

Roman Catholic Influence on the Blooming of Polyphony

As early as the time of Ancient Greece, music has become tied into our lives. However, unlike the vastly diverse genres that we have today, music was almost exclusively linked to a divinity and worship. The influence that religion had on music played a great role in not only its earliest uses, but also its development from a simple monophonic format, to a more complex polyphonic format. A large amount of the transformative pieces of music that were developed were done so in accordance with the Roman Catholic church, through plainchants called Gregorian Chants, named after Pope Gregory. One of the earliest known Gregorian Chants, called *Viderunt Omnes*, became widely used in Catholic ceremonies, namely Christmas Day in this case. This composition was performed with male vocals being sung in unison, as was most common in this time period. This was a strictly monophonic piece, with a single melody being sung at the same time by the performers. In addition, the piece was melismatic in nature, with its lyrics being stretched over multiple different pitches at a time. During this era, there was not much familiarity in complex melodies, and even in such cases, there was no widely used method of notation, making it difficult to keep track of such compositions. For this reason, most pieces sung at this time were pieces of poetry or hymns that were simply melodized and easy to remember and pass on via listening alone, as was the case with *Viderunt Omnes*, which was based on a piece of text from Psalms that describes the word of God,^[1] and carried an important theme given the musical significance that the composition would come to represent.

Roughly a century later, this musical style went through a metamorphosis. Instead of using one set melody, an additional set of notes/chords were added to pieces to enhance its sound. This process began with the incorporation of a drone, where the final pitch of the chant is held by either a voice or

an instrument throughout the duration of the song, and sparked the beginning of the polyphonic musical era. This type of polyphonic rendition became known as an organum, and became more commonly used in medieval chants. Eventually, this transitioned beyond a single drone, and focused on combining two variations of the same melody being sung at different rates. This style was referred to as florid organum. As these styles became more popular across Europe, they began to be taught and improved upon in religious settings. The most notable instance of this occurred at the School of Notre Dame in Paris, led by the composers Leonin and Perotin. The polyphonic composition styles coached at the School of Notre Dame revolved around a process of augmenting plainchant melodies, and incorporating several floored components to enhance the composition. Their polyphonic composition styles were both applied to their own renditions of the aforementioned Gregorian Chant *Viderunt Omnes*, which they had called an *Organum of Viderunt Omnes*.^[2] Their enhancements made upon this already majestic chant gave an insight to just how much more is possible with polyphony, as even a song centered around two words can be given more intensity in its sound.

As seen through the display of events, the development of music from monophony to polyphony was not an overnight process. It was a step-by-step process, as with many things, that was greatly influenced by the incorporation of music into religious teachings, namely in the School of Notre Dame, where more complex and elegant compositions were developed in an expedited process to be used in conjunction with their religious roots. However, while the development of music in this period was greatly influenced by religion, the newly developed polyphonic styles allowed for more possibilities outside of Gregorian Chants, including operas and orchestras.

Works Cited

[1] A History of Western Music by Grout, Burkholder, and Palisca. 10th Edition. W. W. Norton and Company. ISBN: 978-0-393-91829-8

[2] Eliza. "Stretching Time, Stretching Meaning: Setting 'Viderunt Omnes.'" *Interlude*, 12 Feb. 2020, <https://interlude.hk/stretching-time-stretching-meaning-viderunt-omnes/>.

"I pledge my honor I have abided by the Stevens Honor System." -Alex Gaskins

