

## THE MIDDLE AGES

### Chronology, Historical and cultural aspects

This period starts at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century coinciding with the fall of the Roman Empire and the expansion of Christianity and ends in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

On the **social scene**, Europe is divided into a vast array of small territories dominated by feudal lords who compete against and fight one another, whereas there is a network of monasteries and abbeys around Europe under the direction of the Pope whose aim is to spread Christianity around the world. This is the period of the Crusades, military expeditions led by Christian kings whose mission was to recover the holy places of Jerusalem, which were under the control of the Muslims.

On the **cultural scene**, most contributions were made by the monasteries, where monks cultivated the arts and sciences, in two clearly recognizable phases:

- 1- The early Middle Ages: until the 9<sup>th</sup> century, characterized by the invasions of the Germanic tribes in the West and the gradual settlement of different tribes of people.
- 2- The late Middle Ages: until the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which produces two artistic movements that reflected the changes in man's mentality in the Middle Ages:
  - **Romanesque Art** (10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century), depicting the darker or more serious nature of this age, symbolizing man's withdrawal from the outside world to look forward.
  - **Gothic Art**, starting around the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting a brighter outlook, symbolizing man's wish to get closer to God the creator.

On the **musical scene**, although in some courts of powerful kings the troubadours and minstrels (joglars) arose, cultivating music in ballads and songs, music was mainly religious and was concentrated in monasteries and abbeys, where advances were made in the writing of music.



A Gregorian chant score

## Gregorian chant

The Christian Church in the Middle Ages disapproved the use of music as simple entertainment, for singing or dancing, because they thought these actions reminded the new Christians of the pagan world of Greek and Roman gods, and conflicted with the belief in one single God.



Monks singing Gregorian chant

Catholic Church conceived music as an instrument to be used in the service of prayer with one clear aim: to thank God and help men of this age to die in a Christian way and join their Creator.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Gregory the Great unified and compiled all the music they sang in monasteries and established a series of conditions under which all churches would sing in the same way. That religious music was named **Gregorian chant** and became the official singings for Catholic Church.

## Polyphony or simultaneous melodies

A new way of making music appeared in the 9<sup>th</sup> century; it was called **polyphony**. It became even more popular than the Gregorian chants which had reigned during the preceding centuries. We can distinguish three periods in the evolution of polyphony:

### a) The first polyphonic manifestations (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries):



### A present-day transcription of a parallel organum

In this first form of polyphony, one voice (generally taken from Gregorian chants) was given another accompanying voice at a distance of a 4<sup>th</sup> or a 5<sup>th</sup>. The example above is called parallel **organum**, and its name refers to the direction of the two melodic lines (by parallel movement).

A variation of the organum is what is called **discantus**. The two voices run in the opposite way: when one goes higher, the second one goes lower and vice versa.

## b) Ars Antiqua (12<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries):

### VIDERUNT OMNES

Gradual

Perotinus  
(c.1160 - 1240)

Edited by M.A.B. Soloists  
Transcribed for MusicTeX by Moriwaki Michio

#### The beginning of a polyphonic piece by Pérotin

In this period polyphony had reached a certain degree of maturity, and this situation had an important influence on the decadence of Gregorian chants. The main new developments in this period can be summarized as follows:

- Composers are no longer anonymous. The most important ones were **Léonin** and **Pérotin**, both belonging to Nôtre Dame School of polyphony in Paris.
- New forms of polyphony arise, such as **conductus** (rhythmic music accompanying a procession) and **motet**, which was the most popular form of polyphony in this period, with the number of voices being increased to three.



“Congaudeant Catholici”, a three-voice piece from *Codex Calixtinus*

### c) Ars Nova (14<sup>th</sup> century):

France was the first country to develop new techniques, where the brilliant French composers **Philippe de Vitry** and **Guillaume de Machaut** brought medieval polyphony to its maximum level of perfection.

These innovations were compiled in a treatise on music by Vitry called *Ars Nova*, in which the main novelties were the codification of all the musical signs used until then, with the addition, for the first time, of new concepts such as time signatures and metrical units. This theoretical approach was an extraordinary innovation, reflecting more precise indications for rests (silences) and new note figures for shorter notes, which eventually revolutionized the old style, or the *Ars Antiqua*, and would give birth to a new period in Music which prepared a great change in the history of mankind: the Renaissance period (15<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries).

A present-day's transcription of Machaut's  
"Agnus Dei" from *Messe de Notre Dame*

## Profane music

Although the Church disapproved of the use of music outside the religious sphere, popular songs and dances have always existed amongst the population. The **joglars**, called **minstrels** in English, were a type of travelling singer-musicians who were the first to popularize music in this period. They made their living by staging shows using conjuring tricks, acrobatics and maybe trained animals, at castles and in villages, and played their own songs or those of other composers on a variety of instruments. They were either servants of a court, or outcasts.



**Owain Phyfe,**  
a present-day troubadour

The 12<sup>th</sup> century brought the rise in the south of France of the **Troubadour movement**, which helped to lend a certain value to this kind of profane music. **Troubadours** were a sort of singer-songwriters, as they composed their lyrics (poetry) and set music to it. They were cultured and refined persons and often sang in courts and palaces. The themes of their songs were inspired by chivalry and war (bravery, honour, etc.) and courtly love (faithfulness, etc.). They did not use Latin, as in religious music, but rather used the vulgar tongue of their area. In some cases, they belonged to the nobility. Other variants of the troubadours were the **trouvères** in the north of France and the **minnesänger** in Germany.



**Martín Códax's *Cantigas de amigo***

In Spain there are two important composers: **Martín Códax of Vigo**, among whose works seven have been preserved (named *Cantigas de amigo*), and **Alfonso X the Wise** (1221-1284), the king who promoted the arts and sciences during his reign. Alfonso's most outstanding work is the collection known as the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.

The term *cantiga* was used in the Castilian kingdoms until around the 15<sup>th</sup> century to describe a type of religious or profane composition in which poetry and music were combined in the Galician-Portuguese language, which was considered as the most courtly and aristocratic language of the day, and suitable for lyrical poetry.



**Hurdy-gurdy**



**Psaltery**

#### **Some instruments in Alfonso X's *Cantigas de Santa Maria***

The *Cantigas de Santa Maria* are short pieces dedicated to Virgin Mary, composed around the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century under the supervision of the king of Castile, Alfonso X the Wise, who even wrote some of the music. The matters of these pieces are the narration of a miracle (*miragre*) or a song of praise (*loor*) to the Virgin.

MONFERRER & PICAZO, *A World of Sounds-C*, Marfil. Alcoy, 2011 (p. 26-30, 35-36)

Revision: Julián Jesús Pérez