

MSC 1003 – Music in Civilization, Summer 2018

Prof. Smey

Class 2: Tuesday, June 12

FIRST HALF

Polyphony in Medieval Sacred Music

Pérotin's Viderunt omnes

First, we talked about how society in the later Middle Ages (in the 1100s and 1200s) began to transform. In particular, we looked at the growth of cities like Paris, and the construction of giant Gothic cathedrals (like the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris).

There were some isolated experiments with polyphony before 1100, but the first two named figures to compose significant polyphonic works were Léonin and Pérotin, both choirmasters at Notre Dame. Their dates are as follows:

Léonin (or Leoninus), 1169-1201

Pérotin (or Perotinus), 1198-1236

We looked at Pérotin's setting of the *Viderunt omnes* chant.

So, this is some of the first notated music to combine multiple musical lines simultaneously. It is also some of the first music to have a system of notation for rhythms and to present a lively, regular pulse.

The special term we use to refer to this specific genre of relatively primitive polyphonic music from the Medieval period is **Organum**. (That's not a quiz term – just remember that it is no longer Gregorian chant!)

Cantus firmus technique

Pérotin's *Viderunt omnes* is based on a Gregorian Chant that was used in services around Christmas. Pérotin puts the chant in the lowest voice part and stretches it out, so that each note might last for 30 seconds or so. Additional rhythmic and polyphonic material is then built on top of each sustained note. The singers even say the syllable they are stretching out, so that the text is also sung in super-slow motion.

This is known as *cantus firmus* technique. The pre-existing musical material is the *cantus firmus* (or "fixed voice"). The part that sings it is also called the "tenor" (after the verb *tenir*, to hold).

Cantus firmus technique doesn't necessarily require this slow-motion, "stretching out" aspect. That's kind of a quirk that is unique to these early polyphonic composers. We'll see that some later composers (like Machaut) let the CF run at the same speed as the other parts. Ultimately, the most important and

essential aspect of *cantus firmus* technique is that a **pre-existing part is used as the foundation for a new piece.**

Guillaume de Machaut's Kyrie from the Messe de Nostre Dame

Machaut (c. 1300 – 1377) is undoubtedly the most famous of all Medieval composers. He inherited the polyphonic technique of Léonin and Pérotin and brought this technique to new heights (and, as we saw later in the session, he was also considered a great secular artist in the troubadour-and-trouvère tradition.)

Machaut's main contribution to sacred music was creating the first complete polyphonic setting of the Mass.

Mass is a somewhat long and complicated Church service that was conducted mid-morning (around 9:00 am). It has some ritualistic parts in which the text is always the same, plus sections that are different each day. Machaut was perhaps thinking practically about how his music could be re-used – he stripped out all of the changeable parts of the Mass and composed music for all of the fixed parts. This leaves a five-movement structure which would serve as a template for composers in the Renaissance and beyond.

I. Kyrie II. Gloria III. Credo IV. Sanctus V. Agnus Dei

We listened to a minute or so of the Kyrie and noted how polyphony has evolved since Léonin and Pérotin.

- There is a wider spread in the vocal parts. It is similar to the modern Soprano-Alto-Tenor-Bass format and creates a “big” sound.*
- Machaut uses the *cantus firmus* technique like Pérotin, taking a pre-existing melody and embedding it in his composition, but here the *cantus firmus* is in a middle voice, and it runs at the same speed as the other parts. It doesn't “stick out” like in the Pérotin.
- So, in a lot of ways Machaut is writing the “music of the future,” using the same basic technique that Renaissance composers would use. The one detail that marks him as a Medieval composer is that he sometimes makes “weird” or “rough” combinations of notes. Renaissance composers would work hard to have a pretty sound at all times – what sounded good to Machaut sounded a little crude and unsophisticated to a Renaissance musician. We'll look at this in more detail in the next segment.

*A lot of people assume that this reference to SATB format means that there are women in the choir now. But in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, the church choirs were still mostly male. They just used male singers who could sing very high or choir boys or (believe it or not) men who had been surgically altered to sing high. Our recording of the Machaut is actually all men! Listen carefully and see if you can tell.

In modern times it is considered acceptable to use women to sing the high parts in polyphonic music. Some groups do it, some don't. Our next recording on the quiz list (Josquin Despres' "Ave Maria") will be performed by a mixed-gender group, and it sounds a little nicer.

SECOND HALF

Secular Medieval Music + Medieval Instruments

Up until now all the music we've discussed has come from the "the Church" and has featured texts of religious significance. In the later Middle Ages we also see the emergence of secular music at "the Court" for the entertainment of the elite ruling class.

I. Minstrels

As European society became more sophisticated (from the 1000s on) it was able to support traveling musicians known as *minstrels*. We watched a brief video (from *Terry Jones' Medieval Lives*) which made a few interesting points about these performers. We learned that the word minstrel means "little servant," and that the typical minstrel was expected to play a variety of instruments and do other tricks.

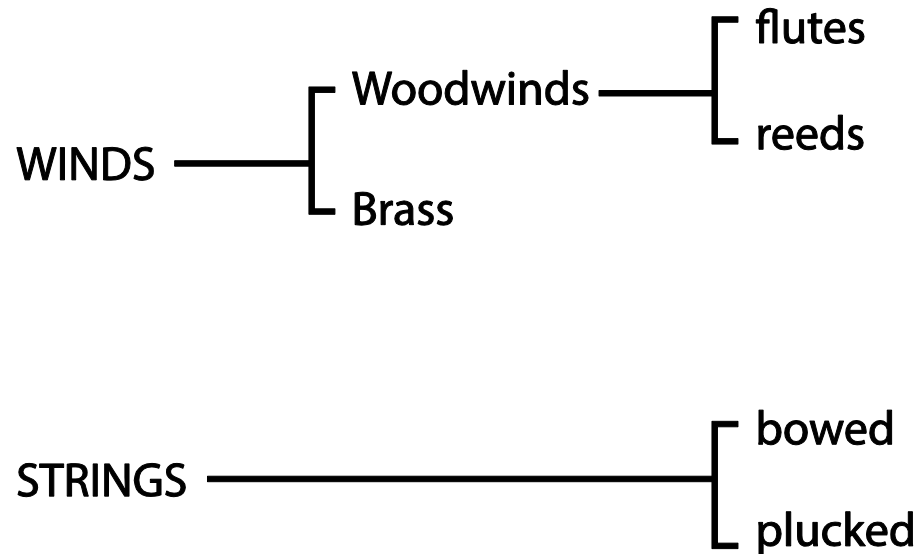
We saw in the clip that the minstrels would often sing *chansons de geste* or "songs of great deeds." These focused mostly on the theme of glory on the battlefield. Minstrels were often a sort of P.R. person, tasked with singing about how extraordinarily brave their employer was.

Illustrations and other sources also tell us that these servants played early versions of wind, string, and percussion instruments. However, because most of this activity was not written down in musical notation we don't know exactly what it sounded like. Modern performers will often add instruments to their performances of monophonic Medieval music, making up additional parts that fill out the sound and make it more interesting.

We listened to one of the few notated instrumental Medieval works that survive, a dance called a saltarello. This dance is written down as a simple monophonic melody for unspecified instruments, and we looked at how a band "brings it to life" by using a variety of winds, strings, and percussion, including some extra drones and drum parts that aren't in the original score.

II. Interlude: The World of Instruments

At this point we veered off into a long exploration of the world of musical instruments. We divided the instruments into a few different families that are categorized according to the mechanism they use to make sound. Here is our map of instrumental families:



PERCUSSION

KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS?*

(Keyboards have an asterisk because this is my own, somewhat unconventional categorization. Pianos and similar instruments are often grouped with percussion. But, a piano has strings inside, and organs are air-driven and can even include reeds. I think the keyboard mechanism is unique enough to make this its own category. Anyway, all of this is irrelevant to our current interests, because keyboard instruments are pretty rare in the Medieval period.)

(You can also look at how our textbook divvies up the world of instruments on pp. 34-40 eighth edition, 33-41 seventh edition.)

Medieval Instruments

We then walked through each category and looked at the Medieval version of these instruments.

Flutes – We'll define a flute as anything that produces sound by blowing across a hole. These are categorized as woodwinds because (as we saw) the original versions were made with wood. The medieval version of the flute is the *recorder* – it is a wooden instrument that is held straight (as opposed to off to the side like a modern flute.) It makes vibration by forcing air past a little notch near the top of the instrument.



recorders

Reeds – A reed instrument relies on a thin piece of plant material to produce vibrations. The bodies of these instruments were also originally made of wood, so they are grouped together with flutes in the woodwind family. The Medieval period has two versions. The *shawm* is the louder variant, and it works pretty much like a modern oboe. The *crumhorn* hides the reed inside the instrument and is quieter than the shawm.



shawm

Brass – Brass instruments are generally made of metal, and one plays them by pressing one's lips against a cup-shaped mouthpiece and making a buzzing motion. I believe they mostly had *straight trumpets* in the Medieval period, which are simple tubes with no valves. These can only play a restricted number of notes, so brass instruments were not especially useful for making music at this time.



Straight trumpet

Bowed Strings - - the most popular kind of bowed string instrument in the Renaissance appears to be the *viol*, and you can still see these somewhat unusual forerunners to the modern violin being played by early music specialists today. More specifically, this is the era of the *viola da gamba* which literally means “viol for the legs.” The most obvious difference here from modern violins is that these instruments are not tucked under the chin – they are held vertically (in one’s lap) like a cello. (Later we get *violas da braccio* (viols for the arm) which are much more like the modern violin.)

Also, these instruments have frets like a guitar. Since Medieval musicians only had access to gut strings (instead of the complex metal & nylon ones of today) viols tend to have a quieter, buzzy sound.

(The book talks about the *veille*, a Medieval fiddle that is flatter and good for playing chords. We are going to memorize the *viol*, though.)



Viol

Plucked Strings – the main ancestor to the modern guitar is the *lute*. Perhaps the most noticeable differences here are in the construction of the instrument, with its gourd-shaped body and 90-degree bend at the top of the neck. This would have also been played with gut strings. In addition, we see a lot of simple, small *harps* which can be held in one's lap.



Lute, harps

Percussion – We know that they had drums in the Medieval period, but the rhythmic patterns that might have been played on them were never written down. One somewhat unusual drum they would have used is the frame drum, which is round and flat like a tambourine.



Frame drum

We concluded this discussion by looking back at our video of the saltarello, and we tried to name all of the instruments we could see. It features two shawms, a recorder, viol, harp, and percussion.

III. The transition from minstrels to troubadours

We also talked about a newer tradition that also emerged in the 1100s, a sort of “new wave” of secular entertainers. This was a group of musicians and poets who were the “singer-songwriters” of their day, creating monophonic melodies with particularly sophisticated lyrics that shed some light on everyday life in the Middle Ages. In France these composers were known as *trouvères* and *troubadours*, depending on whether they were from the North or South. Both terms are based on the verb *trouver*, which means “to find.”

The video we watched emphasized that these performers were a new wave of aristocratic, educated musicians who looked down on the more simplistic work of the minstrels. There was also a change of theme – rather than singing about war and bravery all of the time their favorite subjects were love and sex. They did all of this in the local vernacular language, rather than Latin.

In class we usually make a little table that illustrates the three signature differences between minstrels and troubadours.

	class	subject matter	language
minstrels	lower class	glory on the battlefield	Latin
troubadours	aristocratic	love and sex	vernacular languages

The differences between minstrels and troubadours are not really emphasized in our textbook, but I think it’s a pretty interesting story and often write a quiz question about it!

For the quiz we will learn Guillaume de Machaut’s “Douce dame jolie.” This is typical of a troubadour-type song (or, more accurately, a *trouvère* song, since Machaut was from the North of France.) It focuses on the pain of unrequited love.