

Music 160: Lecture 17, Overview of the Medieval Period

[Keri McCarthy]: Welcome to the part of MUS 160 where we actually get to talk about music history rather than go through terminology. I hope you survived the terminology section fairly well and that you didn't have too many troubles with that part. Now we have the fun part where we get to listen to a lot of music and talk about how music progressed over time and that, to me, is pretty exciting.

So today what I want to talk with you about a little bit is music in antiquity which your book does not cover and a few details about life during the middle ages because you may not have a lot of information about that from other classes. One thing that is useful to think about is what types of materials were left from earlier times, unlike today, where we have CDs or recordings available, and many different types of music notation or different kinds of artifacts left. What kinds of artifacts were available from antiquity (especially and even leading into the Middle Ages as well)? We have things that would be very little music is left and that is one important thing in terms of notation systems. We have some examples of notation systems from earlier civilizations, but we don't always understand how to interpret those notation systems. So we often have varying recordings of music from that time period. What was intended by the composer? How was it performed? Even what notes or the duration of those notes are all really unclear. So we have to recreate or refabricate a lot of those elements. Those can change drastically as we understand them within a ten year period of modern times. So a recording made ten years ago, today may sound very different. Things that aren't related to the physical music itself might be instruments, but we have to remember that instruments and instrument materials degrade over time. So things that were made out of cane, things that were made of wood are no longer available. Things that might remain would be things like bone flutes, one of the earliest instruments in western culture that we have left is a bone flute, which is several thousand years old. We might have reed instruments, but we certainly don't have the reeds left. So we may not understand whether they were single reeds or double reeds, quadruple reeds even and how those instruments functioned. We have, perhaps, brass. So things like percussion or brass instruments like early trumpets might be available. But even some of the materials that might have been made for percussion instruments to be struck, like skins would be lost over time. So what other types of artifacts do we have that key us into how music was used in society? We might have paintings. We might have depictions on pottery, sometimes pottery shards, or sometimes little statues or statuettes of musicians themselves. Those are really useful in not only letting us know not only how the instrument was played or what types of musicians, male or female were using those instruments, but in what situations music was used. We think that music was being used fairly consistently with what we use music for today which is virtually everything. It was used in weddings, in funerals, in ceremonial progressions. It was used to instate new leaders and it was used for recreation. In many cases, especially in ancient Greece, the Greeks believed that it could be used to cultivate a more ethical society. So music itself was created with the intent of cultivating or inspiring a sort of ethos or character in the listeners and

within the community as a whole. So we would have music that would be intended to evoke or change new communities and create faith and confidence in new leadership. So music was used in all different arenas from early times through.

In 476 we have the final collapse of Rome and from that period we kind of call the Middle Ages from 400 to 1400, about a thousand years which is a convenient time period to be able to remember. Remember one of those dates and remember it was 1,000 years and you've got your middle ages. What was happening during that time? Well Rome fell. It was sacked. There were a lot of warring tribes rolling around Europe. Those tribes were really destabilizing communities, especially at the beginning of that time period. What comes in instead to serve as a catalyst for economic growth and also for community building is the church. The church became the dominant social feature during this time period. You think about the types of services that we have that we maybe take for granted from the community today in terms of basic needs like clean water, or if somebody in your family dies and you need some food for the next month until you get your next paycheck, or in their case the next harvest. There was a social service put in place for people to be able to find food or shelter, clothing, heat and those types of things all were provided basically by the church as the dominant social service. We didn't have movie theaters certainly and we didn't have areas where entertainment was consumed in large groups. The church was the place that people would meet. They would often go there throughout the week and it did provide things like shelter and food for the people who needed it. Churches were giant large places for congregations or communities to meet. That plays into music in the following way. If I am standing at the edge of a large space and trying to give any kind of teaching or instruction to people at the other end of the space as well as people in front of me, I am going to have trouble getting my sound across as they did not have PA systems like we do today. So what we did instead was intoned or sung the words intended for the entire church to hear. This is really important for music as a whole. Literacy is an issue in the middle ages. Who was literate? You need to think of serfs, people working in fields, people tending to animals certainly were not literate. There was no need for literacy on their part. Their music, secular music from the middle ages is largely missing, documentation is lacking. Do we know that existed? Yes. Was there a large body of repertoire? Absolutely. Does that repertoire exist today? It was largely lost. It was learned by wrote. You might have something passed down through your family or from friend to friend, or from traveling musician to traveling musician. Communities passed along music. There was no need for written documentation. There was no other possible oral transmission other than wrote. I sing it to you, you hear it, you understand it, you recreate it and you sing it to someone else. So that music is largely lost. The church music however, even many nobles at the time were not literate, so we lose music from the courts of most of the middle ages as well. The church was where it was a center for education. It was a center for community and it was a center for stabilization and growth. The church did have literacy in spades. The monks were literate and they were the people who were scribing or writing down music from a very early time. They were doing this for several reasons.

Music became codified in the church around the 750s. In 752 or 754 The Pope went to visit his friend in France. The King in France had a very elaborate choir setup and they were able to sing these chants beautifully. The Pope realized that there were a large body of chants from across Europe and that if he could convince European churches to come together and share their like music, then if they created a body of repertoire that could be sung throughout Europe, then it could strengthen the Church as a whole and provide also maybe a little more sense of community. If you went to a church in Paris, but then went to a church in Rome you would still hear some of your hometown chants basically being sung with the church. That was a big deal. What they did is they took as many chants from as many different regions of Europe as they could. Then they collected a body of over 800 of them. That is a large number of chants for people to be able to memorize. At this point, music notation becomes necessary. What did it look like to begin with? Let me show you a little bit.

We start out as music being something necessary for people just to have a mnemonic device, something that reminds people of what something sounded like just enough of the beginning of something for someone to have a memory. People at this time were spending something like 8-10 years to learn all of this music. By people of course I mean men because women were not being necessarily educated in the church.

[Draws symbol on piece of paper]

This one is kind of silly. It probably didn't look like that.

[Draws more symbols]

You would need things that go up and down and had contour right? So they would create all sorts of different musical examples that would look similar to this that were just intended for people to get a vague idea of whether the music went up, whether it went down, whether it went in small intervals or large intervals and basically how the gist of it went. This was in order for monks to remember what it was that they were intending to sing. Eventually this is not enough for the whole body of singers to work with. What we end up doing instead is creating a line through the middle...

[Draws more symbols on paper]

...and then using many of these same kinds of scrawly features that would allow people to remember how the piece went.

[Close up of symbols with line running through them]

It would give some idea of the fact that this is maybe the starting pitch or the center. That would not only allow musicians to come up with some sort of vague contour, but also a pitch level, were that convenient for the men all to be singing and starting where their starting pitch is. Is it above or below the basic center of the group?

[Draws more on paper]

This gets elaborated over time and by 1050 we've got four of these little lines. That looks an awful lot like the modern staff. The fifth line came into play far later when the church developed or music in general developed a bit wider of a range. You will notice with Gregorian Chants that the music is very small intervals almost always in stepwise motion rather than leaps. That would be because again what we are trying to do is produce language. We are trying to let people understand to the extent that they can understand Latin (despite the fact that it is not the language being spoken in the community), but to understand the Latin text in large areas and large buildings. So we would use stepwise motion. We would move slowly and the music would focus specifically on how the Latin played over time or how the text progressed through a given phrase with the intent of making the music as clear as possible or the text as clear as possible. What else should we talk about?

I think it's really important when talking about the Middle Ages to consider a couple of things. I think it's very important that you remember that secular music did exist, that there was a lot of it going on. We are certain that it existed but that we have very little documentation remaining. I think it's interesting to think about which artifacts remain and that music notation progressed over this time. We will talk a little bit more about that in another lecture. I think it is very important to think about literacy. Who was literate? What were they preserving and for what purpose? Was it intended to be some sort of notational device for simple memory? Or was it something a little bit more sophisticated where we see the church actually kind of pushing their own agenda through what it is that they are notating or recollecting for the community as a whole? So those are some of the things that I like to think about when I'm thinking about the middle ages as a time period. We will come back and talk a little bit more about music from the middle ages in the next lesson, but I wanted to give you an overview to get started with and there it is. Thanks.