

Medieval Era 450-1450

The period from approximately 450 through 1450 is known as the Middle Ages or the Medieval (mee-dee'-vul) era. Although some instrumental music was performed during this era, most Medieval music was vocal. This vocal music was of two types: sacred (music performed in churches) and secular (music performed outside the church). The sacred music was in a more formal style and the secular music was folk-like.

Secular music was the popular music of its time. It was frequently performed by traveling musicians who sang ballads and accompanied themselves on stringed and percussion instruments. Common stringed instruments were small harps, lutes (which developed into today's guitar), and viols (bowed stringed instruments which developed into today's violin). Percussion instruments included drums, cymbals, and bells. Wind instruments such as flutes and bagpipes were also played.

The music of the church, primarily the Roman Catholic Church, is very important in the history and development of music. For centuries, beginning in the Medieval era, the church was the primary place where serious musicians could perform music together.

Through about 1150, church music consisted mostly of a single melody sung by one person or a group. The singers were almost always men. The music of **Hildegard** is an exception; her music was sung almost exclusively by women.

Instead of speaking a prayer, a priest would sing it on various pitches. These "prayers sung on pitches" are called **chants**. Priests would make up the chants and teach them to other priests or male singers. It's the same way you first learned songs in school. Your music teacher sang a song and you sang it after him or her. After singing it a few times, you could remember the entire song and sing it by yourself or in a group.

As more and more prayers were set to chants, it became difficult for priests and singers to remember them all. So singers developed a group of written symbols, called **neumes** (nooms). The first neume, a black square, indicated the starting point. Other neumes and symbols indicated whether the next note was higher or lower. It looked more like a graph than today's musical symbols. Neumes were the first music notation. They weren't exact, but they allowed singers to sing many more chants than they could memorize.

Eventually horizontal lines were added and the neumes were placed on the lines. The horizontal lines developed into the musical staff we use today, and the neumes developed into notes.

Medieval Era 450-1450

During the period 900-1200, singers began to add a second part to the single-line chants. Music with more than one voice part is called polyphony. In the Medieval era the second melody was usually below the original melody by an interval of a 4th or 5th. The two parts moved together rhythmically and melodically. This is called parallel movement. A chant with a second, lower, parallel part is called organum. (This name has nothing to do with an organ.) Ask your music teacher to play a melody with a parallel melody a 4th or 5th below to hear how organum sounds.

The growth of polyphony continued through the last 300 years of the Medieval era (1150-1450). Neumes developed into more formalized notation, and this allowed music to be more carefully planned by composers. By 1400 the first great cathedrals were being built in Europe, giving composers wonderful places for their music to be performed.

Composers of the Medieval era

Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179)
Guillaume de Machaut (1300-1377)
John Dunstable (1385-1453)
Guillaume Dufay (1400-1474)

Some famous people of the Medieval era

Muhammad (570-632), Arab prophet of Islam
St. Thomas Aquinas (1033-1109), Italian philosopher, church leader
Genghis Khan (1162-1227), Mongol leader
Roger Bacon (1214-1294), British philosopher, scientist
Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400), British poet
Johann Gutenberg (1400-1468), German inventor of movable type
Joan of Arc (1412-1453), French patriot

Hildegard von Bingen



born
1098

Bemersheim, Germany

died
1179

*Rupertsberg
near Bingen, Germany*

“
The oldest, truest,
most beautiful organ
of music, the origin
to which alone our
music owes its being,
is the human voice.
—Richard Wagner

”

Hill'-duh-gahrd fun Bing'-en.

“von Bingen” refers to the town where Hildegard lived.
“Von” means “from” in German, and Bingen is a town. She is referred
to as Hildegard, not “von Bingen.”

A composer of the Medieval era.

Even though Hildegard von Bingen lived approximately 900 years ago, we know a great deal about her. Throughout her life she kept journals and corresponded extensively with others. Her father was a nobleman, her mother a noblewoman. Hildegard was their tenth child, and tradition required that the tenth child should be dedicated to the church. When Hildegard was eight, her parents sent her to a convent which was part of a monastery. Here she joined a religious order led by a nun known as Jutta of Spanheim, who many believed was a psychic and mystic. Hildegard became a nun at 15.

When Jutta died in 1136, Hildegard succeeded her as the Mother Superior of the order. She was 38. Within a few years, she claimed to have visions from God, and, eventually, she began writing down those visions. The church considered her a prophetess and visionary, and many church members began to seek her advice on personal and religious matters.

Sometime between 1147 and 1150 Hildegard founded a new monastery near Rudesheim, Germany. She wrote at great length on many subjects, and she exchanged correspondence with popes, kings, dukes, archbishops, and politicians. Many important and powerful men consulted her on matters of church and state. She also wrote poems and set at least 77 of them to music.

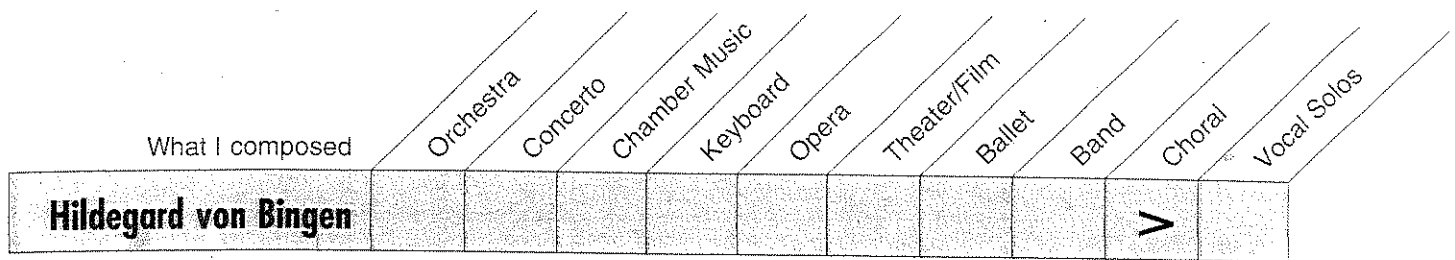
During Hildegard's time, music for the church consisted of **chants** which were sung by male monks. Hildegard, however, composed her music to be sung by the nuns of her order. No other composer of the period wrote music for female voices.

Hildegard seemed to write endlessly, both music and text. She wrote an encyclopedia describing various herbal medicines she had developed. This caused people to visit her to ask her to prescribe various herbs for their illnesses. She wrote biographies of several saints, numerous religious books, and even a play. She composed much of her music between 1150 and 1160.

At the age of 60, Hildegard began traveling and preaching throughout Germany. She was controversial during her lifetime. She claimed to have mystical powers, but not everyone believed her. In 1165 she moved her order of nuns to Bingen, Germany. After her death at age 81, there were several efforts to canonize her, but all the efforts failed.

Hildegard was not educated in the true sense of the word. All her knowledge came from her religious training. Her music is known as **plainsong** chant, the type of music sung in churches during the Middle Ages. But Hildegard's compositions are unique because they were written for female voices. She often claimed that she received her music and her writings directly from God. Because of her many writings, Hildegard is considered one of the greatest women of the Middle Ages.

Hildegard von Bingen



Hildegard Factoids:

- Hildegard claimed her music came to her in visions.
- One of her many books was based on a secret language which she invented.
- Hildegard was an expert on herbs and their healing properties. Many of the texts for her music included references to plants, animals, and minerals.
- Although Hildegard was one of the most remarkable women of her era, she considered herself to be nothing more than “a poor little woman.”

1098: Birth of Hildegard von Bingen; French physician Nicolas Provost writes *Antidotes*, a collection of more than 2500 prescriptions for the treatment of disease.

1100: Native Americans are using the canoe regularly.

1120: The wimple, a fine veil worn by women over the head and wound around the shoulders, becomes fashionable in England.

1131: Pope Innocent II at Reims, France crowns Louis, the son of King Louis VI of France, as king; he rules with his father as joint king.

1143: Robert of Chester and Hermann the Dalmatian make the first translation of the Koran into Latin.

1154: Henry II Plantagenet is crowned as king of England founding the Plantagenet dynasty.

1162: Thomas á Becket, Chancellor to King Henry II of England, is consecrated as archbishop of Canterbury.

1179: Death of Hildegard von Bingen; before her death she writes *Physica*, a closely observed encyclopedia of natural history.

**What in the world
is happening?**