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England [Medieval Music]

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6 England

PETER M. LEFFERTS

English musical life in the Middle Ages is often treated in standard text-book surveys as peripheral to that of France and Italy. This approach has several causes, but is rooted especially in musicology's preoccupation over the past 150 years of scholarship with medieval France. Noteworthy also in this negligence is the pairing of France and Italy late in the era in the emergence of polyphonic refrain songs as the chief new artefacts of secular high music culture in the 1300s, an attractive trend with no contemporary English-language counterpart. Musicology's paradigmatic narrative of English entrance onto the international stage, through its sacred polyphonic music, once began the story only in the second quarter of the fifteenth century.

What emerges, however, from more extended examination of medieval musical life is that modern political, geographic, linguistic and cultural boundaries are not relevant – for high culture, anyway – in the musical affairs of those parts of northwestern Europe we nowadays identify as France and England. And until this essentially homogeneous Anglo-French cultural sphere began to develop some marked regional differentiations in the thirteenth century, the elite and hermetic worlds both of courtly troubadour and *trouvère* song, and of the chant and polyphony of the church, spanned the English Channel effortlessly. The English were not latecomers to a game already being played elsewhere.¹

Further, a burst of research after the Second World War has provided specialists with a much different and expanded sense of the dimensions, vigour and creativity of medieval English musical life in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as it diverged from shared Anglo-French practice. This discovery has been mirrored in recent decades by the extraordinary amount of attention lavished on medieval English music in concerts and recordings by leading ensembles of the Early Music movement in Europe and North America.²

To gain a perspective on the English contribution to medieval music, it will be helpful to refer to the standard threefold division of music and music making that distinguishes between classical, popular and folk music realms. This categorization is admittedly a very simple one, and it is a means of isolating activities that can deeply interpenetrate one another. Nonetheless it is sturdy enough to be of value. For the nearest equivalent to classical

music, we can ask where across the soundscape of medieval Europe there was music that was elite, esoteric, demanding, rigorous and prestigious, requiring not only skill to perform but training to create and an education in taste to appreciate. This is music that was deliberately preserved over time in memory and written record. One such body of music is the plainchant and polyphony of the Western church. Another is secular art songs in Latin and the vernacular, the music of learned clerics and aristocratic high culture.

Popular music is a repertory of more immediate appeal, accessible to listeners across a wider range of social classes and available to hear in less exclusive venues. An entertainment music subject to rapid turnover and without the formation of any permanent written canon of favourites, popular music of any age showcases the performer and is a performer's repertoire. This would have been the most common offering of medieval minstrels, whether in residence in some nobleman's court, working as the local professional in a village or town, or belonging to the itinerant minstrel population.

Folk or traditional music encompasses those songs and dance tunes known by most members of a society. It is the communal repertory carried in memory, preserved for generations, accessible to amateurs, and not necessarily created or performed for profit – thus encompassing but by no means limited to metrical charms and incantations, mothers' lullabies, children's play songs, tunes that lightened the repetitive labour of farmers and the marching of soldiers, and fiddle tunes that quickened the feet. Folk, popular and classical music are not synonymous with lower-, middle- and upper-class music, but while all classes had contact with folk and popular music, the music of the social and educational elite was not as readily available to the lower orders of society.

Accepting the threefold division just outlined, one can move directly to a major point: medieval English folk and popular music do not survive. The ample testimony in documentary archives, in literature and in visual imagery for this kind of music making is not balanced by extant lyrics and melodies. The reason for such a regrettable loss is clear. Although surely known to the literate classes of society, folk and popular music were not preserved by or for that class; those individuals competent to notate such texts and tunes were never given a mandate to do so. We can rail against the literate snobs, but more is at work here that also needs to be acknowledged. For one, literacy meant an education in Latin and an embedded set of biases about what would or would not be committed to writing. Further, from 1066 until the fifteenth century the English upper classes were French-speakers by birth or necessity. Popular and folk musics of medieval England were mainly the province of English speakers, creating a cultural divide not often crossed. Folk musicians in an oral tradition, moreover, would not

have needed notation, and one can imagine that minstrels might even have resisted it, as a threat to the trade secrets of their guild.

Finally, a broader perspective. In the twentieth century the West's popular music, commercialized and commodified, became the world's shared music, but this was not always the case. The secular culture shared across linguistic and geographic boundaries used to be high culture, while folk and popular culture were at once less universal, more varied, less transportable. In medieval England most folk and popular music, like dialect, diet, dress, dance steps and recipes for ale, reflected local custom and taste. There was no demand for it elsewhere, and no compelling need to write it down in order to preserve it for others in the present, or for posterity.

The little scraps of medieval folk and popular music that come down to us from the British Isles are to be found in various odd corners, and mainly give us glimpses of texts, not tunes. Beginning in the thirteenth century, for example, Franciscan sermons cite titles and quote lyric fragments and refrains from the kinds of less-refined vernacular songs they assumed their audiences would be familiar with. And a fourteenth-century English Bishop of Ossory in Ireland, Richard Ledrede, wrote new sacred Latin texts to a large number of vernacular songs in English and Anglo-Norman, identifying the original tune with a text tag and preserving for us in the Latin, something like a dinosaur's footprint, the poetic form and stress patterns of the originals. In addition, English motets of the later thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, like their Continental counterparts, sometimes build up their superstructure of new melodies and texts over a pre-existing foundational melody – the tenor – that is a Middle English or Anglo-Norman song instead of a plainchant fragment (*Dou way Robin; Wynter; A definement d'este lerray*); some of these may be popular songs or folksongs. Quodlibets that stitch together the musical street cries of London vendors survive from the late sixteenth century, and comparable French street cries already are found incorporated in late-thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Continental polyphony, so it may be that the Elizabethan snatches can be fairly heard as echoes from earlier English days.³

Another temptation is to hear in the tunefulness, tonal cogency, symmetry and metrical bounce of thirteenth-century polyphonic songs in Middle English and Latin such as *Sumer is icumen in*, *Edi beo thu hevene quene*, and *Angelus ad virginem* the hallmarks of a British popular or folk style. The temptation is equally strong to see otherwise hidden vernacular idioms as the basis for the language of the few instrumental dances to have been captured in notation.⁴ And it is hard to doubt that the foursquare fifteenth-century partsong *Tappster, drinker, fille another ale* is meant to evoke a hearty popular vein of tavern songs of which no authentic examples survive. Tuneful simplicity and harmonic directness remain attractive features

of the indigenous English partsongs of Cornysh and others up through the early Tudor period.⁵

Of course, some of the literary monuments of high culture, from the corpus of Old English poetry to the lengthy metrical romances in Anglo-Norman and Middle English and the shorter Middle English ballads, have their roots in an oral tradition of popular songs. Although now stripped of melody and standing at some remove from performance as later finished products of a bookish environment, they surely retain some of the flavour of their lost lyrical predecessors. It is equally likely that some of the lower registers of courtly art song, such as the pastourelle, deliberately invoke the metrical and melodic idioms of popular and folk music, especially the communal dance songs, the karoles. But it is beyond our present powers to distinguish a music thought appropriate for playing at being shepherds and shepherdesses from music truly of the rural peasantry.

Concerning the elite art music of Britain's learned and noble classes, a number of observations demand priority. Above all, this music was song, primarily solo song, and often unaccompanied. And the rich and educated were often themselves the wordsmiths and tunesmiths, while performers were of the lower classes. Lyrical and narrative poetry comprise its texts, and these texts most often survive in anthologies copied without any musical notation. Thus they have become grist for the modern mill of literary studies, with the presence of music underappreciated or forgotten. We need to be reminded, for example, that while some genres of Old English poetry may have been intended from the outset to be merely spoken out loud, the central body of eulogistic and epic narratives known to us was to be sung in public performance. Drawing models for narrative melody from ethnomusicological examples found outside Western Europe, as well as from medieval examples from France, Germany and the Latin liturgy, modern Early Music singers now offer large swatches of *Beowulf* to paying audiences, trusting that the Old English text of this famous epic in its surviving form is not too many steps removed from its sung version in an oral tradition.⁶

A second principal observation is that the texts of elite art songs varied across a wide range of topics and registers of discourse. One might turn elegant phrases in praise of some lady's virtue while another lauded the joys of clear, red wine or described the amorous advances of Robin upon Marion. And some were surely intended exclusively for listening, while others were participatory dance songs. Elite songs of low register are not folk or popular music, however, although their texts and tunes may have been enriched with the turns of phrase of more mundane genres, as surmised above.

The role of the performer can be informative in regard to song registers and song audiences.⁷ In Anglo-Saxon England, the *gleoman* was the

professional entertainer, paid for individual performances, who not only sang but harped and piped, juggled, clowned and danced. The *scop*, on the other hand, was a serious and respected individual attached to a court or noble household who made and performed heroic, epic narrative poetry on ceremonial occasions. After the Norman Conquest, a single term, 'minstrel', dominates in British records, but the word clearly had a number of meanings encompassing a variety of duties and spheres of activities. Royal or noble minstrels attached to a court or household had very different duties and occasions for performance than did town musicians, or those travelling professionals perpetually on the go between courts, villages, festivals and fairs. A minstrel who straddled both worlds, called to court one night and playing in an alehouse the next, knew his role and repertory in both spheres.

A third principal observation about the elite secular song repertory of medieval England is that it was polylingual. In Anglo-Saxon times that meant Latin and Old English. After the Norman Conquest, that meant Latin, Anglo-Norman French, and Middle English. The least important of these for over three centuries – until the days of Chaucer and his contemporaries and successors – were the art songs in English. (The ribbon for the least appreciated and most seldom read of these lyrics nowadays would have to go to Latin, of course.) The pattern for survival in the British Isles of later medieval songs of high culture is the same whether they are in Latin, French or English: there are major insular sources of lyrics, mostly copied without music or any accommodation for musical notation, and a much smaller number of sources with empty staves or notated melodies.

Latin lyrics, whether from the international tradition or local products composed in Anglo-Latin, and whether scribbled onto flyleaves or copied into large anthologies, constitute an important and numerous body of medieval British song texts. Their range of subject matter and tone is impressive, from love poetry, humorous stories, and drinking songs to historical narratives and sacred, devotional, philosophical and moral-satirical topics. This was music for the study and recreation of Latinate clerics, bureaucrats, and scholars and students.

Vernacular songs with musical notation are particularly scarce. From before ca1400 there are merely some twenty-odd such songs extant in English and a similar number in Anglo-Norman. But well-known anthology manuscripts assemble a very much greater number of lyrics and narrative poems intended for singing. These songs, secular or religious, vary widely in topic and tone. The most striking difference between the corpus in each language is the absence of English courtly love lyrics until the fifteenth century, while courtly love is a strong thematic presence in the French songs.⁸

Forces on the Continent propelled the collection of troubadour and trouvère songs into chansonniers in the second half of the thirteenth century – only at the very end of that tradition and almost two centuries after its beginnings. This anthologizing project, with its retrospective, preservationist and monumentalizing overtones, is clearly reflected in major British text collections of the same era. For those who coveted these books, whether as prize trophies or as reading material, the song texts evidently were a much higher priority than their tunes. Very few of the surviving Continental anthologies contain music, a loss felt particularly acutely in the case of the trouvère chanson, for which ten times as many lyrics survive as melodies. From the British Isles, only one scrappy flyleaf of this era (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson G. 22), with all or part of two songs in Anglo-Norman and one in Middle English, may have originated in a substantial secular chansonnier that was notated with music. The loss of melodies that did not make it from memory into written record must have been considerable. It is not so clear that we have lost many songbooks copied for noble English patrons.

The making of books of art songs needs to be understood as an enterprise related to but not synonymous with the making of music by and for medieval England's secular high culture. And, as a corollary point, historians of English culture cannot make do with only what was created on English soil or what survives in codices of English manufacture. During the twelfth-century reign of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine the English court was often on the Continent for long periods, and the rich outpouring of literary products for this court, including verse chronicles, epics, romances, *lais*, fables and lyric poetry in French and Latin, was copied and appreciated across western Europe. The domestic and dynastic struggles of the Plantagenets inspired songs in Latin, Provençal, French and Italian. The son of Henry and Eleanor, Richard I ('the Lionheart'), was himself a poet-musician, writing in French; two of his poems survive, one with music, in troubadour and trouvère sources.

As late as the mid fourteenth century the court was still intensely francophile, most importantly through the circle of Continental artists and men of letters around Philippa of Hainaut, queen of Edward III. No monumental codices or collected works of individual composers survive from this environment, perhaps because there was no one dominating musician approaching the stature enjoyed by Machaut in France (and he himself had to supervise several editions of his own collected works). But bits and scraps of musical sources hint at a repertory of courtly polyphonic art song in French, just as we would expect.

By the turn into the fifteenth century, courtly songs by English musicians, surviving in insular and Continental sources in increasing numbers, show

them to be setting secular love lyrics in English and French in the fixed forms of the *rondeau*, *virelai* and *ballade*, and then beginning to favour *rime royal*. John Dunstable, John Bedingham, Robertus de Anglia, Robert Morton and Walter Frye are representative composers of such songs. The polyphonic English devotional carol in English and Latin is an important indigenous product of the same era that did not circulate abroad. Not the music of the noble courts but not the music of the people either, the carol appears to have been a repertory primarily for recreational use at Christmas and Eastertime in the world of the scholars, fellows and singing-men of schools, colleges and major ecclesiastical choral establishments.⁹

It may strike some initially as odd that Christian service music counts as high culture, since it is functional material not created or performed for entertainment's sake and was nominally available to be heard in church by all classes of society. But important qualifiers need to be put upon the latter points. Although functional, it is yet a complex, artful and esoteric body of music, preserved in writing since the ninth century. And although in later medieval England there were more than 10,000 parish churches and many hundreds of major churches and religious houses, as well as eventually seventeen cathedrals, only a fraction had the wealth and trained manpower to support the full sung daily liturgy at regular intervals around the clock, and to undertake the complexities of florid organum and mensural polyphony.

The endless cycle of the liturgy, moreover, was undertaken on behalf of the populace, rather than for an attentive worshipping congregation. That is, secure in the knowledge that they were being prayed for, the laity seldom stepped into sacred precincts on a regular basis until the very end of our era. And the physical enclosure of the choir, a later medieval development creating a building within a building beyond the rood screen in the transept or east end of the church, cut visitors off from the sight and sound of the high mass and canonical offices. In this respect, the Early Music movement does us a disservice by popularizing concerts and recordings of chant and church polyphony in the resonant, bare stone caverns that surviving medieval churches, especially the large abbeys and cathedrals, have become.

In overview, the history of the liturgy and music of the medieval Christian church in the British Isles is best grasped as a series of overlapping waves of practices and influences.¹⁰ These begin with the separate introduction of early Christianity by Celts and Romans in the second century. About their services and music we know nothing, and the invasions of the pagan Anglo-Saxons in the mid 400s, after the withdrawal of the Romans, extinguished Romano-British Christianity. The church survived in Celtic Britain, however, and missionaries from Gaul were found proselytizing among the Anglo-Saxons when Pope Gregory sent Saint Augustine to Kent

in 597. Over the next century Roman customs were established and some form of Roman chanting was disseminated throughout England, but it is undoubtedly the case that local liturgy and chant dialects varied considerably, drifting and evolving away from Rome during this era just as did the Gallican rite in France, the Mozarabic rite in Iberia or the Milanese (Ambrosian) rite in northern Italy. The process is entirely analogous to the early development of Romance languages out of regional dialects of Latin.

Whatever the nature of early Anglo-Saxon liturgy and chanting, it was virtually wiped out in the catastrophic waves of Danish invasion in the mid 800s. The revival of both the secular church and monastic communities initiated under King Alfred at the end of the ninth century, which culminated with the efforts of church leaders such as Dunstan and Ethelwold a century later, relied on northern French missionaries who brought in the customs and music of the religious houses at Cluny, Fleury, Corbie and St Denis. The liturgy they promulgated was mainly a modern Roman liturgy for its day in respect to texts and customs, but the chant dialect in which it was sung was not from the South. It had originated in the later 700s and early 800s in Carolingian Gaul, and its melodies were in the Romano-Frankish or Romano-Gallican hybrid we call Gregorian chant. Thus later Anglo-Saxon England became one of the first regions outside Gaul to adopt the melodic corpus that would by the thirteenth century supplant local chant-families all across Europe, eventually even displacing papal and local Roman urban chant. Textual sources document the later Anglo-Saxon liturgy reasonably well and reveal many small divergences in detail from Roman practices. These older Gallicanisms and indigenous customs would have been sung to older, local, non-Gregorian plainsong.

The core repertory of Gregorian chant comprised simple formulaic tones for prayers and readings, and melodies for antiphonal and responsorial psalmody. In addition to holdovers from older local practices, this body of plainsong was enriched wherever it took hold by new local accretions, which in time became a vast and diverse body of later medieval plainchant for mass and office, including proses in the office and sequences at mass, mass ordinary melodies, new hymns and hymn melodies, Marian and other votive antiphons, processional antiphons, sung liturgical dramas, and much more. English church musicians enthusiastically contributed to these and other categories of later chant composition right up to the reign of Henry VIII and the establishment of the Church of England.

In respect to later medieval chant, the word 'trope' is sometimes used to identify all additions to the Gregorian nucleus. Trope has a narrower meaning, however, when referring just to short musical-textual versicles added later as introductions to lines of Gregorian chant and other pre-existing plainsong. A large Anglo-Saxon repertory of these chant expansions

survives in manuscripts of the late tenth and eleventh centuries that were copied at Winchester and Canterbury; the trope melodies cannot be read, but their Latin texts show hallmarks of the Latinity of late Anglo-Saxon authors, and a good number may be the work of one individual, Wulfstan of Winchester.¹¹

New saints and new feasts, whether of local or universal celebration, were added prolifically to church calendars throughout the later Middle Ages. These additions might be marked by as little as a single chanted item such as a collect, antiphon, hymn or sequence, but many were provided with a complete set of new texts and melodies for all the Proper chants for daily offices and mass. This body of material could total fifty or more substantial compositions. Anglo-Saxon poet-composers poured significant creativity and energy into offices for local saints, including those for Alphege, Birinus, Cuthbert, Edmund, Guthlac and Swithun.¹²

A different means of elaborating the Gregorian core that was instituted or revived in the tenth-century English church was the singing of two-part polyphony (called organum, pl. organa) by ornamenting a liturgical plainsong with a note-against-note counterpoint. A large corpus of 173 organa survives from pre-Conquest Winchester and may also be primarily the work of Wulfstan of Winchester. They constitute the only major body of European polyphony to survive from before the mid twelfth century. Due to difficulties interpreting the insular chant notation, transcription of this music into modern notation is difficult, but it is not impossible, granting us a modicum of insight into the versions of the underlying chants that were used, and the procedures and aesthetics of making organa circa 1000.¹³

In the wake of the Conquest, Norman clerics took control of the English church, overlaying Norman chants and melodic dialect (in effect just a slightly different flavour of Gregorian) over earlier traditions and purging its liturgy of unfamiliar saints and customs, a process resisted by English clergy in some quarters for many years. Every religious community developed its own distinctive rules for the conduct of its liturgical and non-liturgical routines; these were known as its 'use'. In England, post-Conquest changes were consolidated into uses for the major secular cathedrals over the course of the twelfth century. Of these, the use of Salisbury cathedral rose to pre-eminence. It eventually displaced the local use at many other cathedrals, was adopted in chantries, colleges and private chapels, and even spread abroad into dioceses from Portugal to Scandinavia. The ritual and music of Salisbury (or Sarum, an abbreviated nickname current since the Middle Ages) were essentially Roman and Gregorian, with an admixture of local elements. The ritual's attractiveness and success were due not to its chant versions *per se*, but rather to its perceived authority, splendour, elaboration, comprehensiveness and full documentation.¹⁴

A softening of Norman attitudes eventually permitted the retention of many Anglo-Saxon saints in British church calendars alongside Norman and Angevin saints. The further admission of new local or universal saints, and of feasts such as Corpus Christi, the Transfiguration and the Holy Name of Jesus, continued right down to the very end of the Middle Ages. These new feasts provided one of the most important impulses for new chant composition (a phenomenon by no means limited to England) and stimulated a creative musical outpouring that has not yet been fully appreciated, much less catalogued or studied. The most important of the slew of new British offices was the celebrated rhymed office for Thomas of Canterbury, composed in the last quarter of the twelfth century by Abbot Benedict of Peterborough. This office travelled over the whole of Continental Europe, where it became the model for perhaps hundreds of later offices.

A number of religious ceremonies falling mainly outside the canonical daily round of high mass and offices and in some cases performed outside of the high choir, although not necessarily unique to late medieval England were of particular importance there. They became the locus not only of ritual elaboration but of the composition of new chants and the performance of polyphony. Processions are one such class of ceremonies. On Sundays, major feast days and other special occasions, processions wound a circuitous route through the church, or out onto the grounds, or out into town to a neighbouring church and back, and they generated a special repertory of processional refrain hymns, antiphons and responsories. Another set of ceremonies, for Holy Week and Easter, included not only major processions but also the singing of the biblical Passion narratives during mass as the New Testament gospel on Palm Sunday and Good Friday. Missals of the Salisbury Use carefully indicate a dramatic approach and separation of character roles for the reading of the Passion texts, and polyphonic English passions are the earliest in a prominent and long-standing European tradition. In many locales, moreover, there was the performance of two fully sung Latin liturgical dramas – the *Visitatio sepulchri* at the end of matins early on Easter Sunday morning and the *Officium peregrinorum* at vespers that evening. Music was also a significant element in the primarily spoken Middle English vernacular dramas of Eastertide and Corpus Christi.¹⁵

A final set of additional devotions – commemorations and votive services, memorials and votive antiphons – rose to be of the greatest musical importance. By the late Middle Ages they could overshadow or even replace most of the standard daily ritual and music in institutions committed to the fullest expression of the liturgy.¹⁶ Memorials were short services said in the morning after lauds or in the evening after vespers in honour of a saint or other particular occasions. A memorial consisted simply of one principal musical item – an antiphon – plus a versicle, response and collect;

a number of such memorials might be said in a row. A votive antiphon could be sung by itself, usually in the evening after compline outside the high choir at a side altar. The most popular votive antiphons were Marian, and by the mid thirteenth century the post-compline antiphon had been absorbed into a full-fledged Marian memorial often referred to as the Salve service, after the Marian votive antiphon *Salve regina*. The Salve service was incorporated in the customs of many new secular choral foundations of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and was frequently required by the legislation of the most elaborately endowed private chantries, while its polyphonic Marian antiphon became one of the grandest musical forms of late medieval England.

Commemorations were complete sets of office hours and in some cases a full mass, too, that were said weekly in choir on a specified day for the Virgin Mary or Holy Cross or some particular saint (such as the patron saint of the church), replacing the ordinary daily round of services and transposable to another day if in conflict with a significant feast. By the fifteenth century some churches had a commemoration for every day of the week. By long and universal custom, Saturday was Mary's special day, and her weekly commemoration was thus observed vastly more often than any of her feasts. It was enriched in English service books by a great deal of supplementary or alternative plainsong, including many new sequences for example, and also attracted polyphony.

Instead of replacing the daily liturgy, as in the case of commemorations, the services called votive masses and offices were additions to it. The Little Hours of the Virgin, for example, came to be sung after each of the regular hours (and provided the nucleus of texts found in the medieval Book of Hours). Eventually of even greater importance for music and ceremony was the daily votive Marian mass (the Lady Mass), usually celebrated outside of choir as a morning mass for devout layfolk around the time of prime. This service was nearly universal in major English ecclesiastical institutions by the early thirteenth century. Not only did it attract a great deal of new plainsong (including tropes, and series of alternative melodies for the Sequence, Offertory, and Sanctus), but it was for Lady Mass that most or all of the surviving insular polyphonic settings of the mass ordinary from circa 1200 to 1400 (and a large proportion of the settings composed afterwards) were written. It is likely the case, moreover, that the fourteenth-century French adoption of the custom of setting mass ordinary texts polyphonically for votive Marian masses (as in the *Missa Tournai* and the *Mass of Machaut*) is modelled on English practice.

Two late medieval developments eventually brought the liturgy back to the eyes and ears of the laity. One was the cult of the Virgin Mary, as expressed in the services described above. From the mid twelfth century

onwards Mary not only inspired new services, new chants, and polyphony, but also new architectural spaces in which to house those services, which were often deliberately made accessible to lay audiences. England led the way in these regards. The daily morning Lady Mass and evening Salve service, performed outside of choir, usually in a purpose-built hall extending off the church called the Lady Chapel, became the most important occasions for regular attendance at church by the lay public, especially devout women.

The other development increasing lay exposure to the liturgy and to complex polyphony was the rise of new choral musical establishments outside of churches and monasteries.¹⁷ Their model in Britain was the Royal Household Chapel, an itinerant body always in attendance on the king, which spawned a vogue of personal chapels for the great magnates of the land in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Similar choirs, but of fixed abode, were founded by aristocratic patronage in chantry chapels, in larger metropolitan churches and in the colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, especially during the fifteenth century. Their services, inside or outside of choir, would have had a small but select and appreciative audience. Again, polyphonic Marian antiphons and mass ordinary settings were a staple for these new professional choirs on those private and public occasions requiring their most ostentatious efforts.

The uniformity of the Anglo-French high culture of sophisticated church music began to erode in the thirteenth century with the emergence of a clear differentiation in genres, musical style and notation on opposite sides of the Channel, primarily in polyphony. This drift apart is mirrored as well in politics, and in a variety of trends such as in the shift of the Anglo-Norman dialect away from mainland French, in features of Gothic cathedral architecture, and in various specialized intellectual disciplines at the universities. In terms of musical style the trend towards a distinctive insular musical dialect in church polyphony can probably best be explained as a concentration upon certain elements already present in the international repertory of polyphonic conductus and organum of the later twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It may well be (and it is certainly an attractive hypothesis) that these new preferences derive from an awareness by elite English church musicians of the language of the popular and traditional music of the British Isles, and their growing desire to play up these indigenous features in more sophisticated music.

This new polyphonic dialect was distinguished by a preference for imperfect consonances (thirds, sixths and tenths) as harmonies, for voice-leading in parallel counterpoint, for trochaic rhythms in ternary metres, for chordal textures and homogeneity of rhythmic activity, for smoothly stepwise melodies projecting a strong sense of tonality, and for balanced, four-square

melodic phrases. By the late thirteenth century an English motet or conductus sounded different and behaved palpably differently from its French counterpart. Another marked feature of the emerging English idiom was a fascination with constructivist devices involving repetition and exchange of music. In simplest form this could be no more than a *rota* or round, a perpetual canon at the unison, of which the Sumer canon (*Sumer is icumen in*, ca1250) is the most famous example. Voice exchange proceeds in a series of modules within which a foundational voice (the tenor) states and repeats a melody, over which two upper parts sing, and then exchange and sing again, two harmonious counterpointing lines. In a *rondellus* all three voices participate in the exchange, so that in the module each contrapuntal unit must be stated three times (with swapping of parts) before moving on to fresh material. Modules of voice exchange and *rondellus* can be found in conductus, in motets and in troped chant settings, which are the three most important compositional genres of late-thirteenth-century English polyphony; modules of voice exchange and *rondellus* also stand on their own in independent compositions that are kin to both conductus and motet.¹⁸

The notation of polyphonic music evolved across the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries towards a fully mensural system with fixed rhythmic values for each note shape and the means to represent a variety of time signatures. An aspect of the differentiation of practice between England and the Continent was the development of an idiosyncratic English Mensural Notation in the thirteenth century and of several families of notation that accommodated different means and rationales for the multiplication and subdivisions of the *brevis* in the first half of the fourteenth century, in parallel with developments in France and Italy. English theorists engaged with their Continental counterparts as early as the 1310s in the development of what is called Ars Nova notation, particularly via *gradus* theory, and made interesting proposals for the notation and cancellation of chromatic alterations. Not only was their work cited by French and Italian theorists, but entire theory treatises (in Latin) by Englishmen circulated abroad, and English theorists travelled abroad to teach and to copy important treatises up to the late fifteenth century.¹⁹

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English sacred polyphonic genres included the motet, votive antiphon, cantilena with hymn or sequence-style text, and settings of mass ordinary texts.²⁰ The motet eventually shook free of the constructivist devices described above, but its composers continued to explore a number of indigenous motet types until deep in the fourteenth century. Their growing fascination with the numerical disposition of phrase structures and the proportioning of section lengths may have had a direct influence on the nascent continental isorhythmic motet in the

1310s and 1320s. English isorhythmic motets flourished into the mid 1400s in the hands of composers including Dunstaple, Forest and Benet.

The other sacred genres at first shared two compositional approaches: ‘cantilena-style’ free composition in two to four voices, and English discant, a three-voice technique of adding two counterpointing lines to a chant. Then composers began to develop approaches for mass ordinary settings that borrowed from contemporaneous techniques for motets and polyphonic secular songs to create more elaborate works. Large-scale mass ordinary settings, whether freely composed or based on a cantus firmus, began to be written in pairs and longer cycles in the early decades of the fifteenth century, resulting in the five-movement English mass in three and then in four voices, with its movements linked by common musical material, most especially by the same tenor cantus firmus.

English cyclic masses, isorhythmic motets, and large-scale antiphons – the polyphonic repertory of its most elite and up-to-date chapels and churches – came to be enormously popular and influential in mainland Europe by 1450. This music was enjoyed, and exerted great influence, in that similarly small, elite world of Continental listeners capable of appreciating its beauty and of Continental choirs equipped to tackle its complexity.