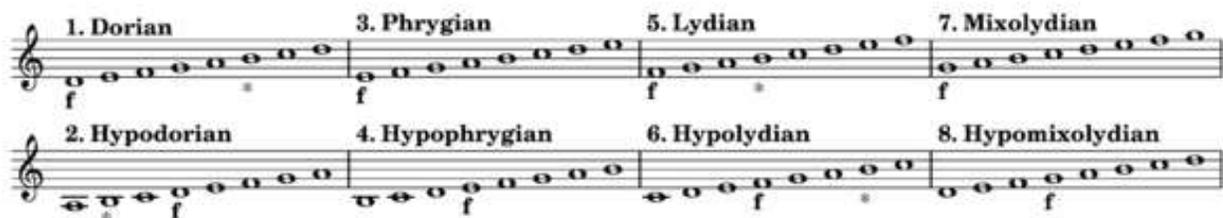


Early Music History in a Nutshell:

From the Ancient Greeks to the Renaissance and Baroque

This class, “Brilliantly Baroque” should give you a window into early music – European vocal and instrumental music of the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The era from 1500 to 1750 was a time of great musical experimentation when new or modified forms replaced the chants and popular dances of the Middle Ages. Since the middle of the 20th century, we’ve seen a “Renaissance” of early music, both in Europe and the USA. It’s especially popular in Boulder. If you listen to The Baroque Show on CPR Classical (AKA KVOD), you’ll be familiar with our topic for this course. Not everyone is familiar with music composed before 1500, so here’s some background material that will explain what led up to the Baroque period.

The earliest known western music came from the songs and chants of the ancient Greeks. The Greeks used *modes* – eight different ways of tuning and playing a 7-stringed lyre – rather than our familiar major and minor scales. The Roman Catholic Church copied the Greek modes and turned them into what is now known as *church modes*. If you attend a Latin Mass somewhere in Europe, or if you go to the *Tenebrae* (Latin for “darkness”) service at St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral (the Wednesday before Easter), you’ll hear a variety of psalms and lamentations chanted in these *church modes*. (See Figure 1.)



* Under certain conditions, the B is flatted in modes 1, 2, 5, and 6.

Figure 1. The eight Greek modes written in modern musical notation.

From about 200-1300 A.D., most sacred and secular music consisted of a single melodic line or *voice*, sometimes accompanied, sometimes not. Music in which everyone sings exactly the same notes is called *monophonic* music. During the Middle Ages, music was seen as a gift from God and making music was a way of praising the heavens for that gift. Around 600 A.D., Pope Gregory I formalized the Latin chants, which were being used for Masses and Biblical verses. These were known as *Gregorian Chants*. Each *Gregorian Chant* had only one melodic line, regardless of how many people were singing it.

Around 800 A.D. (when Charlemagne ruled Europe), church musicians started experimenting with two people (i.e., two *parts* or two *voices*) singing different melodic lines at the same time. This was the birth of *polyphonic music*. *Polyphony* is a style of musical composition that uses simultaneous but multiple independent melodic parts, lines, or voices. It took hold in the French cathedrals as a new musical form called *organum*.

Around 1200 A.D., there was a flourish of organum-writing activity known as *Ars Antiqua* (Latin for “old style”). The first named composers were Leoninus and Perotinus at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. The lower voice, called the *tenor* (from Latin “tenere” – to hold) sang a *Gregorian chant* in long held notes, while a higher voice sang a more complex melody above the tenor part,

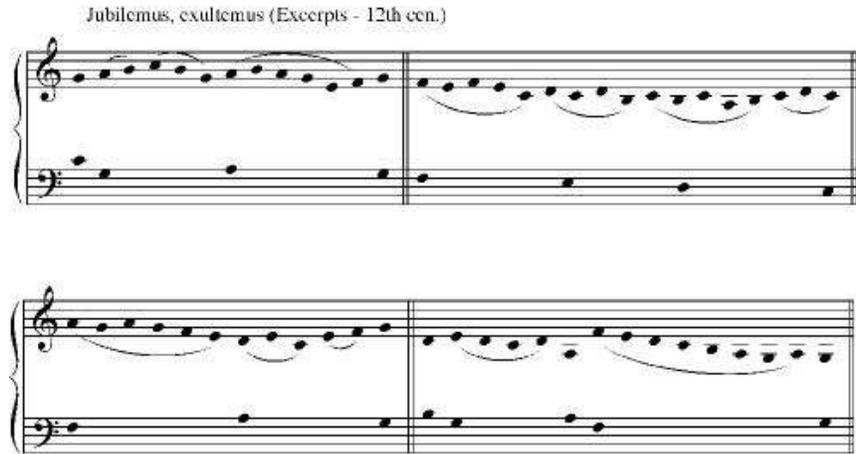


Figure 2. Excerpts from a 12th century Organum, “Jubilemus, exultemus.”

with several notes for each syllable. This is known as *melismatic* style; it is improvisational, similar to blues music today, except that it lacks a repeated rhythmic pattern. Figure 2 shows a few excerpts from an organum based on the Gregorian Chant, *Jubilemus, exultemus*: “Let us rejoice and exult...”

The *Ars Antiqua* composers were followed by the *Ars Nova* (Latin for “new style”) composers from about 1300-1400 A.D. The most famous *Ars Antiqua* composers were Guillaume de Machaut and Phillippe de Vitry, who wrote both sacred and secular music. They experimented with *isorhythmic motets* (highly varied choral compositions based on pre-existing chants or songs). This was not necessarily music to our ears because our concepts of modern harmony and rhythm hadn’t been invented yet.



Figure 3. A 3-part secular motet written by Guillaume de Machaut

Figure 3 shows a few bars from Machaut’s 3-part secular motet, *Quant en moy/Amour et beaute/Amara Valde*: “When love first came to me...” The text, based on the highly popular French poem, *Roman de la Rose*, was added to already written music in the tenor (lower) part. *Isorhythm* is a characteristic feature of the *Ars Nova motet*. This style of choral music consists of a single rhythmic phrase pattern

repeated, usually in the tenor, with one or more other voices weaving melodic lines independently around it. In Figure 3, the tenor part sets up the *isorhythm* in triple meter – 3 groups of 3 beats per measure, with all voices singing different words simultaneously on the first beat of each measure.

Secular music grew in popularity by the 14th century. It was based on epic poems such as the *Chanson de Roland*, written in France in the 1100s. This type of music differed from sacred music because it had its roots in street dances and minstrel songs. Secular music of the French Middle Ages consisted of ballades, virelais, rondeaus, and other types of songs of love and war (called *chansons*), performed by wandering troubadours, trouveres, and minnesingers in the vernacular (French, Italian, or English – not Latin). These *monophonic* compositions with stanzas and refrains were the forerunners of our ballads.

Meanwhile, in Italy, composers such as Francesco Landini were developing their own new, *polyphonic* forms such as the *madrigal* (a complex song performed *a capella* – without instruments – with several intertwining voices singing simultaneously). The word *madrigal* comes from the Latin *matricale* (meaning “in the mother tongue”; i.e., Italian, not Latin). Other types of secular songs were the *caccia* (hunting song), and *ballata* (based on narrative poems, like the *ballades*). This was the age of Humanism, of Dante, Petrarch, and the Medicis – a period of relative peace after the end of the feudal system and the devastation of the Black Plague in Europe. *Madrigals* reflected their philosophy, which emphasized human emotions rather than spirituality. Madrigals were sung in all sorts of courtly social gatherings. This was the pop music of the time – not subject to the strict rules of church music.

In late Medieval and early Renaissance Europe, cultural centers shifted from city to city due to the changing political stability and the relative power and support of the local rulers. From the 1400s onward, the sound of music began to change. There was more tonality (use of Western scales rather than Greek modes) and harmony (use of simultaneous pitches or chords). Musical innovation spread from France and Italy to Burgundy and the British Isles.

One of the greatest composers of the early Renaissance was Guillaume Dufay (1397-1474), who bridged the gap between late Medieval compositional styles and the Renaissance polyphony of his successors. He was equally adept at writing sacred and secular music. He wrote the music for the consecration of the Florence Duomo in 1436. Dufay introduced more harmony and melody into the music of his time. He popularized the use of the *cantus firmus* in his Masses. In music, a *cantus firmus* (Latin for “fixed song”) is a pre-existing melody that forms the basis of a polyphonic composition. At first *the cantus firmus* was almost

always drawn from *Gregorian Chants*, but the range of sources gradually widened to include other sacred sources and even popular songs. In the early 1400s a popular song, *L'Homme Armé*: “Beware the armed man...” took most of Europe by storm.



Figure 4. *L'Homme Armé*, a popular song of the 15th century.

It was a one-hit wonder! Not only was everyone singing and humming this hit tune, but composers everywhere were sampling it and using it as the basis for their own compositions. The Church was not amused. "Why should the devil have all the good music?" This pithy question, often attributed to Martin Luther, is often used to justify the introduction of "secular" musical styles into the church service. In all, more than forty Masses by numerous composers survive, all having the *cantus firmus* melody of *L'homme Armé*. There are several theories regarding the meaning of the name: one suggests that the "armed man" represents Saint Michael the Archangel, while another suggests that it refers to the name of a popular tavern (Maison L'Homme Armé) near Dufay's rooms in Cambrai.

During the reign of the House of Valois (1328-1539), Burgundy was the most powerful and stable political division in Western Europe. The *Burgundian School* was a group of early 15th century composers who were active in Northeastern France and Flanders and were supported by the Dukes of Burgundy. Besides Dufay, important composers included John Dunstable, Gilles Binchois, and Antoine Busnois. These composers continued to write religious music in Latin, such as the *Magnificat*, *Masses*, and sacred *motets*, and their musical styles became more polished over time. However, instrumental music was also becoming quite popular at the Burgundian courts, often for dancing.

During the Renaissance, there was a distinction between country dances and court dances. Court dances required the dancers to be trained and were often for display and entertainment, whereas country dances could be attempted by anyone. Many court dances were collected by dancing masters in manuscripts and later in printed books, while few records of country dances exist. A strange feature of the Burgundian instrumental style is that the dukes and their courtiers preferred music for loud instruments (trumpets, sackbuts, bagpipes, tambourins, and shawms) and more of this survives than for quieter instruments such as the lute or the harp. Today, early instrumental ensembles like the Broadside Band have recorded popularized historically-informed performances of these dances.



Figure 5. Queen Elizabeth I dancing the Volta with Sir Robert Dudley. Did this ever happen?

A major change in the history of music occurred about the middle of the 15th century. The fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the end of the Hundred Years' War at about the same time, increased commerce from the East and affluence in the West. Merchants, bankers, and civil servants were becoming as powerful as the popes and cardinals. Musicians travelled and resided throughout Europe in response to their great demand at princely courts, including those of the Medici family in Florence and the Sforzas in Milan. Further dissemination of knowledge resulted from the invention and development

of printing in 1450, but unfortunately, musical scores could not be printed with movable type. Scores required engravings or woodcuts. In many cases replication was still done by scribes.

The Burgundian School was the first phase of activity of the *Franco-Flemish School* – the main proponents of late 15th century *polyphonic music*. Its leading composers, whose patrons were now members of the civil aristocracy as well as princes of the church, were Jean d’Okeghem, Jakob Obrecht, and Josquin Des Prés. Josquin was one of the most influential and widely regarded composers in the history of Western music, so famous that he is known merely by his first name. He wrote *Masses*, *motets*, and secular songs in both French and Italian and began to merge the ornate Netherlandish style with the simplified songs of the Italians. Most of his compositions were written for four voices.

By the end of his 50 year career, Josquin had developed a simplified style in which each voice of a *polyphonic* composition exhibited free and smooth motion, and close attention was paid to clear setting of text as well as clear alignment of text with musical *motifs* (short themes or passages). Figure 6 shows the beginning of Josquin’s motet, *Tu pauperum refugium*: “Thou art the refuge of the poor,” written in quiet chords. The music then moves into complex polyphony, describing the attributes of God, “alleviator of weakness, hope of the exiled.” This looks and sounds more like familiar music.

Josquin Deprez, 1450-1521

Tu pauperum refugium

The image displays a musical score for the motet 'Tu pauperum refugium' by Josquin Des Prés. It features four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The Soprano part begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The lyrics are: 'Tu pau - pe - rum re - fu - gi - um, tu lan - guo -'. The Alto part also begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The lyrics are: 'Tu pau - pe - rum re - gu - gi - um, tu lan - guo -'. The Tenor part begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The lyrics are: 'Tu pau - pe - rum re - fu - gi - um, tu lan - guo -'. The Bass part begins with a bass clef and a common time signature. The lyrics are: 'Tu pau - pe - rum re - fu - gi - um, tu lan - guo -'. The score shows the first few measures of the piece, with the lyrics aligned under the corresponding notes.

Figure 6. The first few measures of Josquin’s motet, *Tu pauperum refugium*.

Over the next 100 years, European composers began to consider the words of a vocal piece to be as important as music. Orlando di Lasso is considered to be one of the most influential musicians of the

Franco-Flemish School at the end of the 16th century. He wrote a wealth of Masses, psalm settings, and popular songs that strove for emotional impact by careful setting of the words.

In Venice, Gioseffo Zarlino, chapel master at St. Mark's, emphasized the use of *triad chords* (e.g., C+E+G) instead of *parallel fourths* (e.g., C+F) or *fifths* (e.g., C+G) to establish harmony in his compositions.

In Florence, the *Camerata* was a group of humanists, musicians, poets and intellectuals who gathered to discuss and guide trends in the arts, especially music and drama. They based their ideals on their perception of Classical (especially ancient Greek) musical drama that valued discourse and oration – the precursors of *opera*. In other words, they felt that the words were as important or more important than the music. They composed new works in *monody* (solo voices accompanied by instruments).

An important development was the use of *figured bass* on a keyboard instrument to maintain the overall *tonality* of a composition. Only the *chords* were indicated – not the full accompaniment, which

was to be improvised by the performer. The emphasis on *chords*, rather than just notes or melodic lines, set the stage for later

developments in the Baroque, especially the evolution of *tonality* (organizing compositions around a central note or key, called the *tonic*). Figure 7

shows the *recitative* for Henry Purcell's "Dido's Lament" from his *opera, Dido and Aeneas* – with the figured bass accompanying the soprano soloist on a keyboard instrument.

The image displays a musical score for Henry Purcell's "Dido's Lament" from the opera *Dido and Aeneas*. It consists of three systems of music. The top system is the vocal line for the soprano soloist, starting with the word "DIDO" and a series of asterisks indicating a recitative style. The middle system shows the vocal line with lyrics: "bos - om let me rest, More I would, but death in-". The bottom system shows the vocal line with lyrics: "vades me Death is now a wel come guest!" followed by a *pp* (pianissimo) marking. Below the vocal lines, the figured bass is indicated with numbers and symbols (such as ♭, ♯, and †) on a five-line staff, representing the chords for the keyboard accompaniment.

Figure 7. Recitative introducing "Dido's Lament", showing the figured bass for the accompanying instrument.

Perhaps the most important composer of the early 17th century was Claudio Monteverdi, who bridged the gap between the Renaissance and the Baroque. Born in Lombardy, Monteverdi was a composer, singer, and viola player, who later became a Catholic priest and was appointed *maestro di cappella* at St. Mark's in Venice. Besides Masses and the famous *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (the Vespers were discussed at The Academy's Sacred Music course in 2012), he wrote nine books of madrigals and at least 18 operas, but only three have survived and are still performed. From *monody* (with melodic lines, intelligible text and placid accompanying music), it was a logical step for Monteverdi to begin composing *operas*. In 1607, his first and most famous opera, *L'Orfeo*, premiered in Mantua. These were followed by *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (The Return of Ulysses to His Homeland) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea), Monteverdi's drama of sex, love, and crime by the Emperor Nero and his brazen mistress (later, wife) Poppea, which will be performed on April 23-26, 2015 at CU-Boulder.