



COMPOSE YOURSELF

Music History & Theory from the Alchemist Age & Beyond

A 18-WEEK MUSIC LAB FOR EXPLORING MUSIC HISTORY, THEORY, AND SCIENCE THROUGH READING, LISTENING, & ACTIVITIES



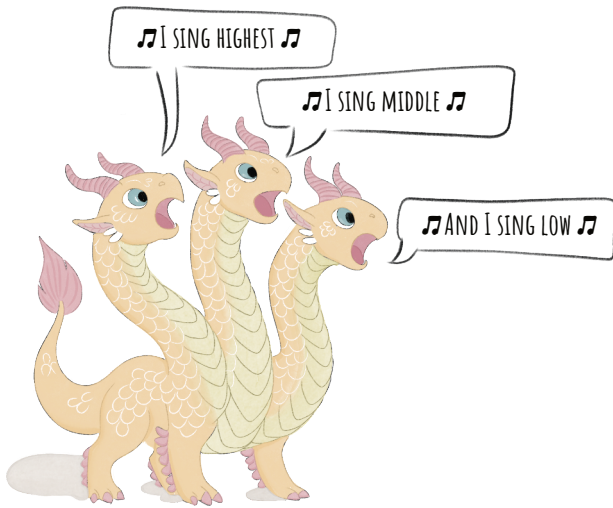
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HARMONY STRIKES A CHORD:

HARMONY, CHORDS, & POLYPHONY



Now that we have a better understanding of what a melody is, we can explore a new layer of music called harmony. Have you ever heard something described as “harmonious?” To be harmonious or in harmony with something or someone means to be *agreeable* with it or them. When we get along with a friend, we have a harmonious friendship. When the decorations in our room are pleasing together, you can say they are in harmony. So what does harmony mean when we talk about music? Musical **harmony** is when the sound of two or more notes played or sung at the same time creates a new, fuller sound. Let’s use food as a comparison. If melody is a raspberry, it’s lovely, nutritious, and sweet alone. Then harmony would be a raspberry plus chocolate! Even more delicious when eaten together! Do the notes always sound agreeable together? That’s where things can get interesting. Typically, the answer is yes, but harmonies can also create tension in a song. That doesn’t mean they don’t

sound good together; it just means that instead of being pleasant to your ears, they might create a different emotion, and this can be useful in creating variety in music.

A great example of harmony is a choir. Choirs are usually split up into at least three groups: one to sing lower notes, one to sing higher notes, and one to sing in between the two. When they all sing these different notes at the same time, it can sound full and powerful!

Let’s take a look at our hydra, also named Harmoni, but spelled a little differently. A hydra has three heads; if each is singing the same words, but with different notes, the first head singing the highest, then the second head singing a bit lower, and the last head singing the lowest. You can’t hear our hydra singing from the page, but if you could, it would sound full and lovely to your ears. That is harmony, singing or playing different notes at the same time that work together to give us a bigger, fuller, or more exciting sound.

⚡ TRY THIS!

If you have a musical instrument like a keyboard or xylophone, try creating your own harmonies by pressing or lightly striking at least two keys at the same time. That’s a harmony! If you don’t have an instrument like this, you can experiment with harmonies by having two people who can use their voices to sing different notes. One of you sings high and the other sings low, but at the same time. Again, that is harmony. You can play around with creating different harmonies by playing or singing different notes at the same time until you find ones you really like together.

Most songs use a combination of melody and harmony to create all sorts of musical combinations that allow us to dance, sing, or just enjoy listening to music.

BUILDING A SONG

When we combine three, or sometimes more, musical notes being sung or played at the same time, it makes what is called a **chord**. There is a lot more to know about chords if you find yourself interested, but what is important to remember for our studies is that they are one of the building blocks of musical composition, meaning you can use melody and chords together to make songs of all sorts. Remember our raspberry versus raspberry with chocolate comparison?

Well, a chord would be a raspberry covered in chocolate with whipped cream on top, an explosion of texture and flavor in your mouth! If you put melody and chords together, you will have a delicious banquet that we call a song.

There are two main kinds of chords we should learn about: **Major chords** and **Minor chords**. Chords can make a song feel emotional. A Major chord tends to sound bright and upbeat. In contrast, a Minor chord can lend a sadder feeling. As you will notice when we study the Classical period, most songs' names from this time include one of these labels, and it can tell you a lot about a song before you even listen to it. If you are in the mood for some uplifting music, you might want to steer away from a song called *Rainy Days in G Minor* because there is a good chance that it might have a more solemn sound to it. But, a song called *Bumble Bees in G Major* might be more what you're looking for!

While songs from long ago started with melody, as time went on, musicians introduced the concept of harmony, which transformed music and composition, making it more complex. Then, they figured out they could have different melodies sung or played at the same time, such as a flute playing a sound similar to a bird song while a drum played a stern march. They are playing different parts with a different combination of notes, but at the same time. They called this combination of parts that sounded pleasing together **polyphony**, meaning many sounds. Now you know how musical composition went from humble beginnings with single notes played or sung, one at a time, to polyphony, which allowed many sounds and parts to be played at the same time, adding fullness and richness to the music we listen to today. But who are some of the people who made this happen?

⚡ TRY THIS!

There is a great recent example of polyphony that you might be very familiar with, the song [Vuelie](#) by Christopher Beck, composed by Frode Fjellheim, from the movie *Frozen*.

📻 **LISTEN & LEARN (SONG FACTS)**: It starts with a melodic chant. After the first round (at 15 sec) of the chant, we hear a new harmony in the background. They sound lovely together, but the original chanters are singing a completely different part to the new voices. If you continue listening (at 47 sec), you will hear another, even higher set of voices in harmony added to the song, yet another layer singing a different part. Again, they are not singing the same notes or words, but it all sounds beautiful together. This is an example of polyphony.

📻 **LISTEN & LEARN (SONG FACTS)**: Listen to this rendition of [Sesere Eeye](#), a traditional Torres Strait Islander song that is a great example of a song that starts with a simple melody and becomes layered with harmony more and more as it repeats! The range of pitches getting wider with each refrain make the sound fuller. It's a lot of fun and a bit of an earworm!

Listen for and identify the melody at the beginning of the song. As each verse repeats, point out the new voices that are added and how they are either higher, or lower, if you can tell. This song typically splits a choir into three sections. For the first round of the song everyone sings the same melody. In the second round, the first section sings a bit higher, the second section sings the same as the first time, and the third section sings lower. This continues again in the third round, with the first and third sections getting each higher or lower. This addition of harmony makes the song sound fuller and pleasing.

LET'S MEET SOME INFLUENTIAL FIGURES:

ISIDORE OF SEVILLE (560–636 CE)

Let's take a journey back in time to the early Alchemist Era (Medieval) to meet Isidore of Seville. He lived more than 1,400 years ago, in what is now Spain (find it on your globe), and he was a thinker! Isidore loved learning about everything—languages, history, science, and even music. In fact, he wrote a huge book called the *Etymologiae*, which was like an encyclopedia for his time, a collection of all sorts of knowledge.

Isidore helped keep chant-based music alive in a time when most people were more interested in building kingdoms and fighting wars than preserving music. Even though he didn't compose music, he wrote about musical ideas, writing down

and preserving Gregorian chants, making sure that people understood the importance of music in human lives. Isidore's writings were one of the ways early medieval musicians learned about how to make music sound melodious! Isidore wasn't just a scholar; he was a protector of music. Thanks to his writings, later composers could learn about the early Medieval world's music theories. He is proof that you don't have to play an instrument or sing to contribute to music culture.

KASSIA (810–867 CE)

Next, we'll meet Kassia, also known as Kassiana, one of the very first documented women composers. This does not mean women did not regularly compose music during this time, but the work of women was not well preserved for future audiences. Kassia lived in the Byzantine Empire, which included modern day Turkey (look it up on your globe), also known as Türkiye. She mostly wrote music called Byzantine chants, and put her poetry to music. She also wrote extensively on human character and injustices. Kassia's music was unique because it was full of powerful emotions. Her melodies were so well-loved that they're still performed today, after more than 1,200 years!



Kassia was legendary, literally. As the legend goes, the Byzantine Emperor Theophilos was looking for a potential Empress and Kassia was one of the two noble women presented to the Emperor. Upon meeting, Theophilos was enchanted by Kassia, but made a remark about women being the cause of all that is bad in the world. Quite rude! Kassia did not take kindly to his untrue statement and she chose to reply by informing him that women are also the cause of all that is good. Theophilos was not impressed that Kassia would challenge him, so he gave the golden apple to Theodora, the other noblewoman. This actually freed Kassia up to become an abbess and pour herself into writing poetry, stories, and music, which gave her influence. She was known for being intelligent, stubborn, and bold.

Additional Playlist

Note: I chose some more modern music to help learners hear the difference between melody, harmony, and polyphony to both mix things up and display the clarity between the concepts with voice instead of instrumentation.

- ♪ [Hymn of Kassiana](#) (Medieval Melody)
- ♪ *I'll Follow the Sun* by The Beatles (Good job of switching between melody and harmony to demonstrate the difference)
- ♪ *Be My Baby* by The Ronettes
- ♪ *Bohemian Rhapsody* by Queen (older learners due to lyrics)
- ♪ *California Dreaming* by The Beach Boys (Polyphony)
- ♪ *Everybody's Free*, featuring Quindon Tarver (Romeo & Juliet Soundtrack 1996, melody, harmony, & polyphony)



EXTENSIONS



Read more about:

- *100 Things to Know About Music*, pp. 36–38 (pre-read), p. 42, p. 75, p. 102, pp. 110–111



MUSIC TO MY EARS: ENTERTAINMENT, INFORMATION, & EDUCATION



GRIOT (GREE-OH) TRADITION

In the Alchemist Era, Griots were found in many regions of Africa, but started in West Africa; they were storytellers, musicians, and oral historians. Commonly found in the courts of leaders, they were known for holding vast amounts of cultural knowledge that they sang and performed at important social gatherings. They used instruments like the kora (sort of like a harp), mbira, drums, and the balafon; their messages were meant to entertain while imparting knowledge, including the teaching of moral stories. Audiences were often encouraged to dance as a means of connecting to the knowledge or song, or as a way of “talking” with the Griot. Sharing a rhythm could be seen as a way of sharing awareness. Many Griots made their way into Europe during their travels, singing of the kingdoms in Africa and intriguing European travelers to visit these kingdoms for themselves. During the Alchemist Age (medieval era), music was an important form of entertainment and information, much like stories. If you wanted to impart new information from one city to another, the easiest way was to gather large groups of people and make your message entertaining and easy to remember! Several jobs throughout the world combined the skills of informant, singer, and storyteller, from Griots in parts of Africa to Minstrels and Bards in Europe. So how were they all alike and how were they different?

⚡ TRY THIS!

The Griot tradition is still alive! Some modern singers are carrying the traditions forward, like Salif Keita. Salif was born with albinism, which limits the pigment in his skin, hair, and eyes. His albinism makes him mostly blind. He faced a lot of challenges growing up in Mali (find it on your globe), with people mistreating him because he was different. He chose to become a musician, storyteller, and educator of both his culture and albinism, but that did not come easily. Salif was born into a noble family, so being a musician was not one of the careers available to him, as that was reserved for the Griot class. But, he pushed forward with his choice anyway and had to break social norms to do it.

📻 LISTEN & LEARN (SONG FACTS): Listen to some of his work [here](#). This song is sung in the Bambara language. While you might not be able to understand it, you can still get a feel for it, following the griot tradition of a storyteller who uses only his voice and instrument. The song's themes are moral ones of loyalty and resilience while also honoring his friend.

MUSICIANS OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE - CHINA

Singers on the Asian continent during the Alchemist Era were highly skilled! China, in particular, has a very long history with music and instruments being a highly valued part of all nobles' lives. Music was seen as a way of connecting to the stars, which they believed influenced their lives. China even had the *Yuefu* (imperial music bureau) that was responsible for standardizing music, hiring musicians, and collecting and preserving music from around the country. Eventually, the Imperial Music Academy was opened to train all musicians who were to perform at the palace, which was hundreds at a time. Musicians of this time mostly used silk and bamboo instruments. The bamboo was carved, and the silk was used as strings. But Chinese musicians also used many metal and stone instruments, like horns, chimes, and bells. Unlike some areas, women in China were encouraged to learn and master music. They often performed at special events for the Emperor. Chinese singers were known to sing only in melody, not harmony, and they sang in high, thin-sounding voices.

In both China and Japan, blind musicians were common and held an honored place among musicians and storytellers. It was believed in China that a blind person had both a heightened sense of hearing, which was sought after in musicians, and the ability to predict the future, which meant people thought they could tell a person's fortune.

In Japan, *Heike Biwa* were narrative singers who told epic stories, sometimes historical, in song form. *Goze* were communities of visually impaired female musicians who played the *shamisen* and *kokyū*, which were stringed instruments. They would recite poetry, sing, and tell stories while asking for donations, which was how they survived.

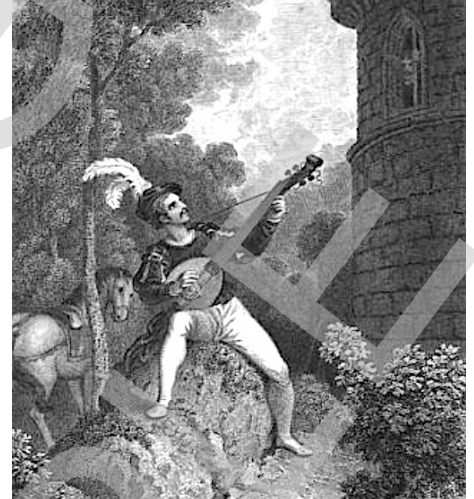
In both places, if a child was born visually impaired or blind, they were typically taught an instrument, if not adopted and raised by a blind community of musicians as a way of connecting with others like themselves and surviving in a culture not built for them.

BARDS, TROUBADOURS, TROUVÈRES, AND MINSTRELS OF EUROPE

Why so many names? Well, it all depended on where you worked! Bards were from the Celtic culture (mainly Scotland, Ireland, and Wales). They were more focused on telling and singing the oral stories and histories of people. You could hire a bard to compose and spread the stories of a family member's life to villages far and wide as a tribute to them. Or, if you had money, you could even hire them to spread stories of your own heroism, making a name for yourself!



Troubadours and trouvères were from France, and what you were called depended on whether you were from the south (troubadour) or the north (trouvère). While bards could be from different classes and spread histories, sometimes embellished, both troubadours and trouvères were from the higher classes. They lived in the courts of royalty, where they focused on writing and performing songs that expressed love.



Finally, we get to the multi-talented Minstrels from England! These composers were known for their entertainment skills, which included singing, dancing, playing multiple instruments, acting, and storytelling, but in many cases, they put all these skills together to create quite a show! Minstrels performed for wider audiences, both common and royal, but if they were exceptionally talented, they were likely invited to entertain nobility and royalty regularly. But that didn't stop many minstrels from entertaining large crowds as they traveled to and from noble homes, singing while playing an instrument, and dancing or acting out the story or song. They definitely had to have a lot of coordination practice to succeed at this without losing their place in the story, stumbling over something, and landing on top of their instrument!

⚡ TRY THIS!

Listen to a few modern renditions of old Alchemist Era compositions:

Griot: [Nan Fulie](#) (Timestamp 0:00–2:55)

Japanese Biwa: [Ogi no Mato](#)

Troubadour: [Douce Dame Jolie](#)

⚡ TRY THIS!

Like Alchemist Era storytelling singers, tell a simple story through song yourself. Come up with a short story from your life, like the time you made a new friend, or a fun story that teaches a lesson, like the time your learning partner stepped on a Lego you left lying around, yelped in pain while dancing around the room, and how that taught you to clean up your toys! Then write it as a short poem and sing it in the Alchemist Era traditions. You can even use percussion, the beating of a drum-like object, to accompany your story, much like griots do. Or, try the one provided below.

Scarborough Fair is an orally passed-down love song about setting impossible tasks for a new love interest. It references a medieval fair that took place annually in Yorkshire, England. Alchemist Era singers and musicians played a significant role in



the development of many folk music traditions. You can listen to the full version [here](#) to get the melody. You can challenge yourself to come up with your own version by changing 'Scarborough Fair' to a location of your choice and creating your own impossible tasks! You can even change the refrain, which is the repeated line in each verse, "Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme." Many musicians today still tell stories through song.

*Are you going to Scarborough Fair?
Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme
Remember me to one who lives there
For she once was a true love of mine*

*Tell her to make me a cambric shirt
Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme
Without any seams nor needlework
Then she'll be a true love of mine*

LISTEN & LEARN (SONG FACTS):

Listen to the song *Mirie it is while Sumer ilast*, one of the earliest known written secular English language songs, from the first half of the 1200s. Notice that even though it is in English, it sounds like a completely different language? The English language has evolved and changed a lot over the years. If you were to hop into a time machine and travel back to the 13th century (1200s), you would have a tough time understanding anything people said because the English language was so different from what it is today. Listen [here](#) or [here](#). Fun fact: The oldest written song ever found was a Hurrian hymn to to moon goddess in 1400 BCE.

LET'S MEET SOME INFLUENTIAL FIGURES:

BERNARD DE VENTADORN (c. 1135–1194 CE)

Do you like lovey-dovey songs? Well, so did Bernard de Ventadorn, a troubadour from medieval France. Bernard was famous for writing beautiful songs about loving and wanting to be loved. During the Alchemist Era, it was common for love not to be considered for marriages of nobles, but instead it was closer to an agreement, meant to benefit each family of the couple. When Bernard sang his love poems, they helped people identify with their feelings. His songs were often about falling in love with noblewomen, including one very famous queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

Bernard wrote songs that people sang while playing the lute or other instruments. These songs, called *chansons*, were performed in the courts of kings and queens, and they helped shape the way people thought about love and music during the Alchemist Era.

Bernard's love songs were so popular that they spread across Europe! Even today, some of his works are still studied by people who love music and poetry.

ADAM DE LA HALLE (c. 1237–1288 CE)

Meet Adam de la Halle, one of the innovative composers of his time! Another talent from France, who performed around Europe. He had a skill for storytelling and music, but he didn't just write love songs, he composed and wrote musical plays! He was known as a *trouvère* who created songs about love, adventure, and told stories of human emotions through the first musicals. Imagine watching a play with live music in the 13th century, over 800 years ago.



One of his most famous pieces was *Le Jeu de Robin et Marion* (The Game of Robin and Marion), which is one of the first known examples of a musical comedy. That means Adam was a kind of medieval “musical theater” creator! His play was about a shepherdess, who already has a partner, being wooed by a knight. The knight does not listen when Marion refuses him, so Marion, her partner Robin, and her friends end up playing tricks on the knight who won’t listen.

Adam’s music was light and fun. His works were often played at parties and celebrations for royalty and common folks alike. Adam’s music is still performed at medieval festivals today!

BALLA FASSÉKÉ (c. 1237–1288 CE)

Griots (in some cultures called Jeliw) are born into their position, taking over the family tradition, but a family line has to start somewhere, right? Balla Fasséké is known through African tradition as being the first of the Kouyaté line who created and continues to tell the oral epic of the King Sunjata. Balla Fasséké was a trusted adviser of King Sunjata, so trusted that he was tasked with telling Sunjata’s story about founding the Mali Empire. The story he created is called *The Lion Thief Who Takes his Inheritance*, and it is said that if all the “chapters” (storytelling sessions) were combined, it would take several days non-stop to recite!

The story generally includes a boy born from a chief and a sorceress, Sunjata. The chief and sorceress were married when a powerful shapeshifter who can change herself into an animal dies, leading to Sunjata’s birth. He is born covered in hair from head to toe and paralyzed from the waist down. But he has magic abilities from his disabled mother, which he uses to perform extraordinary acts. He is eventually exiled from his home, but returns as a powerful trained military leader. He uses his skills and magic to vanquish a sorcerer-king that uses an enchanted Balafon he stole to control his people and invade other lands. Sunjata, playing the hero, saved his kingdom and others, which then became the Mali Empire.

Unlike some stories that were written down long ago and continue to be read today, this story of Sunjata changes over time as the details are manipulated by the griot to be relevant to the audience with each telling. The animal the powerful shapeshifter changes into might be a buffalo in one telling and a zebra in the next, depending on what connects with the audience. Balla Fasséké is said to have been the original teller of this epic changing story and beginning of the Kouyaté line!

TRY THIS!

If you’d like to hear what a medieval musical would have sounded like, you can listen to as much or as little of *The Game of Robin and Marion* as you’d like [here](#). P.S. It’s in French, but you can hear the jovial tone and be transported back to medieval France; as close to a time machine as we can get!



EXTENSIONS

 Watch: (Please vet all films for age-appropriate content before watching with learners)

- *Kubo and the Two Strings* (rated PG, but the claymation monsters can be slightly creepy for sensitive learners). This title is a fun immersive watch because it is inspired by Japanese legend, features a vision impaired main character (Kubo has one eye), emotional growth, and a magical shamisen instrument. It’s a fun way to engage in the themes of Level 2 and this study.
- Watch [How Ears Let Us Hear the World!](#)



Read more about:

- *100 Things to Know About Music*, pp. 60–61, p. 66