

MIDDLE AGES

(Medieval Age)

European Music History

The medieval age was from the fall of the Roman empire to the middle of the 15th century. It was a time of struggle, superstition, laughter and great progress. There were three classes of people.

Serfs (peasants, the lowest class)



Serfs were the poor people of the age. They owned little or nothing, and were obligated to the village or manor where they lived. They worked hard, ate what they could grow, hunt or fish. They lived and loved and had families and friends. They took care of themselves and were respectful to the church and to the local nobility. These people were rarely educated, but had their own traditions and skills. They sang in their homes, played simple instruments and taught each other the folk songs of the age, parent to child, for generations.

Clergy (people who ran the church)



The clergy in the Middle Age were the priests and monks that ran the church. They were educated and had power and influence. The Catholic Church had a lot of power in the Middle Ages and dictated 'truth' to both royalty and serfs. They copied the books, educated the nobility, ran the Sunday services for the village, advised the nobility, and sang. Priests and monks would sing the verses of the bible during church services.

Royalty (people with title and power, often related to the kings)



The royal class of the Middle Age was the class with money and possessions. They would be the head of the village and often have a small amount of wealth and an estate to run. The royalty also had responsibilities to the Kings and paid taxes and tribute. They were responsible to protect their villages and represent their people to the throne. Traveling performers would entertain during parties and mealtimes. Music during supper was a common and normal thing.

Troubadours (traveling musicians and entertainers)



The troubadours (also called Minstrels and Goliards) were men and women who traveled together from town to town and village to village to entertain. They sang and told stories, put on plays and told jokes. These people spread the news from village to village, from church to church. They were given shelter and food where they performed in exchange for their entertainment. They played drums, lutes (the early guitar,) and whistles, and sang silly songs, love songs, and ballads (songs that told stories.) They were loved and respected by both serfs and nobility, but were not as appreciated by the clergy. The priests and monks valued *sacred* music (church music) far more than *secular* music (non-religious music.)

Gregorian Chant (church songs of the priests and monks)



Gregorian chant was also called *Plainsong*. It was verses from the bible, or teachings of the church set to simple songs. It was sung in unison, all the monks sang together, exactly the same melody. It was sung as part of the church services, and parts of the priest's prayers. There were rarely any instruments used to accompany it, and there were no harmonies sung. It was sung exclusively

by the priests and monks and choirs of young boys employed by the church. Regular peasants were not encouraged to sing in church, and were never taught these songs. It is called Gregorian chant in honor of Pope Gregory. The Pope ordered that a certain set of songs be written down and learned by all the monks, that all of his priests would know all of these songs. Wonderfully, this command began the development of written music.

Monophony (singing in unison)



Monophony is the name we give to music that is all sung together in the Middle Ages. The prefix mono- means one, and the suffix -phone means sound, therefore, 'one sound'. Monophony is when the music is all sung in unison, and there is no counter melody or harmony sung with it. It is not until the very end of the Middle Ages that we start to hear polyphony, many melodies of music being sung at the same time. Gregorian Chant was monophony, and the troubadours sang unison melodies, without complicated harmonies.

Guido d'Arrezzo (famous choirmaster who developed the *Guidonian Hand*)



Guido D'Arrezzo was a choirmaster who worked for the church. He taught choirs of young boys to sing the Gregorian chants. He developed a way of explaining the different pitches to the boys using the fingers of his hand. He would have the boys sing certain pitches as he pointed to particular parts of his hand. This way of teaching music spread throughout church music, and was part of the development of written music.

Neumes (earliest written music notes)



Neumes are the very first form of music notes. They were simple shapes placed on a four line staff to indicate pitch and simple rhythm. They were vague and inaccurate, but if you already knew the song, it was enough information to tell you which one it was. These were used to write down the Gregorian Chants.

Superstition and the Church (a way to explain the unknown)



The scientific knowledge of the day was vague. Only the priests and the richest of the nobility got any sort of formal school education. When everyday peasants didn't understand something, they grasped at ideas to explain them. People either looked for explanations in their religion, or became very superstitious. Fantasy creatures and beliefs were common to everyday peasants.

The Crusades (a series of wars to control Jerusalem)



The Crusades were a long period of wars for control of the city of Jerusalem. Both Christians and Muslims wanted control of the Holy city and fought for generations to control the temples, courtyards and sacred places where prophets from their religions taught. Noble families sent their sons, valued knights and soldiers, and the strongest of their peasants to fight for control of the city.

The flute (a musical pipe)



The flute was an early instrument played by peoples all over the world. It was played by the troubadours and by the serfs for secular entertainment. The flute was carved from wood, not made of metal like it is today.

The medieval organ (a keyboard controlling elaborate whistles)



The medieval organ was a set of pipes that worked like whistles. The player would push a key and the air got pumped through to the corresponding whistle. Young peasant boys were employed to pump the air bellows for the organs in the church.

The Lute (the earliest guitar-like instrument)



The Medieval lute was a string instrument made almost entirely of wood. It had a wooden neck and pegs and deep round resonating chamber. It was used for accompanying the troubadours and continued to be popular for hundreds of years later.