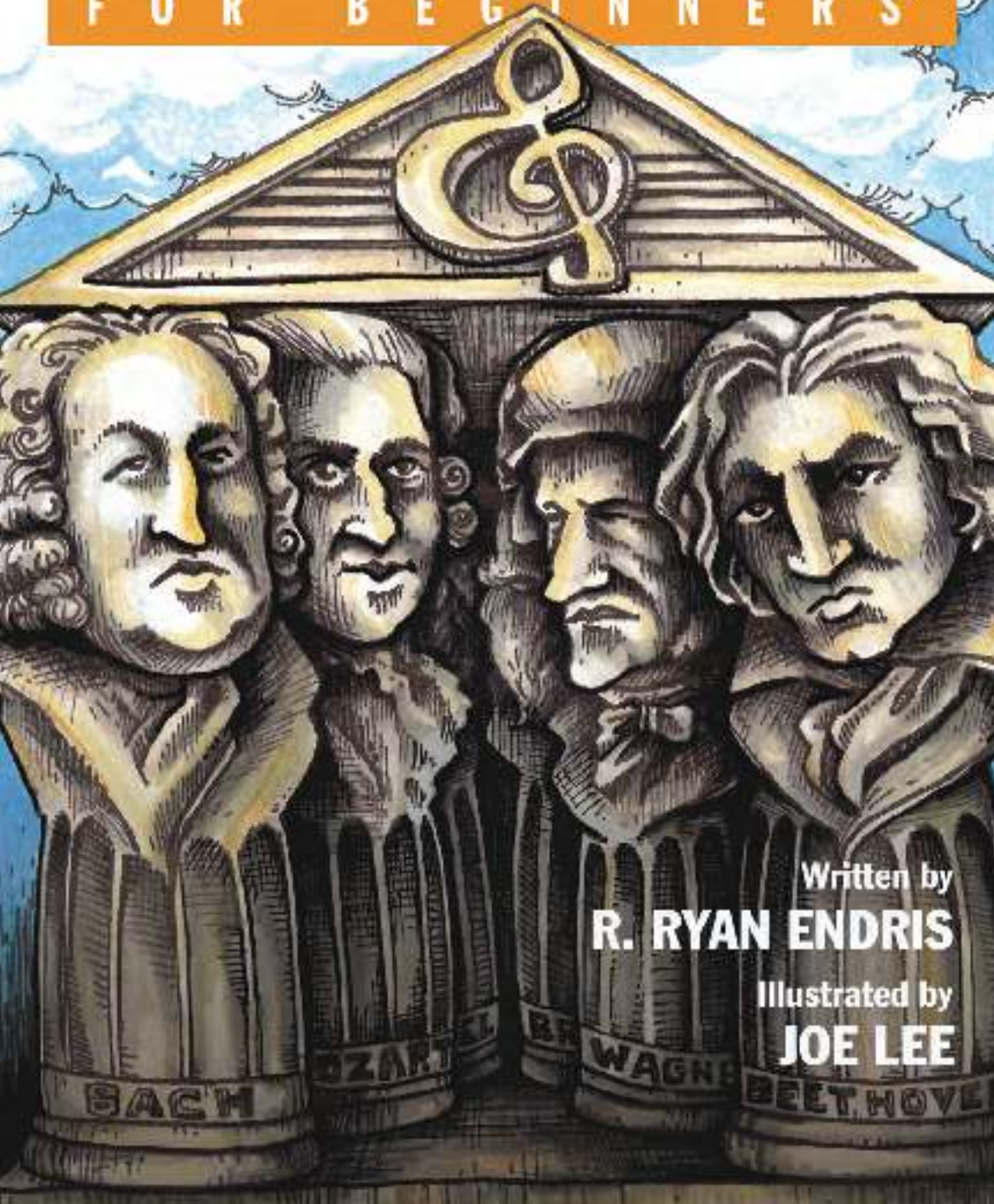


THE HISTORY OF CLASSICAL MUSIC

FOR BEGINNERS



Written by
R. RYAN ENDRIS

Illustrated by
JOE LEE

**THE HISTORY OF
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FOR BEGINNERS®**

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Preface

The History of Classical Music For Beginners was the brain-child of illustrator Joe Lee and me. My dear friend Joe and I met while I was studying and working in Bloomington, Ind. Before I moved to New York to teach on the music faculty at Colgate University, we began talking about a niche that needed filling. Joe has written and illustrated many books in the For Beginners series, and we both felt that the series needed a book about the history of the music we commonly call “classical music.” I am extremely grateful to Joe for agreeing to team up with me in the making of this book.

The History of Classical Music For Beginners provides the necessary scholarly muscle to entice and inform the reader, yet it does not require an understanding of music theory or force the reader to wade through hundreds of pages of jargon and details. Anyone can pick up this book and instantly start learning about—and understanding—classical music. Music theory, the study of *how* music is written and the fundamental elements of music, is excluded from the discussion of music to the greatest extent possible, so that one can read and understand without prior

musical knowledge. The use of jargon and terminology has been kept to a minimum; in instances where it is necessary, a straightforward explanation is provided both in the prose and in the glossary. The words are both italicized and bolded the first time they are presented to draw the reader's attention to them.

Covering fifteen hundred years of music history is no easy task. Doing so in the span of a couple hundred pages is even more difficult, necessitating the exclusion of some musical styles and composers. You will notice that even some notable composers (like Tchaikovsky) are absent from this book. The aim of this book is to cover those musical styles and composers who exerted the *greatest* influence in the history of classical music to give the reader the greatest overall understanding of classical music possible. For example, opera is a genre of classical music that has an entire history of its own, and thus is discussed in only one chapter as part of a larger discussion of stylistic developments. Those wanting to know more about opera in music history should read *The History of Opera For Beginners* by Ron David. In fact, I encourage you to read and discover more about any composer, music, or topic that especially piques your interest while reading this book!

— **R. Ryan Endris**
Hamilton, New York
March 2014



MUSIC OF THE

ANCIENT AND

MEDIEVAL WORLDS

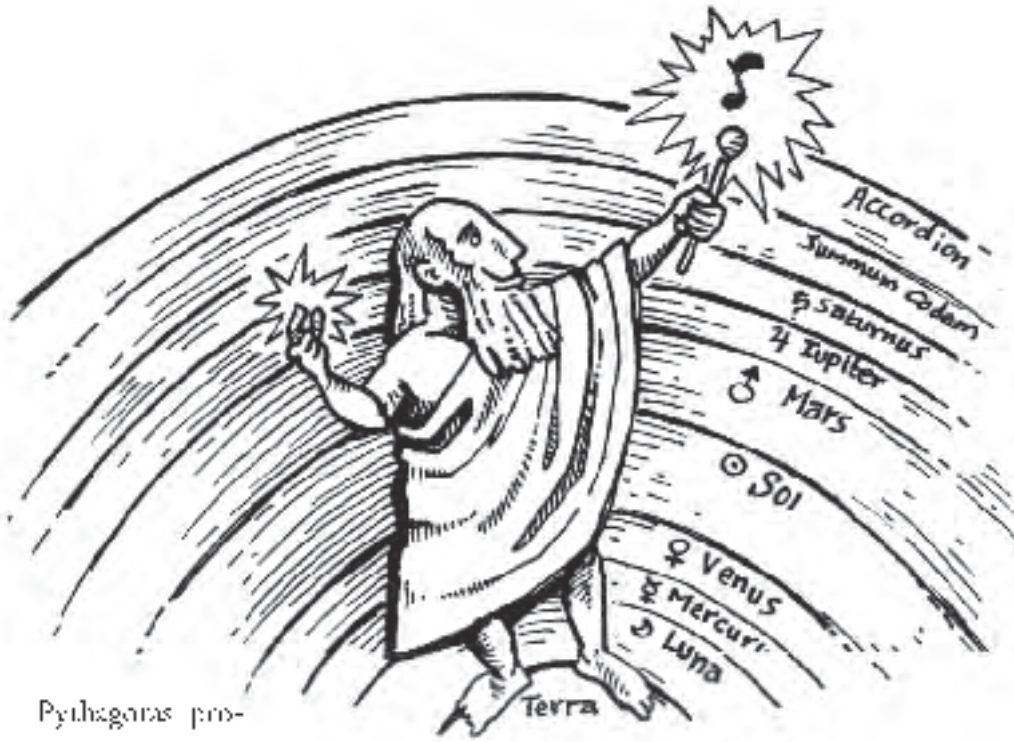




Chapter 1

A N C I E N T M U S I C A N D P H I L O S O P H Y

*M*any people think of the music of Palestrina, Bach, and Mozart as "old music," but the earliest known instruments date to before 36,000 B.C.E.! Today, society considers music as part of the arts, but the ancient Greeks viewed it as part of the sciences. In fact, music was considered as important of a subject as astronomy, rhetoric, and math, and it was often taught alongside those other subjects. The music of ancient Greece (ca. 500 B.C.E.) focused on the role of numbers and mathematics in music. For example, Pythagoras used simple mathematical ratios to define consonances in music of the perfect fourth (4:3), perfect fifth (3:2), and perfect octave (2:1), which are still considered and labeled perfect sonorities to this day. He discovered that when a string is divided into segments with ratios of those lengths, those are the sonorities that sound.



Pythagoras proposed the theory of *musica universalis*, or “music of the spheres,” the theory that the planets, sun, and moon all produce a sound or hum based on their orbits. The sounds produced by the celestial bodies, while inaudible and imperceptible to humans, indeed had an effect on the quality of life of the inhabitants of the earth. In his book *The Republic*, Plato also proposed that the study of music and astronomy were linked by mathematics and numerical proportions. Because numbers inherently governed musical rhythms and sound, music was reflective of the unification of parts in an orderly whole. In this way, music was a prime example of an order that could be sought in other areas, such as philosophy or the structure of societies.

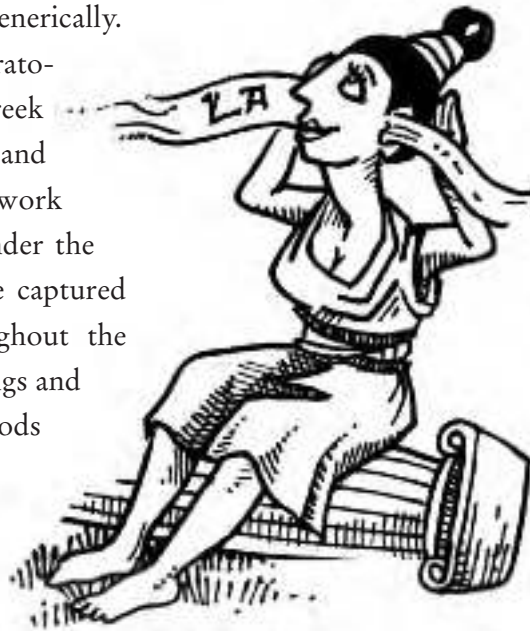
Early Greek writers believed that music could affect one’s ethos, or way of being and behaving. Aristotle wrote of this in his *Politics*: music of a particular emotion or feeling was capable of evoking that same emotion or feeling in the listener. This idea is rooted in the Pythagorean view of music as a system of pitch and rhythm associated with the same

mathematical laws that governed the visible and invisible world. They believed that the human soul was comprised of parts kept in harmony by these orderly systems, and thus music had the potential of infiltrating the human soul. Both Plato and Aristotle held the idea that music was on equal footing with gymnastics in one's education. Gymnastics were intended to provide discipline for the body, while music was to provide discipline for the mind.



Even though this might sound silly to one at first, this idea of the ethos of music has had staying power. Even into the Baroque period, composers still prescribed to the *doctrine of affections*, a belief that emotions such as sadness, joy, anger, love, wonder, and excitement were states of being in the soul, and each one was caused by spirits, or “humors,” in the body. Music at this time did not seek to express the composer’s personal feelings, but rather sought to portray affections generically.

George Friedrich Handel’s oratorio captures both the Ancient Greek and contemporary views on music and affections. The choral-orchestral work describes a banquet held by Alexander the Great and his mistress Thaïs in the captured Persian city of Persepolis. Throughout the banquet, the musician Timotheus sings and plays his lyre, effecting various moods and behavior in Alexander and his





guests. In the end, Timotheus finally incites Alexander to burn the city to the ground in retribution for the Greek soldiers who died in battle. (You'll learn more about Handel and oratorio in Chapter 15).

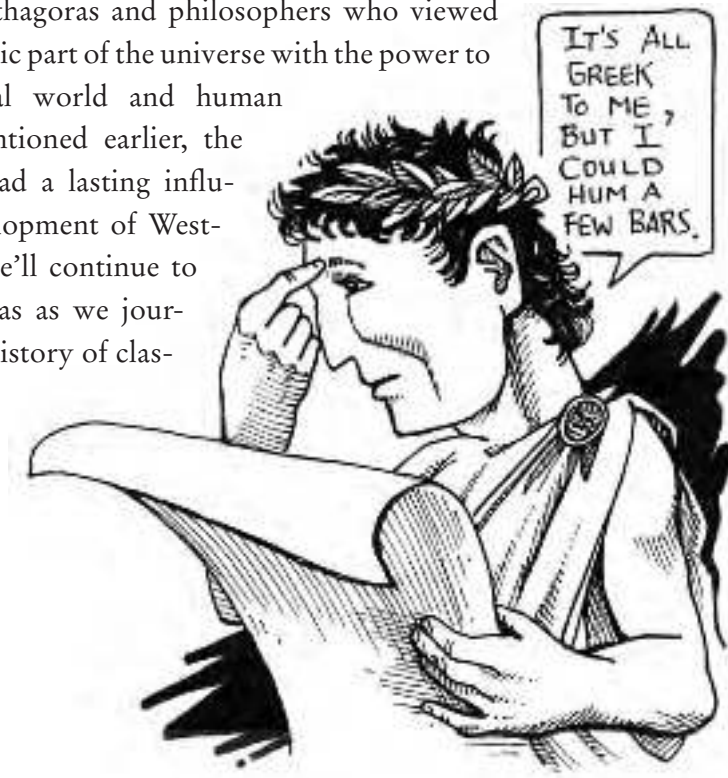
Now back to the ancient Greeks! Very little ancient Greek music actually survives; only a handful of pieces or fragments of music from ancient Greece exist today, and those are primarily dated from 500 B.C.E. to 400 C.E. One reason for this is that there simply did not exist a true method for notating music; rather, musicians relied on their knowledge of musical conventions to perform and relay music. Those scraps of music that we do know of are simply letters and signs placed above the text, looking nothing like what

we view today as musical notation. Two important pieces of ancient Greek music that do remain are the Seikilos Epitaph (music and text inscribed in a stone slab) and a choral ode called *Orestes* by the Euripides. Euripides' *Orestes*, as you might imagine, is the typical Greek tragedy, in which the women of Argos seek the mercy of the Gods for Orestes, who has killed his mother for committing adultery against his father, Agamemnon.

If it seems that we know very little about music in ancient Greece, then we know practically nothing about the music of ancient Rome. Primary sources include images of instruments and written documents

about music, but there are no actual pieces of music that survive from the period of ancient Rome. We do know that the Romans adopted much of their musical culture from the ancient Greeks. Music played a large role in public ceremonies, and in the first and second centuries C.E., many aspects of Greek art and culture made their way over to Rome. Many of the emperors were patrons of music, including Nero, who fancied himself a musician and even competed in musical contests! Sadly, there does not seem to be any evidence of Roman music having any lasting effect on the development of Western Music.

In spite of how little music the ancient world left behind for us, we do know a number of important facts about that music. We know that the music focused primarily on melody, with a particular emphasis on the connection to rhythm and text. We know that there was no organized system of notating music, and thus musicians memorized music or relied on the knowledge of conventions. And we know that music was intimately connected with the sciences, resulting in an acoustical theory by Pythagoras and philosophers who viewed music as an intrinsic part of the universe with the power to affect the natural world and human behavior. As mentioned earlier, the ancient Greeks had a lasting influence on the development of Western music, and we'll continue to explore those ideas as we journey through the history of classical music.





Chapter 2

MUSIC IN THE EARLY CHURCH

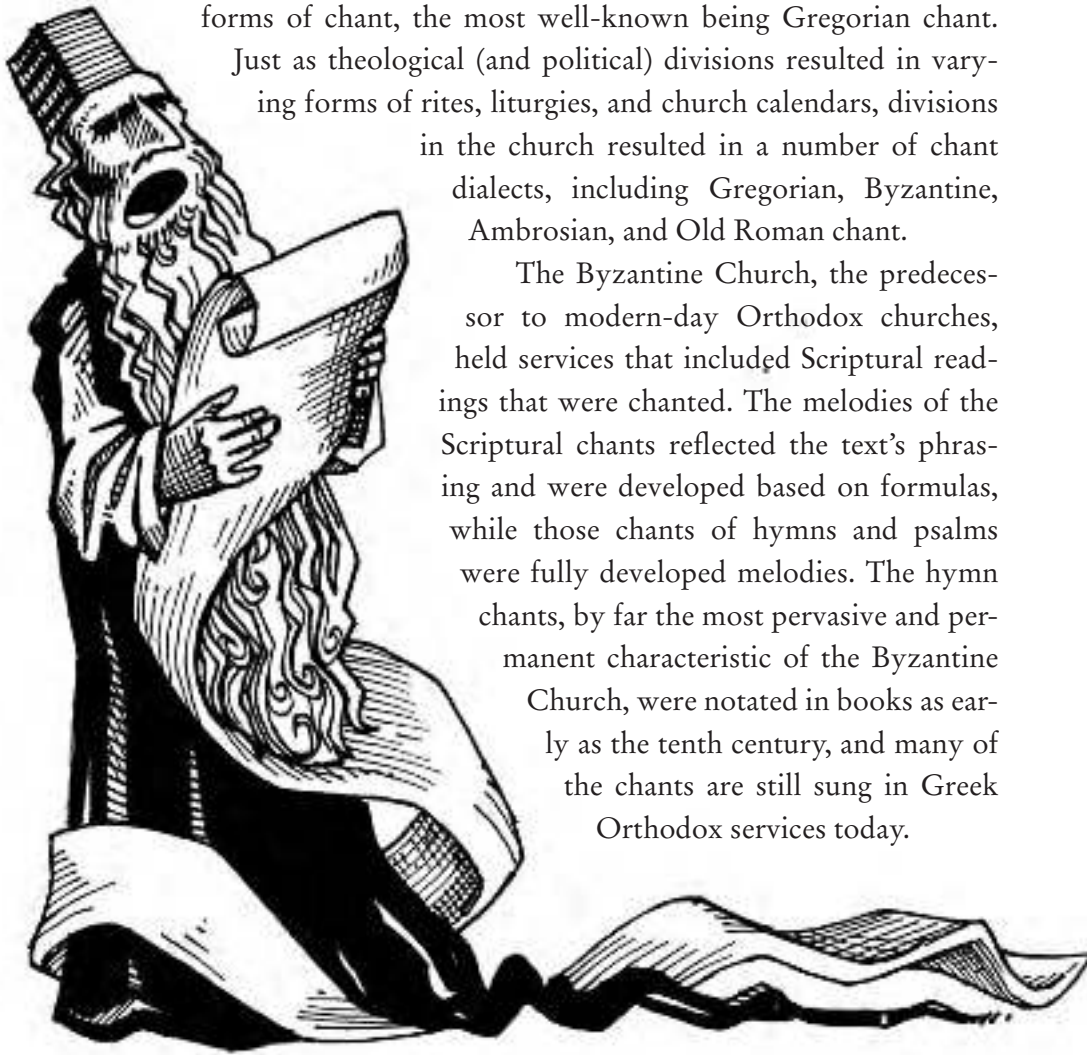
*T*he history of the Christian church, the principal social institution in the Middle Ages, is inextricably linked with the history of music in medieval Europe. Many of the characteristics of Western art music developed out of the needs of the church, from the development of musical notation to the advent of polyphony. With the church as a major player in the development of Western music in the Middle Ages, it comes as no surprise that church music from that era was the best preserved for posterity.

Given that Christianity began as an offshoot of Judaism, many of the Christian musical traditions came from the Jewish musical traditions. One prime example of this is the singing of psalms, sacred songs or hymns, found in the Hebrew Book of Psalms. Likewise, as *cantillation* (chanting of sacred texts) was and is commonplace in the Jewish

synagogue, it also found a home in Christianity through various forms of chant, the most well-known being Gregorian chant.

Just as theological (and political) divisions resulted in varying forms of rites, liturgies, and church calendars, divisions in the church resulted in a number of chant dialects, including Gregorian, Byzantine, Ambrosian, and Old Roman chant.

The Byzantine Church, the predecessor to modern-day Orthodox churches, held services that included Scriptural readings that were chanted. The melodies of the Scriptural chants reflected the text's phrasing and were developed based on formulas, while those chants of hymns and psalms were fully developed melodies. The hymn chants, by far the most pervasive and permanent characteristic of the Byzantine Church, were notated in books as early as the tenth century, and many of the chants are still sung in Greek Orthodox services today.



In the Western Church, the most important religious and musical center outside of Rome was the city of Milan. The songs and chants that developed in this northern Italian city became known as Ambrosian chant, named after St. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan between the years 374 and 397. Although there have been movements to suppress them, Ambrosian liturgy and chant still survive in Milan to this day, and they do share common characteristics with those of Rome.

Gregorian chant is the codified liturgy and musical repertory that developed under the Roman leadership with assistance from Frankish kings. The papal choir called the Schola Cantorum (School of Singers) most likely had an influence in the standardization of the chants in the late seventh century, as this choir performed whenever the pope presided in observances. The Frankish kingdom also helped solidify these chant melodies through an order that the Roman liturgy and music be performed throughout that kingdom. The Franks, of course, contributed to this body of liturgical music through their own additions and alterations.

This Frankish-Roman collaboration led to the standardization of chant that is attributed to Pope Gregory I (r. 590-604), who was revered as the founder of the Western church. As noted previously, the

Schola Cantorum most likely cemented Gregorian chant's place in music history. Unfortunately for Pope Gregory I, he is most likely receiving undeserved credit, even though legend tells that the chants were revealed to him by the Holy Spirit (taking the form of a dove), and he then dictated and preserved the chants. Charlemagne and his successors spread Gregorian chant throughout their lands, and thus they unified the church (for the most part) through a common music.

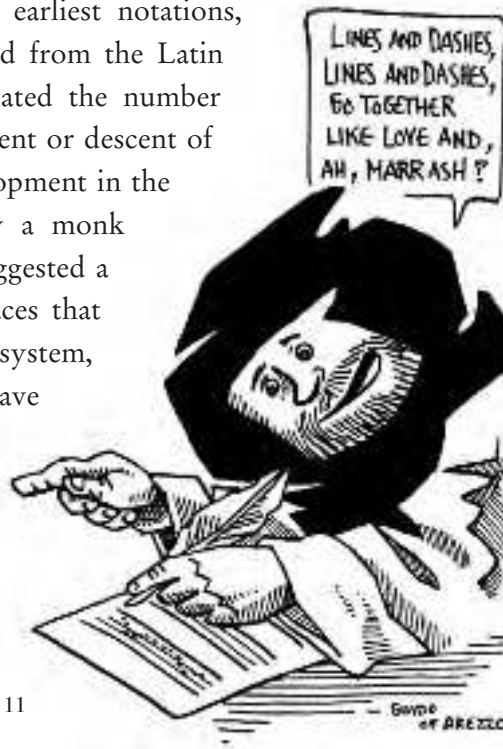
One final repertory of chant that survived until the twelfth century is Old Roman Chant, which not surprisingly was the chant of the city of Rome. Although this dialect of chant essentially drew upon the same liturgies and texts as Gregorian chant, the Old Roman



chants were often more ornate. Given their similarities, it is truly impossible to know with any certainty whether Gregorian chant begot Old Roman chant or vice-versa.

Aside from the body of liturgical musical literature that survives from the Middle Ages, probably the single most important development in musical history from this period was the invention of musical notation. Until this time, there was no unified approach to the written transmission of music; while the texts of eighth-century Roman liturgy were recorded on paper, the melodies that accompanied them were passed down through oral transmission. How these melodies were preserved and transmitted is greatly debated and somewhat controversial. While frequently sung melodies could likely have been passed down verbatim from generation to generation, it is unlikely that this was the case for the hundreds of chants that were sung infrequently. It is much more likely that variations appeared with each transmission and that the chants were improvised within established conventions.

As long as chant melodies survived only in the memories of those who sung and heard them, there undoubtedly would be changes or corruptions to the original tunes. The solution to this was notation, a means for writing down the music. In the earliest notations, small signs called *neumes* (derived from the Latin *neuma*, meaning “gesture”) indicated the number of pitches per syllable and the ascent or descent of the melody. One important development in the eleventh-century was devised by a monk named Guido of Arezzo, who suggested a series of horizontal lines and spaces that would indicate given pitches. This system, now known as staff notation, gave rise to today’s modern music notation. The only problem with this system is that it only could indicate pitch level, not rhythmic duration.



Jumping ahead about 800 years, the Benedictine monks of the Abbey of Solesmes France prepared modern editions of the chants, which was then proclaimed the official Vatican edition by Pope Pius X in 1903. While the Solesmes editions included dots and dashes to indicate lengthened note durations, the problem of notating rhythmic durations was not fully solved. Chant notation still assumed relatively equal rhythmic durations for each of the pitches (which were organized into groups of two and three), which had been the standard for the past 800 years.

Each of the chants was based on one of eight church modes, scales that indicated important features of the chant. The modes informed the chanter of the final (the most important note in the chant and usually the last note in the melody), the range of the chant, and the reciting tone (the second most important note in a mode, often emphasized in the chant and used for reciting text in a psalm). So how would one go about learning how to sing these chants?

Guido of Arezzo, in his infinite wisdom, devised a set of syllables that corresponded to the series of steps and half-steps in the church modes and used the syllables of the first six phrases of the hymn *Ut queant laxis: ut, re, mi, fa, sol, and la*. Sound familiar?

It's the basis of today's modern solfege system, which millions have heard in "Do-Re-Mi" in the musical *The Sound of Music*. Guido's followers didn't stop there; they created a pedagogical aid called the "Guidonian Hand," to help singers learn to sing the intervals. The teacher would point to various joints of the open left hand, with a joint assigned to each of the twenty notes of the system.

From the codification of liturgical chants, to the development of a method for transcribing melodies, to the development of a solmization system for singing those melodies, the Middle Ages yielded a wealth of developments in music that have strongly influenced the development of music and notation in Western art music.





Chapter 3

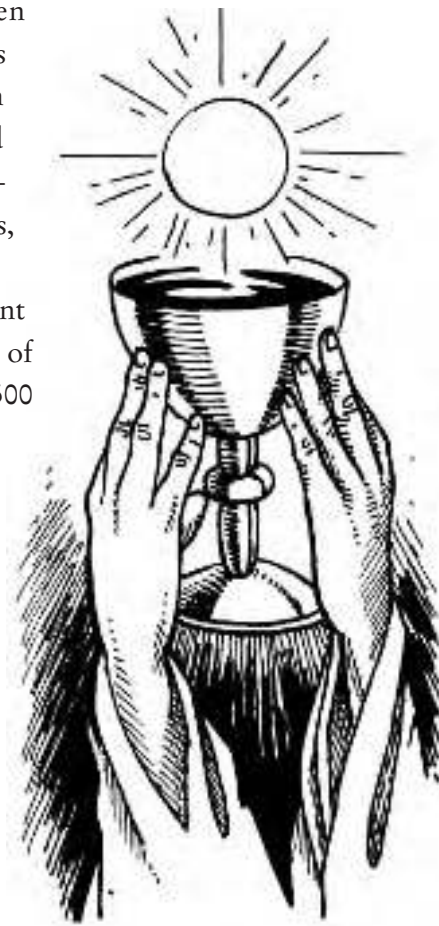
T H E R O M A N L I T U R G Y

Just as the church was the primary vehicle for the composition of music throughout history, the mass was the single most important part of the Roman Liturgy for a number of reasons. For the Roman church, the Mass serves as the most important religious service, in the Middle Ages and the present day. The Mass is divided into two main parts or *liturgies*: The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. During the Liturgy of the Word, scriptures from the Old Testament, New Testament, and Gospels are read and pondered. The Liturgy of the Eucharist is a reenactment of the Last Supper of Jesus, with the priest assuming the role of Jesus by consecrating the bread and wine and transforming them into the body and blood of

Jesus. The consecrated elements are then offered to the faithful as communion. The Mass is celebrated every Sunday in all churches, in addition to special feast days (Christmas and Easter are the two most important); in monasteries, abbeys, convents, and major cathedrals, the Mass is celebrated daily.

Understanding the Mass¹ itself is important to those studying music, as it will remain one of the principle genres of music for the next 1,500 years! The texts of the Mass form the basis of many musical compositions, compositions that served a liturgical function and those that simply used the text as a genre without any liturgical function. The texts of the Mass are divided into two main parts as well, both parts appearing in both the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The first main text, the Mass Ordinary, refers to those parts of the Mass that were the same at every celebration: *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, and *Agnus Dei*. The second main text, the Mass Proper, includes all texts that changed according to the church calendar (and thus were different at every single Mass): *Introit*, *Epistle*, *Gradual*, *Alleluia*, *Sequence*, *Offertory*, and *Communion*.

For those studying sacred music, it is most important to understand the function of the parts of the Mass Ordinary, the staples of each Mass. The *Kyrie* (which actually is Greek, not Latin!) is a threefold invocation at the beginning of the Mass, stating, “Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.” You will notice that groups of three are incredibly common in sacred music, as it is usually a reference to the

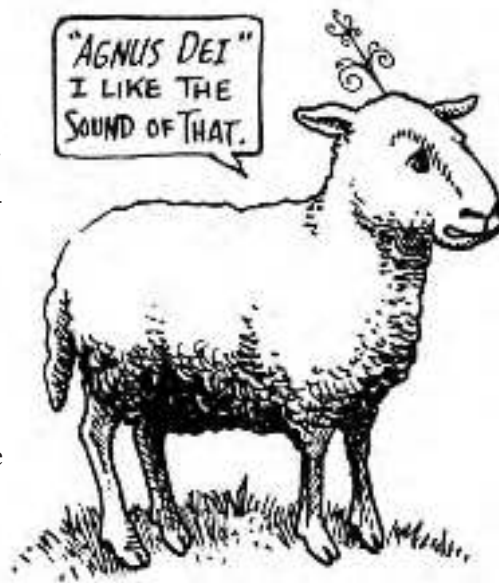


¹ When referring to the actual religious service, Mass is always capitalized; when referring to the set of texts used as a genre of musical composition, mass is not capitalized.



threefold existence of God (the Holy Trinity) as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The *Gloria*, a text of praise that again asks for mercy, invokes the triune presence of God. The *Gloria* is never sung during the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, nor in Masses that take place outside of Sundays and feast days.

The *Credo* (Latin for *creed*) is a statement of faith and belief in the church doctrine. At the center of the creed is a recounting of Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection. The creed most commonly set to music is the Nicene Creed, although it is not uncommon in a Mass to hear the Apostles' Creed. Both are very similar to each other. In the Sanctus, the faithful join the angelic host in proclaiming "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Hosts!" The *Agnus Dei* (Lamb of God), like the *Kyrie*, is threefold in its structure: "Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, have mercy on us (2 times); Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, grant us peace."



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