

# Summary of style periods

Medieval to Classical

Early Medieval music:

Monophony - musical **texture** involving a single melodic line

Melisma - many notes to one syllable of text (**melody**)

Genre:

Gregorian Chant / Chant

Troubadour song\* (or chanson)

Estampie\* - music to accompany dancing

\*Even though there is only one line of written music, these works were performed with instruments whose music was not notated (improvised).

## Later Medieval music:

### Complexities:

Texture - nonimitative polyphony

Rhythmic patterns

### Genre:

Organum

Motet

Estampie

Melody: somewhat shorter in length

Harmony: starts to sound “filled in” to our ears

Rhythm/meter: less use of long-held lines in the lower voices

Contrasting or shifting textures

Text painting - using musical elements to represent a word or portion  
of a text

Sensitivity to vocal tone color

A cappella = voices only

Sacred Renaissance music:

Chant not always used

but when it was used, it was usually paraphrased

Genre: Mass Ordinary (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei)

Motet

Secular Renaissance music:

Genre:

Chanson (song)

Madrigal

Lute Song

Dance music

- Single emotion explored within a single movement/work
- Contrast of timber (tone color)  
Instruments + voices
- Instrumental music and the craft/art of instrument construction reaches new heights.
- Rhythm and meter are audibly defined.
  - A rhythmic idea (motive) can help to unify the whole.
  - The beat is sometimes emphasized through instrumentation.

- Harmony/Harmonic progression or Functional Harmony
- Form /structure  
How a piece or movement is organized,  
often in conjunction with the overall  
harmonic progression
- Basso continuo
- Genre: opera, oratorio, cantata, suite, concerto, solo  
works for instruments

# The Classical Era (about 1750-1800)

- Juxtaposing contrasting ideas within one movement/work  
Drama/excitement is created by through variety and contrasting musical elements within a single movement/work.
- Predominantly a homophonic texture, but polyphony is used.
- Rhythm helps to define new themes or thematic areas.
- Orchestra becomes standardized (strings + some winds)
- Uncomplicated, singable melodies with clear, balanced phrases
- Formal structures built on repetitions, contrast, and cadences (musical closings)



<https://ocw.mit.edu/>

21M.011 Introduction to Western Music  
Fall 2024

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <https://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.