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# Music History

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**Music in Ancient Times**

Our knowledge of musical practice before 200 A.D. is extremely limited because few attempts were made by ancient cultures to preserve music using notation systems. Iconography in music is the study of graphical representations of musical activities. Archaeologists have discovered artefacts and drawings dating to prehistoric times which depict musicians performing on various instruments. Early musical instruments have also been discovered. For example, a recent dig in the Ukraine uncovered musical instruments made from the bones of a woolly mammoth dating back to 18,000 B.C. It is likely that music evolved as a communications medium for early humans in hunter-gatherer groups. Drums and primitive horns made from shells and animal parts are used by primitive peoples even today to communicate over great distances. It is possible that early humans were impressed with the power of such communication and found the sounds to be pleasing as well. As hunter-gatherer groups evolved into agrarian cultures, music may have had a place in religious ceremonies and as a welcome rhythmic accompaniment to the tedious labour of farming. Music was almost certainly placed in a supportive role in human activities. Scholars consider it unlikely that music was ever an independent activity in prehistoric civilizations.

## Ancient Chinese Music

Historical records of Chinese music history date back to the Shang dynasty circa 1600–1000 B.C. Chinese philosophers like Confucius (551–479 B.C.) regarded music as essential in maintaining order in the universe and in human society. Emperor Han Wudi, who reigned from 140 to 87 B.C., went so far as to create an Imperial Office of Music. The ancient Chinese were the first to develop a science of acoustics and placed a high value on the accurate tuning of instruments. Ancient Chinese music was monophonic and based on a five-tone scale similar to the western Pentatonic scale (CDEGA is one example). Expression in Chinese music performance emphasizes subtle changes in timbre on individual tones. Inflection, in Chinese music and language, is extremely important in the interpretation of content. Ancient literature describes a variety of tuned chimes, drums, bells, wind instruments, and string instruments in use in ancient Chinese music. Chinese traditional music has remained unusually stable throughout the millennia and sheds light on the musical practices of other ancient civilizations.

## The Hurrian Hymn to Nikal

In the 1950's an archaeological dig in Syria uncovered a set of clay tablets with cuneiform characters in the ancient Hurrian language. Hurrian was a language used by the citizens of the ancient city of Ugarit which occupied the land now used by the village of Ras Shamra and the small harbour of Minet-el-Beida, about six miles north of Latakia, in north-western Syria. The tablets date back to approximately 1400 B.C. and contain a hymn to the moon god's wife, Nikal. Remarkably, the tablets also contain detailed performance instructions for a singer accompanied by a harpist as well as instructions on how to tune the harp. From this evidence, musicologists have produced a credible realization of the hymn performed in harmony with thirds, sixths, fourths, and fifths. This rare example of polyphony in ancient music appears to shatter the long held belief that harmony did not evolve in human musical expression until the middle ages. It is possible that further archaeological evidence of early polyphony will be unearthed in the future.

## Ancient Hebrew Music

The importance of music in the lives of the Hebrew peoples is well documented in the Old Testament. Psalms were sung during religious ceremonies in call-response (soloist followed by congregation) or antiphonally (one group followed by another). Wind, string, and percussion instruments are mentioned in the old Testament. The only traditional instrument still used in Jewish ceremonies today is the shofar, a primitive trumpet made from a ram’s horn. In some of the Old Testament scrolls, small markings appear above the text of the psalms. A Parisian scholar, Suzanne Haïk-Vantoura, has translated those markings into a system of music notation called «Tanami». This system of marking the text with symbols denoting melodic outlines is strikingly similar to the earliest neumatic systems of notation used in Christian plainchant. The connection is extremely plausible given that early Christians are often considered as a messianic sect of Judaism, retaining Jewish customs and practices while gradually creating a new Christian identity.

## Ancient Greek Music

The early Greeks considered music to be of mathematical and cosmic significance as well. Pythagoras of Samos (circa 500 B.C.) discovered the frequency proportions that define the intervals we hear today. For example, two notes whose frequencies are in a ratio of 2 to 1, sound one octave apart. A ratio of 3 to 2 produces a fifth, a ratio of 4 to 3 produces a fourth, and a ratio of 9 to 8 produces a major second. Greek musicians and philosophers used a single-string instrument, known as the monochord, to produce the various intervals. Pythagorean philosophers believed that these ratios also governed the movement of celestial bodies and other cosmic matters. Thus, music came to be revered as the highest of intellectual and artistic pursuits. Music theorists of the second century A.D. such as Nicomachus of Gerasa and Claudius Ptolemy wrote extensively about the mathematical, moral, and cosmic significance of music. Ptolemy's treatise, *Harmonics*, is the most useful extant reference on ancient Greek music theory. Interpretations of ancient treatises have yielded common ground on the matter of rhythmic notation but much disagreement and speculation on the interpretation of pitch. The Greeks used a system of modes known as tonoi which may or may not be similar in concept to the scales we use today.

Music of the Early Roman Church

There is little evidence that Ancient Romans contributed much to music history other than the development of brass instruments used in the military. The Romans conquered Greece in 146 B.C. and assimilated and adapted Greek music and religion. Writings of Cicero, Quintilian, and others document the use of music for purely entertainment purposes at large festivals with choruses and instrumental ensembles. The gradual decline of Rome after 200 A.D. took place as the popularity of Christianity was increasing. The emperor Constantine I, who ruled from 306 to 337 A.D., adopted Christianity and legalized it for the first time in the Roman empire. Rome had for centuries exerted a peaceful and unifying influence on Europe but that was gradually disintegrating as barbarians increasingly threatened the security of the empire. When the Roman empire was permanently divided in 395 A.D., Christianity became the only major cultural force unifying the still vital eastern empire in Byzantium with the rapidly dissolving western empire in Europe. By the time the last Roman emperor, the young Romulus Augustulus, was finally deposed in 476, the papacy had established itself in Rome and was asserting jurisdiction over the Christian church. The music of the Christian church was for centuries the only cultivated art music in existence in Europe. Early Christian music, largely monophonic chant influenced by the Jewish cantorial tradition, was entirely vocal as the church attempted to purge the masses of the instrumental music associated with competing religions. Latin translations by Boethius (circa 480–524) and Cassiodorus (circa 490–585) of Greek literature on music theory also contributed to the theoretical foundations of early Christian chant. It is from these origins that the history of western art music properly begins.

# Western Music

Music in the Western Culture is the result of various influences, including the formalization of improvised traditions; the growth of notation; the development of tuning systems; the treatment of text; innovative approaches to form; the role of patronage; the absorption of various cultures into the style; the growth of technology; investigations of performance practice; and various other factors.

Western music also benefits from various dualities: sacred and secular traditions; monophonic and polyphonic textures; conservative and progressive tendencies; popularism and elitism; canon and non-canonic works; and other polarities. The western tradition is complicated by these various influences and perspectives, and formal musicological study often becomes a point of departure for other, more individualized investigations of music.

The western tradition of music has its origins in the chant tradition of the early Christian era. The monophonic music of chant dominated the middle ages, and included the composition of sequences and tropes. In the high middle ages, organum emerged, thus introducing polyphonic textures into liturgical music. By the thirteenth century, the motet became a seminal polyphonic composition and included liturgical and secular texts as well as a chant cantus firmus. In the Ars Nova of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, secular music was composed polyphonically, and resulted in elaborate contrapuntal devices and notational practices.

In the fifteenth century the early Renaissance polyphony showed evidence of a new style influenced on fauxbourdon and based on previously improvised traditions. At this time textures grew from a reliance on lower voices to treble-dominated textures. Renaissance motets and madrigals have their origins in the music of the Netherlands composers (Obrecht, Ockeghem, Busnois, Binchois) and the idiom culminates in the work of Josquin Desprez. With the late Renaissance, more national and secular music emerged, as found with the English madrigal and the French chanson.

The late sixteenth-century music included attempts to return to Greek drama. The latter resulted in the formulation of monody for declaiming music which was at the core of early opera (Caccini, Peri) and became a vehicle for composers like Monteverdi to take forward the nascent genre of opera. Italian opera (opera seria, opera buffa) soon dominated the early baroque style of the seventeenth century, which extended to the composition of oratorios on sacred subjects. In France opera soon took root, and a national style evolved starting with Lully.

In the seventeenth century instrumental music developed on its own, treble dominated texture of vocal music was supported by the basso continuo tradition of accompaniment. Works for instruments included keyboard suites (Froberger, Kerll) and sonatas, organ music (Frescobaldi), including various partitas and fugues, and trio sonatas (Corelli, et al.) for various combinations of instruments. Music for orchestra included sinfonias and concertos, including the concerto grosso.

The high baroque music of the eighteenth century was dominated by the genius of Bach and Handel. Bach composed music for almost every genre except opera; he left a corpus of liturgical music, including cantatas, that show the influence of the Reformation on musical style. Handel, as a German – born composer who studied in Italy and worked many years in England, shows the international aspects of the baroque style. Like Bach, he wrote in almost every genre, including opera seria and oratorio.

While Bach and Handel yet composed, a style change was taking place in the early eighteenth century. Rococo preferences moved toward simpler harmonies and more transparent textures, as well as a tendency toward instrumental music (C.P.E. Bach, J.C. Bach, Joseph Haydn). Later in the century, the Classic style of Haydn and Mozart dominated the music of Western Europe, with the symphony, sonata, and string quartet predominating, and the sonata principle at the core of musical structure. The opera seria of Handel and his generation gave way to opera buffa, as found with Mozart and others. The bel canto tradition in opera seria metamorphosed with Mozart and emerged later in the operas of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini.

The classical style may be seen to culminate in the music of Beethoven, who is perceived as the link between the classic and romantic style. This distinction is important for the so-called common practice era from ca. 1725 to 1900, that is the period of the defining tradition of western music. Beethoven contributed to almost every genre of music at the time, including piano sonata, string quartet, and symphony. He expanded the symphony with regard to form, orchestration, texture, and aesthetics, contributing programmatic elements to an otherwise self-contained style.

As the link to the romantic era that dominated the nineteenth century, Beethoven is a point of departure for many of the trends that existed in the era. The so-called Romantic style includes the growth of a number of varied and often antithetical influences. These include the development of the symphony as a genre; program music and the ideal of absolute music; grand opera; lieder; character pieces for piano; the piano sonata; national musical style; and the expansion of tonality and harmonic practice. The early Romantic composers include Schubert, Weber, Berlioz, Mendelssohn, Schumann, and Chopin; among the later ones are Liszt, Wagner, Brahms, and Verdi.

With Wagner romantic opera expanded in terms of the orchestra, the scope of subject matter, the demands on voices, and the overall length. As a controversial figure, Wagner influenced the musical establishment, such that affinities were aligned with him and the music of the future, or with more conservative trends that reached back to Beethoven. Wagner's harmonic and timbral idiom was critical for the late romantic efflorescence at the end of the century that led to the so called end of tonality as it was generally understood in the nineteenth century.

With Wagner, the dominance of the Austro-German tradition in nineteenth-century music became apparent. The extended harmonic and formal practices of Mahler, Richard Strauss, Schönberg, and others preceded the freer treatment of dissonance in the twelve-tone music of the New Viennese School of Schönberg, Berg, and Webern. At the same time, the Impressionism of the French composers Debussy and Ravel were based on non-functional harmonic principles. Composers like Bartók introduced folk elements into music.

Twentieth-century music includes many different styles and tendencies, including neoclassicism (Stravinsky) – an important type of 20th century music is neoclassical. «Neo» means new, so neoclassical music is new music that is similar to music of the Classical period. While neoclassical music sounds modern in many ways, it is written following the basic forms and ideals of the Classical period.

A famous neoclassical composer is Igor Stravinsky. His music uses many different key signatures and time signatures, and sometimes more than one at a time. One example is the Rite of Spring;

expressionism (Berg, Webern);

serialism (Boulez);

electronic music (Stockhausen);

aleatoric music and indeterminacy (Cage) – the composer leaves a lot up to the performer. For example a composer might give each player in the band four different sheets of music. On the director's signal each player in the band could play any one of the four sheets of music, starting and stopping whenever he or she wished. Chance music is interesting because each performance is different. One important composer of chance music was John Cage. His Imaginary Landscape No. 4, consists of 12 radios all playing at the same time, but all tuned to different stations; minimalism (Reich, Glass).

At the same time, the rediscovery of the past has resulted in an explosion of interest in the authentic music of past cultures. Similarly, the eclecticism of twentieth-century culture touches upon the growth of ethnomusicology and the perspectives it offers to studies of more traditional western music.

# Literature

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