

RENAISSANCE MUSIC INTRODUCTION

The date of the Renaissance period differs widely between textbooks. For the purpose of this section of the site, I will use 1450-1600 as the beginning and ending of this period of music.

Renaissance music saw many changes:

1. Technology
 - a. The biggest change is that of the printing press. This invention allowed music mass production and an increasing distribution to all over the world.
 - b. Access to Renaissance music is much easier as much more has survived than Medieval music.
 - c. Technology also allowed for better quality instruments to be made. Famous makers began for many instruments; these makers were masters of their craft.
2. Music Notation
 - a. Changes in note values
 - b. Music was notated only in individual parts
 - c. Scores were extremely rare
 - d. Barlines were not used
3. Style and Expression
 - a. More flowing and freer in style
 - b. Much more expressive than Medieval music
 - c. More rhythmically simpler in style
 - d. Rhythmic drive at cadential points (cadences)

HARMONY AND TEXTURE

The texture of Renaissance music varies widely between composers of the period. Some composers preferred a simple texture of two or three voices (thin and sparse); others liked five to six voices (thick and rich). Continuous imitation was used – a Renaissance polyphonic style in which the motive or subjects move from line to line or voice to voice within the texture of compositions, often overlapping each other.

IMPROVISATION

All music was improvised. Instruments had a limited range, and dynamics ranged from soft to loud. An important part of improvisation was the use of accidentals. Because musicians were highly trained in reading several lines of music at the same time, accidentals were not always specified. Singers made decisions at cadential points by interpreting his or her part by figuring cadential formulas with other parts in mind, and when singing together musicians would avoid parallel octaves and fifths or alter their cadential parts in light of decisions by other musicians. It is through contemporary tablatures for various plucked instruments that we have gained much information about what accidentals were performed by the original practitioners.

LATE RENAISSANCE MUSIC

MUSIC IN VENICE

Venice was an important location for the development of Renaissance music, and also as a transition into the Baroque style. Several important contributions were made in Venice in this period. First, an impressive polychoral style developed, giving music a much fuller sound. Polychoral music is music in which several choirs of singers sing at the same time. This contribution led to worldwide expansion, starting in Germany, then moving to Spain, France, and England.

MUSIC IN ROME

The Roman school was a group of composers of predominantly church (sacred) music in Rome, spanning the late Renaissance and early Baroque eras. Many of the composers had a direct connection to the Vatican and the papal chapel, though they worked at several churches.

MUSIC IN ENGLAND

The brief but intense flowering of the musical madrigal in England, mostly from 1588 to 1627, along with the composers who produced them, is known as the English Madrigal School. The English madrigals were a capella (sung without accompaniment), predominantly light in style and generally began as either copies or direct translation of Italian models. Most were for three to six voices.

BLENDING OF MUSICAL CULTURES

The cultivation of European music in the Americas began in the 16th century soon after the arrival of the Spanish and the conquest of Mexico. Mexican language was combined with European musical practice, creating Mexican hybrid works. This also led to a division by composers in their own works between a prima practica (music in the Renaissance polyphonic style) and a seconda practica (music in the new style) during the first part of the 17th century.

CHURCH MODES

Works of the Renaissance were based on the church modes. These church modes (or Gregorian modes) are eight systems of pitch organization that are used to describe Gregorian chant. Gregorian chant is named after Pope Gregory.