is **plainsong**. This is also called plainchant. The music was mostly **liturgical** and used in the Western Church, which at that time, was the Catholic Church.) The Catholic Church was the only church until the

Reformation in the 1500s.) Chanting of the medieval era was given the name *Gregorian chant* after Pope Gregory I.

Gregorian chants—typically chanted by monks—were **monophonic**. There was only one voice (one note, even if there was more than one chanter) and no instrumental accompaniment. The plainchants provided a calm and meditative atmosphere for prayer. Listen to an explanation and example of monophony: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWmctnwoe50>.

As the medieval era progressed, music changed. Beginning in the 800s, the church opted to use Gregorian chant only; the earliest style of **polyphony** came into existence; and musical **notation** was reinvented.

Polyphony would become the predominant style of music through to the era of classical music. The earliest style lasted from the 800s to the mid-1200s; it was called **organum**. This consisted of **neumatic** chants and **melismatic** chants—the distinction being 2-6 and six or more, respectively. Here is an example of organum (the video is more than seven minutes long; feel free to stop after one): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgHzH5iDcGQ>.

As polyphony progressed, schools of practice formed. came into existence to teach this style. The St. Martial School was a compositional style that was similar throughout a region of France, followed by the Notre Dame School of Polyphony which lasted until 1250. The Notre Dame School was a group of monks who composed in a similar style and who were supported by the Notre Dame Cathedral. Two of the composers we will learn about were Léonin and Pérotin. An anonymous source called them “the best composers of organum.” Together, they compiled *Magnus Liber Organi*—the big book of organum.



Though notation had once been used, it fell out of use centuries before medieval times. The notation, however, provided no **pitch** or **rhythm**. The image to the right is an example of medieval notation. Before notation, music could not be taught to a large number of people as it had to be learned by ear, and it could not be spread far beyond the area in which it was learned. Think about stories told by native people, before a written language was developed. These old stories were handed down by word of mouth. The only way subsequent generations could retell the stories was by remembering what had been told to them by their ancestors. If they didn't share them, the stories would cease to exist. Having a way to write music allowed many people, even people far away, to learn it and play it.

Church music was not the only form of music during the medieval era. There was also **secular** music. French poets called *troubadours* and *trouvères* were among the first people to write secular music. The subject of their songs was usually love. They would play their music in castles, taverns, and town squares, wherever the road led. They were also a source of information and news for the towns they visited.

Besides the vocal component of songs, there were instruments. Many of them you will probably recognize by name, though there are some differences between what we know and what they were like centuries ago. Visit <https://www.music.iastate.edu/antiqua/instrumt.html> to see a list of these instruments. Some of them have a short recording along with their description. The pan flute was very popular during this time, and musicians used many string-like instruments such as the lute. One interesting instrument is the hurdy-gurdy.

There were many composers during this time. They can be divided into “early medieval composers,” “middle medieval composers,” and “late medieval composers.”

Early Medieval Composers (before AD 1150)

Saint Romanos the Melodist was born in Syria. He was a hymnographer; he wrote hymns. It is said he composed 1,000 during the first half of the sixth century. The subject matter of his hymns included the lives of the saints, festivals, Christ’s resurrection and crucifixion, among others. He was born around 490 and died around 555. Listen to a recording of one of St. Romanos’ works: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hZJc_s9F3s.

Saint Yared was highly influential in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He was a musician whose songs, or chants, spoke of the various aspects of the life of Christ. They are still used today. He was born in 505 and died in 571. Here is a recording of one of his hymns (you only need to listen to 30 seconds to gain an appreciation): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MG7nh3tc1Xk>.

Guido of Arezzo was an Italian whose musical notation was the basis for the modern system of notation. 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. Learn more about Guido, his system of musical notation, and the role it played in the solfège system we use today: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-JMX7tVqog>.

Hildegard of Bingen spent most of her life in a small area of a monastery (away from the monks). During this time, she heard the chants of the mass but never composed anything until she became prioress (she was in charge of the other nuns). At this point, she began composing. Her *Ordo Virtutum* is a liturgical drama set to music. Much of her music is labeled as monophonic. She was born c. 1098 and died c. 1179. Here is a sample of her *Ordo Virtutum*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGPZWUNwLG0>.

Middle Medieval Composers (1150-1300)

Léonin was a member of the Notre Dame School of Polyphony. He, along with Pérotin, wrote the *Magnus Liber Organi*. He used rhythmic modes in his compositions and may have been the first composer to do so. He lived between 1150 and 1201. Listen to works by Léonin: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngCRm7uLirA>

Pérotin was a monk and a master composer like his peer Léonin. Portions of his works are included in the *Magnus Liber Organi*. He wrote in four parts instead of the typical two parts of the time. He was born c. 1170 and died c. 1236. Here is a sampling of Pérotin's works:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lbzw3B6jklU>.

Franco of Cologne was from (Cologne) Germany. His contribution to notation included symbols that represent time, in this case, the shape of the note. His *Ars cantus mensurabilis* provides more specificity in relation to rests. This became known as Franconian notation. He was born circa 1215 and died in 1270.

Philippe de Vitry was a French composer and music theorist. He is credited with developing isorhythm—repeated rhythmic patterns are set against a pattern of notes—which he used in his **motets**. The repeated pattern can often be in a new tempo, sometimes faster. Listen to this style: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s0sHwM241eE>. He was born c. 1291 and died c. 1361.

Many of the middle medieval composers added motets to the music, including the four listed above. Listen to some Franconian and Petronian motets:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJbgL80-Hq0>.

Late Medieval Composers (after 1300)

Guillaume de Machaut, French poet and musician, is arguably the most famous composer of the medieval period. His *Mass of Notre Dame* (*La Messe de Notre Dame*—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvIEA2dBKGA>) is a prime example of **counterpoint**. He was born c. 1300 and died in 1377. Machaut's contributions to music are extensive. To learn more, visit:

- <http://www.medieval.org/emfaq/composers/machaut.html>
- <http://biography.yourdictionary.com/guillaume-de-machaut>
- <https://www.allmusic.com/composition/messe-de-nostre-dame-mass-for-4-voices-mc0002361495>
- <http://www.classical.net/music/comp.lst/machaut.php>

Jacopo da Bologna was a composer and theorist from Italy whose songs display human emotion, humor, and sarcasm. He concentrated on **madrigals**. Many of his works can be found in the Squarcialupi Codex (<http://scholar.library.miami.edu/facsimile/squarcialupi.html>), a collection of music owned by the House of Medici (a family that rose to prominence in the fifteenth century). He was born in 1340 and died in 1386. Listen to his madrigals of the fourteenth century: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8EikqtIB_w.

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

1. The medieval period begins with what?
2. What are two names for chanting?
3. What does *monophonic* mean?
4. What is it called when two or more melodic lines are sung at the same time?
5. What are motets?
6. Who added motets to the music?
7. Who were the itinerant musicians who composed secular music?
8. Name the only female composer mentioned in this lesson.
9. Who is believed to have invented modern musical notation?
10. Who is considered to be the most famous composer of the medieval era?