Of Monks and Troubadours: The Medieval Period

In This Chapter

- ◆ Learn how the Greek modes influenced Gregorian chant
- ◆ Discover the emerging secular song of the troubadours
- ◆ Find out how polyphony developed in both secular and sacred music
- ◆ Learn all about organum, conductus, motets, and composer Guillaume de Machaut

Here's something interesting about the way history unfolds. Although succeeding generations often build on the previous culture, more often than not, there is some sort of rebellion against what came before. In fact, some new cultures go out of their way to ignore or even obliterate what has come before, often when the new culture has forcibly conquered the older one.

This sort of generational rebellion is often reflected in the music and art of the new era. If the previous music was simple, the new music would likely be more complex; if the previous music was ornate, the new music would likely be simpler.

This is what happened in the medieval period, after the barbarian forces of Europe brought about the fall of the Roman Empire. The resulting European society, strongly influenced by the newly powerful Christian church, did its best to replace the pagan culture of Greece and Rome with its own Christian religious culture. As far as music was concerned, it was a whole new ballgame; while medieval music built upon the musical modes developed by the Greeks, the music itself was now in service to the Christian church—and began to get a lot more sophisticated.

Timeline: The Middle Ages

476	Fall of the Roman Empire; beginning of the Middle Ages
600	Pope Gregory I standardizes the Catholic Mass
750	*Beowulf* written
768	Charlemagne begins rule in Europe
900	First use of polyphony
1000	Rise of the troubadours in southern France
1020	D'Arezzo invents music notation
1050	First agricultural revolution begins
1066	William the Conqueror invades England
1095	First Crusade begins
1099	Crusaders capture Jerusalem
1100	Beginnings of secular music
1189	Richard the Lionhearted assumes English crown
1209	Cathar Crusade; troubadours flee southern France
1225	Thomas Aquinas teaches at the University of Paris
1247	Robin Hood dies (according to legend) at Kirklees priory
1270	Franco of Cologne invents modern rhythmic notation
1272	Edward I establishes English Parliament
1300	Machaut born
1310	Rise of ars nova
1337	Start of Hundred Years' War between France and England
1347	The Black Death begins to plague Europe
1350	Lute playing becomes popular across Europe
1360	Machaut writes *Le Messe de Nostre Dame*
1377	Machaut dies
1390	First Mass settings with all movements related to each other

Welcome to the Middle Ages

On September 4, 476 C.E., the Roman Empire fell. On that date, Romulus Augustus, the last emperor of Rome, was deposed but not replaced; the empire had spread too far and too thin to defend itself against the hordes of Vandals, Visigoths, and Huns who invaded the empire's European territories.

After the fall of the empire, Europe splintered into numerous regional king-doms and fiefdoms, isolated from one another and ruled by kings who enjoyed the support of the barbarian armies. This led to a cultural Balkanization, as it were; it was difficult, if not impossible, for culture to travel from one isolated country to another.

The lack of a single European ruling entity created a power vacuum that was filled by the newly emerged Christian church. The Christian religion, which began as an underground sect following the death of Jesus in the first century C.E., eventually went mainstream and was ultimately accepted as the offi-cial religion of the Roman Empire. After the fall of the empire, Christianity emerged as the central unifying force in Europe, controlling governments and dictating the destiny of art, literature, and music. This church-dominated era, which dated from the fifth century C.E. to the beginning of the Renaissance in the fourteenth century, was known as the Middle Ages or medieval era.

The Christian church's control over the arts resulted in most professional musicians being employed by the church; the majority of medieval music was created in monasteries. Because the church was opposed to the paganism asso-ciated with ancient Greece and Rome, this led to the dying out of Greek and Roman music (which tended to be in service to those cultures' pagan religions) and to the rise of new sacred musical forms.

The medieval period was a long one, lasting a full millennia. Over the course of a thousand years, one would expect significant musical development. But that isn't what happened—at least initially. While some evolution occurred, especially in the later years of the period, it was perhaps the lack of change that was surprising. This musical stability (or stagnation, if you prefer) was a direct result of the isolation of the various European cultures, as well as the heavy-handed influence of the Catholic Church, which wasn't a big fan of change in any way, shape, or form. So once the prominent medieval musical forms were established, they tended to stay as they were for long periods of time.

Music and the Mass: Gregorian Chant

Note

Monophonic music consists of a single melodic line with no accompaniment—perfect for singing by a single voice, or by multiple peo-ple singing in unison.

The earliest music of the medieval period was performed by the monks of the early Christian church. This music was an unaccompanied monophonic chant, called *plainsong* or *plainchant*. Such chants consisted of Latin words derived from the Roman Catholic Mass, set to simple modal melodies—that is, melodies derived from the seven church modes.

There are two primary types of plainsong: *responsorial* (developed from the recitation of psalms) and *antiphonal* (developed as pure melody). These vocal

melodies were typically unaccompanied and performed in a free rhythm; that is, the rhythm of plainsong is the free rhythm of the spoken word.

This figure shows a typical medieval chant, in its original notation. As you can see, plainsong has its own system of notation, using a four-line staff (in contrast to the modern five-line staff) and no bar lines.

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A typical medieval chant in the original notation.

Due to the isolation of the European countries during the Middle Ages (there were no highways or rail lines, remember), localized versions of chant developed in different regional centers. This localization of chant also served to support the regional liturgies used to celebrate Mass in each country. For example, the Mozarabic chant that developed in Spain showed the influence of North African music; Ambrosian chant, named after St. Ambrose, was the standard in Milan; Gallican chant was used in Gaul; and Celtic chant was the rule of the day in Great Britain and Ireland.

Localized chant became a bit more universal around 600 C.E., when Pope Gregory I moved to standardize the Mass and encourage a ritualized use of music by the church. By this time Rome was the religious center of Western Europe, so a new Mass was created by combining the Roman and Gallican regional liturgies. The resulting chant eventually became known as Gregorian chant, after Pope Gregory. Over the next several hundred years, Gregorian chant superseded all the preceding localized chants, with only a few exceptions.

Gregorian chant was typically sung in churches by choirs of men and boys, as part of the Roman rite of the Catholic Mass. It was also sung by the monks and nuns of religious orders in their chapels. In fact, Gregorian chant continues to be sung today; the modern Roman Catholic Church still officially considers it the music most suitable for worship.

Music and Modes: Understanding the Church Modes

At this point in our examination of the music of the Middle Ages, we need to take a quick time out and discuss the concept of *modes*. All medieval music was based on a specific set of modes, which were often called *church modes* (because the modal plainsong was the music of the church). But modes weren't new to this period; they were originally developed by the ancient Greeks prior to the

fall of the Roman Empire. As you recall from Chapter 1, a musical mode is a series of pitches in a defined order, with specific intervals between each pitch. Modes predate modern major and minor scales, but serve much the same function in defining melody and harmony.

Even if you're not a musician, you're familiar with scales. The major scale, for example, consists of the pitches associated with "do re mi fa sol la ti do," where the second "do" is a repeat of the first one, one octave higher. That series of seven notes (with the eighth a repeat of the first) is the scale, and the notes of the scale are used to create melodies and chords.

Well, before there were scales, there were modes. A mode is just like a scale, except with different sequences of intervals between each tone.

There are seven essential modes, each of which can be thought of as starting on a different degree of the modern major scale. To play the mode, you use the same notes of the relative major scale; you just start on a different tone.
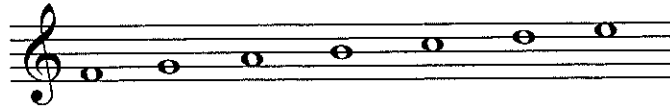
For example, the Dorian mode starts on the second degree of the major scale. In relation to the C major scale, for example, the D Dorian mode starts on D and continues upward (D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D). The same holds true for the Phrygian mode, which starts on the third degree of the related major scale—in C major (E Phrygian): E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E. And so on for the other modes, as shown in the following table:

Note

The Ionian mode is identical to the modern major scale; the Aeolian mode is identical to the natural minor scale.

Modes

Mode	Starts on This Relative Major Scale Tone	Example (based on the C major scale)
Ionian	1	
Dorian	2	
Phrygian	3	
Lydian	4	
Mixolydian	5	

Modes

Mode	Starts on This Relative Major Scale Tone	Example (based on the C major scale)
Aeolian	6	
Locrian	7	

If you want to write your own Gregorian chant, just pick a mode and use the notes of that mode to create a simple melody. Remember to start and end on the home note of the mode; for example, if you're writing in D Dorian, start and end your melody on D. And try your best to stay within the modal octave. That's because most modal melodies stay within the octave or to one pitch outside the octave.

Music for the Masses: Troubadours and Secular Song

Not all music of the Middle Ages was sacred in nature. Toward the latter half of the period, around the turn of the new millennium, sacred musical forms were supplemented by a developing folk music tradition. These secular works typically took the form of poetry set to music, performed on simple string instruments by traveling troubadours.

## Troubadour, Troubadour, Sing a Song for Me

Sometime prior to the eleventh century, a form of secular music sprang forth in southern France. This music was played and sung by roving poet-minstrels, called *troubadours*, who went from castle to castle singing songs, telling stories, and otherwise entertaining the lords and ladies of the upper class. Think of a troubadour, such as the gentleman pictured on the next page, as the medieval equivalent of today's folksinger or singer-songwriter, but without the big recording contract—and, instead of singing in coffeehouses and concert halls, performing for the very wealthiest people in town.

The music of the troubadours was monophonic, just like plainsong, which meant there were no backup singers or duets or anything like that. The troubadour typically accompanied himself on a string or percussion instrument, such as the lyre, lute, fiddle, and drums.

Note

Both sacred and secular music of the Middle Ages incorporated voices and a wide variety of instruments, including the lyre, medieval fiddle (viele), organ, small drums, and bells.
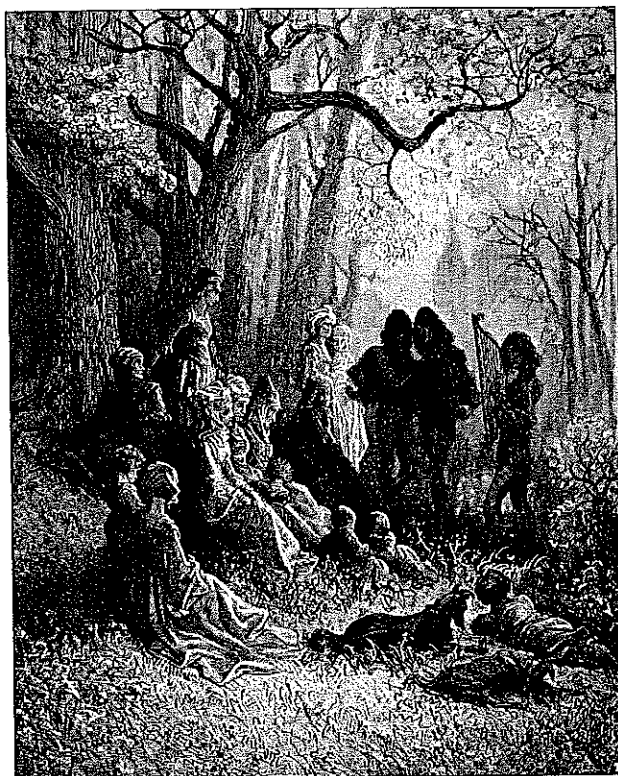
*A typical French troubadour, complete with lute, entertaining
a local crowd during the Middle Ages.*

Note

One of the most famous troubadours was Adam de la Halle, whose best-known work is "Jeu de Robin et Marion."

Note

Troubadours hailed from southern France. In northern France, similar folksingers were known as *trouvères*; in Germany, they were known as *minnesingers*.

The melodies of the troubadours' songs tended to be simpler in design than those produced in the church of the time, although they also were based on the existing church modes. These secular songs were often faster in tempo than sacred songs, and used the common language of the people instead of the Latin text of Gregorian chant.

On a cultural level, the troubadours often sang of war, chivalry, and courtly love (*fin amours*). Of these, courtly love was a very popular topic, much as love songs still dominate the Top 40 today. Under the notion of courtly love, the lover, who relentlessly pursued his often illicit love, was ennobled by the experience; it was a love at once passionate and morally elevating. Note, however, that courtly love typically took place outside the boundaries of marriage, which tended to raise the ire of the Medieval church.

Unfortunately, this ire was given force by the Albigensian or Cathar Crusade (1209–1229), which was Pope Innocent III's attempt to eliminate what he viewed as the heresy of the Cathars, a Gnostic sect that flourished in France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. While it was purely a side effect of the campaign, this crusade forcibly dispersed the troubadours from southern France to Spain, northern Italy, and northern France. And thus the troubadours spread their secular music across the whole of Europe.

By the dawn of the fourteenth century a greater range of secular song forms began to emerge. Many of these forms, such as the *ballade, rondeau,* and *virelai,*

were based on existing poetic forms or peasant dances. Several of these forms were polyphonic in nature—which we'll get into in just a few paragraphs.

Machaut, the Medieval Master

Since the late Middle Ages also saw the rise of music notation (which we'll also get into in short order), individual songwriters began to be recognized. Before notation, songs were passed along via live performance only, and the composers were often forgotten; with notated music, the songwriter's name tended to be attached to the written music. ASCAP and BMI would have been happy, if they had been around at the time.

One of the most celebrated composers of the late Middle Ages—and the first individual musician you need to take notice of in this survey of music history—was Guillaume de Machaut (1300–1377). Machaut was a poet and a composer, prolific in his time and a strong influence on those who immediately followed him. He played an important role in the development of various musical forms of secular song, including the motet.

Music wasn't Machaut's only gig. From 1323 to 1346 he was employed as secretary to John I, Count of Luxemburg and King of Bohemia; he later became a priest and accompanied King John on various trips around Europe. After the death of King John in 1346, Machaut entered the service of other European aristocrats and rulers, including Charles II of Navarre, Jean de Berry, and Charles, Duke of Normandy (who later became King Charles V).

When he wasn't gallivanting about on his church and diplomatic duties, Machaut found time to compose over a hundred known songs (most on the familiar topic of courtly love) and write several motets and Masses. He was also one of the first known composers to explore polyphonic forms. We'll catch up with Machaut later in this chapter, when we examine his music for the Catholic Mass.

Two Parts Are Better Than One: The Rise of Polyphony

Music in the early Medieval period was almost exclusively *monophonic*, meaning that it contained a single melody line with no harmonic accompaniment. In the middle part of the Medieval period, these monophonic melodies began to be accompanied by other instruments in the form of strummed chords, especially in the secular forms of the troubadours.

But in general, Western music remained monophonic through approximately 900 C.E. At that time, for whatever reason, many musicians felt the need for music more elaborate than an unadorned melody. Thus it was that *polyphony* developed, in the form of additional melodic lines sung simultaneously with the original melody.

Note

Polyphony is the mixing together of several simultaneous and independent melodic lines. This is in contrast to monophony, which has only a single melodic line.

Chant + One: Organum

The first polyphonic musical form was known as *organum*, which added an extra vocal part sung in tandem with sections of preexisting Gregorian chant. This daring (for the time) innovation was born in various monasteries, most notably the Abbey of St. Gall in Switzerland; the first document detailing organum is attributed to the Benedictine monk Hucbald of St. Amand.

The added voice part in early organum was quite simple. As you can see in the following figure, the second voice was sung a fourth or a fifth interval above and parallel to the chant melody.

Later variations were more complex, featuring the second voice singing an independent countermelody. In fact, by the early twelfth century, organum incorporated three and four separate voices. This ultimately lead to the development of harmony and counterpoint—two hallmarks of the following Renaissance era.

> **Note**
>
> Parallel fourths and fifths are frowned upon in modern music theory, but were par for the course in the Middle Ages—and, in fact, give Medieval polyphony its unique sound.

Sit   glo - ri - a   Do - mi - ni   in   sae - cu - la
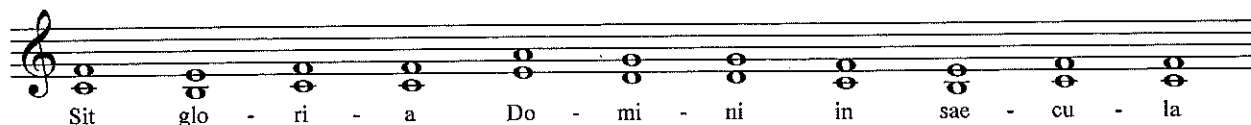
Polyphony in organum—parallel fourths throughout.

Speeding It Up: Conductus

To the southwest, in the south of France, another type of polyphonic composition was born. This new form, called *conductus*, was musically similar to organum but used newly composed texts, often secular in nature.

What truly set conductus apart from organum, however, was speed; in conductus, the words were declaimed at a rapid rate, compared to organum's slower pace. Conductus eventually evolved into the later *motet*.

The New Music of Ars Nova

As the Middle Ages neared their natural end, musical evolution began to speed up. The world was changing, and changing fast.

The fourteenth century saw a major stylistic development dubbed *ars nova* (Latin for "new art"); this was a more sophisticated music, incorporating a new rhythmic complexity. Composers of ars nova used rhythmic patterns of a dozen or more notes, repeated over and over in multiple voices. By layering other melodies over these isorhythmic voice parts, composers created intricate polyphonic designs.

As groundbreaking as ars nova was, it was still based on existing Medieval forms—in particular plainsong. In the music of ars nova, the foundation voice, known as the *cantus firmus*, was typically borrowed from Gregorian chant. Thus we see the evolutionary chain, from Greek modes to Medieval chant to ars nova polyphony—and on to the motet and the Mass.

Music in Two Voices: The Motet

The concepts of ars nova and isorhythm led to the development of the *motet*, a short unaccompanied choral work for two voices. In a motet, the ornate upper voice (called the *tenor*) is given a different text from the chant melody or *cantus firmus*. In this respect a motet is like a song accompanied by a tenor, as shown in this example by Machaut.

Riches d'amour et mandians d'amie

Music by: Guillaume Machaut

A motet with two independent voices—in this instance, Machaut's Riches d'amour et mandians d'amie.

The early motet was exclusively a sacred form, based on preexisting melodies; other words and melodies were added in counterpoint. It stayed secular through the fifteenth century, when Guillaume Dufay introduced secular melodies as part of the motet's cantus firmus. But that gets us into the Renaissance, which is the topic of Chapter 3, where you'll read about the further development of the motet form by composers such as Josquin and Palestrina.

Note

The motet form was expanded late in the thirteenth century, when three- and four-voice motets were introduced.

The Polyphonic Mass

Polyphony also found its way into the Roman Mass, which had incorporated music—in the form of plainchant—since at least the fourth century. During the early Middle Ages, however, ceremonial music was limited to the Proper of the Mass. (The Proper is just one section of the longer Mass.)

During the late fourteenth century, composers began to create Mass settings in which the movements were musically related to each other. In England, Lionel Power (1375–1445) and John Dunstable (1390–1453) unified the Mass by basing all the movements on the same plainchant cantus firmus. By the end of the Medieval period these English Masses had migrated to northern Italy; their impact helped to launch the fully unified Mass cycle that reigned through the end of the seventeenth century, and to establish the polyphonic Mass as the most serious musical form of the Renaissance period to come.

The Development of Music Notation

The rise of polyphony contributed to the development of the modern system of music notation; musicians had to be able to read and perform several different parts simultaneously, hence the need for a precise system of pitch and rhythmic notation. The eleventh-century Benedictine monk Guido d'Arezzo (995–1033) thus conceived of a five-line staff, with each line and space representing a specific pitch; individual notes were represented as square symbols called *neumes*.

A system of rhythmic notation was similarly introduced in the late thirteenth century by German theorist Franco of Cologne (1240–1280). Previously, rhythm was indicated by a series of longs and breves (shorts); a note could either be long or short, but there was no indication as to how long or short. Franco devised a system of notation where different rhythmic values were indicated by differently shaped notes. That system evolved into the series of whole, half, quarter, and eighth notes we use today.

Listening List

So the medieval period, all 1,000 years of it, started out by using simple monophonic melodies based on Greek modes to express Christian beliefs, and ended with very ornate two- and more-part polyphonic melodies in both sacred and secular musical forms. To that end, this chapter's listening list represents both the simplicity of the early Middle Ages and the quite complex nature of the later period.

Listen to these recordings and you'll hear a variety of both sacred and secular medieval forms, including two very popular samplings of that old staple, Gregorian chant, a healthy serving of Machaut, and a bit of troubadour music.

An English Ladymass: Medieval Chant and Polyphony (Anonymous 4)

Chant (The Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo de Silos)

Guillaume de Machaut: Le Messe de Nostre Dame; Songs from Le Voir Dit (Oxford Camerata; Jeremy Summerly, director)

Guillaume de Machaut: Motets (the Hilliard Ensemble)

Troubadours, Trouvères, Minstrels (Studio der frühen Musik; Thomas Binkley, conductor)