

# The developement of polyphony



Rick Serra Professor GrahamMusicHistory 1 2 October 2012 The Development of Polyphony Polyphony is a musical concept that completely revolutionized music as a whole. The development of polyphony began to take shape around the 11th century. When talking about polyphony, we are referring to a texture made up of two or more independent melodic voices, as opposed to music with just one voice (monophony) or music with one dominant melodic voice accompanied by chords (homophony).

Although we have an overall understanding when polyphony came about, many historians are still concealed in speculation and theories. Despite its beginnings we can assume that polyphony existed in one form or another somewhere else before it grew in the West. Some scholars suggest that roots may lie in Greek music, when the technique of improvising on the same melody could be found, also known as heterophony. Others opionate that its origins rest in the natural variations in voice placement from one person to another.

This is best described as when two different voices would sing the same melody using the most comfortable parts of their ranges, causing a succession of parallel intervals to be produced. It can also be viewed as a result of philosophical assumption on the possibility of synchronized interval performances. In order to understand the earliest stages of its development, we must rely on theoretical treatises. These are the technical descriptions of part singing, that have a distinguishing name, organum.

Organums can be found in theoretical works by the ninth and tenth centuries, but we do not find any signs of the early history or an attachment to any specific region in them. Conversely, these treatises describe and

arrange practices that may well have been widespread and could be considered a custom, not a novelty. Another theory of when European polyphony came about begins when the rivalry between the Western and Eastern churches reached a crisis in 1054. When that was taking place, scholars believe polyphony slowly made its way into church music.

So instead of monophony or heterophony, we started seeing separate voices sing together, not in unison or octaves but as diverging parts. In the eleventh century, when singers began improvising under the limits of certain rules left from simple parallel motion to give these parts some independence, a development unique to music history began. This was not a speedy process though, there were no sudden, sharp breaks with the past, these changes came about gradually.

Although we saw polyphony develop from the churches, we have good reason to believe that polyphony existed in Europe long before it was first unmistakably described. Melodic doubling at the third, fourth, or fifth, along with heterophony is found in many cultures and probably existed also in Europe. Unfortunately, no documents of such early European polyphony survive. But the first clear depiction of music for more than one vocal part, written in the ninth century, absolutely refers to a practice already in use, not a new one being proposed.

Passages in an anonymous treatise, *Musica enchiridis* and in a dialogue associated with it, *Scolica enchiridis*, describe and illustrate two distinct kinds of "singing together," both labeled by the name organum. People would sing in parallel fourths sometimes results in a tritone. To evade this undesirable sound, a rule banned the organal voice from going below G or C

in these circumstances. Instead, it was expected to stay on one note until it was safe once again to proceed in parallel fourths without meeting another tritone.

Under this practice, the organal part became separated from the plainchant and a larger diversity of synchronized intervals came into use, not all of them familiar consonances. This led to what we now know and understand as today's standard notation and rules for writing polyphony. Works Cited "The Beginning of Polyphony." About.com MusicEducation. N. p. , n. d. Web. 05 Oct. 2012. < <http://music.ed.about.com/od/historyofmusic/a/polyphony.htm>>. Burkholder, J. Peter, Donald Jay. Grout, and Claude V. Palisca. A History of Western Music. New York: W. W. Norton &, 2010.

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