

Medieval and Renaissance Instrumental Music and Motets

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Introduction

Medieval and Renaissance music did not develop through a simple shift from primitive monophony to perfected polyphony. Between roughly 600 and 1600, vocal and instrumental practices overlapped, changed by region, and circulated through courts, churches, towns, dances, memory, manuscripts, and eventually print. The original essay correctly distinguishes soft and loud instrument groups, recognizes the growth of polyphony, mentions Tielman Susato's dance collection, and identifies Josquin des Prez as a major motet composer. It contains several errors: the Renaissance did not extend to the nineteenth century; chansons and madrigals are vocal genres rather than instruments; Susato's dances belong to the Renaissance, not the medieval period; and Josquin's *Ave Maria...virgo serena* is a motet, not "Eve de Maria." A clearer analysis examines instrumental function, families of instruments, dance forms, notation and printing, the Renaissance motet, and the way composers organized imitation, text, and musical expression.

Period Boundaries and Continuity

The medieval period in Western music is commonly placed from the early Middle Ages to about 1400, while the Renaissance extends approximately from the fifteenth century through the sixteenth. These dates are conventions rather than sudden breaks. Musical practices associated with one period continued into another, and regions changed at different speeds. (Taruskin, 2005)

The Carolingian and twelfth-century renaissances were important medieval revivals of learning, but they are not the same as the later Renaissance associated with humanism, printing, and renewed engagement with classical antiquity.

Instrumental Music and the Written Record

Much instrumental music was learned by ear, improvised, or adapted from vocal pieces, so less of it survives in notation than sacred vocal music. Church institutions preserved manuscripts because liturgical repertory required continuity. Courts and towns also employed instrumentalists, but their daily repertory was not always written down.

The absence of notation does not mean instruments were unimportant. Images, account books,

literary descriptions, surviving instruments, and later collections show their roles in dance, ceremony, entertainment, processions, and accompaniment.

Haut and Bas Consorts

Late medieval and Renaissance writers often distinguished *haut* instruments, suitable for outdoor or ceremonial performance, from *bas* instruments, suitable for quieter indoor settings. Loud ensembles included shawms, sackbuts, trumpets, and percussion. Soft instruments included lutes, harps, vielles, viols, recorders, flutes, and keyboard instruments.

This division concerned volume and social use rather than artistic value. Musicians combined instruments according to occasion, available performers, and local practice.

Instrument Families

Instrument makers increasingly produced families in different sizes, allowing soprano, alto, tenor, and bass ranges. Recorder and viol consort could perform polyphonic music with a blended tone. Wind bands used shawms and sackbuts for public events. Lutes supported solo songs, dances, and intabulations of vocal polyphony.

Standardization was incomplete. Names, tuning, construction, and technique varied, so modern reconstructions represent informed interpretations rather than exact replicas of one universal ensemble.

From Monophony to Polyphony

Medieval repertory includes monophonic chant, troubadour and trouvère song, dance melodies, and sophisticated polyphony. Polyphony developed through organum, motet, conductus, and later fourteenth-century styles; it did not suddenly appear in the Renaissance. Renaissance composers inherited these techniques and increasingly emphasized balanced imitation, consonant sonority, and control of text setting.

Instrumentalists could perform a single line, double voices, add improvised parts, or play complete polyphonic textures.

Dance Music

Dance was a major use of instruments. Common Renaissance forms included the pavane, galliard, basse danse, branle, allemande, and saltarello. Dances were often paired by contrasting meter and

tempo, such as a stately duple pavane followed by a lively triple galliard.

Written collections preserve frameworks, but actual performance could include repetition, ornament, percussion, and adaptation. Social dance connected music with etiquette, class, gender roles, and bodily training.

Tielman Susato and Music Printing

Tielman Susato was a composer, instrumentalist, and one of the first important music printers in Antwerp. His 1551 collection *Danserye* contains instrumental dances suitable for various ensembles. The publication did not prescribe one fixed instrumentation; performers could choose recorders, viols, winds, or mixed groups. (Susato, 1551)

Printing made music more widely and consistently available than manuscript copying alone. It supported amateur music-making, commercial distribution, and the circulation of repertory among cities.

The Pavane Mille Regretz

Susato's collection includes a pavane related to *Mille regretz*, a famous chanson associated with Josquin. This illustrates how vocal music could become instrumental dance material. A chanson is a French secular song, not an instrument or a dance category by itself.

Arrangers could preserve recognizable melodic material while adapting rhythm, texture, and repetition to the needs of dancing. Such borrowing challenges a strict division between vocal and instrumental genres.

Notation and Intabulation

Instrumental music was written in staff notation and, for some instruments, tablature. Tablature tells a player where to place fingers or which strings to use rather than representing pitch in the same way as staff notation. Lute and keyboard players created intabulations of chansons, motets, and madrigals.

These arrangements were not merely copies. They could add ornaments, redistribute voices, and exploit an instrument's characteristic sound.

Humanism and Musical Expression

Renaissance humanism encouraged renewed study of language, rhetoric, and classical texts. Music remained deeply religious, but composers and theorists paid increasing attention to how musical gestures could clarify words and move listeners. Secular patronage also expanded.

Humanism should not be described as a complete replacement of religion by science. Church, court, university, and civic life remained intertwined, and many leading composers wrote both sacred and secular music.

Reformation and Counter-Reformation

The Protestant Reformation changed worship and musical practice by encouraging vernacular congregational song in some traditions while other reformers restricted elaborate music. The Catholic response included discussion of textual clarity, discipline, and liturgical purpose. England's break with Rome produced changing Latin and English repertoires.

These transformations created several sacred traditions rather than one uniform Protestant or Catholic sound.

What Is a Renaissance Motet?

A Renaissance motet is generally a polyphonic setting of a sacred Latin text not tied to the ordinary of the Mass. The genre could be used for devotion, ceremony, patronage, or liturgy. Motets varied in length, voice number, texture, and compositional technique.

Unlike the medieval motet, which could combine different texts and languages over a tenor, the Renaissance motet usually aimed for a more unified text and sonority.

Imitative Polyphony

In imitative polyphony, one voice introduces a melodic idea and other voices enter with related material. Imitation helps articulate phrases of text and gives each voice structural importance. Homophonic passages, where voices move together rhythmically, can create contrast and textual clarity.

Renaissance music was not always unaccompanied. The term *a cappella* is often used for vocal performance without instruments, but historical performances could double or replace voices with instruments depending on institution and occasion. (Atlas, 1998)

Josquin des Prez

Josquin des Prez, active around the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, became one of the most celebrated composers of his era. His reputation rests on masses, motets, and secular songs characterized by clear phrase structure, imitation, and close relationships between music and text.

Later printers used Josquin's name because it carried prestige, and some works were misattributed to him. Modern scholarship therefore studies sources as well as style.

Ave Maria...virgo serena

Josquin's *Ave Maria...virgo serena* is a four-voice Latin motet honoring the Virgin Mary. It begins with points of imitation in which each voice enters successively. Later sections vary texture, sometimes pairing voices or bringing the ensemble together, so musical change follows the poem's divisions. (Josquin des Prez, n.d.)

The concluding prayer becomes more direct and intimate. The work demonstrates how imitation, contrast, cadence, and text can create emotional and architectural coherence without instrumental accompaniment being essential.

Performance Practice

Modern performers must make choices about pronunciation, tempo, pitch, ensemble size, instrumentation, ornamentation, and acoustics. Sources rarely specify every detail. A court wind band and a domestic recorder consort might perform the same printed dance differently.

Historically informed performance is therefore a disciplined conversation among documents, instruments, iconography, acoustics, and practical experiment.

Chanson and Madrigal

Chansons and madrigals were secular vocal genres, not musical instruments. The French chanson ranged from courtly polyphony to lighter forms, while the Italian madrigal became an important setting for vernacular poetry in the sixteenth century. Instrumentalists frequently played these works without voices or transformed them into tablature. Their melodies also entered dance collections and variation sets. Correct classification matters because it shows how repertory crossed performance media: a vocal composition could become raw material for a lute arrangement, consort piece, or dance without changing the fact that its original genre was song.

Conclusion

Medieval and Renaissance instrumental music grew through oral practice, dance, ceremony, vocal borrowing, manuscript transmission, instrument families, and eventually print. The periods contain both monophony and polyphony, and the distinction between vocal and instrumental music was often flexible. Susato's *Danserye* represents the commercial and social energy of sixteenth-century dance music, while its use of *Mille regretz* shows repertory moving between song and instrument. The Renaissance motet developed a unified sacred text through imitative and contrasting textures, and Josquin's *Ave Maria...virgo serena* remains a defining example. The history is not a straight march toward complexity, but a network of performers, institutions, technologies, and expressive choices. (Brown & Stein, 1999)

References

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