The Middle Ages (400–1400 C.E.)

ABOUT THE MIDDLE AGES...
The Middle Ages, or the Medieval Period, were a time of warfare, religious devotion, and royal pageantry. Most of the people in medieval Europe were peasants. They were uneducated and farmed land owned by the wealthy, but received little in return. Diseases, physical deformities, and starvation were common among the peasants, who lived in filth and poverty. The rich landowners, or nobility, were constantly battling each other to maintain their land and servants. Despite their majesty and wealth, the nobles were victims of the same rampant spread of disease, destructive fires, and dangerous bandits that the peasants encountered.

In the midst of this tumultuous time, the Catholic Church, under the leadership of the Pope in Rome, was an important part of life in medieval Europe. Towering cathedrals with stained glass windows and flying buttresses, like Notre Dame in Paris (right), were paid for with donations.

MEDIEVAL MUSIC
Music in the Middle Ages was composed and performed for either sacred (religious) or secular (non-religious) purposes. The earliest form of sacred music was called plainchant or plainsong. This is a single melody written for unison voices, with words in Latin. Pope Gregory I and his assistants compiled chants used for church services and wrote the music on four-line staves using square notes called neumes. Plainchant is often referred to as Gregorian Chant, in honor of Pope Gregory I. Important composers of the Middle Ages include Hildegard von Bingen, Perotin, and Guillaume de Machaut.

The awe-inspiring Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was built from 1163 to 1182 by peasants who dragged the stones one by one to the site.

MEDIEVAL MUSICAL STYLE
Plainchant, the predominant type of sacred music of the Middle Ages, consisted of single unaccompanied melodies sung in unison. This type of music is called monophonic music. Plainchant was written without a fixed rhythm or meter. There were also no tempo markings or dynamics noted on the music, and it was not composed in major or minor keys, but in modes—a unique system of half and whole steps.

By the year 1000, a second melody was sometimes performed simultaneously with the plainchant melody. This form of church music was called organum (OR-gah-num), and over time it was embellished with more and more melodies and voices. Organum represents the beginning of polyphonic music in Western Europe. Polyphony is the combination of two or more melodies at the same time.

INSTRUMENT UPDATE
Wandering minstrels performing secular music often accompanied their singing with the lute—a stringed instrument like a guitar, but with a rounded back. When the strings were plucked, a light delicate sound was created. In contrast, noble ceremonies and battles required loud wind instruments like the trumpet and shawm to play fanfares and calls, along with large kettledrums, or timpani, to accompany. The trumpet at this time was a very long, tubular brass instrument without valves, and the shawm was a reed woodwind with a distinct sound similar to the modern oboe.

In sacred music, instruments played a relatively minor role and often simply supported vocal music. The organ, a keyboard instrument in which bellows force air through pipes to produce sound, was the primary instrument played in churches. Some organs were very large, and many men were needed to push the bellows together to force enough air through the enormous pipes to create music.
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Signs of the Times (History and Culture)

The period of the Middle Ages from 500 to 1100 was known as the Romanesque Period. During this time, much of the culture was still strongly influenced by the Roman Empire, which was in serious decline. These influences were seen well into the Middle Ages, although the Church was rising to become the dominant authority over almost every aspect of life, including politics, society, economics, and of course religion. Within the Church, monasteries were formed and became the primary centers for learning. The Church also controlled every aspect of art and music.

This Romanesque Period contained a great deal of Roman flavor, particularly in the area of the arts. Monophonic music such as the Gregorian chant, or plainsong, was the most common style of music, particularly in the Catholic Church. The aesthetic simplicity evident in music carried over into other creative arts as well.

The final period of the Middle Ages was known as the Gothic Period. From 1100 to 1400, changes began to take place in the way people thought about the world around them. During this time universities were developing out of the monastery schools. Scholasticism was a way of systematically analyzing every aspect of intellectual and religious life within a set of strict rules. Because of this philosophy, music and art became very formulated. This led to artists and composers being unable to freely express their individual creativity. Pope Gregory (540–604) stated, "What those who can read learn by means of writing, that do the uneducated learn by looking at pictures."

Artistic Purpose

Throughout the Romanesque Period, the plainsong or chant was used primarily in a sacred or worship setting. For the most part, music was used in church services as part of the liturgy, or the arrangement of the service. Music was also set to psalms and hymns. The Gothic Period of music began to move away from the simplistic as the development of polyphony, or counterpoint, occurred. Just as in the Romanesque Period, music in the Gothic Period was an important part of the church service. However, at this time, music was becoming more important on a social level as well. Because of this, there came more opportunity for composers to create music.

Creative Characteristics

Music and art in the Romanesque Period contained simple, uncomplicated characteristics. As previously mentioned, Gregorian chant was monophonic, consisting of a single melody line, very chant-like in its delivery, and typically with a repeated reciting tone. It was always performed without accompaniment. Likewise, the visual art of this era was simple and uncomplicated with a primary focus on religious subject matter. Human forms appeared very awkward and had a distinct lack of humanism, lending an iconic feel to the scene.

Gothic creativity introduced more complexity into both music and art with the implementation of polyphonic harmony in music and polychromatic color in art. Music also began reflecting secular texts, while using both monophonic and polyphonic melodies.

Instrument Update

While the use of instrumental music was discouraged in sacred settings (typically, a cappella vocal music was the only allowed music), clergy-sponsored events frequently made use of instrumental ensembles, particularly in parades, festivals and, surprisingly, in medieval dramas conducted in the church building itself. However, the most distinct growth in the use of a small ensemble came in secular music at the civic level. During the 11th or 12th century, it became commonplace to use a tower trumpeter or "watchman" to herald security alarms and times of day. By the 13th century, these civic musicians had formed groups that eventually became guilds (much like today's unions). These groups of musicians would perform at banquets, fairs, and dances. Typically, their instrumentation included a buisine (old style trumpet), slide trumpet, various other horns, and sometimes voices.
SIGNS OF THE TIMES (History and Culture)

The Romanesque Period of the Middle Ages (500–1100) is a fascinating era for study in the modern age. Many present day influences, institutions, and inventions had their birth during this era. The fact that this period is also the connective link between ancient history (Ancient Rome, Ancient Greece, etc.) and modern times (Northern Europe, Russia, the Americas, etc.) flavors its study with an understanding of the rise and fall of civilizations. The Romanesque Period contained many great personalities who contributed much to what influences our culture even today. Included in these were St. Augustine (d. 604), who was the first Archbishop of Canterbury; St. Francis of Assisi (1181–1226); and Dante Alighieri, often considered the father of the Italian language. These men and others contributed to history and culture with their writings, inventions, humanitarianism, art, and music.

The feudal system of government and class structure arose during this time and was primarily controlled by the Catholic Church. Social class structure was basically distilled down to three classes of people—the Church (clergy), the ruling classes (consisting of lords who ruled over large blocks of land), and the serfs (or peasants, who lived in poverty and worked the land for the feudal lords). After his coronation on Christmas Day in 800, Charlemagne’s court in Aachen was considered the hub of European cultural revival.

The Gothic Period (1100–1500) saw a lessening of the Church’s political power. The Crusades began in 1096 and brought with them an unexpected influence in the culture. Knights from all over Europe marched to the Holy Land in order to fight and remove the Muslim Turks and other non-Christian sects residing in Israel. These knights brought back to their homes Middle Eastern influences such as social customs, entertainment, and a sense of more independence. The impact of the Crusades, particularly at the political and social levels, can still be seen today. The Gothic Era also saw much more development of roads and towns in Northern Europe.

ARTISTIC PURPOSE

Very little is known about music produced in the Romanesque Period, due to a lack of a systematic way of notating music. Some early examples of music maintained by the Catholic Church are available today; however, without the benefit of organized written music, it is hard to recreate an authentic version of the music. Music’s function revolved around the church setting and was included in all church rituals from Mass to Lauds (early morning recitations) and Vespers (evening prayer service). During the Gothic Period, music and art took on an increasingly important role. Nobility became patrons of more secular music in everyday language. This led to more prominence of the individual musician/composer which in turn led to a more pressing need for a standardized system of notating music.

CREATIVE CHARACTERISTICS

Although secular music in the Romanesque Period existed, very little of it was preserved because there were no institutions in place to keep any traditions outside of the church. Traveling performers such as jongleurs and minstrels performed songs both instrumentally and vocally, danced, juggled, and performed tricks for the entertainment of nobility and common people alike. Music with instruments was generally banned in the church. Vocal music continued to be the accepted form of music in church worship services. Transitioning into the Gothic Age, music continued to display more organization from a rhythmic, notational, and harmonic standpoint. Most of the melody lines, particularly in secular pieces, followed a form that rose and fell with the lyrical structure of the verse.

INSTRUMENT UPDATE

The Medieval instrumental ensembles were classified in two different ways, as either “loud” or “soft.” The loud ensembles contained instruments that were predominantly the precursors to the brass family of instruments today, including the trumpet, trombone, shawm, horn, and bagpipe. Soft ensembles primarily used flutes, recorders, lutes, and keyboards.