

Liturgical Music: the Western Tradition

Theologically, the West espoused the same basic idea regarding church music as the East: the words are most important, and the music must not distract too much from the meaning of the words but enhance it.

The use of musical instruments

Theoretically, the use of instruments had to be curbed (due to its association with paganism: cf. Aelred of Rivaux's opinion [Bychkov, "Image and Meaning"]). However, it was never considered unacceptable.

Since 9-10th centuries, some instruments, such as the flute and lute, were used. Organs were used only in large cathedrals.

In 14-15th centuries other instruments were used (such as the trumpet), but no large orchestras. From 16-17th centuries onwards we have larger bands of instruments used in churches. The use of instruments was usually reserved for great occasions and solemn Masses.

Development of Western chant. Polyphony

Plainchant ("Gregorian" chant)

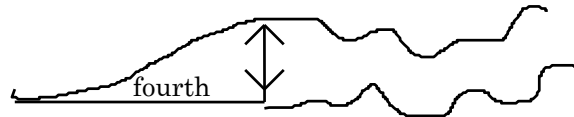
The earliest and simplest chants, still in use today, consist of one line of melody or one voice (*monophonic*, monody). The only way to elaborate such a chant is by holding individual notes for a longer period of time and *ornamenting* them by various melodic patterns (*melisma*, melismatic singing).

Website example: *Gradual*, Easter Mass; early French music (11th c.)

Organum style polyphony

The main principle of *polyphony* (many-voiced musical texture) is the addition of at least one other line of melody, or voice, that can be lower or higher than the main voice. In the *organum* style, the lower voice slowly chants a melody consisting of very long notes, while the upper voice provides elaboration or ornamentation.

In the earliest examples from the 11th century the two melodic voices were almost parallel, following each other at the musical interval of fourth (or fifth):

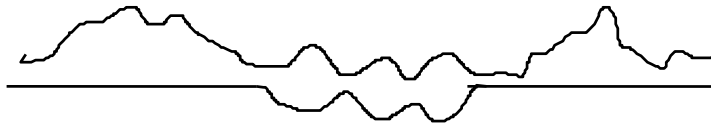


After 11th century, the true organum style appears: when the upper and the lower voices move in opposite directions, maintaining harmonic intervals between them: unison, fifth, octave:



Website example: *Nativity Mass*, The School of Notre-Dame (13th c.); *Sanctus (Holy)*

Around 1200AD the bottom (lower) voice starts to hold the notes longer, in order to allow the top voice to complete the ornamentation. In fact, the impression is that the bottom voice simply drones one low note, while the upper voice is singing a conventional melody (hence the name “organum” style since the lower voice sounds like an organ):



Website example: *Nativity Mass*, The School of Notre-Dame (13th c.); *Gradual*

Such ornamented and elaborate polyphonic chants were used on important occasions and major feasts in large cathedrals (the rest of the services used plainchant). They frequently incurred criticism on the part of the more austere clergy (cf. Aelred of Rivaux mentioned above, and later Pope John 22 [1326-34]).

Later polyphony

In 13-14th centuries a third and a fourth voices are added, and the organum style is transformed into true and complex *polyphony*. In a three-part composition, the bottom voice chants a traditional melody, while the two top voices provide ornamentation. In a four-part composition, there are two bottom and two top voices, all doing something different.

Such technique in its early stages resulted in much *dissonance* (unpleasant sound) since not all the voices were adequately synchronized or harmonized (i.e., voice #2 did not necessarily agree with voice #3, etc.). It was also difficult to understand the words.

Website examples: *Nativity Mass*, The School of Notre-Dame (13th c.); *Alleluia*; Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377), *Mass of the Purification of the Virgin*; *Kyrie*; *Agnus Dei (Lamb of God)*

From 15th century onward, the composers start to think “vertically,” i.e., take great care to harmonize and synchronize all voices between each other. Composers at this point think more about music, rather than the words, compositions are complex (4-5 voices) and use the technique of *counterpoint* (or fugue).

Website example: Josquin Desprez (15-16th c.), *Mass “Pange lingua”*; *Kyrie*

At the Council of Trent, such elaborate music was attacked, which resulted in “refining” the tradition in such 16th-century composers as Palestrina and Victoria.

Website example: Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (16th c.), *Mass of Pope Marcellus*; *Gloria*

The Baroque and the Reformation

In 17-18th centuries liturgical music starts to be influenced by opera (Mozart) and secular classical music (Bach) and basically sounds like any other contemporary musical compositions.

Website example: Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), *Mass in B Minor*; *Cum sancto spiritu*

At the same time, the movement of the Reformation pushes for a simpler type of music, with a simpler structure and harmony, suitable for the performance by the whole congregation.

Website example: Johann Walter (1496-1570), *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*

The Eastern Orthodox liturgical chant

Terms specific to the Eastern Orthodox liturgical chants (see von Gardner, *Russian Church Singing*): *antiphon*, *prokeimenon*, *troparion*, *znamenny chant*

Musical instruments

No musical instruments were ever allowed in Orthodox churches. The word “musical” was perceived as negative (“singing” was used for chants), associated either with pagan cults or Western (“Latin”) services. Instruments were considered inferior to the human voice since they are man-made and imperfect, while the human voice is created directly by God. The Latin Mass that used instrumental music was described in terms of folk celebrations: “banging the cymbals, trumpets, and organs, dancing with their arms, and stomping with their feet: pleasure provided by the devil.” In addition, instrumental music can only create moods, but no exact meaning (see von Gardner, p. 21-22).

Theology of singing

Church singing was seen as the earthly parallel to angelic or seraphic singing in heaven: a form of unity of earth and heaven during church services. Liturgical chants were perceived as the “icons” (symbols) of heavenly chants. The epitome of this idea of parallel liturgy that happens on earth and in heaven (angelic singing) is the Cherubic hymn. Angelic singing is often depicted in icons, and liturgical chants are supposed to purify and lead us to God. Singing psalms had a saving effect, while folk music and instruments were associated with the devil. For this reason, because of their sacred function, melodic formulae became part of the Orthodox tradition and were carefully transmitted as part of the *musical canon*. Another feature is the inseparability of melodies from liturgical texts.

Monody

Monophonic or *unison* singing (cf. Western *plainchant*) originated in the Greek tradition (Byzantium) and was transmitted to Russia,

where it remained the only way of singing until 16-17th c. Theologically, monody represented the principle of the unity of the church, or a united will of all Christians. Emotionally, the slowly “soaring” linear monophonic chant, with its lack of a “gravity center” (i.e., the tonic), inspired a quiet, meditative feeling during church services. With not much repetition, it evoked the idea of the never-ending eternal time.

The traditional Greek and Russian monody used the system of eight *tones* (or *modes*). A tone (mode) is a particular type of scale (cf. our present-day “major” and “minor” scales) with particular melodic formulae that go with it. Each of the eight tones was used for one week, eight weeks creating a “pillar” (*stolp*). The canonical nature of melodic formulae allowed the Orthodox audience to determine every tone by ear, just as they recognized the iconography of the icons.

Znamenny chant

is a type of monody (one voice or several unison voices) that used the system of 8 tones. The older type had no ornamentation, and displayed a perfect unity of word and chant, simplicity and clarity, nothing distracting from the word.

The 15-16th centuries see the appearance of the “stolp” variation of the znamenny chant, with more melodic ornamentation and formulae. This variation was much more musically independent from words, but still did not go beyond the set number of melodic formulae. The movements of the melody could correspond to the meaning of words (e.g., up or down).

Website example: Communion verse “Praise ye the Lord from Heavens” (17th c. Russian)

Polyphony

Since 15-16th centuries, polyphony develops alongside with monody in Russia. (Greek chants of the *ison* type [see below] existed earlier, but polyphony in the Byzantine tradition did not go any further). Severe disputes and conflicts broke out around the introduction of

polyphony: it sounded “Latin” (= Roman Catholic), and therefore, according to the Orthodox, inspired by the devil. Another frequent point of criticism was that elaborate music obscured the words (cf. similar debates in the West). Another objection was that many-voiced texture destroyed the symbolic unity of the monophonic chant.

‘Ison’ type polyphony

(Greek, Byzantine, Russian; cf. *organum* polyphony in the West)

One or several lower voices chant one note, while the upper voices sing an elaborate melody.

Website examples: *Prokeimenon* (Greek, Vatopedi monastery); *Alleluia* (Byzantine, Arabic tradition); *Prokeimenon* (Russian, Suprasl Monastery, 16th c.)

Demestvenny chant

One stage beyond znamenny chant. Started in 15-16th centuries in Russia and was either monophonic or polyphonic (several voices). This type features even more ornamentation and elaboration, and separation between music and word. Many other individual variations of chants followed, which caused the break-down of the musical canon. Musically speaking, demestvenny chant was rather rough and “unpolished” from the point of view of “vertical” harmonic thinking (cf. early Western polyphony).

Website example: *Great Litany* (17th c., Russian)

Strochnoe singing = Linear polyphony

Appears at the end of 16th - beginning of 17th century. In this type of polyphony, all voices (usually three) follow particular melodies that could be used on their own, but in this case sound at the same time. All voices follow approximately the same pattern and are well designed from the “linear” point of view. However, there is no “vertical thinking,” i.e., these three voices are not always well

harmonized with each other and may sound dissonant (cf. early Western polyphony, such as Machaut).

Website example: Hymn to Theotokos (Mother of God) (17th c., Russian)

**“Part” (partes) polyphony
(variant: Znamenny polyphony)**

Finally, in the 17th century in Russia a Western-type polyphony develops where several voices or “parts” were well harmonized with each other by the use of counterpoint and other techniques (cf. Josquin Desprez and Palestrina in the West). The voices or “parts” had no validity on their own, but could only be used as part of the whole composition. *Znamenny polyphony* is a variant of znamenny chant with several harmonized voices.

Website example: Trisagion; Hymn to Theotokos (Mother of God; 17th c., Russian)