

Specific Features

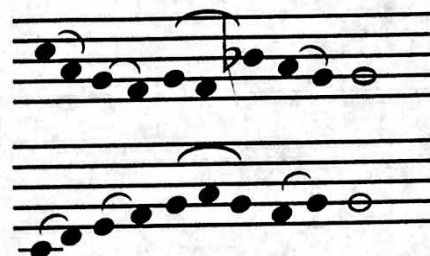
Polyphony

The tenth and eleventh centuries are marked by one of the most important developments in Western music, the evolution of polyphony. Up to that point, music had only had one melodic line, but now composers began to experiment with two.



Parallel organum

The earliest form of polyphony is called organum. It consists of a second line of melody added to a plainsong chant, sung with the same words at the same time. At first, the two melodies ran parallel to one another at the same interval, the notes of the second part a fourth or fifth below the first, in the free-flowing rhythm of the chant. This was called parallel organum.



Organum showing contrary movement

Later, the second melody became more independent, going up when the chant went down, and vice versa.

Next, the second voice began to sing several notes to each single chant note, and the chant notes were held for a long time, like drones. At this point, the chant voice became the lower one, and was called the *cantus firmus*, or underlying melody. It was also called the *tenor*, from the Latin *tenure*, meaning "to hold," the voice that holds the chant.



Haec dies chant showing the long low notes or drones in the *cantus firmus*

The next stage, which occurred around the end of the twelfth century, was to add a second melody, which had to fit with both the chant and the other melody. At roughly the same time, definite rhythms were introduced, and the different voices could each have a different rhythmic pattern. These new forms of organum were developed at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris under the leadership of the monk Léonin and his successor Pérotin. Pérotin wrote organa for as many as four voices at once.



A three-voice chant by Pérotin called *Alleluia Nativitas*

Polyphony

About the middle of the thirteenth century, musicians began writing a new kind of three-part work, called a motet, in which they added words for the upper voices to sing. (In French, *mot* means word.) The motet consisted of a piece of Gregorian chant in Latin, in which the composer kept the original pitches, but gave them a specific rhythm, usually making them very long notes. This part was the tenor, which was then set against one, two or three counter melodies. The middle voice, called the duplum, and the top voice, called the triplum, were set to completely different texts, and were rhythmically much more complex, often crossing over one another. Sometimes both voices would sing different texts in Latin, sometimes one would sing in Latin, the other in French. Often they combined sacred and secular texts in the upper voices of the same piece, while the tenor holds the structure together.

This illustrates a motet in which the triplum is in Latin and the duplum in French.

O Vir - go pi - a. Can - dens li - li - um
Lis ni glay Ni ro - sier fleu - ri,

Triplum
Ha - reu! ha - reu! le feu, le feu, le feu. D'ar - dant de-sir.
Duplum
He - las! ou se - ra pris con - fors
Tenor
OBEDIENS USQUE AD MORTEM

The first few bars of Machaut's *Hareu! Hareu! le feu / Helas! / Obediens*. The poem used by Guillaume de Machaut for the triplum tells of a lover who is being consumed by his love as though by fire. The different poem used for the duplum expresses the lover's despair in the face of his lady's coldness. The plainsong chant used for the tenor says "Obedient even unto death." It originally referred to Christ, but the sentiment fits very well within the context of courtly love.

Ars nova

A new style of music arose in fourteenth-century France. It was called *Ars nova*, or new art, as opposed to *Ars antiqua*, the music of the previous few centuries. The term *Ars nova* came from the title of a work on the new style written in about 1320 by the composer Philippe de Vitry, one of its greatest proponents.

Music of the *Ars nova* was much more complex. Musicians were no longer bound by the rhythmic patterns used by the composers of the *Ars antiqua*. The development of mensural notation with notes of a specific duration gave them the ability to use duple metre instead of the triple metre that dominated the previous age. They also used different rhythms in the different voices. For the first time, composers treated the music for the mass as though the separate parts fitted together into an integrated whole. And they took a much greater interest in secular song. Polyphonic secular music in the form of the ballad, the virelay and the rondeau was an important part of fourteenth-century music. The most important composers of the *Ars nova* were Philippe de Vitry and Guillaume de Machaut.



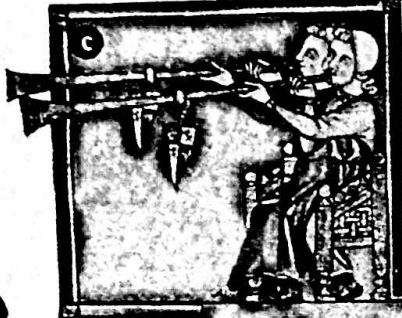
A page from the *Roman de Fauvel* by Gervais de Bus.

A manuscript of this poem made in 1316 incorporated 130 musical works of both the *Ars antiqua* and the *Ars nova* styles. Five pieces by Philippe de Vitry are included, allowing us to see some of the earliest examples of *Ars nova* music.

Instrumental music

Although vocal music still played a central role, by the 1300s instrumental music was increasingly popular. Instruments supported vocal music, either by accompanying singers or, most likely, by doubling their notes using a simple drone. Sometimes instrumental arrangements were made of vocal works, and of course instruments were essential for dance music. Instrumental music tended to be improvised and therefore was not often written down, but some written works remain to give us an idea of what it was like. The instruments themselves are often represented in paintings and books, and some early examples survive in museums.

Early instruments fall into the same general groupings as modern ones; there were strings, woodwinds, brass, percussion and keyboard instruments. They were divided according to whether they were soft (*bas*) or loud (*haut*). Instruments with a soft sound were generally used indoors and louder ones were used for outdoor entertainments. String instruments that were plucked, like the lute, the harp and the psaltery, or bowed, like the *viele* and the *rebec*, were used indoors, as were recorders and flutes. Outdoor instruments included the bagpipes, the shawm (an ancestor of the oboe), and the slide trumpet, which developed into the sackbut, a kind of early trombone. There were other instruments that were used indoors and out, like the crumhorn, a J-shaped woodwind with a double reed and a softer sound than the shawm, and the cornetto, a wooden horn with a mouthpiece like a brass instrument and finger holes like a woodwind. Drums included the large cylindrical tabors and small, bowl-shaped drums called *nakers*. Other percussion instruments were cymbals and bells. Organs were also used in the Middle Ages: large ones with no stops so that all the pipes sounded at once, requiring several men to pump the bellows, and smaller portative organs, with only one rank of pipes and a bellows the player could pump himself. Another popular instrument was the hurdy-gurdy, a kind of mechanized fiddle, with melody strings that are played through a keyboard and drone strings that sound when a wheel is turned.



- a) string instruments
- b) psaltery
- c) horns
- d) set of bells
- e) flutes
- f) bagpipes
- g) hurdy-gurdies