

Western European Instrumental Music in the Middle Ages

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Music was an important part of the culture we study. In Europe, it was one of the Seven Liberal Arts dating back to classical antiquity. Medieval music theory and education were greatly influenced by the treatise *De Institutione Musica* by Boethius (ca. 480-524). With such authority behind it, music was considered an appropriate accomplishment for all three “estates” of man -- clergy, nobility and commoner. Of course, each estate had its own musical genres, but over the centuries there was a great deal of crossover between them.

In the early Middle Ages (at least through the 12th century), vocal music was a capella – unaccompanied by instruments. This is partly because the church considered man-made instruments to be profane. The human voice was an instrument created by God and therefore worthy to be used in sacred music. However, even secular music was performed either vocally or instrumentally, not both. This may be because the instruments of the time were difficult to keep in tune, and thus best suited to solo performance. Technical improvements made instruments in the later Middle Ages more suited to ensemble performance. By the late 14th century, the church had relaxed its restrictions on musical instruments. Some liturgical music was even composed for a mixed vocal-instrumental ensemble.

Medieval church music is most usually associated with plainsong, or “Gregorian chant.” Named for Pope Gregory I (590-604), plainsong actually reached its final form in the 8th or 9th century. Plainsong is monophonic, meaning the melody is unaccompanied by any other parts. By the year 1000, polyphony was used to add ceremonial importance to specific moments in the liturgy. A common practice, known as “troping” chants, was to add newly composed words and/or music to a familiar plainsong. This kind of polyphony was applied to the Easter morning liturgy, and the practice gave rise to liturgical drama.

We know less about secular music in the early middle ages, because very little was written down before 1200. Beginning at least in the 12th century, the composition of music and poetry was a popular aristocratic pastime in the area that is now the South of France. Duke William IX of Aquitaine (1071-1127) is considered to be the first noble “troubadour” (the word comes from the Provençal term meaning “finder”). Troubadour poetry influenced a similar movement in northern France, where such composers were called “trouveres.” Moving into Germany, the art form was practiced by “minnesingers” (“love-singers”), who flourished into the 14th century. The troubadour movement mostly died out in its homeland after the Albigensian Crusade brought the region under French occupation in the early 13th century.

Not all court music was secular. A famous collection of music from the court of Alfonso X of Castile contains songs in praise of the Virgin Mary. Called *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, these were not liturgical songs (those used in church services) but devotional songs which expressed the religious beliefs of lay people in their daily lives.

To further confuse the line between sacred and secular music, many secular songs were composed by clerics. Since the medieval universities (and their predecessors, the cathedral schools) were church institutions, those who studied music theory and notation were most often

churchmen. These highly educated composers found patrons not only in the church, but also in aristocratic and royal courts. Around 1320, Philippe de Vitry (a composer in the service of French Kings, who later became the Bishop of Meaux) wrote several music treatises, including one called *Ars Nova*. Philippe introduced the time signature to musical notation, allowing composers to experiment more freely with rhythm and use smaller note values. The style of music that resulted became known as *ars nova*.

No matter which estate you are recreating with your persona, music should be as much a part of your life as the garb you wear. Seek out early music CDs by groups like the Gothic Voices, Sequentia, the Early Music Consort of London or Anonymous 4 to get a feel for the music your persona would have known. These are scholarly groups who use appropriate instrumentation, and the liner notes explain the context of the music.

The musical instruments of the early Middle Ages were those that had been around since Roman times: harps and lyres; various kinds of flutes; frame drums (as opposed to kettle drums); trumpets (though they did not have valves like modern trumpets); and the organ (though it did not much resemble our modern versions). The vielle or fiddle was also popular in the 12th and 13th centuries. It is not the direct ancestor of our modern violin or fiddle, but it is a flat-backed, bowed string instrument.

We know that from the time of the First Crusade in the late 11th century, a number of musical instruments of Eastern origin began to find their way into Europe. These “new” court instruments include: the lute (a plucked stringed instrument with a pear-shaped body and a round back); the nakers (small kettledrums played in pairs); the psaltery (an early form of zither); the rebec (a bowed stringed instrument with a pear-shaped body and round back); and the shawm (an ancestor of the oboe).

Perhaps the most popular instrument for SCA musicians is the recorder, because they can be obtained inexpensively and are easy to play. Although the cheap plastic school recorders are based on a post-period design, the sound they make is extremely similar to earlier wooden recorders and is therefore SCA-appropriate. Since the recorder is a type of flute, the sound is appropriate for the earliest music.

Many SCA members play guitar. While the familiar guitar is a post-period development, it is somewhat related to some plucked string instruments of the Renaissance, so with a little imagination (that’s what the “Creative” is for in Society for Creative Anachronism), you can play late-period (16th century) music on a guitar without being too anachronistic. If you want to play earlier music, tell everyone your guitar’s persona is a lute.

Another popular instrument among SCA members is the bodhran, the “traditional” Irish frame drum. If you have one, you should be aware that the “traditional” way of playing it, with a double-ended beater making a rapid, sort of brushing motion against the drum, was invented in the 20th century. If you dispense with that particular technique, however, the bodhran is a perfectly appropriate frame drum, a basic type that has existed since Roman times.

There are many different types of musical performance venues in the SCA. Many events with dancing have live musicians. In this type of venue, the more musicians, the better (for added volume). If there are only a few musicians, they should concentrate on playing the melody line of the piece on the most audible instrument(s) they have and have one person play percussion. Most dance music within the SCA is late-period (15th and 16th centuries) or even post-period – mainly because there are no surviving European dance manuals from earlier periods. So even though a great deal of dance music survives from the 13th century onward, we have insufficient evidence to recreate the dances.

Feast entertainment is another common venue for musicians. This can be frustrating, however, if the acoustics of the hall do not allow the audience to hear you very well. Smaller feasts, where the buzz of conversation will not completely drown out the music, work better than large, crowded feasts in huge halls. If you need to read sheet music, make sure there is sufficient light in the hall (or bring small, battery-operated stand lights) – don't try to read music by candlelight.

Ceremonial music exists within the SCA as well. Sometimes the Royalty likes to have a musical processional or recessional during court. There are a great many SCA weddings that involve music as well. Sometimes these happen within a regular event – usually a camping event; sometimes they are stand-alone “events” in their own right.

Bardic circles (or whole bardic events) sometimes offer opportunities for instrumental performances as well. It depends upon the particular circle or event. Some are limited to word-oriented performances; others embrace other performing arts as well.

Ask your local Minister of Arts & Sciences if there is a musical guild, consort or interest group in your area. Even if you are not able to travel to their rehearsals, the group may serve as a resource to help you select repertoire, choose events where you can interact with other musicians, and learn where you can acquire instruments and lessons. Most modern band instruments have some sort of period relative, so if you already play an instrument, you can benefit from that experience. If you have never played an instrument before, the recorder is a good one to try (you probably already played one for a while in third or fifth grade).

For Further Reading

Medieval Music, Richard Hoppin, ISBN 0393090906

Anthology of Medieval Music, Richard Hoppin, ISBN 0393090809

Music in the Middle Ages: with an Intro. on the Music of Ancient Times, Gustave Reese, ISBN 0393097501

Music in the Renaissance, Gustave Reese, ISBN 0393095304

Renaissance Music: Music in Western Europe 1400-1600, Allan W. Atlas, ISBN 0393971694

Anthology of Renaissance Music, Allan W. Atlas, ISBN 0393971708

On the Web

SCA Medieval and Renaissance Music Homepage - www.pbm.com/~lindah1/music.html

Glossary of Terms:

Ars nova - literally, “new art,” this was the name of a music treatise written around 1320 by Philippe de Vitry and also the name of the 14th-century musical genre it described, with more complex rhythms and a time signature. This musical style sounds very different from earlier or later period music.

Guidonian Hand - An early music notation system, invented by Guido d’Arezzo (ca. 1000-50), who also first used the syllables “Ut (later replaced by do), Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La” (later joined by Ti and Do) to name musical notes. They happened to be the first syllables in each line of a Latin hymn to John the Baptist, which rose one full step with each line.

Isorhythm - the repetition of identical rhythmic patterns using different musical notes. Popular in ars nova music.

Liturgical Music - Music used as part of the church service, or liturgy. Also called “Sacred music.”

Lute - A plucked stringed instrument with a pear-shaped body and a round back. Descended from an ancient Mesopotamian instrument with a skin belly, the Arabs developed a wooden-bellied version which they called *al ud* (meaning “the wood”). By the 16th century it was a popular courtly instrument throughout Europe, except in Spain where the vihuela was preferred.

Monophonic - having only one musical line. Plainsong, or Gregorian chant, is monophonic. The entire monastic chorus sings the same melody line.

Motet - A polyphonic style that evolved from organum and became popular for both sacred and secular songs from the 13th century through the Renaissance. The term comes from the French *mot*, meaning word, and refers to the voice above the tenor as well as the composition as a whole. In a motet, the different voices sing not only different notes, but different words as well.

Nakers - A pair of small kettledrums (called *naqara* in Arabic) that are the ancestor of the modern timpani.

Neumes - Signs written above the text of Gregorian chants indicating the rise and fall of the voice. These signs developed into musical notation.

Organum - A type of polyphony in which the different voices move in parallel. There are two types: “strict organum” and “free organum” (in which the voices occasionally diverge from their parallel courses). Used in liturgical music in the early Middle Ages to emphasize certain parts of the liturgy.

Plainsong, or “Gregorian chant.” A familiar type of liturgical music named for Pope Gregory I (590-604), plainsong actually reached its final form in the 8th or 9th century. Plainsong is monophonic, meaning the melody is unaccompanied by any other parts.

Polyphony - more than one musical line. Early polyphony was in a style known as *organum*, with the voices moving in parallel either an octave, a fifth or a fourth apart. More complex types of polyphony developed in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Psaltery - Derived from the Arabic *qanun*, an early form of zither. The qanun reached Europe in the 11th century and became known as a psaltery either from the Greek *psalterion* (meaning “stringed instrument”) or from its use to accompany the singing of psalms.

Rebec - A bowed stringed instrument with a pear-shaped body, it evolved in the 13th century from the north African *rebab*. The rebec in Europe accompanied singing and dancing until it was eventually replaced by the violin (a bowed string instrument with a flat back).

Secular Music - Music that was not meant to be sung in church. Some secular songs have religious themes.

Shawm - A double-reeded woodwind instrument that originated in the Middle East. By the 13th century, shawms were used in Europe, where they eventually evolved into the modern oboe. A loud instrument with a buzzy sound, shawms were popular in outdoor settings.