

The development of notation

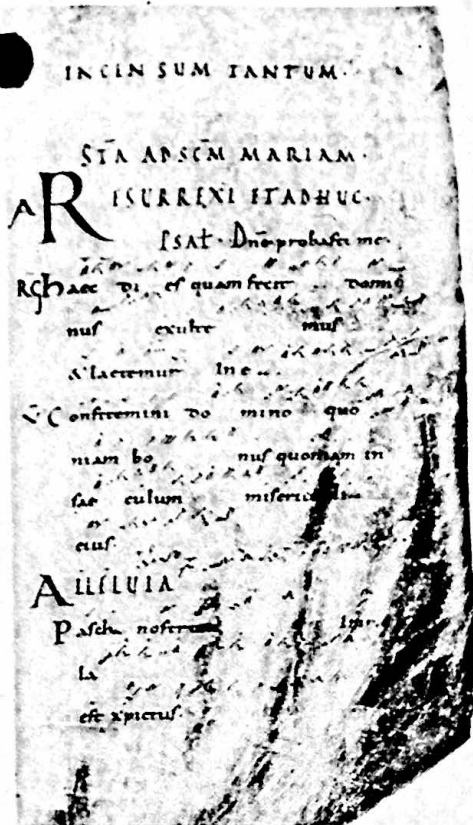
The earliest mediaeval music was monophonic, meaning it had only one line of melody. It was handed down from generation to generation. But as the amount of music grew, musicians needed a written reminder of the melodies for particular plainsong chants, and a system of notation began to evolve. Early plainsong notation was very simple, little signs called neumes that suggested whether the voice should rise or fall. There was no staff with lines to indicate the pitches; the neumes were just written in above the words. In reality, the neumes were a sort of crib sheet, used to remind the singers of the melody for chants they had already committed to memory. This system continued to develop with horizontal lines, one coloured red to indicate the note F and another yellow to indicate C.

In the eleventh century, Guido of Arezzo, a Benedictine monk in Avellana, Italy, further refined the system by adding a black line above F and another above the C, to make a grid of four lines so that all the pitches fell either on a line or in a space. It then became possible to establish the relationship of one pitch to another.

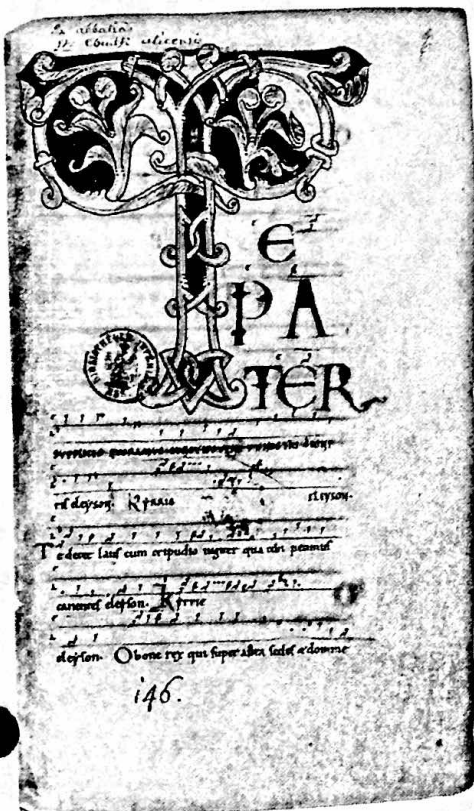
Guido also invented solmisation, a system of designating the notes of the scale with syllables, which is the basis for the modern system of sol-fa, or sight singing. The first six lines of the chant celebrating John the Baptist each begin with a higher note than the preceding line, so Guido named the notes for the first syllable of each line:

Ut queant laxis / Resonare fibris / Mira gestorum
Famuli tuorum / Solve pollute / Labi reatum

The same syllables are used today with the addition of the seventh note. The seventh or leading note was included in the scale at a later time and its name, si, was chosen because the seventh line in the chant begins *Sanctus Iohannes*, the Latin for Saint John. Nowadays do is used instead of ut in most languages, and si has become ti.



This manuscript, c. 900, is the earliest surviving manuscript showing the system of squiggly lines and dots called neumes that were written in over the words as a memory aid to the singers.



This manuscript shows the horizontal lines used to indicate pitch.

The development of notation

In the twelfth century, the curved lines of the neumes changed, and the separate notes within them were indicated by broad horizontal lines, diamond-shaped dots and very thin vertical lines, called ligatures. This produced rather squared-off notes, sometimes with tails added, that resemble our modern notation. By the thirteenth century, the time values for the different shapes were set down. The note with the longest duration, the longa (♩), could be divided into two or three breves (♪), which in turn could be divided into two or three semi-breves (♫), which could further be divided into minims (♬). This system lasted until the sixteenth century, when notes became rounded.

To coordinate and synchronize two or more voices, the composer had to be able to indicate not only pitch but also rhythm for each of the voices. The later development of polyphonic music, or music with two or more melodic lines, would never have been possible without this complex system of notation.



The opening of the *Haec dies* showing ligatures on a staff

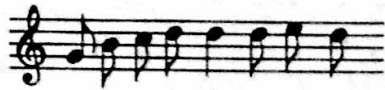


This eleventh-century manuscript is a collection of music entitled the *Recueil de ballades, motets et chansons*. The shape reflects the subject matter of the songs.



Beautifully illuminated manuscripts like this one were not for everyday use. They were generally made as munificent gifts for royalty or princes of the Church.

Plainsong



In pa-ra-di-sum de-du-cant

An example of syllabic chant

The early music of the Christian Church grew in part out of the monophonic music from ancient Greek, Hebrew and Syrian cultures. Called plainsong or plainchant, it is vocal music, written for the choirs found at all cathedrals, monasteries and abbeys. Plainsong is also called Gregorian chant after Gregory I, who was Pope from 590 to 604. He decided that all existing music should be gathered together into a uniform liturgy throughout the church. A great deal of plainsong is left to us, about 3 000 chants, each one with a particular meaning in the liturgy.



An example of melismatic chant

Plainsong* has only one line of melody, but that line can be varied in a number of different ways. It

can be sung by one person, or by a whole choir, or it may alternate between the two. There are several different genres with different melodic styles, varying from near monotone to songs with hundreds of notes ranging more than an octave. Some chants have only one note for each syllable in the text—these are called syllabic chants. Melismatic chants have many notes attached to a single syllable. The style of the chant depended on its role in the service. Psalms were usually chanted with only a slight variation in pitch, but the most important parts of the mass were embellished with intricate melodies.

Plainsong is very recognizable for its tranquil, celestial stream of sound, free from a regular beat or accent. It moves along in a meandering line, sometimes following the rhythm of the text, breaking into phrases rather like the spoken word. Another factor contributing to the sound of plainsong is that the notes are based on pitches organized into modes, which mediaeval musicians gradually derived from the Greek theories of music. Each mode sounds subtly different, but the shadings of sound are very gentle. Because there is only one melodic line, it is easy to follow the direction of the music and be carried along with its flow.



Pope Gregory I



Dorian mode (D-mode)

Phrygian mode (E-mode)



Lydian mode (F-mode)

Mixolydian mode (G-mode)

The main modes, whose names come from the Greek, are organized around four different starting pitches: D, E, F and G. Each mode corresponds approximately to playing the white keys on the piano from these four starting points. Their different sound qualities come from the particular intervals that occur in that mode, the pattern of whole tones and semi-tones that make up the scale.

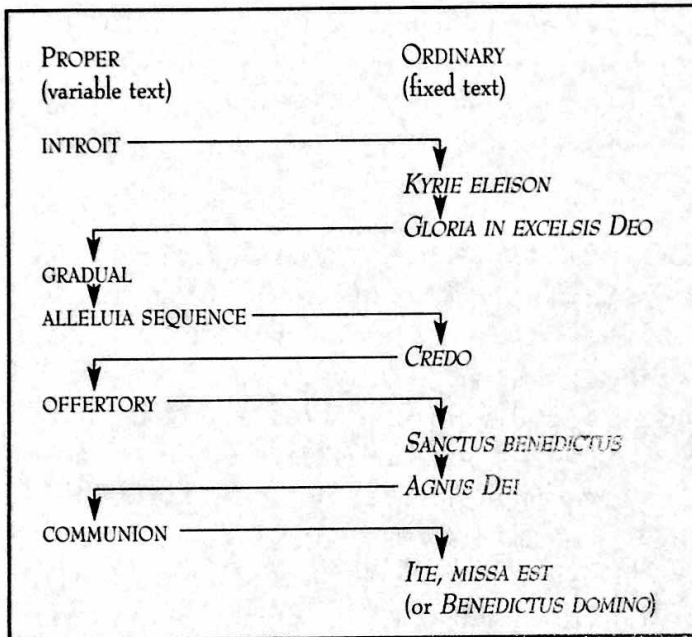
The mass

The form of the church service was relatively stable in Western Europe by the eleventh century. The central part of the mass is the communion, the ritual re-enactment of the Last Supper, designed to inspire the faithful with the certainty of life everlasting. Most people in the Middle Ages would not have understood the Latin text of the mass except by familiarity of use. In the most solemn service, the high mass, most of the prayers would be sung; in less formal services, they might merely be read aloud by the priest. Some parts of the mass, those which form the Ordinary, used the same words every time. Other parts, called the Proper, changed text depending on the feasts of the Church calendar that were being celebrated. There would be plainsong chants for each section of the liturgy, with spoken words intervening.



The Mass of St. Gilles

STRUCTURE OF THE MASS



Ivory carving depicting monks celebrating the mass

Secular song



This illumination shows Heinrich von Meissen, called "Frauenlob" or champion of ladies, surrounded by musicians playing mediaeval instruments.

The songs of the troubadours, trouvères and minnesingers were written in the vernacular, that is, their own language rather than the Latin of the Church. The troubadours spoke Provençal, the trouvères the language of northern France that is the basis for modern French, and the minnesingers, German. Typically, they wrote lyrical love songs to the noble ladies of their courts, who were idealized as beautiful unattainable creatures to whom the troubadours addressed unrequited sentiments of passion, devotion and respect. They also wrote songs praising the Virgin Mary, celebrating marriages, mourning deaths, describing the crusades—songs portraying their lives, in fact.

The musical style of the troubadours was adopted by the trouvères and then by the minnesingers. Most of the songs were monophonic, and the musical forms were closely related to the poetic structure, with specific rhythms derived from the metric system of

the verse forms. Most common was the ballad, which had an AAB structure, but the rondeau, a song for solo voice with a choral refrain, and the virelay, in which the first and last lines of each stanza were the same, were also popular. These were called "fixed forms." Some melodies were like plainsong chants of the syllabic type, others more dancelike. The troubadours and trouvères tended to favour the modes with a "major" sound and they were the first to use the seventh note of the scale, a sound the Church rejected as unharmonious. About 300 troubadour songs and 1 400 trouvères have come down to us.