

Rounds to Rondeaux: Early Medieval Vocal Music

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Introduction

The 11th century marked a significant turning point in Western Music: **Composition** replaced improvisation: for the first time a piece of music existed, independent of an actual performance. **Musical notation** (an art of the ancient world lost in the Dark Ages) allowed sound to be written down in a definitive visual form, and could be executed whether or not the composer was present, by people unfamiliar with the piece. **Principles of order** developed: theory of 8 modes, and rules governing rhythm and consonance, came into being. **Polyphony** began to replace monophony.

Ars Antiqua - sacred music of the 12th & 13th centuries

The *Ars Antiqua* (ancient technique) period spans roughly from 1170 to 1310, in which polyphony, in use as early as the late 9th century for improvisational performance, began to be truly composed. The term *Ars Antiqua* is most commonly used to refer specifically to sacred music from this period, the dominant forms being:

1. Plainchant (also called plainsong, Gregorian Chant) is a monophonic form used in Catholic liturgy, being a single, unaccompanied line for voice with a fairly free rhythm. The Latin lyrics are scriptural or praise-based, used in Western European Christian services as early as the 3rd C, but did not begin to be written down until the advent of neumatic notation in the 9th C.

2. Organum is an early polyphonic form for 2 or 3 voices, in which one voice, the *Vox Principalis*, performs an existing plainchant while another voice, the *Vox Organum*, sings a simple harmony. There are three ways in which organal harmonies were created; in **parallel motion**, the harmony line moves completely parallel to the melody at an interval of a fourth, fifth or octave. In **oblique motion**, the harmony line begins in unison with the melody, then remains on the starting pitch until the melody reaches a designated interval (fourth, fifth or octave), from there moving in parallel at that interval. This is repeated in reverse at the close of the piece, so that the parts return to unison. In **contrary motion**, the harmony moves in parallel with the melody but inversely, so that it descends in pitch the same interval that the melody ascends, and vice versa. In **similar motion**, the parts move inversely from each other as with contrary motion, but can move by different intervals. Through experimenting with similar motion and combinations of all four methods, **free organum** developed and paved the way for true counterpoint.

3. Motet is a complex form of polyphony in which an existing plainchant was supplemented by one or two melodically and rhythmically independent lines, creating true counterpoint with multiple interacting melodies, rather than a single dominant melody with harmonization.

4. Conductus is a non-liturgical form of homophonic sacred music. Unlike the organum and motet forms, which grew out of existing plainchant, conductus pieces were freely composed original melodies with accompanying harmonies, usually for 2 or 3 voices and with Latin text.

Troubadour/Trouvère Forms - secular music of the 12th & 13th centuries

While professional performers were common fixtures at court well before the 13th century, known as jongleurs, minstrels, etc., the period of 1170~1220 was the pinnacle of the troubadours' art form: the *chanson* - literally, 'song.'

1. Epic/Chanson de Geste is a long-form (~4,000 lines) narrative lyric in which mythological, heroic or otherwise notable events are related, extremely popular circa 1050~1250; early epics were undoubtedly sung, but over time recitation with accompanying instrumentation also became common. Form varied by region/culture: in France, the *chanson de geste* was typically 10-syllable rhyming lines arranged in stanzas of varying lengths, whereas English epics were told in the Germanic tradition of alliterative verse.

Lai is the later French form (**lay** in English), written in octosyllabic couplets grouped in stanzas of varying length, the stanzas then in turn set to non-repeating unique musical phrases. *Lais* were mainly composed in France and Germany, during the 13th and 14th centuries. A Provençal term for a similar kind of poem is **descort**.

2. Early Chanson

Canso/Canzone/Chanson Courtoise/Grand Chant are all terms for the narrative love-lyric most popular in 12th/13th C, concerning courtly love and all the emotions such love could incite. The form was always strophic with three sections: an introductory stanza called the *exordium*, in which the composer presents his subject, followed by the body of the piece in several stanzas, and ending in either a *tornada* (short stanza giving resolution) or an *envoi* (addresses to the patron, referencing the composer). Bernart de Ventadorn (1130~1200) is one of the most famous and lauded composers of this genre.

Sirventes is a *chanson* concerning politics, often satirical or critical, rather than love; typically these songs were parody lyrics set to pre-existing *canso*, and could range from light satire to vitriolic denouncement. Bertran de Born is considered the foremost composer of the *sirventes* style of *chanson*.

Tenso/Tenzone is a musical dialogue/debate, typically between two voices.

Ars Nova - music of the 14th century

The *Ars Nova* (new technique) period spans roughly from 1310 to 1377, in which neumatic notation was replaced by the new mensural notation, allowing precise pitch and rhythm to be recorded. Isorhythm came into use, particularly in motets, and secular music overall began to reflect the complexity found previously only in sacred music. Another notable feature of this period is the combining of the secular with the sacred, blurring the line between these previously distinct genres. Sacred texts were set to popular tunes, plainchants were combined with secular melodies, and love songs even found their way into the liturgy in the form of motet-*chanson*.

1. Motet/Motet-chanson of this period took the same general form as those of the preceding century, but blurred the lines of secular and sacred music, outraging the Catholic Church. Plainchants were drawn out, simplified, and matched with secular, vernacular lyrics to form complex polyphony.

2. "Burgundian" Chanson is a complex style of *chanson* originating in 14th century France, generally referring to any French narrative, secular lyric, but specifically referring to one of the three *Forme Fixes* (fixed form), strophic songs ordered by strict and complex rules:

- **Ballade** - three stanzas of eight lines rhyming *ababbcbc*, in which the final (c) line is a refrain repeated at the close of each stanza. The first two lines of a stanza form a musical phrase, which is repeated for lines three and four, but with a different ending, followed by a new musical phrase for lines five through seven plus the refrain, which sometimes reflects the second ending found in line four (giving an overall *aab* musical pattern). The most famous of this period, composed by Guillaume de Machaut, were written for one, two, three or four voices, or for a single voice with various instrumental accompaniment.

Gais et jolis, liez, chantans et joieus Sui, ce m'est vis, en gracieus retour	} a
Pleins de desir et en cuer familieus De reveoir me dame de valour,	
Si qu'il n'est maus, tristesse ne dolour Qui de mon cuer peüst joie mouvoir:	} b
<i>Tout pour l'espoir que j'ay de li veoir.</i>	

- **Virelai** - a three stanza piece which opens with a five line refrain, forming, with the sixth and seventh line, a single musical phrase with the rhyme scheme *AABBAab* (capitals representing the refrain). The next section rhymes *bbabba* with a new musical phrase of three lines, repeated. The third section repeats the first musical phrase, again with *abbaab* rhyming.

Plus dure qu'un d'ymant Ne que pierre d'aymant Et vo durié Dame, qui n'avez pitié De vostre amant Qu'ocies en desirant Vostre amitié.	} A
Dame vo pure biauté Qui toutes passe, à mon gré Et vo samblant Simple et plein d'umilité De douceur fine paré En sousriant.	
Par un accueil atraiant, M'ont au cuer en regardant Si fort navré Que jamais joie n'avré, Jusques à tant Que vo grace qu'il atent M'arez donné.	} a

This pattern continues for two more stanzas, closing with an last iteration of the refrain. The overall musical pattern is therefore *Abba, Abba, Abba*. Guillaume de Machaut is a well-known composer of polyphonic virelai.

Early virelai, called **bergerette**, followed these conventions but consisted of a single stanza, with the *AbbaA* pattern shown at right, and were typically monophonic.

- **Rondeau** - an eight line piece in which the opening two lines form a refrain, each with its own musical phrase, with all subsequent lines using one of these two phrases according to rhyme. The standard form is *ABaAabAB*, in which capitals represents the refrain, illustrating both the rhyme and musical pattern. Rondeaux can be either one-part or polyphonic. **Triolet** is a another term for this early style eight line rondeau. **Rondel** is a 13 or 14 line variation, with the form *ABba abAB abbaA(B)*.

Ma belle dame souverainne Faites cesser ma grief dolour	} A
Que j'endure pour vostre amour Nuit et jour, dont j'ay tres grant painne	
Ou autrement, soies certainne, Je finneray dedens brief jour.	} a
Ma belle dame souverainne Faites cesser ma grief dolour	
Il n'i a jour de la sepmainne Que je ne soye en grant tristour	} a
Se me veullies par vo doulcour Secourir, de volenté plaine	
Ma belle dame souverainne Faites cesser ma grief dolour	} A
Que j'endure pour vostr amour Nuit et jour, dont j'ay tres grant painne.	

In the 15th and 16th century, rondeaux were composed with couplets in place of each single line, so that the *ABaAabAB* form was retained but applied to a 16 line composition, shown at right.

3. **Ballata** is a Spanish form similar to the French *forme fixes*: first comes a refrain, called *ripresa*, with *aa* rhyming, sung to a single musical phrase; next is the verse stanza, comprised of two *piede*, with a *bc* rhyme and sung to a new musical phrase, and the *volta*, with a *cd* rhyme and sung to the same melody as the *ripresa*. The piece then ends with the refrain.

Gia da rete d'amor libera et sciolta Era questa alma et hor e in pianti volta	} ripresa
Che tue eterna bellezze al mondo sole Qual non ebbe Dyana in fonte o in riva	
Con sembianti leggiadri et con parole Han d'ogni alto parlar la mente priva	} piede 2
Pero nympa celeste tanto diva Ne me sia dal bel viso merze tua	
Gia da rete d'amor libera et sciolta Era questa alma et hor e in pianti volta.	} ripresa

Glossary

Canon - melody which occurs in different lines at different times, creating polyphony.

Cantus Firmus - A melody line, usually taken from plainchant, which is used as the basis of a polyphonic composition, a backdrop for the other lines.

Counterpoint - see **polyphony**.

Homophony - a dominant melody line with one or more lines of accompanying chords.

Isorhythm - a repeated rhythmic pattern, independent of melody/movement in pitch.

Melisma - lyrical music in which multiple notes may be sung to a single syllable.

Monophony - solo or unison one-part melody.

Polyphony - two or more parts, harmonically related, with independent melody & rhythm.

Strophic Form - piece containing repeated melodic phrases, i.e. verses, choruses, etc.

Syllabic - lyrical music in which there is one note to each syllable.

Recommended reading / Works Cited

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