

Part I – One last Medieval 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 the tradition of courtly poetry from the trouvères, and brought all of these genres to new heights.

We already looked at an example of his contribution to secular music. His main contribution to *sacred* music was creating the first complete polyphonic setting of the Mass.

Mass is a somewhat long and complicated 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 the 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.

PART II – INTRO TO THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance (1450-1600)

There are some **revolutionary developments** that mark this period as a departure from the Middle Ages.

Perhaps most important is the Gutenberg's invention of the printing press around 1439. (In music, Ottaviano Petrucci is the first to print polyphonic music in 1501 – he is "our" Gutenberg.)

This is also the "Age of Discovery," in which European nations begin to explore (and exploit) the rest of the globe. Portugal begins to explore the coast of Africa in 1419, and Columbus sets sail for America in 1492.

Finally, this era sees the break-up of Christianity into multiple strands, with Protestantism founded by Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517, as well as the splitting off of the Church of England in 1538.

However, there are also **continuities**, ways in which European society remains largely the same.

There is still a pretty clear division between nobles, clergy, and peasants (i.e. the feudal system.) Despite the existence of large kingdoms, Europe is really still fragmented into small city-states. And, in a trend that began in the late Middle Ages, cities continue to grow, supporting the existence of a fourth class of individuals, the independent tradesmen, merchants, and bankers. In particular, the Medici family of Florence, Italy amass fantastic wealth (through banking) and manage to buy their way into the aristocracy.

Humanism

Advanced education for elite men begins to center around the legacy of ancient Greece and Rome, as people study the works of Cicero, Aristotle, and Plato (among others) as a rite of passage into adulthood.

This is a philosophical shift from the God-centered world of the Middle Ages. The valuing of ancient, non-Christian thinkers and the belief that contemporary man could achieve similar things is called **humanism**, and this sort of education eventually became known as "the humanities."

(This is, of course, not to say that European society was not still thoroughly religious. Humanists studied these pre-Christian works alongside religious documents, and sometimes made texts that mixed the two sources together.)

The Arts

In the arts we see a new concept of the artist as an individual genius, rather than an anonymous craftsman.

In class we looked at some technical advances in visual arts. I showed Raphael's *School of Athens* [1510], with its use of 3D perspective and portraits of ancient Greek philosophers, and Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors* [1533], which featured that strange distorted skull at the bottom.

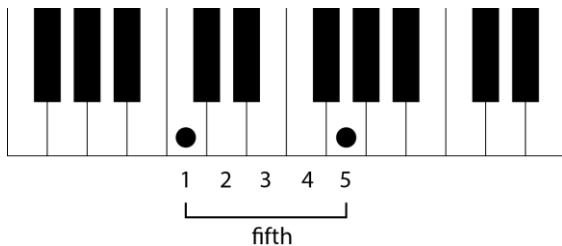
PART III - Sacred Music in the Renaissance

We started by going back to Guillaume de Machaut's *Messe de Notre Dame*, from around 1360. You may remember that I said that Machaut is writing the "music of the future" in the 1300s – there are a lot of ways in which the Renaissance composers simply copied what he did.

However, one way that later composers disagree with Machaut is in their idea of the best way to combine notes into *harmonies*. As usual, in order to understand this we need to back up a bit and talk about some technical aspects of music.

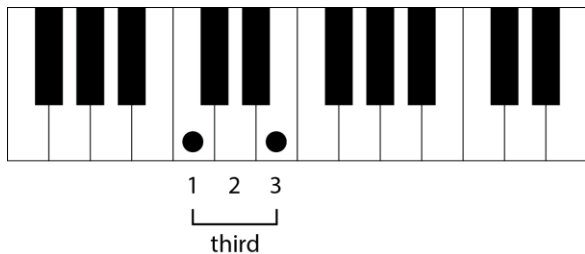
Combinations of notes that sound pleasant and stable are called *consonant*, whereas more "difficult" combinations of notes that seem to clash with each other are *dissonant*. Most music involves some alternation between consonances and dissonances.

Here's the interesting part: Medieval composers and Renaissance composers seem to have disagreed on what the best consonance is. Medieval composers loved *fifths* – the interval you can make if you go to the piano and count off five white notes:



To us today, a fifth by itself can sound a little "empty," "cold," or even "spooky." Medieval composers, however, gravitate to this sound over and over again.

Renaissance composers, on the other hand, discovered that they prefer thirds.



Thirds generally sound “fuller” and “prettier” than fifths. So, in general, Renaissance music also tends to sound fuller and prettier as well.

In class we spent some time listening to tracks and guessing which ones were Medieval and which were Renaissance.

Josquin des Pres, *Ave Maria*

Another new development in Renaissance sacred music is the popularity of the **motet**.

We’ve already learned about the musical **Mass**. We saw how Machaut is famous for standardizing the polyphonic Mass, taking the parts that were used every day at Church and giving them very elaborate music.

A **motet** is not part of an official Church ceremony. Instead, it takes a new sacred text in Latin (usually a carefully chosen passage from the Bible) and creates a piece out of that. It is usually one, single movement, not a set of five like Machaut’s Mass. So, you wouldn’t use a motet as part of church services – instead, they were often presented on a special occasion, like the consecration of a new cathedral or a wedding.

I spoke a little about how Josquin des Pres (c. 1450 - 1521) was like many composers of his day, traveling from court to court in Italy, making fancy church music and secular entertainments for wealthy aristocrats. He managed to build a reputation of simply being the best at what he did, and he commanded a relatively high fee.

The *Ave Maria* is a motet that sets text from a few different prayers praising the Virgin Mary. It is notable for its **imitation** technique, in which short melodic ideas are passed from voice to voice. This creates structure – if a composer is using imitation it gives more “purpose” to the notes in all of the parts.

We watched a youtube animation of the piece in which the notes were rendered as colored blocks, which made the imitation easy to see (and hear.)

I also tried to show how the music seems to have some parts where Josquin is trying to match the meaning of the words in the music. This “musical symbolism” is all “extra” information that is not on the quiz! Craig Wright also writes a little about it in the text.

PART IV - Palestrina and the Counter-Reformation

Finally, we jumped forward and talked about a change in musical style that occurred towards the end of the Renaissance. This was in part due to the influence of the Catholic church and its reaction to the emergence of Protestantism.

In my intro I mentioned Martin Luther and his Ninety-Five Theses [1517]. This launched a new variant of Christianity called Protestantism (and, more specifically, Lutheranism) which rapidly became the dominant belief system throughout Germany and the surrounding areas. Also, the Church of England split away from the rest of Europe in the 1530s. The Roman Catholic Church was understandably very upset about this loss of influence, and began to hold strategic meetings to evaluate what had gone wrong and how to refine their message. The Catholic reaction to the Protestant Reformation is called the Counter-Reformation.

The topics discussed during this period included art and music. The reformers had two problems with the polyphonic music of the day. For one thing, they thought that polyphonic complexity obscured the words of the Latin mass.

In class I played a mass movement from the early Renaissance which I thought was pretty complex, Pierre de la Rue's Gloria from the *Missa L'Homme armé*.

The other problem the Counter-Reformers had with this sort of piece is its secular cantus firmus. You may remember that pieces like Pérotin's *Viderunt omnes* and the Machaut *Messe di Nostre Dame* build their polyphony around a pre-existing melody. These were originally Gregorian chants, but as time went on it became fashionable to use a secular tune as the cantus firmus. The Pierre de la Rue that I played uses a tune called "L'homme Armé," a fun and somewhat raucous song which I also played for you in class. The leaders of the Counter-Reformation thought such a tune had no place in church.

Palestrina's Pope Marcellus Mass

So, the Counter-Reformers wanted less polyphony, a clearer presentation of the text, and an end to secular cantus firmi. One of the first composers to give them what they wanted was Palestrina (1525-1594) in his Pope Marcellus Mass [1555].

We listened to the Gloria from the Mass, and you can definitely hear a difference in texture. The voices combine to make nice chords and there is very little complexity in there. This is mostly homophonic writing!

There is a legend that the Counter-Reformers actually wanted to ban polyphony altogether and go back to monophonic Gregorian Chant, but Palestrina "saved" music as we know it by showing them his Pope Marcellus Mass. There is no hard evidence that this actually happened – it may be a myth. It is safe to say that the Pope Marcellus Mass is some kind of response to the demands of the counter-reformation, but beyond that we don't really know how the details played out.

So this is a general difference between early Renaissance music (like the Josquin), and late (like the Palestrina) – the voices in late Renaissance music are more likely to blend into homophonic chords.