

The Medieval Era

(800 - 1400 C.E.)

Instrumental

Although very little instrumental music has been left intact from the composers of the time period, it is a well known fact that instruments were used throughout the Medieval era.

INSTRUMENTS

Bowed Instruments

The most important of the bowed instruments were the vielles. They were the precursors of the Renaissance viol family. Another bowed instrument used during the medieval times was the rebec, which was a pear shaped instrument. Later in the time period the tromba marina appeared. It was long in shape and usually had one string. Sometimes it had two strings that were tuned in unison.

Plucked Strings

The most important plucked string instrument was the lute. It had an angled neck and a pear shaped body. The psaltery, a flat sounding board was another instrument similar to that of the zither.

Wind Instruments

During this time period recorders, various kinds of trumpets, and horns were in use. The shawm, which was a double reed instrument, was also used.

Organs

In the Medieval era, portative organs or organetto were used. They were small and were able to be moved around. The positive organ was a very important instrument of the time period. It was the first organ for which *polyphonic* music was composed. It was of medium size and could not be moved. During the 1300s larger organs started to appear usually in the churches of Europe. Some of them had up to 2,500 or more pipes.

Percussion Instruments

Drums came in many different shapes and sizes and were used mainly for military and dance purposes. Kettledrums, also called nakers, were used in pairs during this time period. In addition, a cylindrical drum, known as the tabor, was used. Many kinds of bells and cymbals were also used during the Medieval era.

During the Middle Ages, composers were not all that concerned with how their written music was performed. They gave little notice to what instrument(s) would play a piece and never indicated particular instruments within their scores. It is believed that there were basically five ways in which instruments were employed during this period in music history. According to Hugh M. Miller:

1. Vocal polyphony was occasionally played entirely by instruments
2. Instruments were used to double one or more vocal parts
3. Textless parts in polyphonic music were probably intended to be played by instruments as, for example, in 13th century motets and 14th century cacce and ballate.
4. Music clearly intended for instrumental performance was mainly dance music and a few instrumental motets and conductus.
5. They may have been substituted for voices in one or more parts with texts

Dance Music

Almost every single one of the preserved dance forms were written in monophonic style. Folk or court dance music was made up on the spot or played from memory. The principal dance form of the 1400s was the estampie. This dance form had many repeated sections and was almost always played triple time. Some other famous dances were the danse royale and the Italian saltarello and istanpitta from the 1500s. The ductia was also a popular dance that was written in three or four sections. The finale of a dance work was named a rotta, rotte, or rota, and involved a change of meter involved.