

## Music 160: Lecture 18: Sacred Medieval Music

[Speaker: Keri McCarthy]

[On Screen]

[00:00] Sacred Medieval Music

Keri McCarthy

[Keri McCarthy]: So today we are going to be talking about sacred music from the medieval period. Because we had sort of an overview of music from the medieval period earlier I will skip some of the information that was in your reading because we kind have already talked about that. In terms of the church being a really important or dominant feature of the culture during the medieval period, during the middle ages, what I am really interested in showing you through three musical examples is how music progressed over time. We are going to have a couple of examples and very quickly how sophisticated music became near the end of the medieval period.

The first piece I want to look at is a really simple Gregorian chant. This one is a very special chant because we know the name of the composer. The vast majority of chants from this time period, as we talked about earlier, were collected from across the region from around Europe. But even when they were specially composed or created there was a feeling in the church that music was actually composed by God and that the person writing it down or what we would consider a composer today was simply a conduit for that music. So almost all of the Gregorian chant that we have from the Middle Ages is anonymous. Sometimes you'll see Anon and you'll think well who is that guy and he was a lot of guys all of which referenced their materials back to God.

So the Gregorian chant that you are going to be listening to is provided by a woman named Hildegard von Bingen. And she is special for a number of reasons. Some of which are very interesting and some of which are fairly important. Women were not seen often times in the normal church. There were convents to which women could go to be educated and to develop or cultivate their religious faith. But most churches were run entirely by men. The men had entirely the active role. That would certainly be true in the monastery. In convents there was space for women to interact with each other. There were not men that were welcomed or utilized in a convent and so Hildegard's music is intended to be sung mostly, entirely was sung at the time, by women. She founded her own convent.

A couple of really interesting things and I can't remember your book covers some of these but not all. Many of you may know about the practice of tithing. Tithing was a practice at the time where if you would give 10% of your material worth to the church. Hildegard's parents had ten children. Hildegard was the tenth. And at a very young age say around fourth grade your time she was given to the church as a tithing. So these parents were nobility and that was considered appropriate. So they gave their daughter to the church and she reaped a lot of benefits from this. She was educated, she was well taken care of, and certainly with noble parents she maybe didn't have to worry about that so much but nonetheless she was given an education and the opportunity for literacy and the ability to write and notate music as well. And also the ability to perform music at a higher level certainly than she would have received by being raised in her original home, her original household. So those are interesting things.

Another interesting thing about Hildegard is that she was a seer. She was somebody that had visions. She was able to meet with male rulers, with people in positions of power within the church and within the community who would seek her out, who would come to travel to see her to ask for prophecies. To see what it was she was going to see. Nowadays we would call that maybe schizophrenia or we would talk about how that was incompatible with the church. And at the time that sort of mysticism and religion were mixed together without any kind of conflict. I find that to be really interesting. So she was a person who had a large amount of power within the religious community and within the larger community of Europe as a whole. And she was female. All this is fairly unusual. She is a well established figure.

Her music has been rediscovered over the last maybe 20 or 30 years. There are a lot of CDs of Hildegard's music now available. Not only because the music is really beautiful but also because of these really interesting stories about her and her life. So what I would like you to do is we are going to pause or stop the video for a little while. I would like you to go and either stream or through your CDs listen to her piece of music called A River of Blood. Oh Redness of Blood, I'm sorry. It was written to honor, you can read about this in your book, but to honor a number of virgins who were assumed slayed by the Huns in an earlier time. The music talks about the redness of the blood of the virgins and the serpent being the evil or the people obviously doing the slaying. Interesting things that I want you to notice about this piece. It is early, early music. Notice as we were talking about earlier that the music moves mostly in a stepwise fashion. That it is fairly simple. In this particular recording listen to the women singing. There are more than one. They are singing in unison. And you will hear a melody line that sounds so well put together that you may consider it to be only one voice. So to think about these women singing together so perfectly and with the diction of the Latin is really an amazing thing to think about as you are listening to the music. One other important thing to mention early music did not have a system for notating duration. So we don't know how this music was performed in terms of a beat. You won't hear one in terms of a pulse. There isn't a consistent one. There is rhythm but that rhythm is determined entirely by how the Latin itself played out through the phrase. So those are some really important things to listen for. Our next musical example will play a little bit more with rhythm as we start to develop rhythmic modes. But for the Hildegard to listen to it that might be one of the most distinguishing features for you. So go ahead at this point and stop watching me and start listening to Hildegard. See if you can pick out some of those musical features of very early western music Gregorian chant.

Ok so hopefully you were wowed by Hildegard. Maybe not. Maybe it sounds like something that your parents used to put you to sleep when you were a child but it is really beautiful music and I think it is really special that it was created for women in a convent and that the composer herself is a pretty special person.

I want to move along a little bit to an advancement in terms of notation and polyphony. So we start out with something that is unison. So much so that it is hard to hear that there are multiple voices. But quickly people tire of that type of texture and they'd like to have something that is a little bit more complicated to listen to. Suddenly we are not talking so much about just getting this Latin to be understood through a hall but ornamenting or creating interesting features musically to embellish the words themselves. And in many cases you will start to hear with these

later two musical examples that I am going to give for you that the words are to a large extent obscured all together. And so you might give a listen to that or find that interesting given the original function of music in the church. The piece that we are going to listen to next is from the Notre Dame School out of Paris. There is a cathedral there the same name. And from that location we started to have monks who were transcribing or notating music with multiple voices. Leonin is the first of these and he starts out with a two voice texture and Perotin which is his successor by one generation is somebody who took the music of Leonin who was considered to be really influential at the time and widely distributed throughout Europe. Perotin takes it to a new art form or to a new level by adding two more voices and creating more interest between these voices. These changes correspond with an increased ability to notate rhythm. And you'll hear that in the music because although to a certain extent the voices start out moving in a fashion that is largely parallel motion, so you hear two voices or the upper two voices moving along upper three voices moving along like this, you will start to hear that some of them sort of skew off and create their own melody within a given pulse or a given meter. What they are actually using here are something called rhythmic modes that would be like a long and then a short or three equal notes, a short and a long. And everybody is progressing together along with this same repetitive rhythmic pattern. Over also what is a drone being provided by I believe is a crazy sounding organ and some voices that just go along and just stick with that drone. Another interesting feature about the construction of this piece: that drone as you listen to it will change very slowly over time.

The piece that we are listening to is called "Viderunt Omnes" and the drone is actually the original Gregorian chant provided similar to that which we heard from Hildegard taken into incredibly long intervals. So the first note is played out for almost a minute of drone and then when you hear that pitch change that is actually the second pitch in the original Gregorian chant of "Viderunt Omnes" So what Leonin and Perotin did was take the original chant that would have been familiar to people, especially the monks singing it who sang it on a regular basis, and provided it as a foundation musically to create a structure that was far more complicated over top. And so using this tradition as a foundation further cements the use of polyphony in the church because the under guiding feature of the work itself is something that predated the composers and their work. So go ahead and give a listen to this Perotin Viderunt Omnes. You'll hear four voices. Like I said listen to the way that the rhythm interacts over top and the way that low drone moves very slowly over time. These are features of how polyphony emerged very rapidly, only a few decades after that of Hildegard, and how quickly the people of the Middle Ages once they established a method for notating or using rhythmic modes to make things more interesting cultivated a four voice texture that was much more complicated than what had predated it with the Hildegard. So go ahead and listen to Perotin's Viderunt Omnes.

Ok the last piece that I want to share with you from the Middle Ages sounds quite advanced compared with the other two sacred pieces of music that we have as examples. And it does take place about 150 years after the Perotin. So a lot of things changed during this time. They developed a way similar to what we have today where the note shape determines the note duration. Once they have that they develop really complicated rhythms. In fact there are some secular things from Italy from this time period that rival music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century so music doesn't get nearly as interesting rhythmically for the next what 700 years after we develop the ability to notate rhythm it gets complicated very quickly.

I think you will really enjoy this Machaut piece that we are going to be listening to. It has really long drawn out phrases. You are hearing four really consistent voice types. Something similar to soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. So we already have two female, two male parts in the choir and they are functioning in fairly similar ways to what we are hearing in music of Mozart or Beethoven or more contemporary music as well, the stuff you have probably sung or heard. One thing that is useful to know about music from this time period is that in terms of scales they were using different scales than what we have currently. We'll talk about this when we get to the Baroque period but suffice it to say that music from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance can sound fairly wonky when you line it up vertically to create harmonies. They really weren't interested in that particular aspect of the music. They were interested more in lining up melodies back to back or having the same melody running at alternate speeds or alternate times and how those voices interact linearly was much more interesting to them than any kind of real harmonic progression. You can hear that in the Machaut. They intend to have a lot of consonance followed by only occasional and strong dissonances usually that resolved very clearly at the ends of phrases and so the Machaut is particularly illustrative of that fact. If you get to the end of the first or second phrase you hear this crazy dissonance and then really sweet resolution to that. So that might be something that you hear.

If this music makes you a little bit uncomfortable or you just can't get around to really appreciating it in an aesthetic sense it may be that you are just not comfortable with the use of these various modes, many, many scales at use that don't line up vertically quite as nicely to create predictable harmonies like music from the Baroque period forward. What would I like you to know about Machaut? He was a fairly well known composer from the Medieval period. We talked about the fact that composers earlier in the time period were uninterested in adding their names to their pieces. But as we move towards the Renaissance and sort of a more widely understood concept of what it is to be human we end up with the humanist movement or humanism and the idea that individuals can be important and make important contributions. You start to see people not only put their names on pieces but develop a sort of popularity or notoriety and be able to work with different employers and that is sort of a predecessor to what the Renaissance offered for people for community in general and composers in specific.

So Machaut was fairly famous. He wrote music that was intended for church and intended for secular. So we start to have secular music. Especially by the end of this period being written for courts and probably being notated because it would be interesting for the courts to record what type of strong arts and art music was taking place in that court for the posterity of the rulers of themselves. Not for the composers so much and not so that the music could be distributed and performed but because the court wanted to have some kind of record of the type of high art establishment they had created at the time. Regardless of that for the Machaut go ahead and give a listen and listen to the fact that each voice is really moving fairly rhythmically independently. So from no rhythm to really complicated and independent rhythms. We have four voice parts. Interesting to know or useful to understand that in this time period women were still not singing in the church. So that soprano and alto part would have been taken mostly usually by a boy's choir or by a high tenor or a high male's voice. We can talk about [Chris Strodi] in another point in this master but if you are interested you can look that up online. They may also have been singing those high parts, the soprano parts at that time. So go ahead and listen to this

Machaut. I believe it is a curiae and it is a really beautiful part of the mass. Something that would have taken place daily for nuns and monks in convents and in monasteries and weekly for the given populous. Especially on Sundays still takes place today in the Catholic Church. This is a remnant of that same tradition that harks all the way back to the Medieval period and early in the Medieval period. So this is a progression offered to you by Machaut of fairly complex polyphony from the end of the Middle Ages.