

Development of Western Music

Middle Ages – Renaissance – Baroque – Classical

Romantic – 20th Century

What is Western Music

The term 'Western' refers to European traditions and social structures and has come to include societies that were established and shaped primarily by European immigrants, such as those in the Americas. Thus, Western music may be defined as organized instrumentation and sound created and produced in Europe, the United States, and other societies established and shaped by European immigrants. This includes a wide assortment of musical genres, from classical music and jazz to rock and roll and country-western music.

Origins Western Music

To understand why things happen today, we should look to the past. In order for art to develop, it had to build on the past. In order for scientific developments to occur, today's scientists must build on yesterday's dreams and unfulfilled ideas. So, too, the music of today may be viewed as the direct descendant of the music of the past.

Our music may be fully understood only when we understand our forefather's music.

Music in the Middle Ages

The period of history known as the Middle Ages began around the year A.D. 450 with the decline of the Roman Empire and spans about 1000 years to around A.D. 1450. This was a time in history marked by barbaric wars, feudal disputes, and religious crusades. It was also a period of great faith. Christianity had been adopted by the Roman Empire as the church of state, and therefore, it had also been adopted by many of the countries in Europe as the major religion. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, there was a period of great cultural growth. Romanesque-style churches and monasteries and Gothic cathedrals were built, universities were founded, and cities and towns grew.

Music in the Middle Ages

The Middle Ages also was a period in time when there was a sharp division among the social classes: the nobility, the clergy, and the peasantry. The peasants were very poor and were usually feudal subjects to the noble class. Peasants farmed the land for the nobles, and they raised their herds for them. They were very much like indentured servants. The nobility lived in fortified castles and lived lives of great ease. The clergy, or leaders of the church, were very influential in guiding the affairs of the nobility and the peasantry.

Music in the Middle Ages

The church had a virtual monopoly on learning. Both peasants and nobles alike were generally illiterate. Cathedrals and monasteries were the centres of religious, educational, and musical life. All of the important musicians during the Middle Ages were priests and worked for the church. The only music education available during the Middle Ages was in church schools, and only boys were allowed to attend. One of the most important occupations in monasteries was liturgical singing, or the singing of chants for the services that were held throughout the day.

Almost all of the music from the Middle Ages was vocal music. Instruments were not allowed in churches or Monasteries for the majority of the Middle Ages. Not until about 1100 were instruments used to accompany voices. Of all the instruments used, the organ was the most prominent.

Pope Gregory I and the Dove

During the Middle Ages, music in the churches and monasteries consisted primarily of the singing of songs whose words were taken from the Scriptures (the Holy Bible) that dealt with religious feasts or celebrations throughout the year. These feasts and celebrations constituted what is known as the liturgical year. The songs that were sung were known as *Gregorian chants*. The melodies of these songs were derived from the Greek, Hebrew, and Syrian music that formed the basis of the music for the new Christian or Roman Catholic Church. For about 590 years, the melodies and their words were passed down from generation to generation orally.

Pope Gregory I and the Dove

In the year A.D. 590, a new pope was selected whose name was Pope Gregory the Great. He reigned from 590 to 604. During Pope Gregory's 14-year reign, he was instrumental in organizing and having these chants written down. In written form they could be taken to churches throughout Europe, and all the same chants could be sung in every church.



Pope Gregory I and the Dove

The traditional myth is that Pope Gregory dictated or sang all of these melodies to a scribe after they had been sung to him by a dove that was sitting on his shoulder. In paintings from the Middle Ages, Pope Gregory is depicted sitting on this throne with a dove perched on his shoulder and whispering into his ear while a scribe takes down the words from the pope's mouth. The dove is a representation of the Spirit of God.

While this is an interesting story, in reality Pope Gregory had nothing to do with the actual writing down or transcription of the chants; however, he did have a great deal to do with their organization. These same chants have continued to be passed down in written and oral form since that time and are part of the Catholic liturgy today.