

Music In Medieval Period

(500 - 1450)

Medieval music can be described as music that was created and performed during the Middle Ages. This would include both music for the Christian church (liturgical music) and non-religious (secular) music composed for entertainment purposes. This may be music only for voices, otherwise known as vocal music, such as the Gregorian chant that was sung by monks, as well as choral music; music to be played only by instruments; and music that could be performed by both instruments and voices.

Instruments

Many types of instruments that were used to perform music in the Medieval Period are still in use today. For example, the flute was originally made of wood. In addition, it was often made as a "state of the art" instrument, the **recorder**. Plucked string instruments such as the lute (an earlier version of today's guitar). The dulcimer. Former forms of the vielle and the sackbut.

Characteristics of Medieval music

Medieval instrumental music can be characterized by its fine "texture", very rhythmic character; and repetitive quality, as well as the distinctive sound of the instruments of that time.

Genres

Early Medieval liturgical or church music (music for religious purposes) was monophony, mostly sung in a monastery. Polyphony began to develop during the later Medieval Period, and became more common by the later 1200s and early 1300s.

Music theory

During the Medieval Period there were many advances and developments in music theory practices with regard to pitches and rhythm.

- Notation (an abbreviated lesson in the development of music notation)
- Rhythm
- Polyphony
- Tonal Systems

Examples of songs from this period



The Corpus Christi Carol

Lully, lullay, lully, lullay,
The faucon hath borne my make away.

He bare him up, he bare him down,
He bare him into an orchard brown.

In that orchard ther was an hall
That was hanged with purple and pall.

And in that hall ther was a bed:
It was hanged with gold so red.

And in that bed ther lith a knight,
His woundes bleeding by day and night.

By that beddes side ther kneeleth a may,
And she weepeth both night and day.

And by that beddes side ther standeth a stoon:
Corpus Christi writen thereon.

Version by Jeff Buckley, with music by Benjamin Britten

Women in songs of this period

Women appear in this period in many songs, playing different roles:

- As a mother.
- As a bringer of sin.
- As a pure being, subject of love.



Bodleian MS Douce 195, f. 118r.

Here we have an example of the way this subject was treated in popular songs. There is also an explanation of some old English expressions.

WOMEN

[Lambeth MS. 306, leaf 135.]

Women, women, loue of women,
Make bare purs¹ with some men,
Some be nyse as a nonne hene,²
Yit al thei be nat soo.
 some be lewde,
 some all be schrewde;
Go schrewes wher thei goo.

Sum be nyse, and some be fonde,³
And some be tame, y vndirstonde,
And some can take brede of a manes hande,
Yit all thei be nat soo.
 some be lewde,
 some all be schrewde;
Go schrewes wher thei goo.

Some cane part with-outen hire,⁴
And some make bate in eueri chire,⁵
And some cheke mate with oure Sire⁶,
Yet all thei be nat so.
 Some be lewde,
 and sume be schreuede,
 go wher thei goo.

Som be browne, and some be whit,
And some be tender as a tripe,
And some of theym be chiry ripe,⁷
Yet all thei be not soo.
 Sume be lewde,
 and some be schrewede,
 go wher thei goo.

Some of them be treue of love⁸
Beneth the gerdell, but nat above,⁹
And in a hode aboue can chove,¹⁰
Yet all thei do nat soo.

Some be lewde,
and some be schreude,
go where thei goo.

Some cane whister¹¹, & some cane crie,
Some cane flater, and some can lye,
And some cane sette the moke awrie,¹²
Yet all thei do nat soo.

Sume be lewde,
and sume be schreuede,
go where thei goo.

He that made this songe full good,
Came of the north and of sothern blode,
And some-what kyne to Robyn Hode,¹³
Yit all we be nat soo.

Some be lewde,
and some be schrewede,
go where thei goo.

Some be lewde, some be schrwde,
Go where thei goo.

1 Make bare purs, i.e. clean out a man's purse.

2 nyse as a nonne hene, i.e. nice (prudish) as a nun's hen.

3 fonde, foolish, or in this case, easy.

4 Some...hire, some will part with their goods, i.e. "put out," without getting paid.

5 make bate...chire, bait men in every shire.

6 cheke...Sire, some are "checkmating", i.e., "doing" our lord.

7 chiry ripe, red as a ripe cherry; also, ripe for "plucking."

8 treue of love, faithful.

9 Beneth...above, below the skirt, but not above it.

10 hode...chove; "Hode" has a very specific definition

in the MED, and stands for rank; "chove" = "shove."

I will quote a medievalist friend of mine, who goes under

the pseudonym of "Dr. Virago", and who explained it to me thus:

"The whole stanza is punning — she's faithful
"below the girdle" means both the literal sense, at
least at first (she doesn't have sex with other men),
but then comes to mean she doesn't cheat with men of
her station or lower, but is able and willing to "in
a rank above." The whole thing relies on the metaphor
of the body politic — where lower ranks equal
the lower regions of the body."

11 whister, whistle.

12 sette... awrie, set a mock (joke, jest) awry; i.e., "the joke's on you, buddy."

13 kyne to Robyn Hode, kin, or akin, to Robin Hood. It is to be remembered
that the medieval idea of Robin Hood is little like our modern,
noble conception. In the Middle Ages, the gestes and ballads
of Robin Hood were bawdy tales in which Maid Marian was not
much short of a harlot; so, what the songster is saying is that he's
like the writer of those bawdy tales of debauchery.

Examples of songs taken from <http://www.luminarium.org/medlit/mltexts.htm>