Hildegard of Bingen, a German nun, poet, mystic, and advisor to princes, achieved international musical repute in the 1980s: no mean feat, since she had died in 1179. She is, indeed, the earliest composer whose output survives in bulk (around eighty pieces bear her name) and is regularly performed. "A feather on the breath of God," she called herself. If you heard her output without knowing what it was, you would probably take it for **plainchant** with instrumental accompaniment. Her works are, like plainchant, monophonic: comprising, in other words, a single melodic line. The instruments' contributions are mere editorial addenda.

Like every musician of her age and hundreds of years after, she lived and breathed plainchant. Pious belief credited Pope Gregory the Great, during the late sixth century, with having had this chant dictated to him by the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. Alas, scholars now ascribe the chant—which continues to be widely and rather misleadingly known as "Gregorian"—to the time of Charlemagne, crowned Holy Roman Emperor in the

year 800. Before acquiring this title, Charlemagne had imported papally approved chant to France, where it became intermixed with chant in native varieties before making its way across Europe, with Charlemagne's active championship. It eventually triumphed over other, formerly flourishing localized forms of chant: Mozarabic (native to Spain), Gallican (the original French form), and to a lesser degree Ambrosian (named after Milan's Saint Ambrose).

If Hildegard is for all practical purposes the earliest surviving composer, plainchant is for all practical purposes the earliest surviving musical repertoire. A few musical snippets—decipherable only conjecturally—from ancient Greece have endured to our day; of music from imperial Rome, not even that much. The "fiddle" with which Nero proverbially amused himself while Rome burned was, in reality, a lyre; what he played, we have no way of determining, just as we have no way of determining what King David played on his harp.

Such is the terrible fragility of musical knowledge from the days before globally standardized notation, let alone before sound recording. Musical notation first achieved a recognizably modern form at the hands of Guido d'Arezzo, a Benedictine monk (from Arezzo, Italy, hence his name) who around 1030 popularized staves on which to indicate musical pitches. Nothing like this had been systematically done in Europe before, and it required contact with Europe before other civilizations, however high, managed it at all.

Not that European notation achieved that much specificity itself until comparatively recent times. The familiar five-line stave is a thirteenth-century invention. For hundreds of years before that, a four-line stave was standard practice (in the reprinting of plainchant, it still is). It took till 1536 for music history's first tempo indication—in a Spanish collection of lute pieces, as it happens—to appear. Before the twelfth century the great bulk of all music remained monophonic. Continuous and consistent harmonization came only in the late twelfth century, with Paris's Notre Dame school, established just as Hildegard embarked on her old age. Who the specific European genius was who first managed to harmonize a given melody, we shall never know. (The likeliest guess is that originally such harmonizing was improvised rather than written down.) But that the Notre Dame school went further than any predecessors in codifying such harmonizations is beyond dispute. **Organum**, these instances were collectively called, and had been called well before Notre Dame. Léonin—or Leoninus, to use the Latin form of his name—is the Notre Dame school's earliest individual. He and his somewhat younger contemporary Pérotin (analogously Latinized as Perotinus) were hailed by a mysterious English student at Notre Dame, identified simply through the title "Anonymous IV," as "the two best composers of organum." By the time "Anonymous IV" wrote his tribute, both Léonin and Pérotin had long since died. They nevertheless continued to be esteemed long after their deaths, and

no wonder. Most previous attempts at harmonizing had been extremely cautious, with the musical lines being frog-marched along to exactly the same rhythmic pattern. Léonin and Pérotin, on the other hand, positively exulted in soaring, rhythmically varied melodies that bore little relation to the sustained chords beneath them (if any), or to each other.

The Notre Dame school's pioneering efforts attest to how completely religion dominated medieval music. As well as attracting much of the best musical talent, the church preserved musical manuscripts better than did any other institution. Not solely manuscripts of sacred material, either: the irreverent, often lascivious thirteenth-century ditties whose words Carl Orff ransacked, during the 1930s, for *Carmina Burana* had been stored in a Bavarian monastery. By contrast, the Middle Ages' secular music largely lacks Notre Dame–style harmonic inventiveness. Like Hildegard's work, it is mostly monophonic. Again like her work, it carries no hints regarding instrumentation, which must be decided by modern editors. And it is intensely regional. The troubadours belonged mostly to Provence, though formal and stylistic elements of their aristocratic love songs found their way to northern France, where its practitioners called themselves *trouvères*. German-speaking territories responded to both troubadours and *trouvères* with their own courtly secular musicians, the *Minnesänger.* Yet despite the cross-fertilizing that sometimes occurred between these groups, what strikes today's observer is how tied to their

original habitats they were: writing in their vernacular tongues, appealing to their own royal and noble courts' audiences, cramming their texts with political allusions mainly lost on later ages or foreign cultures.

With France's poet-composer Guillaume de Machaut (1300?–1377), there appears for the first time a figure who brought to secular composition the consistent dedication and ingenuity that had so long marked the sacred. Much admired by Chaucer for his amatory lyrics, Machaut left approximately four hundred verses behind him; he also gave the world its first non-plainchant Mass setting by a single hand, namely, the *Messe de Nostre Dame,* written around 1360 for Reims Cathedral. *Ars nova,* "New Art," is the name given even in Machaut's own time for the polyphonic elaboration and sheer rhythmic complexity of his (and certain of his contemporaries') idiom.

After Machaut, the contest between sacred and secular for musical significance remained less hopelessly uneven than theretofore. Most composers for the next two hundred years served God and mammon with ease, although their ultimate allegiance stayed with God. Deriving with remarkable frequency from the Low Countries, they were peripatetic in a way that neither Machaut nor most of his secular precursors had been. John Dunstable (1380?–1453), an Englishman admired for his gifts in astronomy and medicine as well as music, spent time and owned land in France. His plentiful use of mellifluous

third-based harmonies—*la contenance angloise,* "the English countenance," as foreigners called this manner—formed a conspicuous contrast with Machaut's much edgier, more astringent, fourth- and fifth-based harmonic lexicon; and Continental musicians, during the early to mid-1400s, could not get enough of it. Those whom it influenced included Guillaume Dufay (1400?–1474), bastard son of a priest. Dufay spent years at Cambrai in northern France, but he also lived in Switzerland and Italy, alternating between ecclesiastical and noble employment. The somewhat younger Johannes Ockeghem (1410?–97) resided by turns in France and in what is now Belgium, sometimes visiting Spain and elsewhere; he cultivated fantastically elaborate counterpoint, sang bass, and wore glasses.

Similar cosmopolitanism, similar straddling of the sacred-secular divide, typified the generation born around the 1450 mark: notably Heinrich Isaac (1450?–1517), Josquin Desprez (1450?–1521), and Jacob Obrecht (1457?–1505). Isaac—known to Italians as *Arrigo il Tedesco*, "Harry the German"—spent his career at Innsbruck, Ferrara, and Florence. Obrecht, from Ghent, died in Ferrara during a plague outbreak. Josquin, generally viewed as the greatest composer of his time (Luther said of him, "He is master of the notes: others are mastered by them"), worked at Ferrara, Milan, Rome, and Paris. Once France's Louis XII, who combined love of music with almost complete incapacity for making it, asked Josquin to write a piece in which he could participate. Undeterred

by the problem of royal talentlessness, Josquin confined the king's role to the singing of one repeated note, a reproof that Louis accepted with good grace.

This anecdote indicates the considerable freedom composers enjoyed under conditions often routinely denounced as "feudal." When a composer tired of his court or church post, he could and did abandon it with an alacrity that compels surprise. Some eminent musicians —Josquin for one —attained a reputation for arrogance. In no cases did such a reputation leave them permanently jobless. Netherlander Roland de Lassus (1532–94) acquired, when still in his early twenties, one of Rome's most prestigious musical directorships; within a year he had given it up, but far from suffering thereby, he achieved comparable heights in Munich, acquiring a papal knighthood. His two thousand extant works, all vocal, range from the loftiest Eastertide **motets** to the raunchiest drinking songs. Melancholia crippled his last decade.

In many respects Lassus constituted a reversion to medieval concepts of good clean dirty fun punctuated by austere piety, or vice versa. Lassus spent his life as if Protestantism had never happened. Not so the slightly older Palestrina, bound up in his career with a newly militant Catholicism, and accordingly on the defensive in a fashion that earlier church music-masters (*maestri di cappella,* as the collective Italian phrase has it) of similar fame had

not needed to be. Far from bringing polyphony to new levels of elaboration, Palestrina purged it and clarified it. To pass from, say, a Mass setting by Ockeghem to one by Palestrina is to feel that, as it were, the incense has dissipated; that the words are much more readily audible; that the liturgical expression, however polished, is communal, as Ockeghem's sublimely introverted stratagems could never be. Like many great composers Palestrina represented an end, not a beginning. He predeceased Lassus by only four months, and with both men's departure there comes to the historian a sense that they had squeezed their respective styles dry. Younger men who tried to take after Palestrina (several had been his pupils) seldom produced more than wan imitations.

Palestrina, Giovanni Pierluigi Da (Italian, 1525?–94). Composer-laureate to the Catholic Church during the Counter-Reformation—admittedly, careless legend from long afterwards exaggerated his role as "savior of church music"—and acknowledged as the epitome of contrapuntal composition, although he saw himself as a practical artisan with a daily grind, rather than as a role model. He led a mostly quiet and uneventful life as music-master at various Roman churches, refusing lucrative job offers elsewhere. Extremely prolific, he wrote over a hundred settings of the Mass, and almost two hundred motets, along with a handful of (largely forgotten) **madrigals**. For all his devout compositional eloquence, he retained a level business head, periodically complaining if he thought publishers and paymasters were doing him down; in his fifties he married a rich widow. The honors that popes and cardinals showered on him he appears to have regarded as no more than his due. His best-known piece is the *Missa Papae Marcelli,* named after a short-lived pontiff (Marcellus II); other outstanding compositions from his

Already during Palestrina's lifetime his musical opposite had emerged: Carlo Gesualdo, Italian prince, as stylistically hyperemotional as Palestrina was superbly poised. In 1590 (his thirtieth year), Gesualdo had surprised his wife in bed with her lover and stabbed both of them to death. Untouched by official justice, he endured punishment of a subtler kind, insisting that his servants repeatedly and ritualistically flog him. As composer, in his madrigals and religious works he sought out ever more baffling harmonic progressions to express an anguish that he could never shake off. He died in 1613, possibly at his second spouse's hands.

pen are the *Stabat Mater,* the *Missa Assumpta est Maria,* the *Missa Aeterna Christi Munera*, and the exultant motet *Tu es Petrus*. Apart from Lassus, his notable contemporaries included Tomás Luis de Victoria (1548?–1611), from Spain, and William Byrd (1540?–1623), from England. The former openly admired him, unlike the latter, who operated independently of Palestrina's influence.