

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization

Spring 2017

Class Notes – Session 1, Tues, Jan 31

In Class 1, we usually do three major segments.

- I. Intro to the Class
- II. Why is Man Musical?
- III. Intro to Medieval Religious Music

PART I – Intro to Class

This was a walk-through of the class syllabus. For homework, students must check out <http://davesmey.com>, download the syllabus, and read it carefully. (In addition, you are supposed to figure out how you are going to obtain the text, create an account on the site, and do a brief survey.)

PART II – Why is Man Musical

Here I argued that, because music seems to be a universal element in all cultures, it may be instinctual or innate. Thus, many have tried to develop theories on what survival advantage music may have offered early man. There are three popular theories on the evolutionary purpose of music:

TRIBE – Music is useful for tribal cohesion and war-making.

MATE – Music is useful for attracting a mate.

BABY – Music is part of early mother-baby communication, “motherese.”

(In addition, students in class came up with lots of other good theories, such as the idea that music has a psychological benefit for regulating mood etc., and I mentioned that music and religious practices go very well together. The belief in a spiritual world of some sort does seem to be similarly universal and instinctive.)

However, Steven Pinker in *How the Mind Works* has famously argued that music is “evolutionary cheesecake,” that it has no direct purpose but developed out of other more basic survival abilities like language and motor skills.

The purpose of this section was just to get us started and stimulate some thought – it is not quiz material.

PART III

Intro to the Medieval Period (476-1450)

The dates for this period are set at the fall of the Roman empire (476 C.E.) and, a little more vaguely, at the middle of the 15th Century (ca. 1450).

We discussed the overall social structure of the time, which is known as **Feudalism**. The typical feudal city-state is divided between the local aristocracy, the serfs or peasants who do all the hard labor, and the clergy who are representatives of the Catholic church. In the early Medieval period the Church is the main source of music. (Later there is also a flourishing of secular music at the aristocratic Court, which we will discuss in session 2.)

In class we watched a clip from *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives* which emphasized that the church was the social center for the town peasants, the “place where they had their parties.” Jones mentions soccer matches, amateur theater, and priests brewing beer.

Also, I emphasized that the church is the “keeper of knowledge” – the priesthood is the only profession where everyone can read and write, and part of the job of the monastery is to keep a library and to make new copies of books by hand. The church usually provided some education for the young males in the town, in part to recruit new people into the priesthood.

The priests in the monastery follow an elaborate schedule of worship, with many services each day, and all of these are sung. Certain prayers that are sung every day, such as the *Kyrie eleison*, get fairly elaborate melodies, but other texts that will only be used once and then put away are read off with a “reciting tone” – they are sung on a single note, so that the final result is sort of like an auctioneer.

The vast majority of the music from this period is *anonymous*, meaning that we don't know who wrote it. Thus, there are really only a few specific people we are going to focus on from this time. The first is **Pope Gregory the Great** (c. 540-604). He is credited with the invention of musical notation and the standardization of the melodies used for services in the Catholic Church. (It is unclear if he did any of this personally or simply supervised this effort.) As a result, the music of this period is named after him – we call it **Gregorian Chant**.

We listened to one example of Gregorian chant, a setting of the *Kyrie eleison*, a very standard prayer that is part of the Catholic Mass. It is the only part of the liturgy that is in Greek – the rest of a typical Mass would be done in Latin.