Leonardo, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Donatello. These are some of the names that come to mind when we think about the great masters of the Renaissance Age (not the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles!) Of course, the term “Renaissance”, or “rebirth”, is a relatively modern term, coined by the French historian Jules Michelet in the 19th century. Beginning in the Italian city of Florence near the end of the 14th century, the Renaissance Age is generally characterized as the reclamation of classical culture and a widespread development in art, music, literature, science, and education. Great thinkers, inventors, and philosophers sought to understand the ways of nature and the universe, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti. These men embodied the diverse and well rounded skills that would inspire the term “Renaissance man”. In fact, even the term “Middle Ages” was designated as a transitional period between the age of Greek Classicism and the Renaissance (hence the word “Middle”). Above all, the Renaissance would be defined by the concept of **humanism**, a way of learning that emphasized studying the ancient Greek texts and deriving new meaning from them by way of reasoning and research. Scholars and intellectual thinkers such as Niccolò Machiavelli and Thomas More revived the ideas of the Greek and Roman philosophers, and applied them to contemporary settings. Writers such as Dante Alighieri and William Shakespeare devised new ways of understanding the human condition, and composers such as Josquin Desprez and John Dowland brought music to the next stage of its evolution. For music, however, the beginnings of what would be later defined as a style separate from the Middle Ages originated with the composers of England.

**The “English” Sound (“Cheerio, Govn’r!”)**

In the opening years of the 15th century, English music in particular began to have a different sound than that of music on the European continent. At the height of the Middle Ages, composers would strive to make each individual voice of a polyphonic composition be as independent as possible, which would sometimes sound complex and even very confusing. The English composers broke from this tradition by writing more homogeneous lines that promoted sonority above all else. Dissonances, if there were any, were very controlled in the style of chordal writing. In fact, such attention to providing consonances throughout a piece was called **pan-consonant**. The text also dictated the rhythm of the music, with each line moving mostly together in a more “vertical” style than the individual “horizontal” lines of the Middle Ages. The
leading composer of this new style was **John Dunstable** (c. 1390-1453). Dunstable and his contemporaries inspired composers on the continent to write discant in the “English style”. Generally, aside from the pan-consonant method which the English sound was known for, Dunstable and his fellow composers also employed a technique known as **faburden**, derived from the practice of improvisation. Faburden consisted of the use of first inversion triads moving in parallel motion, of which the lowest voice was called the **faburdener**. The practice of writing parallel fifths and octaves was no longer tolerated.

The largest manuscript that contains music of the early 15th century is called the **Old Hall Manuscript**. Ironically enough, Dunstable's works are nowhere to be found, though the music contained within the manuscript dates from 1370 to 1420, exactly during the height of Dunstable's popularity. The picture on the right is a page from the Old Hall Manuscript containing a setting of the Gloria by Roy Henry (King Henry V). Other techniques that the English employed were taking the chant melody of the piece and putting it in the **superius**, or highest voice. Isorhythm was still a celebrated method of composition, and sometimes the chant melody would be found “wandering” from voice to voice, even manipulating it to the point where the theme was almost unrecognizable. Overall, it was the English method of writing that inspired composers all over Europe to elevate music to the next course of its development.

**Humanism: The Face of the Renaissance**

**Humanism**, like the word Renaissance, was a term that was not brought into use until centuries later. For the people who lived in the Renaissance, they truly wished to separate their lives from the destruction and decadence of the Middle Ages, but they did not consider their age a “rebirth” of classical ideals. In fact, works of the great Greek and Roman thinkers were still known to most people living in Italy, and there were even still Greek speakers living at the southern edge. Ancient texts were then reexamined, studied, and edited in the 15th century, but only according to the developing science for which the Renaissance was known for. While all the arts and sciences in Greek culture were thought to be interrelated, Renaissance humanists separated these concepts and studied them for their individual qualities. Music, in particular, was thought of as an expressive art to move the emotions and sway the senses, something that would have been unheard of during the Middle Ages. Thus humanism, developed in Italy, was a mass awakening to the ideals of Greek antiquity and the pursuit of studying and further developing those ideals.

Perhaps the most famous composer of the early 15th century in Italy was **Johannes Ciconia**. Born in Liege (now in modern-day Belgium), Ciconia was the son of a priest whose family was in high standing. As is typical with composers of the Medieval and early Renaissance period, we know very little of Ciconia's early life. We do know that he was studying in Rome in
the 1390’s, and moved to Padua (northern Italy) after the turn of the century. In Padua, Ciconia became a cantor at the cathedral and eventually died there in 1412. Ciconia is primarily known for his uncanny ability to transition between the styles of the French Ars Nova and the new Italian style that would define his music in his later life. In fact, his journey from the French low countries to northern Italy marked the beginning of a mass migration of composers to Italy. Ciconia’s works are noted for their combination of the French contrapuntal style mixed with the Italian humanism that would define the spirit of the Renaissance. His most famous work, the motet O Rosa Bella (O Beautiful Rose), anticipates the evolution of the humanistic approach to music in which the music must reflect the heightened emotional quality of the text. O Rosa Bella was an exceptionally popular tune in those days, and many composers set the poem to music, including John Dunstable. No such approach of specifically crafting the music to suit the emotional quality of the text was made during the Middle Ages, and it is this change in compositional style that is one of the largest differences between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

The French Connection

“I’m French! Where do you think I get this outrageous accent?” - Monty Python and the Holy Grail

While the secular music of Italy and the Burgundian lands were constantly in a state of flux, the French formes fixes of the 1300-1500’s were still going strong. This is apparent in the works of the most famous composer of the mid-15th century, Guillaume Dufay. Dufay (see Composer Profiles for biographical notes) was known for composing not only both sacred and secular works, but in every genre available at the time, including the ballade, the rondeau, and the virelai. The French chanson, or “song with words”, was now considered a secular song with the dominant theme of courtly love. As opposed to the chansons of the Middle Ages, however, chansons of the “Renaissance” quality involve painting the music to the emotional quality of the words. Dufay, in particular, was a master in using elements such as mensuration, texture, counterpoint, and rhythm to heighten the quality of the poetry. Instrumental playing sometimes took part in accompanying the singers, and at times replacing certain voices if singers were not available. The harp was the most practiced instrument in the early 15th century until it was replaced by the more popular lute, ancestor of the modern day guitar.

Another great composer of the mid 15th century was Gilles Binchois (c. 1400-1460). Seen with the harp in the photo above, Binchois is seen having a pleasant discussion with Guillaume Dufay, seen with the portative organ on the left. Binchois served at the court of Philip the Good until his retirement in 1453. While usually mentioned together, Binchois’s music is quite different than Dufay’s, though they both wrote in sacred and secular forms. Binchois was considered the
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finest melodist of his time, with many composers borrowing melodies from him in their own works. His works are much easier to follow than Dufay’s both melodically and rhythmically.

**The Mass in the Renaissance**

One of the most important changes in sacred music came with the new developments of the Mass in the 15th century. While the establishment of the triad as the basis for all polyphonic music is the crowning achievement of the Renaissance in terms of style, then the cantus-firmus Mass is the achievement in terms of genre. Before one underlying theme, known as the cantus-firmus, or “fixed song”, unified all movements of a single Mass, each plainchant that was sung in the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei would be completely unrelated to each other. It was only starting in the 13th century that chants would even begin to be associated with one another and then grouped together in the liturgy. Most Masses were still sung monophonically to Gregorian chant; it was the larger polyphonic Masses that were reserved for special occasions.

The most famous complete Mass from the 14th century that was attributed to a single composer was Guillaume de Machaut’s *Messe de Nostre Dame*. But even Machaut’s Mass does not contain a strong sense of structural unity between each movement because each is based on a separate plainchant. Even when the 15th century began, composers merely paired movements together structurally, such as the Gloria and Credo, or the Sanctus and the Agnus Dei. They could relate these movements together by repeating a primary motive, or by relating the time signatures, keys, number of voices, and even rhythms with each other. In the following decades, the practice of unifying movements of the entire Mass as a whole began to take shape.

It was the English who began the tradition of uniting the individual movements of the Mass together by basing them on a singular preexisting melody, called the cantus-firmus. Masses that were composed using this technique began to be known as cantus-firmus Masses. John Dunstable and Leonel Power are the two earliest known composers that cantus-firmus Masses are attributed to. Over time, each Mass had adapted similar qualities: three voice texture had grown to four voices with the cantus-firmus now sung in the next to lowest voice, called the tenor. A voice created below the tenor was called the bassus, and a newly created second to highest voice was called the altus. The highest voice was called the superius. This, of course, is the origin of our modern day four voice texture involving the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass parts. Overall, in addition to the structural changes of the Mass in the 15th century, Renaissance sacred music is characterized by the extreme control of dissonance, mostly consonant sonorities emphasizing thirds and sixths, equal importance of the individual voices, and the introduction of four-part texture.

**New Technologies**

*“She hit me with technology . . .”* - Thomas Dolby, from “She Blinded Me with Science”

It is impossible to discuss the music of the Renaissance without touching on the technology that created a revelation in printing and distributing music. Published in 1452, the famous Gutenberg Bible was created using the new moveable type printing press by its inventor,
German-born Johann Gensfleish zum Gutenberg (1394-1468). Gutenberg’s forty-two line Bible, so named because each column (two per page) was composed of forty-two lines, revolutionized the technology of using metal blocks instead of wood, which was the practice in China many centuries earlier. Still, while Gutenberg did not invent the concept of printing, he was able to cast multiple pieces of type through the creation of individual blocks each containing a separate letter. These blocks could be easily moved to create three hundred pages per day. This technology would quite literally change the world. Much less expensive than traditional copying, Gutenberg’s invention would put more knowledge into the hands of the people, and in the political and religious strife of Europe in the Renaissance, books and pamphlets would be one of the most important weapons. Without it, Martin Luther’s Protestant Reformation would never have come to pass. The Gutenberg printing press was so successful that no major alterations to its technology had been made in nearly three hundred years.

The Song of the Armed Man

On January 10, 1430, the Order of the Golden Fleece was created by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. Philip, an extravagant patron of the arts in his court, hoped that the knights of the Order would take up the cause of driving the Turks out of Jerusalem, a task that even Richard the Lionhearted failed to accomplish during the Third Crusade. Though Philip’s crusade never got off the ground, a melody that came to be associated with the Order soon became the most popular song in the latter half of the 15th century – the Song of the Armed Man. The treatment of the Armed Man Song, or L’homme arme (see below), represents the stylistic changes developed in the third quarter of the 15th century. Composers set the tune in a variety of ways, each using more complex harmonies and rhythms to the cantus-firmus. No melody had been copied and set as much as the L’homme arme tune.
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The composer who some scholars believe to have composed the Song of the Armed Man was the French composer and poet Antoine Busnoys (c. 1430-1492). Busnoys, a primary composer of secular music (about seventy-five songs), is known mostly for his treatment of the Armed Man Song in his Mass of the same name. In each movement, the primary tune asserts itself at the very beginning. In addition, the entire Mass is constructed in a way that the durational patterns of each section are in accordance with the ratios of Pythagorian harmonics (ex. 2:1, 3:2, 4:3). Busnoys's Mass also contains some number symbolism; there are thirty-one breves in the center section of the Credo (the middle, or "core", of the Mass), which corresponds with the thirty-one knights in the original Order of the Golden Fleece. Busnoys's Mass was the model for many of the L'homme arme Masses that were to follow; in fact, around forty separate Armed Man Masses were composed over the next hundred years by some of the most preeminent composers of the Renaissance.

Instrumental Music

Before 1450 there exists very few examples of purely instrumental music that was not used in conjunction with voices as a mere accompaniment tool. This is not to say that instruments did not serve an important function in aristocratic and religious life, only that little of it has been preserved. During the Renaissance, organ and keyboard music, in addition to instrumental ensembles began to become more commonplace. Organs came in two primary sizes: the large, grand organs set in churches and cathedrals throughout Europe, and the smaller, portable organ called the portative organ, which could be carried over the shoulder (see below). In the mid 15th century, works for organ that included instructional manuals, arrangements of popular melodies, and freely composed introductions, called preludes, were written by organists and theorists. The Netherlander Henri Arnaut wrote a treatise around 1440 that contained information about the

![L'homme arme (The Song of the Armed Man)]
design and variety of Renaissance organs and other instruments, a treatise that survives to the present day.

Just as each court retained a company of singers for many occasions, members of the nobility also kept a staff of instrumentalists. These instruments included the Renaissance equivalent of the trumpet and trombone, as shown in the picture below. The trumpet players, in particular, were responsible for more than performing for social events. They led processions, announced government proclamations, and sounded military calls during battles. Performing for feasts, dances, and other public and private entertainment was an important function that sometimes required around twenty instruments. Smaller ensembles, or “soft ensembles”, contained more delicate instrumentation, comprising mostly of the harp, the lute, and the portative organ. Music publishers would sometimes advertise their material as suitable for both voices and instruments. This is proof that vocal and instrumental pieces were often interchangeable, including both sacred and secular music.

The Josquin Generation

The composers that were active in the latter half of the 15th century were among the best and the brightest that a single generation ever produced. While they were all known for their technical skills of setting polyphony, they were also famous for their ability to create emotion through aligning words and music. The next generation that occupied the years around 1600 modified that style with respect to their predecessors. While respecting that lineage, however,
they took steps to reshape their music to form the foundation of their own personal styles. With the composer Josquin Desprez at the helm, music would once again go through a “rebirth”.

Although imitation in counterpoint was not an invention of Josquin and his contemporaries, they were the first to use it as the building blocks of their own works. While imitation was formally used as a means to unite only two voices, such as the superius and the tenor, Josquin used imitation throughout all four voices of his compositions. Not only this, but while these imitations of the past stuck to a primary routine in their behavior, Josquin’s imitations are very unpredictable. For example, in the piece Ave Maria, virgo serena, there are contrasts between duets of each individual voice, including high and low duets in both homophonic and polyphonic writing. In addition, the piece also contains shifting meters, overlapping phrases, word painting that corresponds directly to the text, and it all seems natural and almost effortless. In fact, Ave Maria was described by the musicologist Jessie Ann Owens as the Mona Lisa of Renaissance music.

Josquin’s life leaves much to be determined, unfortunately (see Composer Profiles for a brief biography), but it is certain that he is the most studied composer of the Renaissance. Running a Google search on his name will give you approximately 130,000 results. The “Josquin” generation, so named because Josquin is universally considered by scholars to have been at the forefront of musical life at the turn of the century, was responsible for altering the relationships between the individual voice parts of their songs. In Dufay’s generation, each voice played a role in a prescribed “hierarchy” that contained mostly the same superius-tenor duet texture, with the altus and bassus filling out the chords. With the pervading imitation of Josquin’s polyphonic treatments, that relationship now equalized each voice, creating the ability for any voice to drive the text. The relationship between music and text also evolved under Josquin. While the composers of the previous generation, specifically Busnoys and Ockeghem, treated text with a more general musical setting, Josquin and his contemporaries were the first to express emotion (particularly sadness) in a way that sounds recognizable to our modern ears. For example, Josquin descends into the lower range of the bassus in his Nymphes des bois, specifically during the line “but descend into hell weeping”, which clearly is meant to convey a sense of mourning. The piece itself was designed as an elegy to Ockeghem, of who was a compositional hero to Josquin. In summary, the accomplishments of Josquin and composers of his generation include the technique of imitation as a basis structural foundation of their work, the larger sense of chordal sonority with greater controlled dissonance, the shift from the overuse of melismas, the use of shorter melodic motives driven by the text itself, and an expression that was more accessible to the listener and still sounds modern to listeners in the present day.
The Turn of the Century
“Party like it’s 1499!”

The Josquin generation continued to make alterations to the existing forms of the day. The Mass, for example, was significantly changed by the advent of pervading imitation through all the voice parts, which was called a paraphrase Mass. Still many more composers would transform individual pre-existing motives into the basis of the Mass structure itself, called a parody Mass. These types of Masses became favorites going into the sixteenth century. Another composer in Josquin’s generation, Jacob Obrecht, still wrote Masses using the cantus-firmus technique as he lived the life of an everyday church musician. A theme that originated in the Requiem Mass that continues to this day is the dies irae (below). This theme, which appears in Antoine Brumel’s Requiem Mass, is the earliest known setting of the melody. The dies irae theme was famously used in Hector Berlioz’s Symphonie Fantastique, written in 1830, and is featured in the opening credits of Stanley Kubrick’s The Shining. In fact, many composers have set the dies irae theme, including Mozart, Verdi, Liszt, Saint-Saens, and even in contemporary composer Michael Dougherty’s Metropolis Symphony, based on the death of Superman!

In another big change around the turn of the century, the formes fixes that survived many years of prolonged use during the Dufay – Ockeghem generations was finally ending its run. And just as the rondeau, the ballade, and the virelai were no longer being used, other, more nationalistic forms were beginning to take hold. These styles, which began to emerge in the years 1450-1475, began to adopt the conventions that their predecessors held in their time. Josquin, Obrecht, and other composers of that generation didn’t write a single piece in the antiquated formes fixes. In Italy, around the 1490’s, the secular song form known as the frottola became increasingly popular. The word “frottola” had two meanings for musicians during that period. First, it could designate polyphonic settings of Italian secular music in a fixed poetical meter, or it could describe any Italian secular piece of a courtly art, mostly with a theme of melancholy love. The composer Marchetto Cara (c. 1465-1525) was particularly masterful with the frottola, and could write for four-voice texture or for a solo voice with lute accompaniment.

In Spain, another tradition was being formed. During the reign of Ferdinand and Isabella, the repertoire of polyphonic song that emerged was vast, considering that both were great patrons of the arts. The villancico was by far the most popular form; there were over 300 written in the Palace Songbook, written during the years 1500-1520. Spanish polyphonic song in general contains a sense of simple melodic direction, easy to understand homophony, and a modern sense of tonality. In Germany, the tenorlied, or “social song” reached its maturity. Heinrich Isaac, Germany’s most famous composer of his generation, reached an almost rock-star status with his farewell to Innsbruck, entitled Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen (Innsbruck, I must leave you). The
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song received a number of choral settings, including several by J.S. Bach and two by Johannes Brahms. Even today, one can visit Innsbruck and get a postcard where the melody is written out against a backdrop of snow-covered mountains.

The Post-Josquin Generation

While the list of composers following Josquin did not follow exactly in his footprints in regards to compositional technique, they were nevertheless referred to as the “post Josquin” generation. The state of progress in not only music, but art, architecture, and literature during the 15th and 16th centuries suggests that each succeeding generation added to the quality of what came before it. The second half of the 16th century brought with it several noteworthy composers, of whom the most famous of which was Adrien Willaert. Willaert (see Composer Profiles) was probably the foremost musician of his generation. Continuing on the practice of relating text to music in a more emotional vein, Willaert and his contemporaries also expanded the tonal space of their music. In fact, historians even argue that there was a “secret chromatic art”, or harmonies that went outside the basic tonality of commonplace 16th century music. Willaert’s Quid non ebrietas shows extraordinary chromatic harmony, which even borders on heresy! Like Magellan circulating the globe in 1519, Willaert was circulating the realm of tonal space. While certain advancements were being made in secular music, the music for the Mass remained largely untouched by this generation. The parody Mass was still the basis for composition, as was the paraphrase Mass. However, in the development of national song styles, the European world was just getting started.

National Song Styles

Three new song genres sprang up in the second quarter of the 16th century: the Parisian chanson, the Italian madrigal, and the German lied. Before the 1520’s, the modern areas of Holland (Flemish) and France (Franco) were very much intertwined from a musical standpoint. That relationship would eventually split and form two distinct cultures in the Low Countries and in France, labeled “Netherlandish” and “Parisian”, respectively. On the one side, the term “Parisian” chanson does not necessarily contain an accurate description of where the song originated, considering that most “Parisian” chansons were written outside Paris, though they were composed in France. Even so, they differ very little from the chanson of the same name that was used at the end of the Middle Ages. Its music reflected poetry of multiple styles, with its lyrical melody in the top voice, clear-cut phrase structure, and a very chordal style in the other voices. The Italian madrigal, however, is related to its Medieval counterpart in name only. While the early madrigal developed from Franco-Flemish composers, the 16th century madrigal is entirely associated with Italy. Though the Italian madrigal may not have an exact origin (many historians credit the frottola), it does represent secular Italian music at its best. The madrigal was an all-vocal piece, sounding with each phrase of music for one line of text (like the frottola). The poetry itself, was in no short supply. Francesco Petrar (1304-1374), considered with Dante to be the greatest poet of the late Middle Ages, had a resurgence in popularity after being all but
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overlooked in the eyes of his contemporaries. His texts, along with 16th century poet Pietro Bembo, would give the Italian madrigal its “voice” to composers like Willaert for several decades.

Left: Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374)

In this edition of the madrigal, composers gave the poetry of Petrarch the serious musical treatment it deserved. The term “madrigal”, like the frottola, was only a generic term that encompassed a variety of poetical types, including the sonnet, balata, canzone, or poems set to be written specifically as madrigals. In addition to Willaert, some of the leading composers of madrigals included Philippe Verdelot (1480-1545) and Jacques Arcadelt (c. 1505-1568). In Verdelot’s madrigals we see a transition to more shifting vocal groups and overlapping cadences into subsequent phrases. Arcadelt, who may have been friends with Verdelot, spent most of his life in Rome after tours in Florence and Venice. He later moved back to his native France, where he spent the rest of his life. Arcadelt used the rhyme scheme of the text itself to highlight his word painting. In the madrigal Il bianco e dolce cigno (The White and Gentle Swan Dies Singing), he calls attention to certain words and phrases by changing the rhythmic and harmonic structure in certain places. For example, he places a flat seventh on the word “weeping”, while there is a short melismatic flourish on the word “beato” (happy). While the church music of this period was practically devoid of emotional subtext (it was still largely forbidden), the madrigal became the most popular form of expression for its wide embrace of communicating feeling and the human condition.

The German lied, on the other hand, was far less complex and much more conservative. Designed primarily as a drinking hall song, lied were mostly sung by a group of professional singers called the Meistersingers (“master singers”). Chief among them was the German-born Hans Sachs, who was a shoemaker by profession. The Meistersingers held an annual competition to determine the best singer; the winner would receive a chain of medallions which he kept until the next competition (kind of like Miss America, but with less swimsuits and more beer!). Sachs’s Nachdem David war redlich und aufrichtig (Since David was Honest and Candide), is a prime example of monophonic lied which is set on the biblical conflict of David and Saul.

Instrumental Music to the End of the Renaissance

Like the madrigal, Italy was the center of the innovation that came out of the instrumental contributions from the Renaissance. New genres and styles grew everywhere, and instrumental forms started to depart from its vocal models into something completely independent. Though the art of arranging vocal pieces for instruments such as the organ or lute continued its business, the amount of embellishment that the arrangers added was far beyond the scope of any vocal
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ability. These additions spread like wildfire, and more and more virtuosos were clamoring for pieces that demonstrated their technical skills. One of the primary forms that continue to inspire composers today is that of the theme and variations. While variation technique was not new to 16th century composers, the formalization of that technique (using it as a structural foundation) had not yet been explored. The Spanish composer Luis de Narvarez used a variety of variation technique for the Spanish counterpart to the lute, called the vihuela, which looks more like a modern guitar than a Renaissance-era lute (see picture on right). While a composer could write individual self-contained variations as separate pieces, another could write several variations in the piece continuously. And a performer, though he may have had the music right in front of him, would not refrain from adding his own embellishments and improvisations. This goes to show that the practice of improvisation far predates the beginnings of 20th century Jazz music. Musicians had been improvising for centuries before Jazz became a definitive art form. In fact, improvisation would be a required ability for every church organist looking for a good job. A choir book would be opened at random and the candidate would have to perform improvisations on the chosen piece.

The form most responsible for the creation of the Baroque fugue was the ricercar. Meaning “to seek out”, or “to search out”, the ricercar was exactly that. A thematic idea would be stated in the opening phrases, which was then embellished and varied, often resembling speech patterns. The ricercar was even deemed suitable for singers, but could only be sung on solfege syllables like “la, la, la”. The ricercar became a thoroughly imitative piece, and was the first instrumental style to use pervading imitation. Francesco Canova da Milano (1497-1542), known as the most famous lutenist of his day, wrote a series of Fantasias, or “fantasies”, based on imitative themes designed to demonstrate technical prowess.

Two more influential forms were the canzone and the toccata. While the canzone originated as a mere arrangement of a French secular vocal piece, it soon made the transition into a purely instrumental form. While still containing pervasive imitation, its lively rhythm separates it from the slower beat of its vocal predecessor. The toccata, however, grew out of the church service, as evident in J.S. Bach’s famous Toccata and Fugue in D minor, written sometime between 1703 and 1707. The toccata served a prelude-like function and grew out of the tradition of improvisation. Mostly organists embraced this form, especially at St. Mark’s where Adrien Willaert taught many influential composers of the late Renaissance. One of these composers was Claudio Merulo, who studied with Gioseffo Zerlino, a leading theorist who studied with Willaert. Merulo won the post of organist at St. Mark’s in Venice, succeeding Zerlino, and wrote a number of toccatas that were hugely influential with Baroque composers such as J.S. Bach and Frescobaldi.
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A Return to Jolly Old England

While England had been completely out of the spotlight since the beginning of the Renaissance period, we return to it now to find the Tudor dynasty, the English Reformation, and the rise of a new English style with a new cast of characters. England had not yet made any significant advances in music for two reasons. First, English composers did not travel as extensively as those on the continent, and second, England did not immediately embrace the technological advancements of printing music. It was not until the rise of Henry VII and Henry VIII that England cultivated a style all its own.

When the throne, and a (1491-1547) became king at 18 years of age, England had already separated its musical tradition from that of the continent. The major source of English music around 1520 is a text called “King Henry’s Songbook”, of which the best composer represented was King Henry himself. Henry VIII loved music and had a large collection of viols and recorders. An amateur composer as well, Henry is not the first royal to dabble in music, though he was by all means an amateur. The leading composer at Henry’s court was William Cornysh (d. 1523). The Henry Songbook contains about a dozen songs of his, one of which, “Ah Robin, gentle Robin”, contains a canon technique like the famous Sumer is icumen in.

Henry VIII is most famous for his break with the Catholic Church and marriage to his six wives. His first wife, Katherine of Aragon, was the daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, and was married to Henry’s older brother, Henry VII, before his death. Catherine was then married to Henry VIII and failed to produce a male heir, only a daughter named Mary. Meanwhile, Henry fell in love with Anne Boleyn, and tried to have his marriage to Katherine annulled on the basis that she had married him after she consummated her marriage to Henry VII, which Katherine denied. The Pope sided with Katherine; after which Henry broke completely with the Church, establishing himself as the Supreme Head of the Church of England. Subsequently, Anne Boleyn also failed to produce a male heir, giving birth to Elizabeth, who would later become Queen Elizabeth I. Anne was beheaded on accusations of adultery, and Henry...
would eventually be married four more times before his death in 1547. Thus the Church of England was established, which is one of the leading religions in England to this day.

The Eton Choirbook, which is the most significant collection of English sacred music between the Old Hall manuscript and the English Reformation, is entirely absent of stylistic innovations that were going on in the continent. There is no pervading imitation, no sense of word painting, or even any trace of humanist philosophy about the relationship between words and music. It does, however, have tendencies toward bold dissonances and energetic rhythms that are not present anywhere else in Europe. Two of the most widely represented composers of this style are Robert Fayrfax (b. 1464) and John Taverner (c. 1490’s). While Fayrfax has left us more music from this time period than any other English composer, it was John Taverner that is considered the greatest composer of his age. While composers on the continent had been developing the L’homme arme, or “armed man” theme, English composers such as Taverner were setting a theme known as the Western Wynd. It is not completely known how the theme came into existence, but it appears in an early 16th century manuscript as a basic monophonic theme. Taverner’s settings culminate in his Western Wynd Mass, where he restates the theme repeatedly and assigns it to different voice parts. Each statement constantly varied the number and makeup of the voices, and no two statements are exactly alike. The Masses of John Taverner bring an end to the cantus-firmus centered Masses of the previous century, further distancing itself from music on the continent. After the Reformation, only English texts were considered appropriate for use within the church service, and it would not be until the reign of Elizabeth I that the integration between English music and that of the continent would occur.

The Counter-Reformation

“I’m rubber and you’re glue. Whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you.”

While Martin Luther and his followers were creating an uproar with the rise of Protestantism, the Roman Catholic Church was planning their comeback with the Council of Trent. The Council, which met three times over a period of eighteen years, was designed to revitalize the church doctrines and unite against all rival religions. Music was no exception to these proceedings. The church liturgy was heavily scrutinized for being too polyphonic, or so complex that the meaning behind the music became unintelligible. In addition, this music obscured the words and too often used secular melodies such as chansons or madrigals. Ironically enough, John Calvin, one of the most outspoken and influential figures of the Protestant Reformation, completely banned the use of polyphony altogether in church music. It was Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, or so legend has it, that “saved” polyphony in the church. Palestrina (for full bio see Composer Profiles), edited current liturgical works so they would be more in tune with what the Council deemed “worthy” music for the church. In addition, he composed more than a hundred masses, including his most famous Pope Marcellus Mass, written while in the service of Cardinal Ippolito II d’Este. Before becoming “the savior of polyphony”, Palestrina also wrote secular works, which he regretted after entering the service of the church. Though in retrospect he may have been a normal working church musician, Palestrina does remain the model of sacred polyphony by which most Renaissance and Baroque
composers were judged. Johann Joseph Fux in his treatise *Gradus ad parnassum* describes Palestrina as “the celebrated light of music”, while his masses served as inspiration for generations to come. Even Beethoven studied Palestrina’s counterpoint when composing his *Missa solemnis*.

In Spain, under King Philip II (r. 1556-98), religion under the Catholic banner thrived. The music of the liturgy was very intense under the greatest Spanish composer of the 16th century, **Tomas Luis de Victoria**. Born in Avila in 1548, Victoria is considered the greatest Spanish composer of the Counter-Reformation. He served the Empress Maria after spending twenty years in Rome studying both music (possibly with Palestrina) and theology until her death in 1603. He remained with the convent as organist and composer until his death in 1611. Victoria composed no secular music at all, but his sacred music reflects the homophonic simplicity and lack of elaborate counterpoint that is evident in Palestrina’s style. Of his works, *O Magnum Mysterium* and *O vos omnes* are the most performed. They both illustrate Victoria’s intense passion for religious mysticism.

Of all the great composers on the continent in the second half of the 16th century, **Orlande de Lassus** was the most universal, composing equally in sacred and secular forms. Born in present-day Belgium, Lassus traveled to Sicily, Milan, Naples, and eventually Rome. In 1563 Lassus became maestro de cappella in the service of Albrecht V in Munich and remained there for the rest of his life. The only other European composer that obtained such fame during his lifetime was Palestrina. Lassus wrote over 2,000 works during his life, including more than 500 motets. Ironically enough, there is unfortunately no instrumental music by Lassus, especially at an age where instrumental music was becoming increasingly popular. What is so significant about Lassus’s style is his uncanny ability to make his text “speak”. In his view, music should always be analogous to speech; that the music should serve the text unequivocally. This style of music was called *musica reservata*, and had champions in the compositions of Cipriano de Rore and the French composer Claude Le Jeune. Lassus, however, stands out for his enormous compositional output, in addition to his masterful execution of word-painting and partwriting.

Overall, the tension between the Catholic church of the Counter-Reformation and Lutheran Protestantism was felt in all corners of Europe. The close of the Renaissance, therefore, will end as it began, with a final return to England.
England Under Elizabeth I

“God Save the Queen!”

After Henry VIII died in 1547, the throne was taken up by his nine-year old son by his third wife, Jane Seymour. Known as Edward VI, he became ill in 1553 and died at the young age of 15. During his brief lifetime, however, Edward was adamant regarding Protestant reform and the return of England to religious unity. Upon his death, Mary I took the throne. Mary, daughter of Henry and his first wife, Katherine of Aragon, attempted to reverse England's religious direction and return the country back to its Catholic roots. While she was considered first in the line of succession, so was Elizabeth, daughter of Henry and Anne Boleyn. A number of plots were uncovered with the intent to replace Mary with Elizabeth, so Mary imprisoned Elizabeth in the Tower of London and executed her supporters, earning her the nickname “Bloody Mary”. Mary died in 1558, and though she failed to return England back to Catholicism, her relatively short reign was nonetheless successful, as she opened up new trade routes between England and France, developed a new coining system that lasted for several centuries, and created relations between England and Russia for the first time in its history. After her death in 1558, Elizabeth, then 25 years old, became queen of England. Elizabeth was extremely popular with the people. A Protestant like her mother, Elizabeth issued the Act of Supremacy following her coronation, which placed Elizabeth as head of the Protestant Church in England, much like her father did before her. During her reign, she was placed under enormous pressure to marry, which she refused, and died without an heir, ending the reign of the Tudor dynasty.

While under her rule, England exhibited a mixture of musical influence from its own past and that of the continent. Music was still centered at the royal court and was subject to Elizabeth’s tastes and pleasures. With the defeat of the Spanish armada, England enjoyed the reputation as a world power, especially in its navy. This new-found pride penetrated all aspects of culture, including literature, drama, and music. Known as the literary age of Shakespeare and Marlowe, England became a center for world culture. Elizabeth herself was very talented: she spoke French, Italian, and Spanish, read Latin, played the lute, and enjoyed dancing and hunting. She was certainly a “Renaissance woman”, and is considered the greatest of the Tudor monarchs and possibly one of the greatest rulers in England’s history.

English music under Elizabeth completely turned its back on Latin sacred music. It was generally accepted that the native English tongue was the only acceptable medium for both sacred and secular music. After all, this was all subject to Elizabeth’s will, and musicians who
wanted work at her court (a very good job!) had to compose as she wished. The composers most acquainted with English sacred music were Thomas Tallis and William Byrd. Tallis (c. 1505-1585) composed for Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I, altering his style to fit the tastes and demands of each ruler. Like Byrd, who studied under him, he remained a devout Roman Catholic, though there was no controversy that surrounded him due to his prodigious technique. Byrd, however, held “undercover” Catholic services at one of his patron’s homes in Essex County. Each composer is characterized by their tendencies toward a very tonal and homophonic style, using music to convey the meaning of the texts.

Secular music was mostly lorded over by John Dowland (see Composer Profiles). Dowland was primarily responsible for bringing the lute song, which up until then had been mostly an amateur pursuit, into a sophisticated art form rivaling any of the sacred genres. While the word of the Lord and Christ were the sole themes of the church liturgy, the lute song went the opposite way and favored melancholy and despair as their source of inspiration. Dowland’s Flow, my Tears was one of the largest “hits” for both the commoners and royalty alike. The lute song was more of a simpler, direct style of expression as opposed to some of the other secular forms like the madrigal.

Epilogue

Overall, we cannot put a single date as to the beginning or end of what we have determined the “Renaissance Period”. After all, the term “Renaissance” is a fairly recent one, having been created by the French historian Jules Michelet in 1855. The term appears in his Histoire de France, a 19 volume encyclopedia written between the years of 1833 and 1867. To the people living in the early Renaissance, it is true that they thought their age may have been detached from the Middle Ages, mostly due to the concept of humanism and a return to the philosophies of ancient Greece, but even the term “Middle Ages” was used to describe a period between when Greece was in its prime and the return to its philosophies a thousand years later. The next so-called “period” of music, the Baroque, extends (say music historians) from 1600 to 1725, another arbitrary date set so it makes it easier for us to encapsulate a period of history within a given timeframe. The truth is, as most historians well know, that these changes happen gradually, and there is no stop watch where one style becomes popular and another becomes archaic. Many forms and styles of the Middle Ages were still popular well into the Renaissance, and thus many Renaissance styles were still popular after the dawn of the Baroque.

For Review:

- The Renaissance Age was characterized by the concept of humanism, which was a resurgence of interest in studying and developing the concepts of Greek antiquity.
- Music in the Renaissance originates with the “English sound”, which employed heavy consonances, called pan-consonance. Individual lines also lost their independence as a more homogeneous character became the norm.
- The most famous of the early English Renaissance composers was John Dunstable.
Many of the examples of the “English sound” are found in the Old Hall Manuscript.

Scholars generally agree that the beginnings of humanism were created in Italy, particularly in the city of Florence. The most famous Italian composer of the early Renaissance, Johannes Ciconia, was a master in both the Italian and French Ars Nova styles of composition.

Many composers from the Burgundian low countries migrated to northern Italy and began practicing these new styles of composition.

French composers still wrote music in the styles of the formes fixes well into the 16th century. Guillaume Dufay was the most famous composer of the mid 15th century with works spanning all genres, both sacred and secular.

Sacred music of the 15th century introduced the cantus-firmus Mass, where each movement was related to one another by the use of the same melody, or cantus-firmus. Four voice texture also replaced the three voice structure of the Middle Ages.

The greatest revolution in technology in the Renaissance was the invention of the moveable-type printing press by Johann Gutenberg.

The Song of the Armed Man, or L’homme arme, was considered the most popular tune of the mid-15th century, and was set by many composers into Masses, including its possible creator, Antoine Busnoys.

Instrumental music played a large part in the aristocratic courts, using a variety of instruments for different entertainment and military functions.

The greatest composer of the mid-Renaissance was Josquin Desprez, who in conjunction with his contemporaries, including Jacob Obrecht, Pierre de la Rue, and Heinrich Isaac, transformed Renaissance music into a more “modern” sound.

Around 1500, composers abandoned the formes fixes in favor of more modern, nationalist forms. The Spanish villancico, the German tenorlied, and the Italian frottola all replaced their earlier counterparts.

The “post Josquin generation” included composers like Adrien Willaert, who expanded the tonal space of his secular music. Sacred music largely remained untouched, however.

The Italian madrigal was at the forefront of secular Renaissance music until the end of the century. The German lied and the “Parisian” chanson were also influential secular forms.

Instrumental music was greatly expanded during the second half of the Renaissance. Forms such as the theme and variations, the canzone, and the toccata brought instrumental music to a new forefront that separated it from its vocal counterparts.

English music was completely separated from music on the continent. John Taverner and his Western Wynd Mass stood at the forefront of English sacred tradition.

The Council of Trent was designed to counteract the Protestant Reformation. During the council, polyphonic music was essentially put on trial and completely reorganized, mostly under the efforts of Giovanni Palestrina.

The greatest Spanish composer of the Counter-Reformation was Tomas Luis de Victoria, who wrote exclusively sacred music for the Spanish court.
Music in the Renaissance – 1400-1600

- **Orlande de Lassus** equaled Palestrina in fame for his use of word-painting and the idea that music should serve the text of a piece, known as **musica reservata**.
- English music under the rule of Queen Elizabeth I was devoid of all Latin influence and harbored both sacred and secular composers, including **Thomas Tallis**, **John Dowland**, and **William Byrd**.

**Suggested Listening:**

John Dunstable: *Quam pulchra es, O Rosa Bella*
Johannes Ciconia: *O Rosa Bella, Ut te per omnes/Ingens alumnus Padue*
Guillaume Dufay: *Resvellies vous et faites chiere lye, Se la face ay pale, Missa L'homme arme*
Gilles Binchois: *Amours mercy, De plus en plus, Dueil angoisseus*
Antoine Busnoys: *Missa L'homme arme, In hydraulis*
Josquin Desprez: *Ave Maria . . . virgo serena, Misere mei, Deus, Missa Pange lingua: Kyrie*
Heinrich Isaac: *Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen, Missa de Apostolis – Kyrie*
Adrien Willaert: Madrigal: *Aspro core e selvaggio, O Dolce vita mia*
Jaques Arcadelt: Madrigal: *Il bianco e dolce cigno*
Phillipe Verdelot: Madrigal: *Madonna, per voi ardo*
Hans Sachs: *Nachdem David war redlich und aufrichtig*
Francesco Canova da Milano: Ricercar: *Fantasia No. 6*
Vincenzo Pellegrini: *Canzon detta “la serpentina”*
Claudio Merulo: *Toccata*
William Cornysh: *Ah Robin, gentle Robin*
John Taverner: *Western Wind Mass*
Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina: *Pope Marcellus Mass, Nigra sum*
Tomas Luis de Victoria: *O Magnum Mysterium, O vos omnes*
Orlande de Lassus: *Prophetiae Sibyllarum – Prologue, Tristis Est Anima Mea, Lagrime di San Pietro*
Thomas Tallis: *If Ye Love Me, Salvator Mundi*
Thomas Weelkes: *O Care, Wilt Thou Dispatch Me*
John Dowland: *Flow, my Tears, In Darkness Let Me Dwell, The Lowest Trees Have Tops*
William Byrd: *Sing Joyfully Unto God, Pavana Lacrymae*

**Sources:**