CHAPTER 3
MUSIC IN THE MIDDLE AGES
(c. 450-1450)

General Background on the Middle Ages

During the "Middle Ages" (the "Medieval" era between the fall of Rome and the start of the Renaissance), the Western Christian ["Catholic"] Church evolved into Europe's strongest institution. Medieval times also included the "Age of Chivalry," the Crusades, the "Black Plague," and the establishment of the first universities. Feudalism separated society into a multi-leveled structure, ranging from wealthy royalty to poor serfs.

Important Musical Considerations in the Middle Ages

Music in the Middle Ages began as monophonic chant, then around 1000 A.D., new types of polyphony developed and gradually expanded in rhythm, harmony and texture until reaching an extremely complex style in the late 1300s. A full assessment of Medieval music is difficult because the amount of musical source material that has survived from this era is limited by several factors:

• A process for printing music had not yet been invented.
• A standardized music notation system was slow to evolve.
• Copying music by hand was a tedious task—few people had the skill or the time to do so. Until the widespread use of paper in the Renaissance, music had to be copied on to large pieces of animal hide (expensive and difficult).
• The church was one of the few institutions to educate music copyists. Some monks lived in solitary confinement and copied music in service to God.
• Many precious manuscripts that had survived into the 20th century were destroyed by Allied bombs during World War II.

Representative Composers of the Middle Ages

Early Medieval composers were rarely identified by name; however, as polyphony developed, some composers were credited by others for their innovations:

HILDEGARD of Bingen (1098-1179; Germany)
This Catholic nun is noted for her expressive chants and hymns. She was also a visionary/mystic who wrote on theology, politics, medicine, and science.

LEONIN (c. 1135-1201) and PEROTIN (1180-c.1207—France)
These two composers worked at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris and are noted for developing an early type of polyphony called organum.

Guillaume de MACHAUT (c. 1300-1377; France)
The most important composer of the Middle Ages; He brought Medieval music to its height of rhythmic and harmonic complexity.
SACRED MUSICAL GENRES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The Roman Mass

For hundreds of years, Christians were persecuted by Roman authorities; however, during the 5th century in a miraculous turnabout, the once-underground Christian Church became not only tolerated—but formally established as the official church of Rome. Gradually, its most sacred ritual—Holy Communion (the taking of bread and wine to commemorate the Last Supper of Jesus and His Disciples as recounted in the New Testament)—became the foundation for the daily Mass. By c.1000, the Roman Catholic Mass had expanded to approximately 20 prayers, divided into two categories:

- The Mass "Ordinary": the five standard prayers of the Mass that are used every day—the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei
- The Mass "Proper": 15 prayers that change daily to focus on the specific occasion being celebrated in the church calendar—the most important church festivals being Easter and Christmas.

The prayers of the Mass Ordinary were among the most important musical texts of the Middle Ages. Short prayers, such as the Kyrie, Sanctus and Agnus Dei were sung with expressive melismas (many notes sung to each syllable of the text), but longer prayers such as the Gloria and Credo had to be sung in a recitational style (one note sung per syllable of text):

**KYRIE:** ("Lord have mercy . . .")—This prayer is in "A B A" form ["ternary"]

Kyrie eleison . . . Christe eleison . . . Kyrie eleison
(Translation): Lord have mercy . . . Christ have mercy . . . Lord have mercy.

**GLORIA:** ("Glory to God in the highest . . .")

Gloria in excelsis Deo...Et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis...
Laudamus te...Benedicimus te...Adoramus te...Glorificamus te...
Gratias agimus tibi propter magnam gloriam tuam...Domine Deus, Rex caelestis...Deus Pater omnipotens...Domine Fili unigenite Jesu Christe...Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris... Qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis...Qui tollis peccata mundi, suscipe deprecationem nostram...Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris, miserere nobis... Quoniam tu solus sanctus...Tu solus Dominus...Tu solus altissimus, Jesu Christe... Cum Sancto Spiritu, in gloria Dei Patris. Amen.

(Translation): Glory to God in the highest...And on earth peace to men of good will...We praise You...We bless You...We adore You...We glorify You...We give You thanks for Your great glory...Lord God, heavenly King...God, the Father Almighty...Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of the Father...Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father...Who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us...Who takes away the sins of the world, receive our prayer...Who sits at the right hand of the Father, have mercy on us...For You alone are Holy...You alone are Lord...You alone, O Jesus Christ, are most high...Together with the Holy Spirit in the Glory of God the Father. Amen.
**Credo:** (Creed: "We believe in one God . . .")

Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem...factorem caeli et terrae...visibilium omnium et invisibilium...Et in unum Dominum Jesum Christum...Filium Dei unigenitum...Et ex Patre natum ante omnia saecula...Deum de Deo, lumen de lumine...Deum verum de Deo vero...Genitum, non factum, consubstantalem Patri...per quem omnia facta sunt...Qui propter nos homines, et propter nostram salutem...descendit de caelis...

Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto ex Maria Virgine...et homo factus est...Crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato...passus, et sepultus est...Et resurrexit tertia die, secundum Scripturas...Et ascendit in caelum: sedet ad dexteram Patris...Et iterum venturus est cum gloria judicare vivos et mortuos...cujus regni non erit finis...Et in Spiritum Sanctum Dominum, et vivificantem...qui ex Patre, Filioque procedit...

Qui cum Patre, et Filio simul adoratur, et conglorificatur...qui locutus est per Prophetas...Et unam, sanctam, catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam...Confiteor unum baptisma in remissionem peccatorum...Et expecto resurrectionem mortuorum...

Et venturum regnum...Amen.

(Translation): I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...Creator of heaven and earth...and of all things visible and invisible...And in one Lord Jesus Christ...the only-begotten Son of God...born of the Father before all ages...God from God, Light from Light...true God from true God...Begotten, not made; one in being with the Father...by Whom all things were made...Who for us and our salvation...came down from heaven...and by the power of the Holy Spirit, through the Virgin Mary...He was made man...He was crucified for us, suffered under Pontius Pilate...died, and was buried...And on the third day He rose again in accord with the Scriptures...He ascended into heaven, and sits at the Father's right hand...And He shall come again to judge the living and the dead... and of His kingdom there shall be no end...I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life... Who proceeds from the Father and the Son...Who together with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified...Who spoke through the prophets...I believe in one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church...I confess one baptism for the forgiveness of sins...I expect the resurrection of the dead...and a life in the world to come. Amen.

**Sanctus:** ("Holy, holy, holy Lord . . .")

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth...

Pleni sunt caeli et terra gloria tua...Hosanna in excelsis...

Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini...Hosanna in excelsis.

(Translation): Holy, holy, holy Lord Almighty...

Heaven and earth are full of Your glory...Hosanna in the highest!...

Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord...Hosanna in the highest!...

**Agnus Dei:** (refers to Jesus as the sacrificial "Lamb of God")

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis...

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: miserere nobis...

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi: dona nobis pacem.

(Translation): Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world: have mercy on us...Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world: have mercy on us...Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world: grant us peace.
The **Mass** was not the only sacred service in the Roman liturgy: a series of eight shorter daily prayer services known as the **Divine Office** (or "The Canonical Hours") was also developed during the Middle Ages. The **Office** includes services celebrated (usually in private) by clergy at 3AM, sunrise, 6AM, 9AM, noon, 3PM, twilight, and before bedtime. Some of the most expressive Catholic texts come from the **Office**—especially from the twilight service called "Vespers."

**Chant**

The largest body of western art music that has survived from the Middle Ages is Catholic church music. For many centuries, the prayers of the Catholic Mass and other religious services were sung as monophonic **chant** (music sung to a single unaccompanied melody in a free rhythm). Catholic **chant** (sometimes called "Gregorian Chant"—named after Pope Gregory I) was prominent until the development of **polyphony** around c. 1000, and it is still used today. The Catholic monks who wrote chant rarely put their names on manuscripts because they wanted to glorify God—not to themselves (so they remained "anonymous").

**EXAMPLES OF CHANT**

ANONYMOUS: *Alleluia: Vidimus Stellam*
see MUSIC GUIDE 3 (page 21)

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN: *O Successores*
see MUSIC GUIDE 4 (page 22)

ANONYMOUS: *Haec dies*
see MUSIC GUIDE 6 (page 23)

**Organum and Motet—Early Sacred Polyphony (c. 1000-1300)**

Around the year 1000, composers in Europe began to experiment with **polyphony** (music based on several simultaneous sounds). **This bold step is perhaps the single most important occurrence in the history of Western music.** Around the year 1200, a simple type of polyphony called **organum** developed in France. This technique features long-held notes in the lower part (actually a **chant** melody moving very slowly), with choppy, faster-moving voices in the upper parts (based on secular dance rhythms. In **organum**, the voices often sing extended **melismas** (many notes sung on one syllable of text—a technique that expressively emphasizes the most important words of a prayer).

**EXAMPLE of ORGANUM (from the Christmas Mass "Proper")**

PEROTIN: *Haec dies* (organum)
see MUSIC GUIDE 6 (page 23)
Over the next 200 years, composers gradually devised more daring polyphonic and rhythmic techniques, leading to the very complex musical styles of the late Middle Ages (the "Ars Nova"—"New Art"). During the 1200s, a new polyphonic genre known as the motet emerged out of organum—as words were interpolated onto each note of a melisma to create a more syllabic and metrical style. Medieval motets commonly featured three or more vocal parts—often with completely different texts in each voice (even texts in different languages simultaneously). **Note: The biggest difference between a musical Mass and a motet is the TEXT (a motet can never be based on a Mass text).**

**EXAMPLE of a Medieval MOTET**

ANONYMOUS: *O mitissima—Virgo—Haec dies*

see MUSIC GUIDE 6 (page 23)

**The POLYPHONIC MASS of the Late Middle Ages: (c. 1300-1400)**

By the early 1300s, sacred and secular music had become very complex, especially in regards to rhythm and harmonic dissonance. A very important work from the late Middle Ages is the *Missa Notre Dame* ("Mass to Our Lady") composed in homage to the Virgin Mary by Guillaume de MACHAUT. This was a major innovation in Western music—the first time the five prayers of the Mass Ordinary were musically set into a reusable POLYPHONIC composition.

**EXAMPLE of a Medieval POLYPHONIC MASS**

MACHAUT: "Agnus Dei" from *Missa Notre Dame*

see MUSIC GUIDE 7 (page 24)

**SECCULAR MUSICAL GENRES OF THE MIDDLE AGES**

**Dance Music**

Throughout the Middle Ages, instrumental dance music was a very popular form of entertainment for all social classes. As mentioned above, the repetitive meter of secular dance music—especially when blended with innovations in harmony during the 12th to 15th centuries—eventually led to bold new types of Catholic church music such as organum and motet.

**EXAMPLE of Medieval INSTRUMENTAL DANCE MUSIC**

ANONYMOUS: *Estampie*

see MUSIC GUIDE 5 (page 22)
**Songs**

In addition, much of what we know about society in the Middle Ages comes to us through contemporaneous popular *songs* written about political, religious and love-related topics. Some of the most important musical innovations of the Middle Ages came through this medium. One of the more remarkable examples is the secular "round" *Sumer is icumen in* ("Summer is a-coming in") written around 1300 by an anonymous English composer.

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**SUMMARY OF MAIN MEDIEVAL TERMS, COMPOSERS AND CONCEPTS**

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This Alleluia is a responsorial chant in ternary form (A B A):

**Formal Design**
- Solo phrase, repeated by choir; (long melisma on “ia”)

**Text and Translation**

- **A**
  - Alleluia (Hallelujah)
  - Vidimus stellam ejus in Oriente (We have seen the star in the East)
  - et venimus cum munerebimus adorare Dominum. (and have come with gifts to worship the Lord.)

- **B**
  - The Biblical verse sung by the choir

- **A**
  - Return of the opening section sung by choir
  - Alleluia (Hallelujah)

The opening monophonic texture of this work may be graphed as follows:

This is an example of plainchant (or chant), which flourished in Catholic church music between c. 300 and 1100. The Latin text is from the Catholic Mass Proper of the Feast of Epiphany (January 6) that commemorates the day the three kings of the Orient arrived in Bethlehem, bearing gifts for the Christ child (an adaptation of the Biblical text Matthew 2:2.) This music is monophonic, based on unmetered rhythm (free), and it is rather impersonal (intends to draw attention to God—not to the singers themselves nor to the composer). The text-setting is primarily melismatic—many notes sung to each single syllable of the text (to show expression on important words).
In the later Middle Ages, trained musicians in the Christian Church began to add new texts to the melismatic sections of chants, and extended the chants with melodic material as well (a process called "troping"). Some of the more daring composers, wrote entirely new chants for use as devotional songs. Among the most esteemed composers of this era is Hildegard of Bingen—a 12th century Abbess of a German convent of nuns, who was known for her mystical revelations, and her writings on medicine, science, history, music, and theology. She is the first woman for whom a large number of works (in this case, monophonic sacred songs)—have survived.

In this text, Christ is referred to as both the "Lion" and the "Lamb"

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<th>Text</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<td>O successores fortissimi leonis inter templum et altare, dominantes in ministratione eius</td>
<td>You successors of the mightiest lion Between the temple and the altar, You the masters in his household,</td>
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<tr>
<td>sic transit gloria mundi</td>
<td>As the angels sound forth praises You are here to help the nations, You are among those who accomplish this forever showing your care</td>
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<tr>
<td>in officio agni.</td>
<td>in the service of the Lamb</td>
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The estampie is a medieval dance, and one of the earliest types of instrumental music that still survives. In the original handwritten manuscript for this work, a single melodic line is notated and no specific instrument is identified. On the Kamien Recordings, the melody is played by a rebec (a stringed medieval instrument) and a pipe (a tubular wind instrument). Following possible performance practice of the time, the performers on the recording have also taken the liberty of adding a drone part—two pitches sustained a fifth apart on a psaltery (a plucked/struck string instrument). The estampie is in triple meter with a fast, strong dance beat. All the melodic material is derived by gradually manipulating the main motive (small musical building block) of the opening phrase.
The *Haec dies* chant (c. 800—from the Easter Day Proper of the Catholic Mass) was later transformed polyphonically and rhythmically into *organum* (c. 1200, by adding a new voice-part above the chant) and *motet* (c. 1250, by adding a 3rd voice-part and syllabic words to the two highest voices).

### Chapter 3: Music in the Middle Ages

#### Anonymous: *Haec dies*

The opening section of the monophonic chant version may be graphed as follows:

1. Ha (a melisma) di (a melisma)

   (Translation: “This is the day” refers to Easter as THE day of the Resurrection)

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#### Anonymous: *Haec dies*

The opening section of the 2-voice organum version may be graphed as follows:

1. Ha (ec)

   (etc.)

   1

2. One long-held note! another held note

   (etc.)

   2

In this 2-voice organum version (probably written by Pérotin at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris), the LOWER VOICE sings the notes of the *Haec dies* chant VERY SLOWLY (on long-held notes), while the UPPER VOICE is a faster-moving/newly-composed melody with metrical rhythms and harmonies derived from Medieval popular dance music.

#### Anonymous: *O mitissima—Virgo—Haec dies*

1. **High Voice** (Text:) *O mit-tis-si-ma* Vir-go Ma-ri-a...

2. **Middle Voice** (Text:) *Vir-go vir-gi-num*, Lumen lumi-num...

3. **Tenor Voice**

   This LOW part is the *Haec dies* CHANT melody

   Tenor Rhythm Pattern: (ostinato)

   | Haec dies. | This is the day. |

This is an early example of a motet. It features three different Latin texts, sung simultaneously. The low “*tenor*” part presents the *Haec dies* chant melody in a recurring 5-note RHYTHMIC OSTINATO, while the upper voices move on faster rhythms.
"Agnus Dei" from Missa Notre Dame by Guillaume de Machaut (c 1300–77)

The opening texture of this work may be graphed as follows:

Text and Translation

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi, dona nobis pacem.
Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, grant us peace.

(In this prayer, the words "Agnus Dei" refer to Jesus as God's "sacrificial lamb".)

Guillaume de Machaut was the most important French composer of the late Middle Ages. Around 1350, he composed the Missa Notre Dame ("Mass to Our Lady [the Virgin Mary]")—which is historically important because it was the first polyphonic setting of the entire Mass Ordinary written by one composer. Its rhythms are very complex and disjointed, and its harmonies often sound strange and dissonant to modern ears (the music is "modal"—not tonal). The four voices are highly independent (there is no imitation).