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## Content Guide

# The Medieval Period, Part 2: Polyphonic Traditions

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# Content Guide

## The Medieval Period, Part 2: Polyphonic Traditions

[Karen M. Cook](#)

### Assigned Readings

#### Core Survey

- [James Maiello, “Medieval Music”](#)
  - Focus on the following sections:
    - Early Polyphony and the Birth of Harmony
    - Intersections of Sacred and Secular (revisited)
    - Intertextuality (revisited)

#### Historical and Analytical Perspectives

- [Fiona McAlpine, “Genres and Forms in the Baroque Era”](#)
  - Focus on the following sections:
    - Isorhythm
    - Other Plainchant Forms: Sacred Forms (revisited)
    - The *Formes fixes* of the French Fourteenth Century: Rondeau, Ballade
    - The Italian Trecento
- [Fiona McAlpine, “Music Theory in the Middle Ages”](#)
  - Focus on the following sections:
    - Early Polyphony
    - Notre Dame Organum
    - The Motet
    - Ars Nova
    - Ars Subtilior
- [Emily Laurance, etc., “Commentary on Alleluia: Justus ut palma, from \*Ad organum faciendum\*”](#)
- [Emily Laurance, etc., “Commentary on Motets on Tenor ‘Dominus’ “](#)
- [Emily Laurance, etc., “Commentary on \*Messe de Notre Dame: Kyrie\*, by Guillaume de Machaut”](#)
- [Emily Laurance, etc., “Commentary on \*Non avrà ma’ pietà\*, by Jacopo da Bologna”](#)

#### Composer Biographies

- [Alice V. Clark, “Guillaume de Machaut”](#)
- [Lucia Marchi, “Francesco Landini”](#)

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## Supplementary Readings

**Supplementary Reading 1:**  
**Excerpt from *De mensuris et discantu***  
**Anonymous IV**  
**Reproduced from Piero Weiss & Richard Taruskin,**  
***Music in the Western World: A History in Documents***  
**(Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 1984)**

Master Leoninus was generally known as the best composer of organum, who made the great book (Magnus Liber) of organa for Mass and Office for the enhancement of the Divine Service. This book was in use until the time of the great Perotinus, who shortened it and substituted a great many better *clausulae*, because he was the best composer of discant and better than Leoninus. Moreover, this same Master Perotinus wrote excellent compositions for four voices, such as *Viderunt* [*omnes*, the Gradual for the third Mass of Christmas Day] and *Sederunt* [*principes*, the Gradual of the Feast of St. Stephen, Martyr], replete with artful musical turns and figures, as well as a considerable number of very famous pieces for three voices, such as the Alleluias *Posui adiutorium*, *Nativitas*, etc. Besides, he also composed conductus, such as *Dum sigillum summi patris*, and monophonic conductus, e.g. *Beata viscera*, and lots more. The book, or rather books, of Master Perotinus have remained in use in the choir of the Church of Our Blessed Virgin in Paris [i.e., Notre Dame] until the present day.

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**Supplementary Reading 2:**  
**Excerpts from *De musica***  
**Johannes de Grocheio**  
**Reproduced from Piero Weiss & Richard Taruskin,**  
***Music in the Western World: A History in Documents***  
**(Belmont, CA: Schirmer, 1984)**

The music which men in Paris use can, so it seems, be broken down into three broad categories. We say that one category is that of simple [i.e., monophonic] music, which they call vulgar [i.e., vernacular] music. Another is that of compound [i.e., polyphonic] music, which they call measured music ... The third type is called ecclesiastic and is designated for praising the Creator.

*Vulgar*: Musical forms contained under the first category, which we have named vulgar music, are of two types: either they are performed by the human voice or by artificial instruments. Those which are performed by the human voice are of two types. We call these either a *cantus* or a *cantilena*.

A *cantus* is called *chanson de geste* if it relates the deeds of heroes and the achievements of our ancient fathers, such as the life and martyrdom of various saints, the battles and difficulties which men of old underwent for their faith and belief, the life of the Blessed Stephen, and the history of Charlemagne. This kind of song ought to be provided for old men, working citizens, and for average people when they rest from their accustomed labor, so that, having heard the miseries and calamities of others, they may more easily bear up under their own, and go about their own tasks more gladly.

A *cantus coronatus* is normally composed by kings and nobles and performed before kings and princes of the earth so that it may move their souls to audacity and bravery, to magnanimity and liberality, which lead all things to a good order. This kind of song is about delightful and serious subjects, such as friendship and charity.

A particular kind of *cantilena* is called *round* or *rotundellus* by many, for the reason that it turns back on itself in the manner of a circle and begins and ends the same way. We, however, call *round* or *rotundellus* only that whose parts do not have a different melody from the melody of their response or refrain. It is the custom in the West, for example in Normandy, for girls and young men to sing a *cantilena* of this type to enhance their festivals and great gatherings.

The method of composing all these types is normally the same. First, words are provided as raw material, afterwards a melody is adapted to the text in an appropriate way. Let us now turn to instrumental forms.

Instruments are divided by some people on the basis of how they generate artificial sound. They say that sound on instruments is made by the breath, as in trumpets, reed instruments, flutes, and organs; or by percussion, as in strings, drums, cymbals, and bells. Among these, stringed instruments occupy the chief place, i.e., the psaltery, harp, lute and fiddle. And here, of all the

instruments of the string family, so we feel, the fiddle occupies the main place, for a good performer on the fiddle uses normally every kind of *cantus* and *cantilena* and every musical form. Those, however, that are commonly performed before the wealthy in feasts and games, are, besides the *cantus coronatus* about which we have talked before, the *ductia* and *stantipes*.

A *ductia* is an untexted piece, measured with an appropriate percussive beat. I say *untexted* since, although it can be performed by the human voice and represented in notation, it cannot, however, be written in words, for it is lacking in word and text. But I say with an *appropriate percussive beat* because these beats measure it and the movement of the performer, and excite the soul of man to move ornately according to the art they call dancing. A *stantipes* is also an untexted piece of a complicated nature; it makes the soul of the performer and also the soul of the listener pay close attention and frequently turns the soul of the wealthy from depraved thinking.

The sections of *ductia* and *stantipes* are commonly called *puncta*. A *punctum* is a systematic joining together of two sections alike in their beginning, differing in their end, which are usually called *close* and *open*. To compose *ductia* and *stantipes* is to shape the sound through *puncta* and correct beats. Just as natural material is shaped by natural form, so the sound is shaped by *puncta* and by the artificial form given to it by the craftsman.

*Measured music*: Certain people, relying on experiment, discovered a kind of song in two voices dependent on both perfect and imperfect consonances. But others, relying on the three perfect consonances, have invented a song in three voices, regulated by a uniform measure, which they have called a *precisely measured song*; it is this type of song that present-day people in Paris use. We divide it into three broad categories according to the custom of people today, that is, *motets*, *organum* and cut-up song which they call *hocket*.

A *motet* is a song composed of many voices, having many words or a variety of syllables, everywhere sounding in harmony. Each line ought to have a text with the exception of the tenor, which in some has a text and in others not. This kind of song ought not to be propagated among the vulgar, since they do not understand its subtlety nor do they delight in hearing it, but it should be performed for the learned and those who seek after the subtleties of the arts. And it is normally performed at their feasts for their edification, just as the *cantilena* which is called *rotundellus* is performed at the feasts of the vulgar.

*Organum* is a song composed harmonically of many voices, with only one text. This kind of song is varied in two ways. There is one type which is based on a given [i.e., preexistent] melody, that is, an ecclesiastical one. This is sung in churches or holy places for the praise of God and reverence of His high place. And this kind of song is what is properly called *organum*. The other is based on a melody composed at the same time as the rest [i.e., not preexistent]. This is normally sung at parties and feasts given by the learned and the rich. And, taking its name from this, it is called by the appropriate name *conductus*.

*Hocket* is cut-up song, composed in two or more voices. This kind of song is pleasing to the hot-tempered and to young men because of its mobility and speed. Like seeks out like and is delighted by like.

Wishing to compose measured music, one first should arrange or compose the tenor and give to it mode and measure. The principal part ought to be fashioned first, since it is then used to fashion the others. I say *arrange* since in motets and in organum the tenor is taken from an old song and is previously composed, but is laid out by craftsmen in rhythmic patterns. The tenor having been composed or arranged, one ought to compose or arrange the *motetus* above it. Finally the *triplum* [whence our English *treble*] ought to be superimposed on these, to fill out the consonances.

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## Suggestions for Further Reading

Everist, Mark, and Thomas Forrest Kelly. *The Cambridge History of Medieval Music*.

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Worldcat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1057478006>

Fassler, Margot. *Music in the Medieval West*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014.

Worldcat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/909966089>

Heng, Geraldine. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. Cambridge, UK:

Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Worldcat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1110486620>

Klinck, Anne L., and Ann Marie Rasmussen. *Medieval Woman's Song: Cross-Cultural*

*Approaches*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002.

Worldcat: <http://www.worldcat.org/oclc/1013949103>

Global Middle Ages Project. [www.globalmiddleages.org](http://www.globalmiddleages.org)

## Summary List

### *Genres to understand*

- Mass
  - Ordinary
  - Propers
- Organum
  - Duplum, triplum, quadruplum
- Clausula
- Motet
- Conductus
- Lauda
- Carol
- Rota (round), rotundellus
- Estampie (stantipes), ductia
- *Formes fixes*
  - Rondeau
  - Virelai
  - Ballade
- Trecento song
  - Ballata
  - Madrigal
  - Caccia

### *Musical terms to understand*

- parallel, oblique, contrary motion
- florid, melismatic
- discant
- tenor
- duplum, triplum, quadruplum
- motetus
- rhythmic modes
- isorhythm
  - color
  - talea
- Ars Antiqua
- Ars Nova
- Ars Subtilior

### *Contextual Terms, Figures, and Events*

- *Musica enchiriadis, Scolica enchiriadis*
- Léonin & Pérotin
  - *Magnus liber organi*
- Philippe de Vitry
- Guillaume de Machaut
  - *Messe de Notre Dame*
- Francesco Landini
- Jacopo da Bologna
- Gherardello da Firenze
- Lorenzo da Firenze
- Baude Cordier
- Johannes Ciconia

*Main Concepts*

- The idea of the “Middle Ages” as a period of backwardness, violence, and religious dominance was created in the fourteenth century and perpetuated by later generations, especially those of the nineteenth-century Romantics. You should pay particular attention to the myriad social, intellectual, religious, and economic structures of the medieval period, and to how music works within them.

On that note, the European medieval period was much more diverse than most modern media portray; pay careful attention to the music, scholarship, and influence of Jews, Muslims, Arabs, and people of African descent, both within and outside of the dominant Christian traditions.

- The European medieval period is usually defined as having lasted for the thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and the fall of Constantinople in 1453. This is not only a gigantic length of time, but it is a length of time bounded by political, not musical, events. As such, what we call the medieval period is not nearly as musically unified as other later eras in music history, the dates of which have been constructed primarily according to musical developments and characteristics. Needless to say, there are too many genres, practices, composers, performers, and works to name here. This workbook lists some of the more common genres, and it gives under “Names and Works to Remember” just a few good examples of the vast literature that remains.
- You should understand that early polyphony has its roots in improvisation and existed, like monophonic music, long before it was ever written down.
- You should understand the fundamental importance of perfect consonances (unison, fourth, fifth, and octave) to all medieval polyphony.
- Be aware of the complex relationships between early kinds of sacred Christian polyphony and the plainchant on which it is based.
  - You should understand how the motet developed from the substitute clausula, which in turn was taken from organum, which itself was harmonized and embellished plainchant.
- You should understand the basic forms and topics of the major secular song genres, and pay attention to how these can and do occur in both monophonic and polyphonic song.
- Also pay attention to rhythmic and metrical (mensural or measured) developments from the twelfth to the early-fifteenth centuries; you should understand the basic characteristics of the rhythmic modes, the popularity of ternary rhythms, the later emphasis on binary rhythms as well, and the complex rhythmic and metrical styles popular in the late fourteenth century.

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## Scores and Recordings

### *Examples of Organum*

- *Kyrie cunctipotens genitor*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- *Alleluia, justus ut palma*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- *Musica enchiriadis examples*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Léonin, *Viderunt omnes*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Perotin, *Viderunt omnes*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)

### *Clausulae and Motets on "Dominus"*

- Clausula #26: *Dominus*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Motet: *Factum est salutare/Dominus*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Motet: *Super te/Sed fulsit/Primus tenor/Dominus*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)

### *Instrumental Music*

- Anonymous, Estampie from the Robertsbridge Codex
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)

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*Vocal Music*

- Albertus Parisiensis (?), *Congraudeant catholici*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Anonymous, *Edi beo thu, hevene quene*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Anonymous, *Alleluia, a newë work*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Anonymous, *Sumer is icumen in (Perspice Christicola)*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Adam de la Halle, *De ma dame vient/Dieus, comment porroie/Omnes*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Philippe de Vitry, *Garrit gallus/In nova fert/Neuma*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Philippe de Vitry, *In arboris/Tuba sacre/Virgo sum*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Guillaume de Machaut, *Messe de Nostre Dame, Kyrie*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Guillaume de Machaut, *Ma fin est mon commencement*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Guillaume de Machaut, *Rose, liz*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Guillaume de Machaut, *Je puis trop bien*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Francesco Landini, *Ecco la primavera*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Francesco Landini, *Non avr  ma' piet *
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Lorenzo da Firenze, *A poste messe*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Jacopo da Bologna, *Non al suo amante*

- [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Baude Cordier, *Belle, bonne, sage*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Baude Cordier, *Tout par compas*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)
- Johannes Ciconia, *Una panthera*
  - [Score](#)
  - [Recording](#)

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## Exercises ([click here for key](#))

1. Examine the *Viderunt omnes* chant from the Mass for Christmas Day. Locate the melisma on the word “Dominus” and familiarize yourself with it.
  - a. Now find that same word within Léonin’s two-voice setting of *Viderunt omnes*. How does he set the original chant melisma? How does he treat the texture and rhythm of this section as compared to the surrounding polyphonic material?
  - b. Examine the clausula on “Dominus.” How does this short work compare and contrast to Léonin’s treatment of this word?
  - c. Articulate the relationship between the clausula on “Dominus” and the motet *Factum est salutare/Dominus*.
  - d. How does the two-voice motet *Factum est salutare/Dominus* relate to the four-voice motet *Super te/Sed fulsit/Primus tenor/Dominus*?
  - e. In each of these polyphonic settings, what roles are given to the perfect consonances (unison, fourth, fifth, and octave)?
2. Examine the Kyrie of Guillaume de Machaut’s *Messe de Notre Dame*. As with the works in the previous question, this Mass movement is also based on a pre-existing chant, this time the Kyrie from the Mass for Christmas Day. Looking at the tenor voice in the first Kyrie of the Mass, how much of the original chant does Machaut use? How is the chant rhythmicized here, and to which facet of isorhythm does that pertain?
3. Explain the relationships between the three voices in Lorenzo da Firenze’s *A poste messe*. How does this fit or not fit the definition of a caccia?
4. Looking at the approaches to rhythm and meter in the two Baude Cordier works, note some of the rhythmic complexities that might have been considered to be “more subtle.” Examining the two works in [facsimile](#), make note of any other features that you feel might also be considered “subtle.”

## Key to Exercises

### **1. Examine the *Viderunt omnes* chant from the Mass for Christmas Day. Locate the melisma on the word “Dominus” and familiarize yourself with it.**

- a. Now find that same word within Léonin’s two-voice setting of *Viderunt omnes*. How does he set the original chant melisma? How does he treat the texture and rhythm of this section as compared to the surrounding polyphonic material?**

Léonin sets the chant melisma in the tenor voice in even note values, while the top voice moves in short triplet rhythmic groupings above it. This is a good example of the rhythmic modes in action. The modal rhythm breaks down at the syllable change to “-mi-” and becomes a lot more rhythmically free, while the lower voice drones on a single sustained pitch. Overall, the music set to the first syllable of this section is distinct from the surrounding material, which also features a long-held tenor note with a more rhythmically active upper voice.

- b. Examining the clausula on “Dominus,” how does this short work compare and contrast to Léonin’s treatment of this word?**

The clausula is more similar to Léonin’s setting of “Do-” than it is to his setting of the rest of the word; the lower voice, containing the chant, is rhythmicized in repeating segments, while the upper voice moves largely note-against-note or in short triplet groupings against the lower notes.

- c. Articulate the relationship between this clausula and the motet *Factum est salutare/Dominus*.**

The clausula and the motet are exactly the same, except that the motet has set new words to the upper voice.

- d. How does this two-voice motet relate to the motet *Super te/Sed fulsit/Primus tenor/Dominus*?**

The upper voices of *Super te/Sed fulsit* contain a lot of similar melodic and rhythmic material to *Factum est salutare/Dominus*, though not exactly the same; since there are multiple upper voices, there is a higher percentage of contrary motion, and the two voices do not always phrase or pause at the same moment, which provides a sense of forward motion through the work.

- e. In each of these polyphonic settings, what roles are given to the perfect consonances (unison, fourth, fifth, and octave)?**

Perfect consonances are structural—you will see them at the beginnings and endings of these works, plus at major cadences throughout, and are frequently used within phrases as well. Fourths are much less common, though, than the other kinds of perfect consonances, and will eventually be treated as a dissonance.

2. **Examine the Kyrie of Guillaume de Machaut’s *Messe de Notre Dame*. As with the works in the previous question, this Mass movement is also based on a pre-existing chant, this time the Kyrie from the Mass for Christmas Day. Looking at the tenor voice in the first Kyrie of the Mass, how much of the original chant does Machaut use? How is the chant rhythmicized here, and to which facet of isorhythm does that pertain?**

Machaut uses the entirety of the first “Kyrie eleison” of the chant in the first Kyrie of the Mass. Here, he has broken up the chant into four-note cells, each with the same rhythmic pattern (dotted whole note, half note, whole note, dotted whole note, and full bar of rest); this rhythmic unit will occur seven times throughout this Kyrie, and this is called the *talea*.

3. **Explain the relationships between the three voices in Lorenzo da Firenze’s *A poste messe*. How does this fit or not fit the definition of a caccia?**

In this work, all three voices imitate each other at the unison, only ceasing at the end of the main section; this is striking given that most caccias only have two voices imitating each other, and if a third voice is present, it tends to be a slower-moving tenor line. The ritornello, moreover, is monophonic, rather than having all three voices continue. The text, however, certainly fits the norms for the caccia, which are usually about hunting or a chase, as is found here.

4. **Looking at the approaches to rhythm and meter in the two Baude Cordier works, note some of the rhythmic complexities that might have been considered to be “more subtle.” Examining the two works in [facsimile](#), make note of any other features that you feel might also be considered “subtle.”**

In both cases, Baude Cordier uses complex rhythmic passages and metrical proportions popular in late fourteenth-century France and Italy. At times these are restricted just to one voice, while at others they play out throughout the multiple voices of the piece. Note the frequency of small triplet groupings, duplets, and heavily syncopated lines in both works, which is heightened in *Tout par compas* by its canonic structure, and even the 8-against-3 in the penultimate measure of *Belle, bonne, sage*.

Moreover, in both cases the composer dabbles in some creative wordplay, writing *Belle, bonne, sage* in the shape of a heart and *Tout par compas* in a series of concentric circles, which play up the idea that the piece is about a compass and consists of a canon. You might

also note the presence of interesting note shapes, colors, and mensuration (meter) signs throughout both pieces, indicating that these rhythmic and metric patterns are novel.