Cambridge **Introductions** to Music

Helen Deeming and
Frieda van der Heijden

Medieval Polyphony and Song

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What characterizes medieval polyphony and song? Who composed this music, sang it, and wrote it down? Where and when did the different genres originate, and under what circumstances were they created and performed? This book gives a comprehensive introduction to the rich variety of polyphonic practices and song traditions during the Middle Ages. It explores song from across Europe, in Latin and vernacular languages (precursors to modern Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish); and polyphony from early improvised organum to rhythmically and harmonically complex late medieval motets. Each chapter focuses on a particular geographical location, setting out the specific local contexts of the music created there. Guiding the reader through the musical techniques of melody, harmony, rhythm, and notation that distinguish the different genres of polyphony and song, the authors also consider the factors that make modern performances of this music sound so different from one another.

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for Matthew, Zoë, and Sammy
HD
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for Hucbald
FvdH

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Historical Outline

This book is about the music composed for singers during the long period of Europe's history that we now call the Middle Ages, or 'medieval' period (from the Latin *medium* – 'middle', and *aevum* – 'age/era'). Though it by no means encompasses all vocal music from this period, the music explored in this book embraces a dazzling variety of sounds, including compositions of monumental scope and complexity, matched to the architectural splendour of the Gothic churches and cathedrals in which they were performed, as well as some of the most poignant songs of love and loss ever to have been written. This book aims to give an overview of where and when the different kinds of medieval polyphony and song emerged; who was responsible for composing them, singing them, and writing them down; and the kinds of functions – in churches and monasteries, royal and aristocratic courts, universities, and other urban institutions – that they were created to serve.

A few words about what is not included in this book would be appropriate here. It does not cover the kinds of music that were probably encountered most frequently by medieval people – namely the songs sung by mothers to their infants or by workers in the fields, and the music of instruments played in the streets and the taverns: these kinds of music have left only the faintest trace on the historical record because they were hardly ever written down or described in detail. This book also passes over the wealth of **chants** sung in churches (often grouped together under the umbrella term 'Gregorian chant'), for which a book by David Hiley in this same series of Cambridge Introductions to Music provides an excellent overview. Nevertheless, we will encounter chant frequently in the following chapters, as a great deal of medieval polyphony was conceived as an elaboration of the chant and was musically based upon it in fundamental ways.

Instead, we will be exploring the other types of vocal music that were composed and written down during the Middle Ages. **Polyphony** is a very broad term indicating any music in more than one part (from the Greek *poly* – 'many', and *phōnē* – 'voice' or 'sound'). It took many forms, from the earliest examples in which a chant melody was sung in parallel fourths or fifths – a type of singing known as **organum**, and which has often served to evoke the atmosphere of the medieval church in films and other popular media – to extremely elaborate

compositions in which three or four simultaneous melodic lines were ingeniously combined to create complex and rich musical **textures**. The term for the opposite of polyphony – **monophony** – means music in only a single part, though it is possible that in practice some monophonic music was accompanied by additional parts that were improvised at the time of performance. 'Song', a term even broader than polyphony, encompasses religious and secular pieces, texts in Latin and in everyday, vernacular languages such as French, German, and English, and subject matters as diverse as funeral **laments** and May Day celebrations. The term 'song' overlaps with 'polyphony', since some songs were polyphonic (composed in two or more parts), and others existed in both monophonic and polyphonic versions. And the connections between polyphony and song go further still, since in many situations, song and polyphony were cultivated side by side, by the same musicians working in the same environments. Just as certain medieval polyphony was musically based on chant, some other polyphony was based on pre-existing songs: for all these reasons, it makes sense to treat polyphony and song together in this book.

As we would expect from such a distant historical period, before technological innovations such as the printing press, which allowed knowledge and information to be spread much more quickly and to many more people, and long before safe and reliable modes of long-distance transport were available, many aspects of medieval culture were strongly local in character. In some cases, music composed and sung in one place might never be heard anywhere else, at least nowhere that was more than a day's journey away on horseback. Exceptions to this rule exist, however, and we will encounter examples of music and musicians in this book that travelled quite exceptional distances, often undergoing interesting transformations on the way. When music (or anything else) was written down at this time, it was in **manuscript** ('handwritten', from the Latin *manu* – 'by hand' and *scriptum* – 'written'): this process was slow and painstaking, and usually only a single copy was made. The systems for notating music in the Middle Ages varied from place to place and changed substantially over the course of the period. Musical manuscripts could become obsolete quite quickly, when their original readers were gone and later musicians either had no use for – or simply could no longer decipher – the musical copies they left behind. Over the centuries that have elapsed since medieval singers sang their music and medieval scribes wrote it down, many – probably most – of these written copies have been lost or destroyed (by accident or intentionally), leaving us with information that is patchy and incomplete. What we have left is a series of 'pockets' of information about medieval polyphony and song, and it is around these different pockets that we have arranged the chapters of this book.

The Chapters of This Book

There are many different ways of organizing the information that we have about medieval polyphony and song. One way would be to group the musical materials into categories according to their musical characteristics, but because these categories were mostly defined by scholars *after* the music was composed (sometimes long after), there are many pieces that blur the boundaries and refuse to fit. A chronological approach – setting out the materials in order from earliest to latest – is also possible, though not without its problems: on the one hand, there are so many gaps in our knowledge that the chronological thread would be constantly interrupted, and on the other, this approach can risk giving the impression that historical events and changes in musical style always followed on from one another neatly and inevitably, overlooking their geographical separation, which in some cases meant that these things happened in complete isolation.

Instead, we have arranged the chapters of this book so that each covers a different geographical region, sometimes as small as a single city (such as Paris in Chapter 4), in other cases a very large area spanning multiple countries (such as the lands on the shores of the Mediterranean in Chapter 8). Each of these areas incorporates one or more 'pockets' of evidence that point to particular cultures of music-making, sharing some similarities, whether of language, musical style, or social or institutional conditions. Some of the pockets refer to musical practices that seem to have emerged and died out in relatively limited periods of time (this is true of the polyphony from Aquitaine discussed in Chapter 3, for example), whereas others point to kinds of music-making that endured for much longer. Sometimes strong continuities exist between chapters: Chapters 4, 5, and 6, on Paris and Northern France in the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, could easily have formed a single chapter, for example (although that would have been far too long). There is a loose chronological arrangement to the chapters: Chapter 2 explores the earliest specific evidence that we have for medieval polyphony and song, whereas Chapter 9 looks at materials from the twelfth right up to the fifteenth century, but the intervening chapters sometimes overlap (for example, Chapter 7 – on England after the Norman Conquest – covers the same time period as Chapters 3–6, which relate to Southern and Northern France). To help you navigate these intersecting chronologies, we have provided a timeline in the next section of this chapter; you may wish to refer back to this for orientation as you read the later chapters of the book.

It is our hope that this book will enhance your enjoyment of listening to medieval music, whether you are someone who has already listened to lot of it or someone whose interest in this music is just beginning. There are numerous excellent recordings of the music discussed in this book, many of which are

becoming ever more easily available via digital download and streaming services, and at the end of each chapter we have suggested recordings that you may wish to seek out. If you can read musical notation, you might like to read through the musical examples we have provided while listening to recordings of them. Alternatively, if you prefer to pass over the more detailed musical discussions in this book, you will still be able to follow our exploration of this music's historical, cultural, and social contexts. In each chapter, we have also provided a list of suggested further reading to extend and deepen your knowledge of the topics we have discussed. These suggestions refer to books and articles from which we have learnt a huge amount and which we have often recommended to our students, and we owe a great debt of gratitude to the scholars on whose work we have built our own approaches to this fascinating music and its history.

Historical Outline

This period – the Middle Ages – was given its rather dismissive name by writers in the following centuries, who regarded their own age as a 'Renaissance' or re-birth, reviving the cultural glories of the so-called 'Classical' age (that of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome). For some of them, the intervening period was a time of darkness and backwardness, merely that which fell in the 'middle' between their own, 'modern' age, and the world of the Ancients that they admired and – in some ways – tried to emulate. The fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE is usually considered to be the start of the Middle Ages; the period's end point is less widely agreed upon, with various dates on either side of the year 1500 marking significant events that are regarded as the end of the Middle Ages in the history of different countries. In the study of art and literature, the start of the Renaissance (and therefore the end of the Middle Ages) is often dated earlier, to around 1400 in the case of art, and back into the 1300s in literature, and music history has often defined its periods to synchronize with those. The parallels between music and these other art forms only hold true to an extent, however, and no single point is entirely satisfactory as an end to the musical Middle Ages. So while much of the music of the fifteenth century belongs to the musical Renaissance (and is explored in Fabrice Fitch's book *Renaissance Polyphony* in this series), certain kinds of early fifteenth-century music are included in this book, as they seem to have more in common with medieval approaches. At the same time, there were also many continuities of musical practice between the so-called 'medieval' and 'Renaissance' periods, and elements of what we might identify as Renaissance thinking in music emerged both earlier and much later than 1400. All in all, it is important to remember both that the musical periods are categories that have been

imposed retrospectively, at a great historical distance from the times they describe, and that there are no clear breaks or boundaries between one period and the next, but instead many overlaps and fuzzy edges.

The nature of the evidence for medieval polyphony and song makes it difficult to say anything with precision about them before the ninth century. There were certainly traditions of song, and probably of polyphonic singing, before the 800s, but the rare surviving documents from the early centuries of the Middle Ages preserve texts alone, with neither musical notation nor concrete information about musical performance. The earliest medieval sources to include musical notation for song, and detailed instructions for the performance of polyphony, date from the ninth century, and were created at important monasteries within the Carolingian Empire, a vast region stretching over much of modern Germany, France, the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, and Northern Italy (see Figure 2.1). Named after the Emperor Charlemagne (or *Carolus Magnus* in Latin), the Carolingian Empire brought together the territories of various kings under one ruler, and lasted from Charlemagne's coronation as emperor in the year 800 until its eventual break-up into separate kingdoms towards the end of the ninth century. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the political unity of the Carolingian Empire had important consequences for the spread of knowledge and culture, including music, although the enormous distances from one end of the empire to the other still imposed limits on cultural exchange.

In the centuries following, Europe reverted to a complex network of kingdoms and dukedoms, each ruled separately by its own lord. The political map was in almost constant flux because diplomatic alliances and dynastic marriages between members of the ruling families frequently led to territories being joined under one ruler. This happened, for example, when King Henry II of England married Eleanor of Aquitaine, who was ruler of Aquitaine (a large area in what is now Western and Southern France) in her own right following the death of her father: on their marriage, her dominions were united with Henry's, and for a time, England and Aquitaine were officially under Henry's control. Surprisingly, little evidence survives of any contact between English and Aquitanian music and musicians that this dynastic marriage might have brought about, even though Eleanor was an important patron of **troubadours** such as Bernart de Ventadorn. Another royal marriage, that between Edward III of England and Philippa of Hainault, was probably responsible for bringing three of the greatest poets of the fourteenth century – Geoffrey Chaucer, Jean Froissart, and Guillaume de Machaut (the last of whom also set his poetry to music) – into contact with one another.

The political map of medieval Europe shifted not only as a result of marriages and alliances but also of military actions. Disputes over the rightful possession of territories were common, and rulers frequently raised armies to resolve these questions by force.

Some rulers were especially inclined to military action and set out on campaigns of conquest to extend their power and influence. Among the Norman aristocracy in the eleventh and twelfth centuries were several prominent conquerors: around the same time as Duke William II set sail over the English Channel to defeat the English King Harold in battle in 1066 (leading to a decisive shift in English history that we will explore further in Chapter 7), Robert Guiscard and his brother Roger, from another Norman noble family, journeyed to Sicily, setting up a new power base on this strategic position in the Mediterranean (something that we will consider in Chapter 8). Others channelled their military ambitions in another direction, responding to calls from the Church to reconquer the Holy Land from Muslim rule. These actions, collectively known as the Crusades, took European noblemen, and the foot soldiers they brought with them, to the very edges of the known world; many died, either in battle or as a result of the perils attending such a journey at that time. Frequent references to the Crusades in the texts of medieval songs make clear how real – and at times how tragic – was their influence on medieval lives.

Beyond war, crusading, and the political manoeuvrings of kings and rulers, the lives of medieval people were influenced by other natural and man-made forces. An increase in average temperatures across much of Europe between the ninth and the twelfth centuries – now sometimes termed the Medieval Warm Period – led to better harvests and higher prosperity: new trade routes opened up within Europe, and merchant-explorers such as Marco Polo travelled further afield to the Near East and Asia. The cities swelled in size during the twelfth century as people moved from rural homes to urban centres: many of these cities were trade hubs, and in some, the first universities were founded to educate lawyers, doctors, and churchmen. By the fourteenth century, the climate had changed for the worse, and years of harsh winters and poor harvests led to famine and high mortality. When the series of plagues known collectively as the Black Death struck, the fourteenth-century population declined even further. All of these events shaped medieval music-making more or less directly. Travel (whether for war, trade, or education) brought musicians from different places into contact with one another and allowed music books to circulate from place to place. Stability and prosperity created conditions for music-making to flourish, as both the financial resources to employ musicians, and the leisure and cultural inclinations to enjoy them, were more readily available to patrons of high social status. By contrast, disease and deprivation reduced opportunities, though music continued to play an important role in commemorating the dead and providing solace to the living.

*****

Each of the chapters that follow (except Chapter 6, which relates to roughly the same area as Chapter 5) includes a map showing the political situation of the

area under discussion at a certain point during the Middle Ages. Comparing these maps to one another will give a quick sense of the changes in power and leadership over the 600 years that this book covers. The nation states of Europe that we know today were established in their present forms long after the end of this period, so when we mention their names ('Germany', 'Italy', and so on) in the following pages, it will be as a shorthand for the geographical regions that those names now represent. Each chapter opens with a more detailed description of the area covered, charting the changes in its leadership and the significant historical events that shaped it. Table 1.1 below, a timeline showing some of the key moments that surrounded the creation of medieval polyphony and song, will give you a general orientation in the history of the Middle Ages. You may find it helpful to refer back to this timeline to anchor your understanding of the musical developments discussed in this book in the broader context of the period as a whole. At the end of the book, we have provided a glossary, defining key terms relating to medieval polyphony and song, as well as an index, to help you trace mentions of important places, people, concepts, and music throughout the book.

Table 1.1 *Timeline of musical and historical events of the Middle Ages*

Musical events	Dates	Historical events
	800	Charlemagne crowned emperor
	840	Division of the Carolingian Empire
Musica Enchiriadis and *Scolica Enchiriadis* compiled	**late ninth century**	
Earliest songbooks with musical notation	**end ninth century**	
Earliest surviving example of practical polyphony	**early tenth century**	
	late tenth century	Monastic reforms in England, led from Winchester
Winchester Troper written	**1020s–1030s**	
Guido of Arezzo develops staff notation	***c.*1030**	
Cambridge Songs compiled	**mid-eleventh century**	
	1061–91	Norman Conquest of Sicily
	1066	Norman Conquest of England

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Musical events	Dates	Historical events
Godric of Finchale, author of first songs in English	***c.*1070–1170**	
Guillaume IX, Duke of Aquitaine, first troubadour	**1071–1126**	
	1095	Start of the Crusades to the Holy Land
St Hildegard of Bingen	**1098–1179**	
Theory texts *Ad organum faciendum* and *De musica* written	***c.*1100**	
First manuscripts of Aquitanian *versus* written	***c.*1100**	
Bernart de Ventadorn	***c.*1130/40–*c.*1190/1200**	
Hendrik van Veldeke	***c.*1150–*c.*1184**	
Léonin	**active 1150s–*c.*1201**	
	1152	Marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry II of England
Philip the Chancellor	***c.*1160/70–1236**	
Chrétien de Troyes	**active *c.*1160–90**	
Wolfram von Eschenbach	**1160/80–*c.*1220**	
	1163	Building of Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris commences
	1170	Martyrdom of Archbishop Thomas Becket
Walther von der Vogelweide	***c.*1170–*c.*1230**	
Codex Calixtinus written	**before 1173**	
Gautier de Coinci	**1177/8–1236**	
	1180–1223	Reign of King Philip II Augustus of France
	1182–1226	St Francis of Assisi
Raimon de Miraval	**active *c.*1185–*c.*1229**	
Books of Aquitanian *versus* collected at St Martial, Limoges	**late twelfth century**	
Gertrude of Dagsburg	***c.*1190–1225**	
Neidhart	***c.*1190–after 1236**	
Odo de Sully, Bishop of Paris, regulates use of polyphony at Notre-Dame	**1198–99**	
Later Cambridge Songs compiled	**late twelfth–early thirteenth century**	

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Musical events	Dates	Historical events
Pérotin	**active *c.*1200**	
	1200–10	Foundation of University of Paris
Thibaut IV, Count of Champagne and King of Navarre	**1201–53**	
	1209–29	Albigensian Crusade
Hadewijch	***c.*1210–*c.*1260**	
Carmina Burana compiled	***c.*1230**	
Adam de la Halle	***c.*1245/50–1285/8, or after 1307**	
Manuscript containing *Sumer is icumen in* compiled at Reading Abbey	**mid-thirteenth century**	
Cantigas de Santa Maria composed	**1252–84**	Reign of King Alfonso X of Castile-León
De mensurabili musica revised by Johannes de Garlandia	***c.*1260**	
Theory text by 'Anonymous IV' written	***c.*1275**	
Worcester manuscripts of polyphony written	**second half of thirteenth century–first half of fourteenth century**	
Franco of Cologne, *Ars cantus mensurabilis*	***c.*1280**	
Philippe de Vitry	**1291–1361**	
Johannes de Grocheio, *De Musica*	***c.*1300**	
Wizlav	**active *c.*1300**	
Guillaume de Machaut	***c.*1300–77**	
	1309–77	Avignon papacy
	1315–17	Great Famine
Interpolated *Roman de Fauvel* completed	**1317/18**	
Marchetto of Padua, *Pomerium*	**1318/19**	
Ars nova (linked to Vitry) and *Ars novae musicae* (Johannes de Muris)	***c.*1320**	
Francesco Landini	***c.*1325–97**	
	1328	Capetian dynasty in France ends; succeeded by House of Valois
	1337	Start of Hundred Years' War

(*cont.*)

Table 1.1 (*cont.*)

Musical events	Dates	Historical events
	1340–84	Geert Grote, early leader of Modern Devotion movement
	1347–53	Black Death
	1348	Foundation of Charles University, Prague
Philippus de Caserta, *Tractatus figurarum*	***c.*1370**	
Llibre vermell de Montserrat compiled	**end of the fourteenth century**	
Baude Cordier	**active *c.*1400**	
	1415	Henry V of England wins Battle of Agincourt
	1492	Conclusion of the Christian re-conquest of Spain

Chapter 2

Monastic Centres in the Early Middle Ages

Introduction

When Charlemagne was crowned Emperor in Rome on Christmas Day 800 CE, he was the first ruler in Western Europe to have been granted that title since the last of the Roman Emperors over 300 years earlier. The title was a fitting one, as Charlemagne's thirty-year reign as king of the Franks up to that point had brought together much of the territory that had once belonged to the Roman Empire, and he had also cultivated a special relationship with the popes, whose seat in Rome and right to govern the Latin Church he had sworn to protect. With the backing of the Church, Charlemagne's empire supported a religious and cultural revival often called the Carolingian Renaissance. The monasteries, which were the centres of education and learning in the centuries before the foundation of the first universities (something we will return to in Chapter 4), built up enviable libraries, not just of theological and religious books but also works of literature, history, rhetoric, and many other subjects, often including works by the great classical authors of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Since the only way of receiving an education at that time was in a church or monastery school, the only people who learnt to read and write were those destined for lives as monks, nuns, or priests. The rest of the population, from peasants to nobility, were unable to read books or write letters for themselves, though wealthy rulers could – and did – employ clerks to read aloud to them and to write down texts that they dictated. All books were written by hand, and in each of the larger monasteries a scriptorium, or writing workshop, was established, in which monks laboured with quill pens and parchment to make copies of existing texts or to commit new materials to writing. To expand their book collections, the monasteries borrowed books from one another in order to make copies in their scriptoria, and the comparatively stable conditions of Charlemagne's empire allowed monks to travel between abbeys to share books and ideas.

The primary function of the monasteries – and the main activity of the monks and nuns who lived in them – was to carry out the **Divine Office**, or cycle of church