Gregorian chants were various religious songs used in churches and monasteries during the Middle Ages. These chants were single melodies. There was only one melody being sung to the words written. Around A.D. 1100, a very important development in music history took place. This development, known as polyphony, combined two or more simultaneous melodic lines. Then, instead of just one line of melody, the priests and monks in monasteries could sing two or three or four lines of melody at one time.

Having that many melodies meant that music would have to be written down in a more accurate manner. In this way, the use of polyphony brought about the development of precise notation of music. The earliest known composer of polyphonic music was Leonin, who lived in the last part of the twelfth century. He was one of a number of composers whose center of study and composition was the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. The style of polyphony that Leonin composed was called organum. Organum was created by adding a second voice or second melody to the Gregorian chant. It ran parallel to that chant at the interval of a fourth, either above or below.

Leonin's successor was Perotin. Perotin wrote polyphonic music in three and four parts. Toward the end of Perotin's life, composers began writing new words to be used by the additional voices. While the original Gregorian chant melody was sung with the original Gregorian chant text or words, new words would be written for the other two or three voices. The addition of these new texts resulted in what was called the motet. It was the most important form of early polyphonic music. The motet from the late Middle Ages could be either secular or sacred; it could have to do with a religious or nonreligious theme. (Something sacred is religious, and something secular is nonreligious.)