

THE BIG PICTURE

THE HISTORY OF WESTERN European music really starts around the fourth century, with the church music we call Gregorian chant. This began as a single vocal line and stayed that way for a few hundred years. Change came slowly back then.

It took a few more centuries to add more voice lines. (Then as now, good singers are hard to find, and the monks didn't want to rush anything.¹)

THE EARLIEST TWO-PART CHANTS are known as *organum*, in which to the main chant (known as the *cantus firmus*, or “fixed song”) is added another voice.² *Organum* comes in two main types: parallel *organum*, in which the second voice shadows the *cantus firmus* at a set interval; and contrary *organum*, in which the second voice moves around the first pretty much any way it wants.³

By the 12th and early 13th centuries, chant and *organum* had become even more complicated, with as many as four voice parts, all based on a Gregorian *cantus firmus*. The best examples of this music come from two composers named Leonin and Perotin,

¹ An abbess named Hildegard of Bingen did more than her share of writing some of this music, and very lovely it is. But by and large, monks were writing it. They had cornered the market.

² The term “fixed song” seems to imply that at some point the song must have been broken. But in fact it's more like fixed meaning rigged, the way you'd fix a race to make sure your horse came out the winner.

³ There was never anything called *simultaneous organum*. The church frowned on this activity. Still does, pretty much.

who developed what we now call the School of Notre Dame.⁴

Much of this Notre Dame repertoire is preserved for us in a couple of manuscripts generally referred to as W_1 and W_2 , because most people have trouble spelling (and pronouncing) Wolfenbüttel.

Meanwhile, Europe was being overrun by roving gangs of troubadours, trouvères, minnesingers and other wandering minstrels singing songs about unrequited love and drinking and other dangerous pastimes. (They were dangerous because most of the love was directed at other men's wives. Maybe it had something to do with the drinking.)

As music progressed in the 14th century, composers of a new generation felt they were writing better than anyone before them, and in 1330 a man named Philippe de Vitry wrote an essay extolling the virtues of this new style of music, which he dubbed *ars nova*, or the "new art." He thought it was just the bee's knees. You'd think being Archbishop of Meaux would have kept Phillippe de Vitry busy enough. Obviously not.⁵

IN THE MID-14TH CENTURY comes the music of Guillaume de Machaut (1300-77), who's generally credited with writing the first four-part mass. Over in England, John Dunstable (1380-1453) was busy playing around with the sounds of thirds and sixths and early attempts at theme and variations.

Leaving the Middle Ages and turning to the Renaissance, such composers as Gilles Binchois (1400-60), Guillaume Dufay (1400-77), Josquin des Pres (1450-1521) and Orlando di Lasso (1532-94) started a wave known as the Netherlandish school.

⁴ I always have trouble telling Leonin from Perotin and vice versa. But at least it was awfully thoughtful of them to have been born in alphabetical order like that.

⁵ Don't confuse *ars nova* with *bossa nova*, which came much later.

(Some people – old fuddy-duddies, mostly – called them outlandish.)

Like the School of Notre Dame, this wasn't really a formal school with classes or exams or anything – which at least meant you didn't have to pay tuition. They were called Netherlandish composers since most of them came from what we now call the Netherlands, or the Low Countries. One of their most important innovations was the use of popular secular songs instead of Gregorian chant for the *cantus firmus*.⁶

BY THE 16TH CENTURY this routine had gotten a little out of hand and the church bigwigs were pretty upset. St. Charles Borromeo, the archbishop of Milan, collected all the church music he could get his hands on. Eventually there were 1,585 pieces and he didn't approve of one of them. But a composer named Palestrina (1525-1594) came along and saved the day, convincing the church that music wasn't so bad after all, as long as you wrote it properly.⁷

THE 17TH CENTURY saw the beginning of what we now call the Baroque era in music – what some music lovers like to consider the Good Old Days. The old church modes were dropped in favor of the two main major and minor scales we still use today – the musical equivalent of metric and imperial, if you want to look at it that way.⁸

⁶ It may be difficult to think of them as Low Countries when you find them at the top of the map, but that's what they're called anyway.

⁷ That is, the way *he* did. Palestrina's influence was so great that even to this day whole generations of music students study how to compose just like him, in a particular form of academic punishment known as species counterpoint. (The human species, mostly.)

⁸ The term Baroque comes from a Portuguese word meaning "rough pearl." Originally this was an insult, referring to architecture or music that was grotesque or in bad taste. Nowadays no one seems to remember this.

BAROQUE MUSIC IS usually pretty easy to spot: Just listen for the strong bass line, lots of notes and everything chugging along like a steam engine. Such composers as Antonio Vivaldi (1680-1743) in Italy, Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632-1687) and Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) in France and Henry Purcell (1659-95) in England are all important in the general scheme of things, but none of them can hold a candle to the true bigwigs of Baroque music, German-born Bach (1685-1750) and Handel (1685-1759). Bach in this case is Johann Sebastian, J.S. for short, the father of a bunch of lesser Bachs who followed in his footsteps. (Handel is G.F. Handel, for George Frederick, or George Frideric, or sometimes Georg Friederich. But whatever his first names, his last name was Handel.)⁹

BACH WROTE A LOT OF ORGAN MUSIC, more cantatas than you can shake a stick at and a whole mess of big churchy stuff such as the *B-minor Mass*, the *St. Matthew Passion* and a bunch of motets. Handel wrote a lot of churchy music too (there's that little thing he calls *Messiah*), but also spent a lot of time writing operas, until he decided there was no money in it anymore.¹⁰

BAROQUE MUSIC IS BEAUTIFUL and inspiring, but it tends to be a bit heavy-handed. The next generation of composers, in what's known as the Classic era, went for something a little less pedantic and stodgy. The undisputed masters of this lighter, more melodious style are Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) and W.A. Mozart (1756-91), usually known as Wolfgang Amadeus. (And let's not get into an argument over the Amadeus. Just call him Mozart and have done with it.)

⁹ Or sometimes Händel. Or Haendel.

¹⁰ Handel was nothing if not practical. In fact, he was practically a genius.