Chapter 6 -- SACRED MEDIEVAL MUSIC

The Medieval Era (500 C.E. to 1450 C.E.)

There is a famous observation known as “Murphy's Law”--if something can possibly go wrong, it will.

Murphy's Law has a number of colloraries—including one known as “The Golden Rule of the Arts and Sciences”. *He who has the gold makes the rules.*
Meant to be tongue in cheek, nevertheless the “Golden Rule” has a lot of truth in it. Within the last 50 years, we have seen a number of revolutions in music: in the 1950s, for the first time in modern history, the popular musicians began targeting the teen market. When the British Invasion hit in the early 1960s, the musicians were barely older than the teen market they were trying to sell their music to.

In the later 60s, a very unpopular war caused great social upheaval in the U.S. Open dissent against the war as well as racial injustice in the U.S. found a voice in the music of the time and an audience of young people who were opening their eyes and seeing unjustices.

Why did this happen? The economy and political environment was such that people of that age had disposable income—a lot of it. Sound reproduction equipment was relatively inexpensive, television and radio had sufficiently expanded as a medium to be able to help promote music and artists. Not a small factor was the freedom of speech that everyone found themselves in—even freedom to criticize the government, which over history is a rare commodity. Again, he who has the gold makes the rules.

In earlier generations, the process was the same—the music making machine ground away, but the outcome was a little different. Beethoven, for example, became the first truly successful freelance musician and died quite wealthy. He, however, did not fire up the teen crowds enough to buy his recordings. Adolescents in early 19th century Austria didn't have the income, or the freedom, nor did they have records to buy and play because there were no record players. Beethoven didn't write for a rock band, but instead for an orchestra and other ensembles.

Why did this happen? The political environment had changed to where an artist could become a people's hero and speak with his own voice; disposable income among the middle class helped him become financially stable by targeting an audience outside of the Court and the Church. Both the Court and the Church had lost a great deal of political power. It should be no surprise that the great political revolutions—the American and the French—happened during this era.

The music making machine process of each era is a constant. As each era is different, so are the results.

The period we know as the Medieval Era (sometimes called the Middle Ages or the Dark Ages) begins with the collapse of the once formidable Roman Empire. Political authority—that demanded allegiance and brought protection—became centered around a series of small feudal fiefdoms. While they retained a certain amount of power (and the children of nobility were among the few who were able to learn to read and write), there
was no political structure to keep order that distantly resembled the Roman Empire.

However, the vacuum was filled in another way. In a spiritual sense, as well as a political sense, the Roman Catholic Church became very much the focal point of a Medieval man's life. Between the collapse of control of the Roman Empire around 500 A.D. and the beginning of the Renaissance in the middle 1400s, the Church remained the most continuously powerful organization in Europe.

The Roman Catholic Church became an important thread that held civilization together during the Medieval Era. From the standpoint of musical history, it preserved what little tradition existed and laid the foundation for Western music history's growth up to the current era.

Life was extraordinary difficult and dangerous for the common person, especially those outside of protected cities or castles. The church gave meaning and promises of an afterlife for the faithful and in general held society together. Life started with baptism and ended with a funeral. In between the Church was responsible for giving order and direction to the lives of its parishioners, giving an explanation for the sometimes terrifying things that they saw around them, and even a great deal of simple social support.

Not one of the least important functions was the Church's role in preserving literacy as well as musical literacy.

A wonderful example of the power of the Church is in the great Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages. The Washington National Cathedral, which might be the last Gothic cathedral ever to be built, was started in 1907 and finished in 1990. With construction, design, and materials similar to the Medieval versions, it took 83 years to complete—in an era with power tools, electricity, vehicles to haul the stone blocks, and massive cranes to lift them to the top of the spires.

Medieval cathedrals were constructed in an era where the stones were cut by hand tools, hauled on ox-carts, and hoisted by ropes. Many of them took less time to build than the National Cathedral!

On a more mundane, but necessary topic, the National Cathedral was built in an era where donations came from all over a prosperous nation.

Medieval cathedrals had no such relatively easy funding. While it was believed that to worship God through one's craft was the highest artistic principle of the times, workers still needed to eat, have shelter, and support families.
The raising of the money needed to build these cathedrals represented great financial hardships imposed on the area. The thousands and thousands of hours of labor, the tremendous cost involved, the extraordinary and detailed craftsmanship without the use of cranes or power tools must give us an idea of the effects of religion and the power of the Church.

In spite of these difficulties, dozens of these structures were built in the latter half of the Medieval era. This is an indication of just how the Church towered (figuratively and literally) over other institutions in Medieval society. It is hard to imagine anything like that happening today.

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**MUSIC IN THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH**

Music has always been an integral part of religious celebrations throughout history, and for the Catholic Church in the early centuries of the Christian Era, it was a vital element.

As noted earlier, there was little musical influence left over from antiquity. There is still a large amount of debate about details of early music, but what we do know is that many of the texts in the elaborate Catholic ritual were sung in monophonic ritual chants. Much of this music contained Greek, Jewish, and Syrian influences.

Instruments were rarely used in the church, more or less being banned from worship. They found a home in secular music, though (more on this later).

In an attempt to standardize the hundreds of pieces of chant used in the yearly liturgical cycle, the church began organizing them in the 6th century. Gregory I, pope from 590 to 604, is usually given the credit for getting the effort started. While some sources suggest that he composed many of the melodies, there is little to authenticate this. Nevertheless, this music is often called "Gregorian Chant" in his honor.

Also known as “plainchant” it has a very austere beauty. From what modern musicologists can decipher, it was sung by male voices (women were not allowed to sing in church at that time), moves very slowly, has little repeating formal structure, and is not performed with any type of repeating rhythm. It is sung very freely with no harmony.

The sound of the music may, in part, be related to the acoustical environments of the cathedrals of the time. With smooth stone walls and floors and high ceilings, reverberation time is several seconds. Music would be sung from the front of the church.
Fast moving music tends to become muddy and dissonant—music with different parts and harmony lines is even more difficult to perform cleanly. Certain scales and intervals (different from the ones we use now) work better than others.

The scales used in the singing in church were called “modes”. Incorrectly believing that they had reconstructed Classical Greek music, the Medievals gave them the Greek names Ionian, Dorian, Phyrrigian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Locrian.

Sacred music of the Middle Ages centers around two primary areas--the Mass and the Office. Virtually all sacred music at that time was sung in Latin.

The most important musical event in the Roman Catholic Liturgy was the Mass with the consecration of the wine and host as its focal point.

The parts of the Mass fall into two categories known as the Proper and the Ordinary. Even though they are generally said in the language of the congregation (unlike the universal Latin of the Middle Ages) Modern Roman Catholic services have a strong structural similarity to their Medieval counterparts.

The Proper of the Mass is the part that changes from day to day, as do the readings geared for specific occasions and feast days.

The Ordinary of the Mass is the text that remains consistent throughout the church year. The five parts of the Ordinary are the ones most commonly set to music in later eras, with many of the settings being secular concert settings.
Below is a list of the parts of the Mass, still used in the Roman Catholic Church today. The parts of the Ordinary are in **bold** typeface.

- **Introit**
- **Kyrie**
- **Gloria**
- **Collects**
- **Epistle**
- **Gradual**
- **Alleluia (or Tract in certain seasons)**
- **Gospel**
- **Credo**
- **Offertory**
- **Preface**
- **Sanctus/Benedictus**
- **Canon**
- **Lord's Prayer**
- **Agnus Dei**
- **Communion**
- **Post--Communion prayers**
- **Ite Missa Est**

In addition to the regular Mass, a Requiem Mass was a common liturgy. Meaning "rest", the Requiem Mass was the "Mass for the Dead", used at funerals. While our current era views the role of the funeral Mass to comfort the living, its Medieval counterpoint pulled no punches—part of its text graphically depicted the terrors of eternal condemnation for the unfaithful.

Parts of the Requiem Mass have also been useful to modern composers in secular concert settings.

Another part of the liturgy that was set to music was known as the *Hours of the Divine Office*. Monks were expected to sing, pray, and read scripture during set times of their daily cycle. The eight times began with *Matins* (in the middle of the night), *Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers*, and *Compline* (at dusk).

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**THE MUSIC**

The earliest settings of Medieval music were strictly monophonic—only one musical line. They were generally written on large manuscript pages (large enough to allow a number of singers to read from the same page) usually made from vellum. They were copied individually by hand (music printing had to wait until nearly 1500) and
represented great hardships on the part of the poor monk assigned to do the copying\textsuperscript{vi}.

The vast majority of Medieval music, both sacred and secular, was written anonymously. Living in an era where digital rights are fought over furiously and complex legislation is written to jealously guard intellectual property (sometimes even to the point where an artist is no longer permitted to perform his own music), this is probably hard to fathom.

Musicians in the Middle Ages (and for many centuries afterward) were a servant class. With very rare exceptions, they were not musical personalities, but a small part of a very powerful church. It was a high form of praise and worship to offer one's talents to God. There was no market to sell music (because few could read it, let alone afford to buy it), there was no form of publishing (which would naturally have to wait until music could be reproduced easily), and to top it off, creative artists did not compose for posterity\textsuperscript{vii}.

Up until around the year 1000 C.E., the dominant religious music is probably very similar to modern recordings of plainchant.

However, after 1000, something very unusual and unique began to happen.

For the first time in history—not just Western history, but in known human history—music began to take on what is fundamentally an extra dimension.

Something called \textit{polyphony} began to develop. Polyphony is a texture where there are independent musical lines that weave in and out against each other.

Certainly one of the factors that enabled this was the development of a stable and standardized notation system. This system gradually evolved to meet the needs of composers chomping at the bit to bring new ideas to music (and continues to evolve today)\textsuperscript{viii}.

As certain factors began changing, a few composers moved out of the shadows of anonymity. Early composers of sacred polyphony include Leonin and Perotin (both worked at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris) and Guilliame de Machaut (from Rheims) who is the first truly important Western composer.

The first polyphony was called \textit{organum}, named after an effect created with different organ sounds. The lines moved in simple parallel for a good part of the time, but nevertheless, the barrier was broken and true polyphony eventually developed.

As noted a few paragraphs earlier, polyphony is similar to adding a third dimension in visual art. When we look at a picture, we are seeing two dimensions; width and height. A painter is pretty well stuck with that limitation. If you look at early paintings, the
depiction of the third dimension—depth—is very clumsily handled. In early art, objects at a distance are simply drawn smaller in the same basic plane as the figures in the foreground.

At some point, visual artists began handling this quite differently. By the incorporation of a vanishing point, artists were able to more accurately portray a sense of objects fading off into the background (along with the use of simulated haze and other lighting effects)\textsuperscript{ix}.

What makes this fascinating is that in all of recorded history, these two innovations—polyphony and perspective—happened roughly at the same time (ca 1000 for the music, ca 1400 for visual art) and in the same locale (Europe/Italy).

This raises an interesting question: did something happen that caused Medieval man to learn to see and hear things differently? In the first part of this text, we describe music and art as being the product of a complex equation of science, economy, philosophy, etc. Did one of the factors in that equation change that caused our predecessors to grasp an additional dimension in the world\textsuperscript{ix}?

Was this only a coincidence? We may never know for sure.
Monophonic texture still dominates much non-Western music today, at least those societies that haven't been “corrupted” by Western music.

The modern printing of Liber Usualis (which includes antique notation) is a massive collection of the entire liturgical cycle.

Because of a translation error of a manuscript by early philosopher Boethius.

Including composers such as J.S. Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Howells, Stravinsky, Leonard Bernstein, and many others.

Even though many of these modern settings were never meant to be performed as part of a church service, that is not to imply that they were taken lightly by the composers. Very sincere—and powerful—settings by Mozart, Verdi, Berlioz, Faure, and others are important parts of modern concert repertoire. Benjamin Britten's War Requiem combines the traditional Requiem text with poetry written by Wilfred Owen, a soldier who died in World War I.

After the daunting work of copying a book, one apparently frustrated copyist included the following: “Whoever steals this book let him die the death; let be him be frizzled in a pan; may the falling sickness rage within him; may he be broken on the wheel and be hanged.”

Beethoven in the early 1800s may have been the first major composer to even bring up the concept of his music being played by future generations.

Guido, a Benedictine Monk from Arezzo, Italy (now usually known as Guido D'Arezzo) devised a version of the staff that is the precursor of today's staff. Some of his practices also contributed to "sight-singing"--the reading of music at sight. Using the plainsong hymn Ut Queant Laxis, Guido created a system for teaching pitches by assigning the Latin syllables Ut (Do), Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La that we still use today.

The depiction of true depth from a flat surface is fairly easy to accomplish with relatively inexpensive stereo photographic equipment—within certain limitations, it can actually be done with any camera.

There have been some interesting discussions about other perceptions throughout history—one of them being that certain colors were not able to be perceived before a particular point in time. Evidence supporting this is cited in the lack of descriptions of certain colors (such as a blue sky) throughout most of history. Psychologists have long noted that Eskimos have eight or so words in their language for the various conditions of snow. Does that mean that the rest of us are not aware of different “snows”, or is it that it’s not important enough in our lives to require them? Do “I love ice cream”, “I love my cat”, “I love my children”, “I love my wife” mean the same kind of love? Does it make a difference to understand that they are not the same?