A Brief History of Medieval Music

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Music is one of the most important aspects in human life. It influences humans’ emotion and spirit. People like music because everyone can find something for himself or herself with the great variety of music today. Modern day music traces its root back to classical music, and classical music traces its root back to the medieval music. Hence, medieval music, with all development since the dawn of the Christian chant, is the origin of the Western classical music.

The earliest form of Western classical music is the Christian chant. The history of Christian chants can be divided into three periods. The first one was around the second century, when there was not much progress due to the severe persecution of Christians, who were small in population. The second period dated from the second to fourth century. This period was the first growth of the Christian music. As the number of Christian converts was growing, music also grew (Resse, 61). However, the biggest change to Western music came after the year 313 when Constantine legalized Christianity and made it the state religion. Since then the Emperor did the Christian churches many favors, including exempting the churches from taxation, which allowed the Churches a huge sum of money to build spacious churches. Hence, there was a need for an appropriate form of music for the Church. Before, music was used mainly in Greek entertainment like comedies and tragedies. Therefore, Bishops thought that only certain types of music were appropriate for church.

Music in the early days of the Church was called the plainchant, because they were all unaccompanied, monophonic, and solemn. One of the surviving chants is Dies Irae. Most of the
content was taken from the hymns or psalms. The Bishops realized that “music can either ennoble or debase man’s moral fiber and that therefore all church music must be associated with devout words” (Harman, 2). Moreover, the chants of this time were orally transmitted without being officially transcribed. Hence, the melodies of these chants were quite loose and naturally harmonic. It was not until ninth century, when the Franks assembled all the earlier chants, that the term “Georgian Chant” was coined. The Georgian Chant owes its name to either Pope Gregory I (590–604) or Pope Gregory II (715–731). However, the former was more favorable with this assumption, because Pope Gregory I liked English. Moreover, he was also believed to “codify and unify many types of religious chant that existed in the early Christian times” (Fiero, 216).

By examining the Frankish preservation of the early Georgian Chants, it can be seen that the Georgian Chants follow Greek modes. Modes are the set of scales or melody types (Hiley). Each mode has a central pentachord, “which is a group of five adjacent notes” (Sternfeld, 63). With this core, people can extend either upwards a fourth to reach an ‘authentic’ mode or downwards to reach a ‘plagal’ mode. The pentachords can base on only one of four notes: D, E, F, or G, (Re, Mi, Fa or Sol, respectively) and there were only two ways to extend this base. There were only eight Greek modes in total. With this given melody, the lyrics, psalm or hymn were put to fit to the rhythm of the melody. Hence, music in early Christianity can be seen as rather simple.

Other than the Christian Chant, the liturgical drama was another dominant form of music in the early days. Liturgical drama was a combination of music and certain liturgical texts. These dramas were created because Christian music was boring (Fiero, 321). By the tenth century, as the drama in these antiphons was raised higher, a separation of dramas from the chant was
formed. The new form of drama was called the liturgical drama. These dramas were performed in the interval of the mass. The liturgical drama was taken mostly from Book of Daniel (in the Hebrew Bible). (Fiero, 321) Liturgical dramas can vary from rather simple to complex. The simplest form of this type of drama can be described as a dialogue tropes of the Introit of the Mass (Stevens et al.). The more complicated drama was *Dum transisset sabbatum*, which has three degrees of dialogue. The music accompanying these dramas also varied to suit each context. With this variety of music and the combination of music and dramatic feature, liturgical drama was one of the origin of opera, a popular form of classical music founded in Italy in 16th century.

These features remained the same until the ninth century, when *organum* (plural *organa*) was invented. An example of an organum can be found here. This new form of music marked the first extensive and systematic use of polyphony in the church. In the ninth century, the Georgian chants were developed by the addition of two or more voices into the main one to enhance the text of the chants. The new line can be added parallel with the main line to form parallel organum or contradictory to the main line to form free organum. Either way marks the foundation for the polyphony in the early Christian chants (Reckow et al.).

Another product of the Notre Dame school of music was the conductus. One of a surviving conductus can be found here. Conductus was firstly founded in mid-twelfth century sources and was assumed to originate from France. The distinctive feature of this type of music is the tenor, which closely oriented to other voices of the songs. All these voices together were consonant. Moreover, the structure of the conductus was strict with cauda, a section in which all voices were combined into one. Moreover, the structure of the conductus was strong, clearly-
outlined and declamatory and showed the text-related repetition (Knapp). Conductus was the basis for songs with multiple voices in the next period.

In the tenth century, musical notation, one of the most important inventions of the Western music, was founded. This early was called *neumatic* notation. In plainchants, to note the height and length of each word, there was small dot above each word just to show the words went up or down. The notation system can be seen in this picture. Later on, the notes were arranged vertically with lines to indicate the pitch. This system was rather simple with only two notations at first to measure the track, which were long and which were breves, three other beams, two rests and two ornamental signs (Pryer). They were difficult to interpret. It was the first time in the history that the Christian chants were noted properly. Specifically, all notes were ink dots and were usually connected together to form a group of notes, following a number of rules. In the earliest time, some recorded rhythmic rules were long breve, breve long, long breve breve, breve breve long, long long long long long, breve breve breve breve breve (Horne). Later on, there were many other notes, which were introduced, which devised new melodies and rules for music. In short, the notation system of this time just stopped at semibreves, rather simple and difficult to interpret.

In the Renaissance of the twelfth century, Paris was not only a political and religious center of France, but also an intellectual center of Europe along with Oxford and Vienna. Hence, the Notre Dame School of Music influenced not only France, but also the rest of Europe as well. When referring to the Notre Dame school, modern scholars refer to “the group of musicians active in Paris between about 1150 and about 1250” (Roesner). Although all the composers in this period were anonymous, two names stood out. They are Leonin or Leonius (1150s–c1201) and Perotin or Perotinus (c1200). Leonin, who was called ‘*optimus organista*’ (the best
composer of organa) by Anonymous IV, did a great job of improving the melisma, in which a group of notes are sung for one syllable of text by using discant style. Specifically, in discant style, there were two or more notes going along with the original note of the plainchant. Hence, it added not only more colors to the music but also more voice to the chant. From this basis, some earliest polyphonic chants were founded (Sternfeld, 104). On the other hand, Perotin continued to build on Leonin’s foundation. Instead of two, Perotin built *tripla* and *quadruple*, which are organa with three and four voices sung at the same time. However, these new lines were based much on the main lines of the organa. These additional voices were usually guided by the pipe organ, the only musical instrument in the Church other than the bell. Nonetheless, this continuation was important to the development of Western music, because these organa set the first step for more complicated music style in Western music.

One of the distinctive features of fourteenth century music is the Ars Nova style. In Medieval Latin, Ars Nova is literally translated into New Art. Ars Nova is usually credited to Philippe de Vitry (c.1291-1361), with his piece of music compiled in Paris around 1320. Since then, scholars referring to the music in the fourteenth Century use the term Ars Nova later. Although it cannot be recognized as a truly new form of music, there are several differences between the Ars Nova and the music of earlier period, often called Ars Antiqua, including the notation, rhythm and harmony.

Regarding notation, new notations for smaller values were introduced. “Vitry introduced, in addition to the existing note values of Franco of Cologne, a new figure, the *minima* (minim) which was soon to give rise to an even smaller note-value, the *semiminima* (semiminim), which is allowed greater diversification of rhythm” (Sternfield, 151). Prior to this period, Franco’s system had only two subdivisions of the notes, specifically, “long into breves (*modus* or mode)
and breve into semibreves (*tempus* or time).” With the new system, the semibreves were divided into the minims (prolatio or prolation). This innovation means that the mensuration based on binary division was formally accepted (Sternfeld, 152). Since then, earlier polyphonies were now innovated. In specific, the ornamental voices were more independent from the main lines. (McCob, “Philippe de Vitry”)

Moreover, this innovation also introduced the idea of isorhythm, which is the “the technique of using a repeated rhythmic and melodic pattern as a main structural component” (Latham). However, only informed musicians can easily recognize this repetition. Hence, this feature reflects advancement in the ninth century music in comparison with the earlier music because it challenged the listeners and the composers of that time. In addition, this feature lasted for more than century, which means the intellectual life reflected through art was developing.

There was another part of the medieval body music: the secular music. In 1095, Pope Urban II called for a rescue of Jerusalem; hence, Christianity went to war with Islam. In the context of warfare, courtly love poetry concerning about desired and free love and adventure were created. Two examples of the troubadours and trouvères can be found here and here. Through these two examples, a development of ars nova in secular music can be seen. With this new form of literature, there came a new form of music: troubadours and trouvères. This new form of music was the first vernacular, secular music in the West. In specific, this trend started in Poitiers and from the Atlantic coast south of Bordeaux in the west and extended to the Alps bordering on Italy in the east (Stevens, Butterfield, and Karp). “To entertain the French nobility, troubadours and trouvères composed and performed poems devoted to courtly love, chivalry, religion and politics” (Fiero, 271). In contrast to the churches’ music, the troubadours and trouvères’ musical poems just dealt with personal matters, such as feeling. As quoted from
Troubadours, trouvères of John Steven, some genres of the troubadours and trouvères’ poems were

(i) canso: a courtly love-song, the central type of Occitan lyric which allowed a wide variety of predominantly serious content and high style; (ii) sirventes: a song usually satirical on a political, moral or literary topic devised to a borrowed melody; (iii) tenso, partimen, joc-partit: songs of various kinds in debate form, often involving therefore, two participants by name, but not necessarily being joint compositions; (iv) pastorela: a courtly song in mock-popular style presenting an amorous encounter between a knight and a shepherdess; (vi) dansa: a mock-popular song based on a dance form; (vii) descort: in some sense a ‘discordant’ song.

The music used by this poet was monophonic, accompanied with a lyre or a lute.

During the course of development, more and more musical instruments were used in the secular music. Musical instruments of that time were divided into some main groups of instruments, including string instruments, wind instruments and percussion instruments. String instruments included the psaltery, the harp and the lute, wind instruments include portable pipe organs, recorders, and bagpipes, and percussions included chimes, cymbals, bells, tambourines, and drums (Fiero, 323). In today world, although all these instruments still survive, they are not used frequently any more, except for the percussion. Back in the medieval time, among all of these musical instruments, only drums and pipe organs were used in the church. The musical instruments were flourish in the secular music, in which troubadours, trouvères used to accompany their songs.
Moreover, the instrumental music was used greatly in the dances. The most popular form of the instrumental dance music was *estampie* in France and Italy in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The most dominant feature of this type of music is the repetition. An estampie can be made up of many verses, each verse had its own versicles, or repeated section, to form its own melody (McGee). Although the dance music at that time was rather simple, the existence of this type of music suggests a diversity in genres of the music in late medieval time. The extensive use of musical instruments to accompany dance can be seen as a foundation for ballet and opera in later classical music.

One of the most dominant figures of the secular music in the medieval era was Guillaume de Machaut (c. 1300-1377). He was the French poet and musician, one of the two pillars of Ars Nova. He worked in every genre of poem and music at that time. He was the one who defined the *ballade* and *rondeau*, which still exist in modern days. (McComb, “Classical Net - Basic Repertoire List - Machaut”) Moreover, he also composed several sacred pieces for the Mass. He is the one who “create a polyphonic setting of the Ordinary of the Catholic Mass” (Sherrane). His death also marked the end of the medieval music, and since then, composers started to focus more on the floral secular music, which was the basis for Renaissance music.

With all above developments, medieval music was the seed to the development of later classical music. The early Georgian Chants still survive nowadays and become the only official music in the church. Nowadays, acapella becomes an art of singing, which requires sensational ears and years of practice to perform. Despite of being in its early form, the notation system started to have the precise measure and notes, which later musicians sometimes take it for granted. Until the end of the medieval era, although the shortest note was only the semibreves, musicians later used this basis to change the shapes of the notes and add more signs to the
system. Polyphony, for instance organum, was the basis for any later form of music involving singing with multiple voices. Liturgical drama and secular dance music were the basis for ballet and opera of later time. As a whole, medieval music theory set the basis for the development of rhythm, notation, melody and genres in later time.

In conclusion, although there is still a long way to reach the peak of the Classical music with Bach, Mozart, Beethoven or Chopin, but medieval music can be seen as the substructure for the remarkable works of classical music. Medieval music progressed through the freely unaccompanied monophonic chant to a more diverse type of music, including the polyphonic sacred and secular music throughout a millennium. Moreover, through the slow-paced development of the medieval music, scholars and audience can see how fast music developed from the Baroque to the modern day music.
Bibliography


