The Renaissance: c. 1450-1600

Historical & Social Perspectives

Following a period known as the “Middle Ages” or medieval times, plagued with disease, famine and war, people began to turn from the Church in favor of a discovery of man’s artistic and scientific mind and the world around him. A renewed interest in Greek and Roman arts and philosophy emerged and Western society experienced a “rebirth” – what the French call “renaissance”.

Religious Contexts

A defining moment in social evolution occurred in 1453. The innovation developed by Johannes Guttenberg of Mainz, Germany is recognized as the inaugural event of the Renaissance – moveable type printing used in the Guttenberg Bible. Although it was a lengthy and expensive process, this advance began a process that lasted over 200 years, moving the power of knowledge away from the clergy and royalty to the common man. Another event that occurred that same year is the fall of Constantinople to the Turks. Eastern scholars, clergy and artists fled the region, flocking to Rome and central Europe.

Another watershed event struck with a heavy blow against a church door in Wittenburg, Germany. Some 250 miles northwest of Mainz and sixty-four years later on October 31, 1517, Martin Luther tacked his list of ninety-five grievances with the Catholic Church upon the Schlosskirche. An unimaginable wave of transformation occurred in the German church – the Protestant Reformation – that placed participatory music at the center of the church service. These challenges to the authority of the Church of Rome spread to Sweden, Scotland, and France and across most of Europe. Martin Luther and French legal scholar, John Calvin, shaped a religious movement that placed the congregation as the fundamental possessors of church doctrine and manipulation thereof. Between 1545 and 1564, Catholic church leaders met in a series of meetings known as the Council of Trent to stem the tide of the Reformation. The result of this Counter-Reformation made the Roman Catholic church more attractive in substance and image to churchgoers. Ornate façades updated the tired architecture of the past. The resurfacing of stained glass windows served several purposes to the clergy and congregation.
The artistic quality of these windows enhanced the worship experience to commoners on an aesthetic level. They helped educate the mostly illiterate masses by depicting church history, biblical passages and enumerated beliefs. The creation of these windows provided jobs for many artisans, reaching out to a group that had begun to feel alienated by the Church.

**Artistic & Scientific Contexts**

The Age of the Renaissance inspired exploration, practical invention and discovery. Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan all discovered and explored new lands; Nicolai Copernicus and Galileo Galilei expanded our knowledge of the universe through astronomy and our physical world on earth. Indeed, many men during this age often crossed disciplines. Niccolo Macchiavelli (1469-1527) was not only a political official, but also a famous philosopher, historian, essayist and author of the famous political treatise, *The Prince*.

Perhaps the most representative of the broad genius of this time is Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). Perhaps best remembered for his artistic accomplishments of the *Mona Lisa* and the fresco, *The Last Supper*. He supplied the world with a trove of inventions and knowledge in anatomy, architecture, aviation theory, mathematics, mechanics and a host of other disciplines. Leonardo’s range of accomplishment is rivaled by fellow Italian artist Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564). His sculptures *David* and *Moses* as well as his paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican stand as some of the greatest artistic works in the history of Western culture.

**Music in the Renaissance**

In contrast to the other arts, music of the Renaissance had less remarkable innovations. The quantity of performance opportunities increased as did the number composers who contributed technical improvements. Religious music still dominated, however a demand for secular music escalated.

The primary compositional style of the Renaissance was that of *polyphony*. Polyphonic music is sophisticated and often confusing to which to listen, often with four or five melodic lines performed simultaneously. What held this music together was that no melodic idea was totally unique from the primary melody. This use of *counterpoint* that wove these voices together and gives music of this time a very thick texture is what makes this music so interesting to hear. Music of this era can be best described as a tapestry
or intricate and delicate lacework. Each strand is unique unto itself, but in combination with other strands creates a harmonious and beautiful design.

It took nearly twenty years following the printing of the Guttenberg Bible before the first music book was published. It is known to be a Gradual, a book of church service music, but the name of the printer and exact date are not known. The first music widely circulated was completed in 1501 by Ottaviano Petrucci, who succeeded in adapting Guttenberg’s movable type for a musical format.

Music of the Renaissance was still written primarily for voice, although instrumental music, and its notation, became more popular. Popular instruments in use during the Renaissance were guitar, recorders, flutes, rudimentary trumpets, horns and sackbuts (trombones), viols, lutes and percussion. New instruments that emerged were the violin family, large copper timpani, the harpsichord and clavichord.

Musical Occupations

*Resident Court Composer* With aristocracy developing its own self-contained society including its own clergy and chapels, the need for a resident composer grew substantially. The resident court composer was responsible for supplying all music – religious, chamber, dance and choral – for the variety of events hosted or held by the patron aristocrat.

*Troubadours & Minstrels* Small groups of poet-musicians still existed in many countries during the Renaissance, although their pinnacle occurred in medieval France. These groups were the original vaudevillians – performing magic tricks, telling jokes, performing acrobatics and setting folk legends to music. Society often treated these performers as outcasts, until employed by resident court composer and the sponsoring aristocracy. The music these performers presented was known as *madrigals*. Madrigals covered a wide range of subjects including nature, setting of sonnets and pious dedications, but often relied on romantic, and often bawdy, relations of love.

Important Composers

*Josquin des Prez (c. 1440-1521)* One of the greatest composers of the Renaissance, Josquin was born in France but spent most of his productive life in Italy. He wrote many Masses, but was perhaps most well known for his secular *chansons* or chamber songs.

*Thomas Tallis (c. 1505-85)* An English church composer who wrote music in English and Latin under several different monarchs for both the Anglican and Catholic churches.
**Tielman Susato (c.1515-67)**  
Susato was born in northern Germany but spent much of his time writing and publishing music in the Franco-Flemish tradition. His output comprised of primarily chansons, which were much more musically ornamented and more free flowing than others of the period.

**Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c. 1525-94)**  
A gifted Roman composer and musician, Palestrina spent much of his career in the Vatican as the primary Vatican composer. Wrote over 100 Masses, including the *Pope Marcellus Mass* and the *Missa brevis*; over 500 sacred works and over 140 madrigals.

**William Byrd (c. 1543-1623)**  
One of the best English composers prior to the Baroque era, he composed music for both the Anglican and Catholic churches, a substantial amount of keyboard music and songs. Byrd received much of his musical training from Thomas Tallis, and they served together in the Chapel Royal for many together.

**Performance Practices**

Not much is known of how performances occurred or, more importantly, what they sounded like. Printed music during this time was extremely costly and rare. Traditional or folk music was rarely if ever chronicled, so performances and their style varied widely. Conventional wisdom assumes they are nothing near to the quality and clarity of today’s recordings with contemporary musicians. There has been an effort, albeit strange, to replicate authentic performances with untrained musicians or musicians trained to sound untrained. Due to the exploratory nature of the era, exploration of the mind, the arts, the spirit, and the common experiences of man, much feeling and enjoyment was derived from music making and listening.

**References:**


