**Chapter 4**

**Music of the Catholic Church**

Western European art music has its roots in the music of the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. No other institution has had such a profound influence on art music in the Western world. In the Middle Ages there was much secular music, but we have little or no record of it, or how it sounded. We have record of sacred music of the time because the Church was the center of learning and records in the Medieval period. Religion so dominated this period of time that it would have been unthinkable for a composer to not naturally write sacred music both for the glory of God and for the practicalities of worship service.

Sacred art music of this time was written for professionals—musicians whose lives were dedicated to the Church. As such, the music is complex and esoteric. The esoteric and ethereal sound of much of the music of the period leant itself well to the elitist notions of the Catholic clergy of the time. Much of the control of the peasant masses was made possible through the mysticism of the Catholic faith and music played an important part in this.

Music was composed for what the Catholic Church calls the Mass and for the Divine Office. The mass is a long ceremony usually performed once each day. The Divine Office is a set of shorter services, usually eight, that are performed at different times of day. The words, or texts, of these services change according to the time of the year. These texts are mostly sung and the early music of the Church was written for these texts.

We call these basic liturgical melodies "plainchant," chant or Gregorian chant. Plainchant, because it is unadorned or unaccompanied. Gregorian chant, in honor of the great Pope Gregory of the Catholic Church, who was pope from 590 to 604. It is believed that he ordered the codification of music used for the services.

Chant is usually monophonic, conjunct, and has few if any dynamic changes. It does have rhythm but not a recurring beat or steady rhythm. This is what makes it seem to float as we listen to it and adds to its mystical sound quality. Chant was originally not written down but was passed on aurally. The beginning of our present day notation system started with simple up or down indications on written texts to aid the singer in remembering the chant.

There are two types of chants; melismatic and syllabic. Melismatic is a chant in which the singer sings many notes on one syllable of a word. Syllabic means that each syllable of a word has a corresponding note to go with it.

One of the primary artistic figures of the Middle Ages that we do know about was a woman named Hildegard of Bingen. She was from a well-to-do family in Germany and became an Abbess in a convent. She wrote books and music. By the time she was writing, simple instruments were used to accompany chant.

As we learned in Unit 1, Polyphony is the simultaneous performance of two or more melodies. It began in the late Middle Ages and is thought to have developed in France, perhaps at the Cathedral of Notre Dame. The earliest composers of whom we have record wrote in this style and were church musicians at Notre Dame; first, around 1000, a man named Leonin, and later, about 1200, Perotin.

Polyphony was used first in church music as a way of embellishing or ornamenting the chant. The earliest type of polyphony was called organum. Organum began as the addition of a second melody to the original chant. This second melody, or counterpoint, moved in a parallel fashion to the chant—in other words its rhythm and direction were the same as the chant. Later this counterpoint, or second melody, became more elaborate and moved independently of the chant. Then, a third melody was added; and by the end of the middle ages a fourth countermelody was added to the chant. This more complicated style of polyphony is called a motet.

As the counterpoint became more complicated it became more necessary for the music to be written down. Singers needed a notation system to help them remember the polyphonic melodic lines. The composers in France developed a notation system that was used for 200 years and that serves as the basis of our method of writing music today.

Perhaps the earliest form of vocal music still often performed today is the motet. Begun as a three or four part sacred piece of music, by the Renaissance era the motet was used for sacred and secular subjects. An early important composer of the motet, both sacred and secular was Guillaume Machaut (1300–1377). Machaut was very influential as a composer of Catholic church music and he worked at the Notre Dame cathedral in Rheims.

A motet is usually polyphonic and imitative in style. Oddly, it sometimes is also polytextual. This means that there is more than one set of words at the same time, or that the text is in more than one language. This oddity is the result of the motet’s origins in the Catholic Church and its use of a chant as one of the three or four parts of the motet. When the motet became a secular form, the idea of using a chant as one of the parts was retained and it was kept in Latin despite the other parts being in the vernacular.

During the late Middle Ages in a time period that we call the Ars Nova, polyphony became important in music outside the Church. This popular, or secular art music still used chants or fragments of chants but they were obscured in the overall texture of the music. The motet was the end development of the complicated polyphony of the Notre Dame composers. Rhythmic complexity is one of the traits of the motets of the late middle ages. In the secular world these motets were love songs or satire songs. Sometimes instruments were added to accompany the different lines, or the motets were performed on instruments without singers

Polyphony is one of the most important developments of Western music. It created a shift to music that was actually composed rather than improvised. And, it created music that was so complex that it demanded a notation system. By the end of the Middle Ages music in the secular world has become almost as important as music of the Church.

The mass is the largest and most important of the church services of the Catholic faith. In large cathedrals it is celebrated in some form each day with special masses for certain ceremonies. By about the year 1010 the service itself had become divided into two major sections called the Ordinary and the Proper. Each of the sections had particular chants associated with it that were sung to deliver the liturgy. The Ordinary section of the mass had an unchanging set of chants and the Proper section contained chants that changed based upon the church year. Since the Ordinary section had unchanging chants this is the section that most Renaissance composers devoted their musical energies to. By about 1450 five sections of the Ordinary were used to create the musical form called mass. These included the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. Each of these five sections had a chant associated with it and composers would use this chant to create larger polyphonic pieces of music to set the texts. The musical mass has retained this five-section form to the current day. The mass that began in the Middle Ages became the most important musical form for composers in the Renaissance.

An early mass by Machaut was the *Notre Dame Mass* written in the mid 1300s.

The earliest composer of Renaissance style of mass was Guillaume Dufay, who lived from 1400–1474 and worked in Italy. His music influenced a new generation of Renaissance composers through simplicity of rhythm and the beginnings of homophony. One composer who was important in the late Renaissance who built upon the ideas of Dufay was Josquin Desprez. Josquin, like Dufay worked mostly in Italy. He lived from 1440–1521. His works are characterized by the extension of the homophonic style and by a compositional technique called imitation. Imitation can most easily be thought of as one melody or voice imitating another by repeating the first voice, or some similar version of it, slightly later than the first voice. This imitative style changed polyphony. In this style no one voice is more important than the other. Prior to this time in the Renaissance most polyphony was not imitative. After Josquin, most polyphony was written in this imitative style.

As you heard before, these developments meant that composers had at least three distinct styles and sounds of composition available to them; monophony or single line like the chant, polyphony or multiple voices or melodies, and homophony or melodies that create harmonies and chords in a manner than sounds more vertical than horizontal in nature. The addition of imitative polyphony was a fourth compositional style. Composers used these styles to create repetition and contrast in their music.

By 1500 most music of the Church was for voices only again. We call this style a cappella, or for voices alone. The term actually means for the chapel, which indicated at the time that no instruments were to be used.

Composers like Josquin also began to try to match musical sounds with expressive words in the texts. This appears to be the beginning of an attempt to make a particular musical sound evoke some understanding or emotion in the listener. For example, the word “heaven” might be set to a very high note for the singer. Or, if the text is about a soul ascending to heaven the melody might ascend in pitch as well. This is called word painting and it dominates the compositions of the Renaissance in sacred and secular music.

In the Renaissance, travel and trade were much more common in Europe than in the Middle Ages. People traveled further, heard and saw new things, and music of one composer or country became known throughout the Western world. This created the beginnings of a Western style of art music. By the end of the Renaissance composers like Palestrina, de Lassus, and Byrd were famous throughout the courts and churches of Western Europe and their music was imitated and copied by lesser known composers.

The leading composer of mass at the end of the Renaissance was a man named Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, commonly referred to as just Palestrina. His masses represent the height of this style and time period. His works are the culmination of the development of this period.