

LIFE & TIMES

Europe in the fourteenth century

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL PROGRESS OF EUROPE WAS SEVERELY DISRUPTED BY MAJOR EVENTS OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY INCLUDING THE BLACK DEATH (1348–1350), THE HUNDRED YEARS’ WAR (1338–1453), AND THE LOCATION OF THE PAPACY IN AVIGNON INSTEAD OF ROME FOR MOST OF THE CENTURY.

Notions of a politically unified Europe that may have existed in earlier times gave way to the development of distinct political entities such as the Kingdom of France or the small Italian city-states.

In the arts, the fourteenth century saw some of the greatest literary works of all time, including Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. The greatest painter of the period, Giotto, is famous for his emphasis on the natural representation of people and objects. The fourteenth century also saw the beginning of humanism in intellectual thought—a movement that placed the achievements and activities of humans foremost instead of interpretations centered on the divinity.

Below A scene from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The work is divided into three books describing the poet’s epic journey through the three lands of death—the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.



Above A woodcut depicting scenes from the *Decameron* by Boccaccio. This masterpiece of Italian literature was written in the 1350s, and inspired writers for generations.

CHURCH AND STATE

The growing distinction between sacred and secular domains of human activity in the fourteenth century was evident in the idea that the state looked after people’s earthly concerns while the Church concerned itself with the welfare of their souls. The Church’s ability to counter these tendencies was hampered by its internal problems with corruption and decadence. Rival claimants to the papacy at this period led to the pope’s removal to the southern French city of Avignon. The existence of these problems and their widespread criticism from individuals in many fields led to the foundation of movements that foreshadowed the Protestant Reformation of the next century.

Musical developments were centered on the emergence of the Ars Nova (new art). Novelties associated with this artistic movement were mainly in the realm of musical notation and the codification of musical rhythm. Many of the principles established by musicians of this period have lasted to the present time (such as the consolidation of the practice of binary division of notes—that is, one long note can divide into two equal shorter ones). Composers delighted in exploring new possibilities with rhythmic intricacy, which led to some of the most complex compositional activity and difficulties for performers that can be found in European musical history.

CHANSONS AND MOTETS

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, chanson was a general term for any polyphonic setting of a French secular poem. Following traditions developed by late medieval composers and poets, a chanson text was built upon one of the “formes fixes” (fixed form) structures applied in poems known as rondeaux, virelais, and ballades. Each of these forms has its own rhyming scheme, line numbers, and recurrent refrains. On the whole, composers of this period showed great sensitivity to poetic nuances when they set poetic texts to music. Earlier composers often wrote monophonic settings but as the fourteenth century progressed polyphonic settings became the norm.

As a genre, the motet is quite difficult to define as it has appeared in many different guises throughout the history of music. Perhaps the easiest way to think of the motet is as any vocal setting of a sacred text that does not have a specific place in the celebration of the Christian liturgy. Of course, many compositions such as hymns and Magnificats do have specific places in the liturgy and share many features in common with motets. Given its flexibility, it is not very surprising that motet writing grew enormously in popularity among fourteenth-century composers and retained its popularity over the course of the following two centuries. Composers wrote examples in this genre for varied occasions, from church ceremonies on a grand scale to devotional or smaller scale activities.

Right A page from a chansonnier, containing poems, lyrics, and chansons of the troubadour tradition. Chansonniers, or songbooks, usually included both sacred and secular songs.

THE TREATY OF CALAIS (1360)

The Treaty of Calais marked a brief truce in the so-called Hundred Years’ War between England and France that started in 1337 and finally finished in 1453. The war began when Edward III of England laid claim to the French throne. His initial military successes included gaining control over much of France and capturing King John II of France. The provisions negotiated for the Treaty included a huge ransom for John, and formalizing Edward’s rule over about half the French kingdom. In exchange, John was to be released and the English agreed to renounce their claims to the French throne. However, the details about John’s claim to the French throne and his receipt of the French lands did not enter the final treaty. Fighting resumed shortly afterwards between the two sides and hostilities did not conclude until the English defeat in 1453.



Henry Purcell

SEPTEMBER 10(?), 1659–NOVEMBER 21, 1695

HENRY PURCELL IS AMONG THE GREATEST OF ENGLISH COMPOSERS. HIS LIFE, LIKE MOZART’S, WAS BRIEF BUT EXTRAORDINARILY PRODUCTIVE. HIS OPERA *DIDO AND AENEAS* IS ONE OF THE EARLIEST AND BEST LOVED WORKS IN THE REPERTOIRE; HIS SACRED MUSIC IS STILL PERFORMED AND REVERED IN CHURCHES AND CONCERTS; AND HIS SKILL AT SETTING WORDS WAS FAMOUS AMONG HIS CONTEMPORARIES AND INSPIRED COMPOSERS AS RECENT AS BENJAMIN BRITTEN AND MICHAEL TIPPETT.

There is little direct evidence about Purcell’s early life. His father (almost certainly another Henry Purcell) was a respected musician, as were his uncle Thomas and his brother Daniel. Young Henry was trained in the choir of the Chapel Royal, perhaps from the age of about six, and seems to have shown early signs of extraordinary talent.

COMPOSING FOR CHURCH AND COURT
By the time he was 18, Purcell had been appointed composer for the king’s violins. His works were being performed in Westminster Abbey, where he was organist from his early 20s until he died. At about 21, he commenced a career as a court composer, writing odes and anthems praising the king (then Charles II) and other noble personages. He married Frances Peters in 1680; of their children, two—Frances and Edward—lived to adulthood.

Charles II was succeeded in 1685 by James II, and for the coronation Purcell wrote the famous anthems

Right Although he died over 300 years ago, Purcell’s place as possibly England’s finest composer has never been usurped.

Below The classic tale of Dido and Aeneas was adapted by librettist Nahum Tate to accompany Purcell’s music. The opera is rightly considered a masterpiece.



“Here lies Henry Purcell Esq, who left this life and is gone to that blessed place where only his harmony can be exceeded.”

EPITAPH IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY

“I Was Glad” and “My Heart is Inditing.” As work from the court diminished, however, he turned more to other music, including, in the 1680s, the odes for the feast of St Cecilia, the patron saint of music.

WRITING FOR THE THEATER

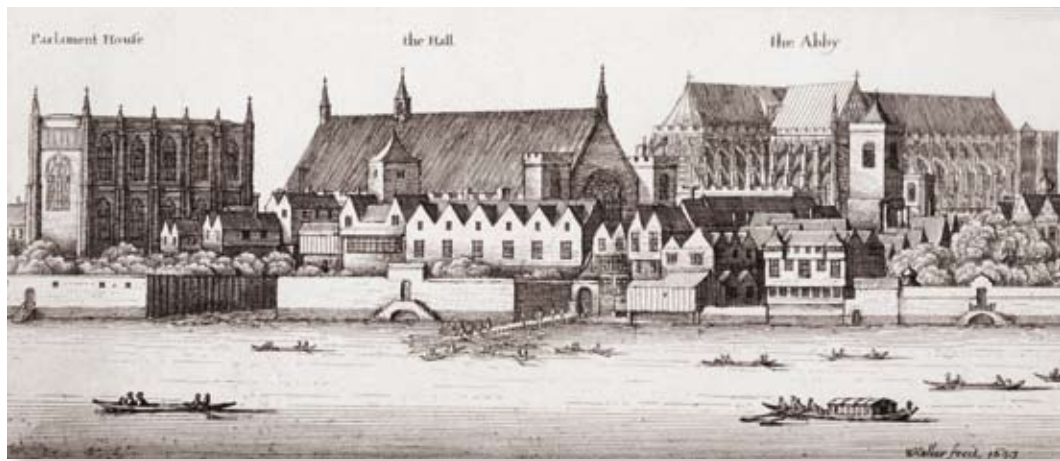
Purcell’s theater music became a very important part of his work. He supplied music for plays by many prominent dramatists of the time; later, he composed “semi-operas” or “dramatic operas.” These include *King Arthur* (1691), by the dramatist and great poet John Dryden; *Dioclesian* (1690); *The Fairy Queen* (1692, an adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*); and *The Indian Queen* (1695, completed after Purcell’s

death by his brother Daniel). Today we might call these pieces musical theater—spoken plays with many songs and spectacular extended scenes that include some of Purcell’s finest music.

Purcell continued to write both sacred and secular compositions; the music he wrote for the funeral of Queen Mary is justly famous. The songs he wrote throughout his career are among the finest ever composed, with haunting melodies and demonstrating an extraordinary mastery of form.

In 1695, at the age of 36, Henry Purcell died very suddenly. He was still composing on his deathbed—the published version of his great song “From Rosy Bowers” carries the note: “The last song the Author set, he being in his sickness.” He was buried at the foot of the organ of Westminster Abbey.

Below A glimpse of Purcell’s London can be seen in this seventeenth century engraving of part of the waterfront at Westminster.



DIDO AND AENEAS AND THE GROUND BASS

The only work by Purcell that we would call a true opera is *Dido and Aeneas*, performed in 1689 at a girls’ school. The libretto, by poet and dramatist Nahum Tate, is based on an episode from the *Aeneid*, the Latin epic by Virgil (70–19 BCE). Dido, queen of Carthage, falls in love with the Trojan hero Aeneas, wandering the world after his home has been destroyed by war. A jealous enchantress sends a spirit to remind Aeneas of the gods’ command to leave Carthage and found the city of Rome. He departs reluctantly, and Dido, abandoned, goes to her death singing one of the most moving and sustained laments in music (“When I am laid in earth”). The opera hardly lasts an hour and uses the simplest effects, but presents varied evocative music and vivid characters, including the half-comic, half-terrifying witches and the noble Dido.

Dido’s famous lament takes a form that Purcell often used with brilliant effect—the ground bass. In this technique, a tune is constantly repeated in the bass while the upper part weaves in and out, sometimes letting the bass be heard and sometimes seeming independent of it. Some of Purcell’s most celebrated songs employ this technique, evoking emotions ranging from enchantment (“Music For a While”) and devout meditation (“An Evening Hymn”) to sprightly joy (the duet “Sound the Trumpet”).

Discover the music

- “Thou Knowest, Lord” (1674)
- “Rejoice in the Lord Always” (the “Bell Anthem”) (1683–1684)
- “An Evening Hymn” (1688)
- Dido and Aeneas* (1689)
- King Arthur* (1691)
- “The Blessed Virgin’s Expostulation” (1693?)
- “Lord, What is Man?” (1693)
- Come Ye Sons of Art, Away* (includes the duet “Sound the Trumpet”) (1694)
- The Indian Queen* (1695)



MUSIC AND NATIONALISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Music helps people to possess the idea of a nation. It does so by fortifying a nation's sense of authority through a national anthem, never mind how dreary that song might turn out to be. It also provides a potent soundworld in which national landscape, epics, folk dances, myths, and martyrs can be championed in the public spaces of concert halls, opera houses, and pageants.

The idea of a nation is a relatively new one and emerges from two “national” revolutions—the American (1776–1783) and the French (1789). Both revolutions were radical shifts away from absolute monarchies towards representative, republican democracies. In France, Napoleon rather spoiled this by declaring himself Emperor (1804), yet the main idea of this Enlightenment venture was to create a system of government where “the people” as “the nation” was the source of power, not a monarch who claimed authority thanks to “divine law.”

NATION BUILDING

Nation building advanced in one of two directions during the nineteenth century—either unification or independence. First came the attempt to unify a group of historically separated but connected states, as with Germany and Italy, which were both unified in 1871. Second, were the efforts of small countries to

THE BROTHERS GRIMM'S CHILDREN'S AND HOUSEHOLD TALES

Commissioned by Arnim and Brentano, linguists Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm collected fairy stories, including *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Hansel and Gretel*. Published in 1812, the stark violence and cruelty of their renditions diminished over 17 revisions, as the stories—intended for nationalist adults—became popular with children. The tales



were often turned into operas, most notably Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* (1893).

break away from control by others, such as the Netherlands (1815) and Belgium (1830) through

Above Artists of the Royal Opera on stage at Covent Garden, London, perform in Englebert Humperdinck's *Hänsel und Gretel* in late 2008.

to Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia in 1918. Both kinds of nationalism triggered the twentieth century's two world wars.

Nations and would-be nations fed off “nationalism,” a constructed set of ideas used to mark out one set of people from another. These notions usually involved assumptions about land (native soil), language (native tongue), and ancestry (native blood). Land, language, and ancestry were embodied in “folksong,” a term invented by theologist Johann Gottfried Herder in his *Stimmen der Völker in Liedern* (*Voice of the People in Song*), two collections of German folksongs published in 1778–1779. Editions of songs, legends, and epic poems started to be published in countries seeking to feed nationalist outlooks.

These included the pagan *Nibelungenlied* (*Song of the Nibelungs*) adapted by Friedrich Heinrich von der Hagen between 1810 and 1842, which provided Wagner with the mythology for his operatic *Ring* cycle (1848–1874). In Finland, Elias Lönnrot compiled the epic poem *Kalevala* in 1835, from which Sibelius crafted his patriotic *Kullervo* Symphony (1892). Meanwhile the Bohemian composer Smetana combined landscape and legend in the six symphonic poems of *Má vlast* (*My Fatherland*, 1874–1879).

Left This painting by Henri de Groux depicts the death of Siegfried. The story comes from the *Nibelungenlied*, the epic poem made famous by Wagner's *Ring* cycle.



Although nationalist sentiment spread and affected composers of the era in various ways, it generally gave them an opportunity to “tame” unusual sounding folk music and make it more palatable for the emerging bourgeoisie. Alternatively it gave them licence to be harmonically adventurous by engaging with indigenous styles. Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances* and Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* are examples of the former; Grieg's settings of Norwegian Hardanger fiddle music or Bartók's Hungarian peasant songs are models of the latter.

In Russia, the fact that several of its most noted composers—such as Balakirev (*Overture on Russian Themes*), Mussorgsky (*Boris Godunov*), and Rimsky-Korsakov (*The Tsar's Bride*)—were amateurs untrained in German standards, is now considered a benefit that produced highly influential “exotic” nationalist music. Elsewhere too, German stylistic influence became something to be confronted through self-conscious difference, hence the distinctive symphonic styles of Sibelius and Nielsen in Scandinavia, or the limp

classicism of Fauré and Satie in France. Overall, however, constructing and identifying a national “sound” was a way to exploit new markets, both internal (patriotism) and external (exoticism).

DES KNABEN WUNDERHORN (1805–1808)

Two writers, Achim von Arnim (1781–1831) and Clement Brentano (1788–1842), collaborated on a three-volume collection of the German words to more than 600 folksongs. At this time what we call Germany was a land of independent city-states and principalities united by language. In *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* (*The Boy's Magic Horn*), Arnim and Brentano aimed to demonstrate a cohesive German heritage rooted in traditional verbal expression. In fact, many of these folksongs came from diverse sources and were liberally altered and adapted by the collectors. Nevertheless, a number of German and Austrian composers, including Weber, Schumann, Brahms, Mahler, and Zemlinsky, set the simple verses to their own Romantic music.

Below Village culture, including dancing and singing, were embraced by many composers who were seeking to express more nationalistic ideas in their music.



Leonard Bernstein

AUGUST 25, 1918–OCTOBER 14, 1990

PROBABLY NO CLASSICAL MUSICIAN HAS MADE AS DEEP A MARK ON HIS NATIVE LAND AS LEONARD BERNSTEIN MADE ON AMERICA. BEFORE HIM, THERE WAS CONSIDERABLE PREJUDICE AGAINST HOME-GROWN TALENT, PARTICULARLY IN THE FIELD OF CONDUCTING. REAL PUBLIC ACCLAIM WAS RESERVED FOR FOREIGNERS, BUT BERNSTEIN’S UNDENIABLE BRILLIANCE SHATTERED THE GLASS CEILING, ASSURING AMERICAN MUSICIANS OF THE HONOR DUE IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY.

Bernstein’s parents were Russian–Jewish immigrants. Samuel, his father, had risen from extreme poverty to become a successful businessman and feared that his son’s obsession with music might divert him from a prosperous business career. Only after the 10-year-old boy raised his own fees for piano lessons did Samuel’s opposition thaw. Once a family piano was purchased, Leonard spent hours practicing, improvising, and composing, and was already a brilliant pianist with rare skills of improvisation and musical parody when he entered Harvard in 1935.

THE STUDENT YEARS

At 17, Bernstein was extraordinarily handsome and already possessed his characteristic charm, wit, and generosity of character, and he soon adopted the raffish, gay lifestyle that remained his hallmark. He pursued every performing opportunity but avoided “boring” music lectures in favor of linguistics and philosophy. Even so,

Above right Bernstein in 1945. He once famously remarked, “Life without music is unthinkable. Music without life is academic. That is why my contact with music is a total embrace.”



he graduated *summa cum laude* in 1939. He then studied with Fritz Reiner and later Serge Koussevitsky. Neither conductor approved of his libertine ways, but both recognized an extraordinary talent. The famously dour Reiner, apostle of minimalist podium technique, gave him the only A grade he ever awarded, and Koussevitsky recommended him for the Assistant Conductorship of the New York Philharmonic in 1943.

Discover the Music

- Symphony No. 1 “Jeremiah”* (1943)
- On the Town* (1944)
- Suite from On the Waterfront* (1954)
- Candide* (1956)
- West Side Story* (1957)
- Symphony No. 3 “Kaddish”* (1963)
- Chichester Psalms* (1965)
- Mass* (1971)

Left A poster for the 1961 film version of *West Side Story*. A reworking of the tale of the doomed lovers, Romeo and Juliet, the musical is set in New York in the mid-1950s. Leonard Bernstein’s music is a tour de force.



TRIUMPH FOR “LITTLE SNOT-NOSE”

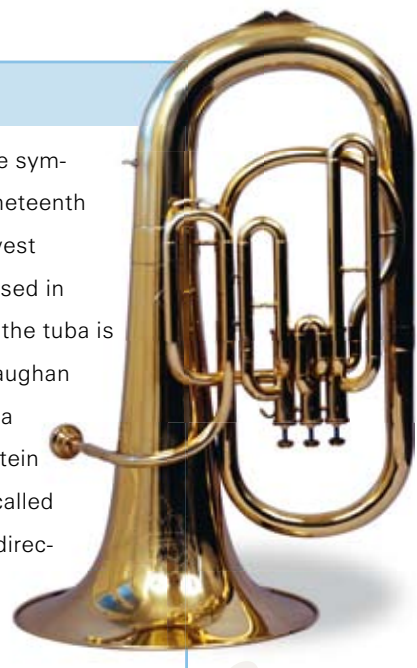
Soon after Bernstein’s appointment, Bruno Walter, the great Austrian conductor, fell ill before a concert. Bernstein had to step in at six hours’ notice after an all-night party. Neither apprehensive orchestra nor disappointed audience hoped for more than a disaster-free run-through of the program, but heard instead an electrifying interpretation quite different from the one Walter had prepared.

At the end, even the orchestra’s hardened professionals stood and cheered. One musician described his amazement that “this little snot-nose” turned out to be “the most extraordinary musician I ever met.” A star was born, in demand all over the US as a conductor, pianist, and composer. Hollywood even offered him a screen test for the role of Tchaikovsky.

The peak of his hugely successful career was probably his long innovatory tenure as Music Director of the New York Philharmonic. He promoted modern music, particularly that of Copland and other American composers, played a major role in resurrecting Mahler’s music, gave illuminating talks to the audience and—his most-applauded innovation—made a series of television programs aimed at enthusing the young.

Tuba

One of the most recent additions to the symphony orchestra, appearing the mid-nineteenth century, the tuba is the largest and lowest pitched brass instrument. Commonly used in military, marching, and concert bands, the tuba is typically pitched in B flat, E flat or F. Vaughan Williams’s *Tuba Concerto in F Minor* is a famous work for the instrument. Bernstein composed a very short piece for tuba called *Waltz for Mippy III* (1948). His famous directions for performance are “as graceful as possible under the circumstances.”



THE COMPOSER

Despite his success, Bernstein was an unsatisfied and sometimes contradictory man. Avowedly homosexual, he nevertheless married Felicia Cohn in 1951. They had three children together before he left her for a male lover, only to return and care devotedly for her during her final illness.

Similarly, he was torn all his life between enjoying the ephemeral art of conducting and finding time to

Below An exuberant Leonard Bernstein conducting the New York Philharmonic in Central Park in August 1986, in front of an estimated audience of 200,000.

compose. He wanted to write the great American opera and the great American symphony, and was never fully satisfied by the huge success of his theater works. His symphonies and other “serious” pieces are enjoyable both for their finely crafted tonal music and for their philosophical search for the God he wished he could believe in, but even his friend Copland characterized them as “conductor’s music.” They clearly lack the sheer genius of the theater music, especially what is possibly the greatest musical ever composed, *West Side Story*.

Bernstein died in 1990, just two months after conducting his last concert with the Boston Symphony, aged 72—or, as his friend Ned Rorem said, aged 288, because “he lived four lives in one.”

IMPORTANT CONNECTIONS

Two of Bernstein’s romantic attachments proved to be particularly important. Aaron Copland became a life-long friend and compositional mentor and, crucially, an affair with charismatic conductor Dmitri Mitropoulos (1896–1960) influenced Bernstein to follow the same profession. Like Mitropoulos, Bernstein continued to compose throughout his life.

