

THE SAYLOR FOUNDATION'S SECULAR MUSIC IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Part 1: Geoffrey Chaucer's "Sumer Is Icumen In"

Introduction: A small but significant repertory of secular song in English survives from the thirteenth century. These songs are contemporary with the great English poet Geoffrey Chaucer whose *Canterbury Tales* are full of musical metaphors and references to music.

A simple (and fun) way of creating harmony in the Middle Ages was the round, or a composition in which two or more voices sing a melody, with their parts entering one at a time. The oldest known round in Western music, based on Chaucer's poem "Sumer Is Icumen In" ("Summer is Coming"), testifies to the popularity of the round in England. One unusual feature of "Sumer Is Icumen In" is that it is composed as a double round. Two voices sing a persistently repeated (and somewhat silly) phrase, "Sing Cuccu!" while two (or more) voices sing the melody. Each of these two melodies is sung as a round—simultaneously!

Instructions: To understand the complex structure of "Sumer Is Icumen In," view the [original manuscript from the British Library archives](#),* and read the Middle and Modern English texts. Then, listen to the [Hilliard Ensemble's performance](#).*

Information on singing the double round, with modern musical notation, can be found at [this web site](#).* If you can, try to sing the round with two or three companions, as the original manuscript suggests.

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Part 2: Medieval Musical Instruments

Instructions: To explore the amazing variety of musical instrument textures and sounds in the Middle Ages and to hear examples of them played by performers in period costume, click on [this link](#).* Listen to as many examples as you desire, and read the accompanying historical notes. Try to focus on these instruments: sacbut, organetto, shawm, dulcimer, rebec, hurdy gurdy, psaltery, and crumhorn in order to answer the questions below. These instruments are performed by students and faculty at Iowa State University, which owns the collection of music and hosts this website. Answer the questions that follow, and then, check your response with the answer key at the end of this document.



1. Medieval instruments were divided into “loud” and “soft” ensembles. A “loud” ensemble, which performed outdoors, could consist of which combination of instruments?

- A. Dulcimer, psaltery, and sacbut
- B. Organetto, rebec, and crumhorn
- C. Crumhorn, sacbut, and shawm
- D. Hurdy-gurdy, psaltery, and shawm

2. On which instrument does the player accompany himself with a drone pitch, as in medieval organum? (Note, this instrument is played in our [previous example featuring Hildegard von Bingen’s chant*](#)).

- A. Hurdy-gurdy
- B. Rebec
- C. Psaltery
- D. Shawm

3. Which stringed instrument is most akin to the modern violin?

- A. Hurdy-gurdy
- B. Rebec
- C. Psaltery
- D. Shawm

4. Which instrument appears frequently in early Christian iconography?

- A. Hurdy-gurdy
- B. Rebec
- C. Psaltery
- D. Shawm



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Part 3: The Counter-Reformation: the Refined Art of Palestrina

Instructions: Listen to the [National Public Radio program on Palestrina](#).* Pay close attention to the musical excerpts, and write down some reactions to what you hear. Using vocabulary learned in this course, describe the following: melody, rhythm, and texture. Then, briefly answer the following questions in your own words:

Which features of Palestrina's music were most admired by his contemporaries? Which features of his music are most likely to be admired by a modern audience and why?

Optional/Advanced: For a challenge, advanced students may want to also consider describing harmony.

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ANSWER KEY:

1. C, 2. A, 3. B, 4. C

