

James Hooker

Prof. Durakoglu

20 October 2023

History of European Music

### Development of Polyphony and Creativity in the Medieval Period

When we think of music, most people describe the elements of contemporary songs. These elements usually include a rhythm section, lead vocals, and lead instruments - multiple parts playing simultaneously, creating harmonies that sound pleasing. This is known as polyphony, which is a system of music that we often take for granted - polyphony was not always the standard! Throughout its history, music has gone through a wide range of very slow changes. One of the most important periods of change was the Medieval period - when liturgical and secular music drastically evolved, allowing for musicians and poets to explore the use of more creativity and joy in their work. This was primarily exemplified by the development of polyphony during the Medieval period.

In the early Medieval era, great strides in the development of polyphony were made by the liturgical society. One great example is the contributions of Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179). Describing herself as “a feather floating on the breath of God,” Von Bingen was a visionary, poet, and composer of sacred music. Her masterpiece “Ordo Virtutum” was a liturgical drama consisting of 82 songs, following the story of allegorical characters like prophets, virtues, and souls. The reason Von Bingen’s work was so groundbreaking was that she was the first known composer to use larger leaps and fifths, which was a very expressive method of writing

for her time. These extremely expressive melodies, combined with the fact that these were dramas and not necessarily connected to the liturgy, were a huge development in musical creativity. The development of creativity goes hand in hand with the development of polyphony. Von Bingen's contribution to polyphony's development can be accredited to her use of antiphonal dialogue in "Ordo Virtutum." In antiphonal dialogue, two groups are taking turns singing their parts. This call and response style was one step closer to the introduction of polyphony. Soon enough, these two groups would start singing *simultaneously*, or polyphonically. This was explored a few hundred years later with the development of isorhythms.

The development of isorhythms took place in France in the later Medieval period, with a new system of music called Ars Nova (1315-1375). Huge developments in rhythm and notation were crafted in this period, with the most important being the introduction of isorhythm. Isorhythm indicates a special kind of structural organization in the tenor line of motets (sacred choral music). The procedure involves talea, a rhythmic pattern reemphasized multiple times in the tenor line of a piece. Essentially, composers started modifying the tenor lines of their music to allow for unique rhythmic changes, AKA, the organizing principle of most polyrhythmic music at the time. One example of this is the 13th Century motet *En non diu-Quant voi*. This motet arose from the organum tradition exemplified by the Notre Dame School led by masters Léonin and Pérotin. In this piece, the melodic repetition is combined with the rhythmic talea adding a unique sense of motion. The harmonies created by the tenor line also add a significant sense of movement that was not seen in older versions of organum. However, it is clear that this composition was still based on the chants of the liturgical society. The period of Ars Nova shows

us an important development in the transition from monophony to polyphony, and how creativity was slowly starting to infiltrate the church.

In the Medieval period, composers began to experiment with their style and creativity while still staying within the constraints of the liturgical forms. This is clearly seen in the use of antiphony by Hildegard Von Bingen in the 12th century, as well as in the development of isorhythms by the composers of the Notre Dame School in 14th Century France. These two developments were central to the solidification of polyphony which can be seen in all music today. The Medieval era was known for its groundbreaking contributions to the development of not only polyphony but creativity and the availability of music as well. As the forms binding music to the liturgy slowly became looser, new developments like antiphony and isorhythms started a snowball of creativity that continues to gain traction to this day.

## Works Cited

Britannica, "Notre-Dame school." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jul. 1998,

<https://www.britannica.com/art/Notre-Dame-school>.

Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/antiphonal>