

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization

Fall 2017

Class Notes – Session 1, Tues, August 29

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 usually discuss how 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). There is no doubt that Gregory earned his title of “the Great” – he made a lot of reforms to church services and help strengthen the influence of the office of Pope, at a time when Rome was otherwise in decline. Centuries later a legend arose that he also composed all of the melodies that were sung in the church, which is why the music of this period is named after him – we call it **Gregorian Chant**.

(However, Modern historians can't find any evidence that the legend is true! Some even think that people are confusing Gregory the Great with another Pope Gregory, Gregory II.)

We talked about how the Medieval church was obsessed with synchronizing their activities across all of Europe, so that everyone would do the same things at the same time. In order to standardize the music we need a form of **musical notation**. If you look at a page of written-down Gregorian chant you can see that it basically works the same way that our modern notation does. This development is hugely important for the history of Western music!

We listened to one example of Gregorian chant, a setting of the *Kyrie eleison*, a 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.