

Patrons



Henry VIII was known to be a good musician. He also composed motets and love songs.

The main patrons of music in the Renaissance remained, as they were in the Middle Ages, the Church and the courts. The Church still needed music for all its public activities. Kings and queens, like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I in England and Francis I in France, were still important patrons. However, the demand for secular music increased with the rise of the city states, particularly in northern Italy. Aristocrats like the Medici in Florence wanted music to reflect their wealth and taste, and city fathers wanted music for civic rituals and ceremonies. So opportunities increased: musicians could be employed as composers and performers, choirmasters and builders of instruments for a greater range of clients.

The life of the musician

Most musicians began as choirboys in a church or in the chapel of an important court. The boys sang the soprano and alto parts, were taught music and some other subjects, and usually learned to play an instrument. When their voices changed, some would continue singing bass and tenor, and if they showed talent, be taught composition. The very best composers might then be hired as *maestros di capella*, or music directors. Once their reputations were made, composers could move to other, better positions, finding increasingly important patrons.

It is interesting that although the Renaissance was essentially an Italian creation, there were very few important Italian composers until Palestrina in the latter half of the sixteenth century. The major musicians of the period came from Flanders, the Netherlands and Burgundy, which is now part of France, and they travelled all over Europe as their services were required by the aristocratic courts.



This painting shows the entertainment at a marriage celebration. You can see two different musical ensembles, as well as the dancers in the masque.



A group of musicians playing at a wedding



Choir boys singing

Women musicians

Very few women were professional musicians during the Renaissance. When they did occur, they tended to be singers or perhaps instrumentalists. Nuns in convents regularly sang and there is some research to suggest that they composed as well. At the end of the sixteenth century, the convent of San Vito in Ferrara was particularly well-known for the quality of its music. The nuns there formed an ensemble, which was unusual in particular because it included instrumentalists as well as singers.

There was a professional group of four sopranos in Ferrara in the 1580s called the "Concerto della donne," or the "Ladies' Ensemble," who sang for the duke and duchess and their guests. They were very popular, and many composers wrote music for them that featured their high voices, adding an accompaniment for a bass instrument and harpsichord or lute. Imitators of the group appeared at other ducal courts in Italy. The existence of these groups of trained female singers undoubtedly had an effect on the appearance of roles for women in the new genre of opera, which emerged in the Baroque period.

Rarely were women given the opportunity to compose. One of the few recognized woman composers was Maddalena Casulana (c. 1544-90). A lutenist and singer as well, Casulana wrote three books of madrigals, and was the first woman to have her music published.

There were, of course, plenty of amateur women musicians. Music was an important skill and well-to-do women were encouraged to develop any talent they had on a social level. There were also women who influenced music from their positions as patrons of the arts.



This painting of women singing was done in sixteenth-century Venice.



Music in the home was increasingly important. These three young ladies are playing a song from a book of printed music, with one playing flute, another singing and a third on the lute. You can see the lute case hanging on the wall behind them.

Musical borrowing

Renaissance composers borrowed frequently from music that had already been written. This was not then considered cheating—originality in music is a modern concept—but an indication of esteem. They made use of existing plainsong melodies, well-known songs, and their own and other composer's works.

Modern melodies

In the Renaissance, composers liked to take the melodies from plain-song chants and highlight them, instead of using them as a foundation upon which to build their polyphonic structures. They added notes, made the rhythms more fluid and generally "updated" them to their taste. This process was called paraphrase. You can see in the example below how the composer has used all the notes in the chant melody but changed their duration and added more notes for a fuller, richer sound. In addition, the melody is no longer at the bottom, but given to the soprano voice.

The bottom two staves show the beginning of Josquin Desprez's *Kyrie* from the *Missa Pange Lingua*. The top one shows the original chant melody.

The image shows three staves of musical notation. The top staff is a single line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, containing the original chant melody with the lyrics "Pan - ge lin - gua glo - ri - o - si". The middle staff is labeled "Josquin's adaptation" and shows a more complex melody with the lyrics "Ky - ri - e e - lei - son". The bottom staff continues the adaptation with the word "son".

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is a single line with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat, containing the original chant melody with the lyrics "Su - mens il - lud A - ve Ga - bri - e - lis o - re". The bottom staff shows a more complex melody with the same lyrics. Vertical dotted lines connect the notes of the original melody in the top staff to the corresponding notes in the adapted melody in the bottom staff, illustrating the process of paraphrasing. The word "etc." is written at the end of the bottom staff.

Expression

Renaissance composers, as people living in an era of humanist thought, were aware of the musical ideas of antiquity, and knew that ancient philosophers believed that music could arouse emotion. They knew that poets could express emotion with words, and they sought to do the same thing indirectly by illustrating the words in their texts musically. Renaissance composers had a much greater sensitivity to the words in the texts they were using than did composers of the Middle Ages.

This illustration shows the process of paraphrasing. The dotted lines indicate the notes taken directly from the plainsong.

Imitation

The technique of imitation involved having each voice in the music present the same musical phrase successively; each line enters one after the other, so the listener has the sense that the music overlaps. Everyone is familiar with singing canons, or rounds, like *Frère Jacques*—this is imitation in its strictest form, where each voice sings exactly the same thing. But Renaissance composers also used a freer imitation, in which only the first few notes of a melody are repeated by each voice, which then continues with its own polyphonic line. Imitation made Renaissance music sound smoother and more harmonious, with less contrast

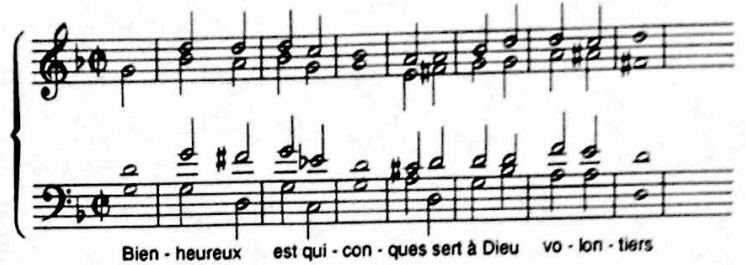
between each voice than had been the case in the Middle Ages.

The upper staves illustrate strict imitation (a round); the lower ones, free imitation.

A section from Palestrina's *Missa brevis* showing the technique of imitation. In this section, the voices enter in ascending order.

Harmony

Renaissance composers developed new ideas about consonance. In the late Middle Ages, European musicians tended to regard only fourths, fifths and octaves as consonances. In England, however, the intervals of the third and the sixth were in common use, and under the influence of the English composer John Dunstable who was present in the Burgundian court in the early fifteenth century, the third and the sixth became acceptable consonances across Europe. At this same time, composers seemed to be developing a sense of tonality, the concept that a work begins with a definite keynote and returns to it again at the end. They were also beginning to think of harmony as vertical, concerning themselves with the notes that occurred at the same time in all the voices, rather than only thinking in a linear way of the melodies that fit together in the counterpoint. By the end of the sixteenth century, writing in counterpoint lost its sway and composers often put more emphasis on one melodic line supported by chords. The bass line supported all the harmonies above, often written with figures below the notes to indicate the chords. This was the beginning of the figured bass, or basso continuo, so prominent in the Baroque period. This concept of the melody and the bass lines being the important ones with the parts in the middle being harmonic fill is very different from the polyphonic view, which saw all voices as equally important. In addition, composers were gradually working outside the ancient Church modes, adding additional notes that broke down the distinction between the modes. This would lead gradually to a reduction in the number of modes to just major and minor, and the end of the modal system. It opened the way to the supremacy of tonality.

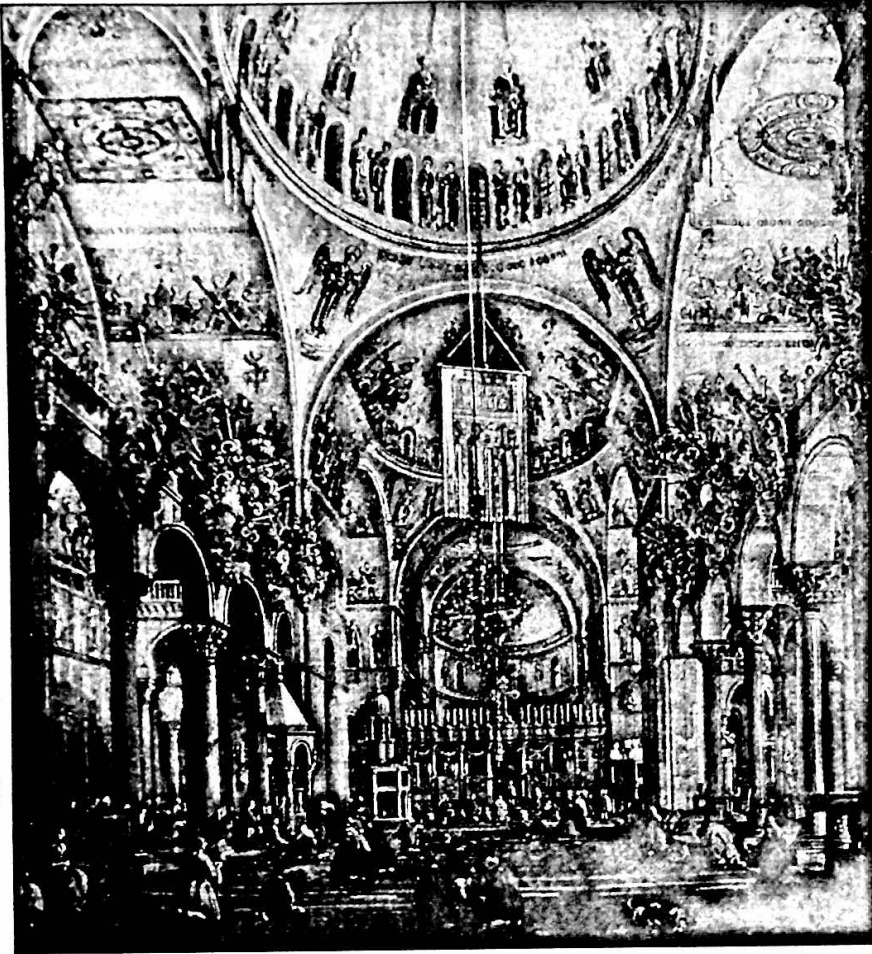


Each of the voices here is stacked vertically with each note being of exactly the same duration.



In this fragment, we see that the composer has used the middle line to indicate the harmonies he wants the keyboard player to fill in.

Treatment of words



The architecture of St. Mark's Cathedral made antiphonal singing possible.

Because the words they were setting to music were so important, Renaissance composers developed new ways of emphasizing their significance. First of all, they began to write music that conformed to the normal rhythms of speech so that the words fit naturally and beautifully with the melodies. This is not true of mediæval music, in which the structure of the music was much more important than the words. Secondly, they developed the technique of word painting, in which the music was matched to the meaning of the word. Words like "flying" or "heaven" were accompanied by rising notes, "happiness" by sweet-sounding chords, "death," "torment" and "grief" by discordant ones. A "sigh" could be signified by a rest, or a falling two-pitch figure. When

used sensitively, this technique added a great deal to the emotional expressiveness of the music, and it has been used by composers in all later periods.

Polychoral music

Venice was a major Italian musical centre during the Renaissance, with a series of strong choirmasters and organists. Particularly common there was the use of antiphonal choirs, two or three choirs who answered each other alternately as well as singing together. This made echo effects possible as one choir responded to another. The St. Mark's cathedral, the most famous church in Venice, had two organs installed. The choirmaster would have a choir at each organ and others placed around the church, producing a kind of "surround-sound" effect.