MEDIEVAL MUSIC THEORY AND NOTATION

During the Medieval period the foundation was laid for the notational and theoretical practices that would shape western music into what it is today. The most obvious of these is the development of a comprehensive notational system; however, the theoretical advances, particularly in regard to rhythm and polyphony, are equally important to the development of western music.

NOTATION

The earliest Medieval music did not have any kind of notational system. The tunes were primarily monophonic and transmitted by oral tradition. This caused several problems. First, this format could only be used as a memory aid for a singer who already knew the melody. Also, it was difficult to transmit these chant ideas across large distances. Third, there was no way to indicate exact pitch, rhythm or even the starting note.

The introduction of neumes was the first step to fix this problem. Neumes were various signs written above the chant texts to indicate the rise and fall of the voice. It was evident that a new system of more specific notation would be needed.

The next advance in Medieval notation was heighted neumes, in which neumes were carefully placed at different heights in relation to each other. This allowed the neumes to give a rough indication of the size of a given interval as well as the direction. This quickly led to one or two lines, each representing a particular note, being placed on the music with all of the neumes relating back to them. This was the beginning of the musical staff as we know it today.

This system is usually credited to Guido d'Arezzo, one of the most important musical theorists of the Middle Ages. It has also been suggested by modern scholars that he acted more as a codifier of a system that was already being developed. Even with this new system, one major problem remained: rhythm. There was no clearly defined way for the singing of notes.

MUSIC THEORY

The music theory of the Medieval period saw several advances over previous practice both in regard to rhythm, texture, and tonal material.

RHYTHM

Rhythm: First codified system was based on a series of six rhythmic modes by the music theorist Johannes de Garlandia in his treatise "De Mensurabili Musica". In his treatise Johannes de Garlandia describes six species of mode, or six different ways in which longs and breves can be arranged. Each mode establishes a rhythmic pattern in beats (or "tempora") within a common unit of three "tempora*"* (a perfectio) that is repeated again and again. Furthermore, notation without text is based on chains of "ligatures" (the characteristic notations by which groups of notes are bound to on another). Because the rhythmic mode was generally determined by the patterns of ligatures used, once it was assigned to a melodic line, it generally wasn't changed.

The next advance in rhythm came from the German theorist Franco of Cologne. In his treatise "Ars Cantus Mensurabilis" ("The Art of Mensurable Music"), written around 1280, he describes a system of notation in which differently shaped notes have entirely different rhythmic values. In this system, the mode depended on and was determined by the individual note values (rhythmic value of each note). This innovation has had a massive impact on the subsequent history of European music. The step in the evolution of rhythm came after the turn of the 13th century with the development of the Ars Nova style.

ARS NOVA

The Ars Nova (New Art) was a new style of music writing. There theorist who is most well recognized in regard to this new style is Philippe de Vitry. His famous treaty was the Ars Nova treatise, written around 1320. The composers of Ars Nova broke free from the older style of music writing, that of de Garlandia, and instead used the system of Franco of Cologne.

There were two important changes in the Ars Nova with regards to rhythm. One was a smaller subdivision of notes. The second change was the development of mensuration. The root word "mensural" refers to the ability of this system to notate complex rhythms with great exactness. Mensurations could be combined in various manners to produce metrical groupings, which lead to the system of simple and compound meter.

Vitry also developed the beginnings for our modern day time signature. He did this by indicating the proper division of a piece of music at the beginning through the use of a "mensuration sign", equivalent to our modern day time signature.

For the duration of the medieval period, most music would be composed primarily in perfect tempus, with special effects created by sections of imperfect tempus; there is a great current controversy among musicologists as to whether such sections were performed with a breve of equal length or whether it changed, and if so, at what proportion. This Ars Nova style remained the primary rhythmical system until the highly syncopated works of the "Ars subtilior" at the end of the 14th century, characterized by extremes of notational and rhythmic complexity. This sub-genera pushed the rhythmic freedom provided by Ars Nova to its limits, with some compositions having different voices written in different tempus signatures simultaneously. The rhythmic complexity that was realized in this music is comparable to that in the 20th century.

POLYPHONY

Of equal importance to the overall history of western music theory were the textural changes that came with the advent of polyphony. This practice shaped western music into the harmonically-dominated music that we know today. The first accounts of this textual development were found in two anonymous yet widely-circulated treatises on music, the "Musica*"* and the "Scolica enchiriadis". These texts are dated to sometime within the last half of the ninth century. The treatises describe a technique that seemed already to be well established in practice. Essentially, these treatises corrected problems with earlier musical rules and expanded on early polyphonic rules and practices