Writing Assignment: Lesson 4

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When we listen to music today, it is easy to overlook the complexity in its design and composition. There are so many instruments, voices, harmonies, melodies, and tones that blend together to create a pleasant experience for our ears. As we might have guessed, music began as simple chants that were sung by a single individual. There was not much complexity. The individual needed only to worry about how appealing the sound was to the ear. This might bring us to ask: who was the first to suggest that multiple sounds played simultaneously might sound good. How did anyone discover this?

As we learned in the first lesson, sound travels in waves that carry a particular frequency. When the nodes of the waves align, the notes produced with typically compliment each other. Thus, when two people sing together and “match” pitch, they can sing different notes that share the same “key” (or align the amplitudes/nodes). Around 900 A.D., people began to discover that multiple sounds could blend in this way. As you added more people to the chant, you could accent a melody with multiple notes and make it stand out. These chants became songs with multiple parts woven together to create complex oral masterpieces. As time moved into the 1200’s, rhythm became a measurable part of music to keep each person in a choir on pace with the one another. This was formalized at the School of Notre Dame in 1150 A.D. Finally, when the Renaissance (1450-1600) grabbed it’s foothold on history, the oral tradition expanded further into church choirs, royal entertainment, and art-styles. This newly developed understanding of music opened the door for instruments to become an important aspect of music. It did not matter what sound you made or how you made it; there was always some place you could put it in a song. People began to seek new ways to create beautiful, unique noises that would compliment their compositions. This shift in music began the road to where we are today. It took a movement like this to push humans to explore the possibilities in music and sound. I do not think it was a single individual, like a radical monk, who began this exploration. I believe it was an overall “global” attitude of people to seek out artistic “rebirth.” It did not spring from one man; rather, many people experimenting and sharing their ideas.

As I look back at the stages in music I described, polyphony means everything to our current state of music. The concept of playing notes simultaneously, fearing their interference with each other, was a bold idea. Once it was proven to work, music grew into a very complex artist environment. Now, a musician can use many instruments and voices to add their personal flare, taste, state, and emotions to music. They are not bound to a single melody sung by in an individual. It also provided the way for anyone to express themselves musically. It no longer matters whether a person can sing to create music.