

# Western Classical Tradition

Music for voices: choral music



# Singing

- # The oldest musical activity
- # Can take place as a solo activity, in pairs (**duet**) or a small group (**choir**)
- # Can be accompanied by instruments, or just a voice or voices without any instrumental accompaniment
- # The human voice can be trained
- # Vocal music has played a long and important role in musical history



# Types of vocal music

# The mass, motet and cantata are types of vocal music composed for religious occasions, and are usually performed by a group of singers, such as a **choir**



# Mass

- # A mass is a musical setting of the different parts of the church service known as **Eucharist** or **Communion**
- # Masses are often sung in Latin, but more modern masses, particularly in the Anglican church, may be in English

# Structure

# A mass usually has 5 sections:

1. **Kyrie** (Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy)
2. **Gloria** (Glory to God in the highest)
3. **Credo** (I believe in one God)
4. **Sanctus** (Holy, holy holy) – which also includes **Osanna** (Hosanna) and **Benedictus** (Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord)
5. **Agnus Dei** (Lamb of God)



# Structure

- # There may be different versions of this plan depending on the occasion or purpose for which a mass has been composed
- # A **requiem** is a mass for the dead, with extra sections appropriate for this occasion

# Listening Activity

# You are going to listen to 2 excerpts of music taken from different masses. The first is the opening of the Credo from Haydn's *Missa in Augustiis*, also known as the 'Nelson Mass'. This is an example of a **canon**. A canon is a particular type of imitation (sort of like a round)



# Listening Activity

- # The orchestra introduces the main theme of the canon, joined by sopranos and tenors, who start singing the melody in **octaves**
- # After one bar, the altos and basses start to sing the melody, again in octaves, although their version is written a **fifth** below the original pitch
- # The two parts shadow each other in this way throughout the excerpt, creating, along with the orchestra, a **polyphonic/contrapuntal** texture





# Listening Activity

- # Now listen to the opening of the Rex tremendae (King of tremendous majesty) from Mozart's Requiem
- # Like Haydn, Mozart starts with the orchestra
- # Listen for 'skipping' **dotted rhythms** in both the orchestral and vocal parts, which are a major feature of the music, and also the variety of different *textures* Mozart uses, starting with a **harmonic/homophonic** texture when the choir first sing the words 'Rex tremendae majestatis', a **polyphonic/contrapuntal** texture when the words are repeated for the second time, and then a section in **octaves** before the music is repeated with new musical material added



# Motet

- # The word **motet** is taken from the French word *mots*, meaning 'words'
- # During the **Renaissance** period (1450-1600) a motet was a sacred (religious) piece, composed for voices
- # The texture of the music was mainly **polyphonic/contrapuntal** with much use of imitation, where a melodic idea in one voice-part would then be copied, in turn, by each of the other voice-parts
- # Motets are often performed **a cappella** – by the singers only, without accompanying instruments



# Listening Activity

- # Listen to the opening of the motet *O sacrum convivium* by the Renaissance English composer Thomas Tallis
- # It has all the features of a motet described within the presentation
- # It is a **cappella**, having no instrumental accompaniment, and uses imitation to create a rich **polyphonic/contrapuntal** texture where the different voice parts weave together their individual melodies



# Cantata

- # A **cantata** is usually for one or two solo voices and choir, accompanied by instruments
- # Cantatas can be **sacred** or **secular**
- # They are often made up of **recitatives** (where a solo voice sings in a style which resembles half singing, half reciting), **arias** and **choruses**
- # Recitatives and arias are often paired, the aria following the recitative



# Oratorio

- # An oratorio is a setting of a religious story
- # Like a cantata, it has recitatives, arias and choruses, and is accompanied by an orchestra
- # A commentator – not one of the characters, but a kind of narrator – often sings the recitatives
- # One of the most famous oratorios is *Messiah* by Handel



# Madrigal

- # Madrigals are secular songs, sung by a group of solo voices, and are often about life, love and nature
- # They became popular in Italy during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and spread to England when a collection of Italian madrigals was published there in 1588
- # There was a craze for madrigals in Elizabethan England.
- # English composers caught on to this and were soon writing madrigals of their own



# Listening Activity

- # Compare the recitative 'Behold a virgin shall conceive' with the aria that follows it, 'O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion', from the oratorio *Messiah* by Handel
- # Note the simple melody and accompaniment in the recitative and the more elaborate vocal melody and instrumental accompaniment of the aria, which begins with a lengthy instrumental introduction



# Listening Quiz

# Listen to this excerpt taken from the madrigal 'Now is the month of maying' by the English composer Thomas Morley

1. Which two terms best describe the texture at the opening of this excerpt, on the words 'Now is the month of maying, when merry lads are playing'?

harmonic/homophonic   canonic octaves unison   a cappella

2. To what new key has the piece modulated at the end of this phrase on the word 'playing'?

relative major   relative minor   subdominant   dominant

3. Suggest a possible time signature for this excerpt.





# Key terms

- # Sacred: based on religious texts
- # Secular: based on non-religious texts or stories
- # Recitative: sung recitation. The melody closely follows the rhythm, and rise and fall in pitch of the words. It is used to tell the story. Recitatives are usually accompanied in a simple style, often by plain chords on a harpsichord with a cello playing the bass line
- # Aria: literally means 'air', and refers to a length vocal solo (or sometimes a duet), which emphasises the technique of the singer, or reflects on the story or plot
- # Chorus: a movement or section of music performed by a choir

