

A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE

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A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE IS A FASCINATING JOURNEY THAT TRACES THE EVOLUTION OF SOUND, EXPRESSION, AND CREATIVITY ACROSS CENTURIES. FROM THE CHANTS OF MEDIEVAL MONKS TO THE ELECTRIFYING RHYTHMS OF MODERN POP, MUSIC HAS BEEN AN ESSENTIAL THREAD WOVEN INTO THE FABRIC OF WESTERN SOCIETY. UNDERSTANDING THIS RICH HISTORY NOT ONLY ENRICHES OUR APPRECIATION FOR MUSIC BUT ALSO REVEALS HOW CULTURAL, SOCIAL, AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES HAVE SHAPED THE MELODIES AND HARMONIES WE CHERISH TODAY.

EARLY BEGINNINGS: FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO MEDIEVAL TIMES

THE ROOTS OF WESTERN MUSIC EXTEND DEEP INTO ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS, WHERE MUSIC WAS TIED CLOSELY TO RELIGIOUS RITUALS AND STORYTELLING. ANCIENT GREECE PLAYED A PIVOTAL ROLE IN LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN MUSICAL THOUGHT. PHILOSOPHERS LIKE PYTHAGORAS EXPLORED THE MATHEMATICAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MUSICAL NOTES, INTRODUCING CONCEPTS OF HARMONY AND SCALE THAT STILL INFLUENCE MUSIC THEORY.

MEDIEVAL MUSIC: THE BIRTH OF NOTATION AND SACRED SONG

AS WE MOVE INTO THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD, ROUGHLY SPANNING FROM THE 5TH TO THE 15TH CENTURY, MUSIC BECAME PREDOMINANTLY LINKED TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH. GREGORIAN CHANT, CHARACTERIZED BY ITS MONOPHONIC AND UNACCOMPANIED MELODIES, DOMINATED WORSHIP SETTINGS. ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS DURING THIS ERA WAS THE INVENTION OF MUSICAL NOTATION, ENABLING COMPOSERS TO WRITE DOWN MELODIES WITH PRECISION. THIS BREAKTHROUGH ALLOWED MUSIC TO BE PRESERVED, LEARNED, AND SHARED WIDELY.

THE MEDIEVAL ERA ALSO INTRODUCED THE BEGINNINGS OF POLYPHONY—MULTIPLE INDEPENDENT MELODY LINES PERFORMED SIMULTANEOUSLY. COMPOSERS LIKE LEONIN AND PEROTIN AT THE NOTRE DAME CATHEDRAL EXPANDED THE COMPLEXITY OF MUSIC, SETTING THE STAGE FOR FUTURE INNOVATIONS.

THE RENAISSANCE: A FLOURISHING OF MUSICAL EXPRESSION

THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD (APPROXIMATELY 1400 TO 1600) SAW A BLOSSOMING OF ARTISTIC AND INTELLECTUAL ACTIVITY, AND MUSIC WAS NO EXCEPTION. THIS ERA EMPHASIZED BALANCE, CLARITY, AND BEAUTY, REFLECTED IN THE RISE OF VOCAL MUSIC SUCH AS MADRIGALS AND MOTETS. COMPOSERS BEGAN TO EXPERIMENT WITH RICHER TEXTURES, BLENDING VOICES AND INSTRUMENTS IN MORE INTRICATE WAYS.

HUMANISM AND MUSIC

THE HUMANIST MOVEMENT ENCOURAGED A RENEWED INTEREST IN ANCIENT TEXTS AND IDEAS, WHICH INSPIRED COMPOSERS TO FOCUS ON MUSIC'S EMOTIONAL IMPACT. SECULAR MUSIC GAINED PROMINENCE ALONGSIDE SACRED COMPOSITIONS, AND INSTRUMENTS LIKE THE LUTE AND VIOL GAINED POPULARITY IN COURTS AND SALONS. THE INVENTION OF THE PRINTING PRESS ALLOWED MUSIC TO BE DISTRIBUTED MORE WIDELY, FACILITATING THE SPREAD OF STYLES AND IDEAS ACROSS EUROPE.

THE BAROQUE ERA: COMPLEXITY AND ORNAMENTATION

THE BAROQUE PERIOD (1600–1750) IS OFTEN RECOGNIZED FOR ITS DRAMATIC, EXPRESSIVE, AND HIGHLY ORNAMENTED MUSIC.

THIS ERA INTRODUCED NEW FORMS SUCH AS THE OPERA, CONCERTO, AND SONATA, PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES OF MUSICAL STORYTELLING AND TECHNIQUE. COMPOSERS LIKE JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH, GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL, AND ANTONIO VIVALDI ELEVATED INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC TO NEW HEIGHTS.

INNOVATION IN HARMONY AND FORM

BAROQUE MUSIC IS NOTABLE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF TONALITY—THE SYSTEM OF MAJOR AND MINOR KEYS THAT UNDERPIN MUCH OF WESTERN MUSIC TODAY. THE BASSO CONTINUO (CONTINUOUS BASS LINE) BECAME A DEFINING FEATURE, PROVIDING HARMONIC STRUCTURE AND RHYTHMIC DRIVE. THE ERA'S FASCINATION WITH CONTRAST AND EMOTION RESULTED IN MUSIC THAT COULD EVOKE INTENSE FEELINGS, WHETHER THROUGH A DELICATE ARIA OR A POWERFUL FUGUE.

THE CLASSICAL PERIOD: CLARITY, BALANCE, AND FORM

FOLLOWING THE BAROQUE, THE CLASSICAL PERIOD (ROUGHLY 1750–1820) BROUGHT A SHIFT TOWARDS SIMPLICITY, CLARITY, AND STRUCTURAL BALANCE. COMPOSERS LIKE WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART, LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN, AND FRANZ JOSEPH HAYDN CHAMPIONED THESE IDEALS, EMPHASIZING CLEAR MELODIC LINES AND FORMAL DESIGNS SUCH AS THE SONATA-ALLEGRO FORM.

THE SYMPHONY AND THE STRING QUARTET

THIS ERA SAW THE RISE OF THE SYMPHONY AND STRING QUARTET AS CENTRAL GENRES, SHOWCASING THE ORCHESTRA'S EVOLVING CAPABILITIES AND THE INTIMATE DIALOGUE BETWEEN INSTRUMENTS. THE MUSIC BECAME MORE ACCESSIBLE AND EMOTIONALLY VARIED, REFLECTING ENLIGHTENMENT IDEALS ABOUT REASON AND HUMAN NATURE.

THE ROMANTIC ERA: EMOTION AND INDIVIDUALITY

THE 19TH CENTURY USHERED IN THE ROMANTIC PERIOD, CHARACTERIZED BY AN EXPLOSION OF EMOTIONAL INTENSITY, INDIVIDUALITY, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MUSIC. COMPOSERS LIKE FRANZ SCHUBERT, RICHARD WAGNER, FREDERIC CHOPIN, AND JOHANNES BRAHMS CRAFTED WORKS THAT EXPLORED DEEP FEELINGS, NATURE, AND MYTH.

PROGRAM MUSIC AND EXPRESSIVE FREEDOM

ROMANTIC COMPOSERS OFTEN WROTE PROGRAM MUSIC—INSTRUMENTAL PIECES THAT TELL A STORY OR PAINT A SCENE. THIS ERA EMBRACED EXPANDED ORCHESTRAS, INNOVATIVE HARMONIES, AND FREER FORMS. THE RISE OF VIRTUOSO PERFORMERS ALSO CHANGED HOW MUSIC WAS CONSUMED, WITH CONCERTS BECOMING POPULAR SOCIAL EVENTS.

20TH CENTURY AND BEYOND: DIVERSITY AND INNOVATION

THE 20TH CENTURY SHATTERED MANY TRADITIONAL BOUNDARIES IN WESTERN MUSIC. WITH RAPID TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES, NEW GENRES AND STYLES EMERGED, REFLECTING A WORLD IN FLUX.

MODERNISM AND EXPERIMENTALISM

EARLY 20TH-CENTURY COMPOSERS LIKE IGOR STRAVINSKY AND ARNOLD SCHOENBERG CHALLENGED CONVENTIONAL TONALITY AND FORM. SCHOENBERG'S TWELVE-TONE TECHNIQUE, FOR EXAMPLE, REDEFINED MUSICAL ORGANIZATION, WHILE STRAVINSKY'S RHYTHMIC INNOVATIONS TRANSFORMED ORCHESTRAL MUSIC.

POPULAR MUSIC AND CULTURAL SHIFTS

SIMULTANEOUSLY, POPULAR MUSIC GENRES SUCH AS JAZZ, BLUES, ROCK, AND LATER HIP-HOP AND ELECTRONIC MUSIC DEVELOPED, ROOTED IN BOTH AFRICAN AMERICAN TRADITIONS AND GLOBAL INFLUENCES. THESE STYLES RESHAPED WESTERN CULTURE, INFLUENCING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND EVERYDAY LIFE.

UNDERSTANDING THE LEGACY AND INFLUENCE

LOOKING BACK AT A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE REVEALS A DYNAMIC AND EVER-CHANGING LANDSCAPE. EACH ERA BUILDS ON THE PREVIOUS ONE, BLENDING INNOVATION WITH TRADITION. WHETHER YOU'RE A MUSICIAN, A CASUAL LISTENER, OR A HISTORY ENTHUSIAST, EXPLORING THIS JOURNEY OFFERS A DEEPER CONNECTION TO THE ART FORM THAT CONTINUES TO EVOLVE AND INSPIRE.

ONE TIP FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN DELVING DEEPER IS TO LISTEN TO REPRESENTATIVE PIECES FROM EACH PERIOD, PAYING ATTENTION TO HOW MELODY, HARMONY, RHYTHM, AND INSTRUMENTATION CHANGE. THIS ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT ENHANCES APPRECIATION AND REVEALS THE RICH TAPESTRY THAT IS WESTERN MUSIC HISTORY.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR PERIODS IN THE HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE?

THE MAJOR PERIODS IN WESTERN MUSIC HISTORY INCLUDE THE MEDIEVAL (500-1400), RENAISSANCE (1400-1600), BAROQUE (1600-1750), CLASSICAL (1750-1820), ROMANTIC (1820-1900), AND 20TH/21ST CENTURY (1900-PRESENT) PERIODS.

HOW DID THE INVENTION OF MUSICAL NOTATION IMPACT WESTERN MUSIC?

THE INVENTION OF MUSICAL NOTATION IN THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD ALLOWED COMPOSERS TO WRITE DOWN MUSIC PRECISELY, FACILITATING THE PRESERVATION, DISSEMINATION, AND COMPLEXITY OF COMPOSITIONS, WHICH SIGNIFICANTLY SHAPED THE DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN MUSIC.

WHO ARE SOME KEY COMPOSERS THAT INFLUENCED WESTERN MUSIC HISTORY?

KEY COMPOSERS INCLUDE JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH AND GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL (BAROQUE), WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART AND LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (CLASSICAL), AND JOHANNES BRAHMS AND RICHARD WAGNER (ROMANTIC), AMONG OTHERS.

HOW DID THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD INFLUENCE THE DEVELOPMENT OF WESTERN MUSIC?

THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD EMPHASIZED HARMONY, POLYPHONY, AND VOCAL MUSIC, LEADING TO ADVANCEMENTS IN CHORAL MUSIC AND THE WIDESPREAD USE OF MODES, WHICH LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR TONAL HARMONY IN LATER WESTERN MUSIC.

WHAT ROLE DID TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS PLAY IN THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN MUSIC?

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS SUCH AS THE PRINTING PRESS, THE PIANO, RECORDING DEVICES, AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

REVOLUTIONIZED MUSIC PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION, EXPANDING THE REACH AND DIVERSITY OF WESTERN MUSIC.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE: TRACING THE MELODIC EVOLUTION

A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE UNFOLDS AS A RICH TAPESTRY WOVEN THROUGH CENTURIES OF ARTISTIC INNOVATION, SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATION, AND TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENT. FROM THE MODAL CHANTS OF THE MEDIEVAL CHURCH TO THE ELECTRIFYING BEATS OF CONTEMPORARY POPULAR MUSIC, WESTERN MUSIC HAS CONTINUOUSLY EVOLVED, REFLECTING AND SHAPING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF EUROPE AND BEYOND. THIS EXPLORATION DELVES INTO THE SIGNIFICANT EPOCHS, INFLUENTIAL COMPOSERS, AND DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS THAT HAVE MARKED WESTERN MUSIC'S JOURNEY, PROVIDING NOT ONLY A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW BUT ALSO AN ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ITS ENDURING IMPACT.

THE ORIGINS: MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE FOUNDATIONS

THE EARLIEST IDENTIFIABLE PERIOD IN WESTERN MUSIC HISTORY BEGINS IN THE MIDDLE AGES, ROUGHLY SPANNING FROM THE 5TH TO THE 15TH CENTURY. DURING THIS TIME, MUSIC WAS PREDOMINANTLY CENTERED AROUND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH, WITH GREGORIAN CHANT EPITOMIZING THE MONOPHONIC, UNACCOMPANIED VOCAL STYLE THAT DOMINATED SACRED MUSIC. THIS ERA'S MUSIC WAS MODAL, RELYING ON SCALES AND TONALITIES DIFFERENT FROM TODAY'S MAJOR-MINOR SYSTEM, WHICH CONTRIBUTED TO ITS ETHEREAL AND MEDITATIVE QUALITY.

MEDIEVAL MUSIC AND THE CHURCH'S INFLUENCE

THE CHURCH'S ROLE AS THE PRIMARY PATRON OF MUSIC FOSTERED THE DEVELOPMENT OF NOT ONLY CHANT BUT ALSO EARLY POLYPHONY — THE SUPERIMPOSITION OF MULTIPLE MELODIC LINES. COMPOSERS BEGAN EXPERIMENTING WITH ORGANUM, AN EARLY FORM OF HARMONY THAT LAID THE GROUNDWORK FOR MORE COMPLEX MUSICAL STRUCTURES. THE INVENTION OF MUSICAL NOTATION DURING THIS PERIOD WAS REVOLUTIONARY, ENABLING THE PRESERVATION AND DISSEMINATION OF COMPOSITIONS BEYOND ORAL TRANSMISSION.

THE RENAISSANCE: HUMANISM AND MUSICAL FLOURISHING

TRANSITIONING INTO THE RENAISSANCE PERIOD (15TH TO EARLY 17TH CENTURY), WESTERN MUSIC SAW A MARKED SHIFT IN STYLE AND PURPOSE. INFLUENCED BY THE BROADER CULTURAL MOVEMENT OF HUMANISM, COMPOSERS EMBRACED GREATER EXPRESSIVENESS, CLARITY, AND BALANCE. POLYPHONY REACHED NEW HEIGHTS WITH MASTERS LIKE JOSQUIN DES PREZ AND PALESTRINA, WHOSE WORKS COMBINED INTRICATE COUNTERPOINT WITH EMOTIVE TEXT SETTINGS.

INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC BEGAN TO EMERGE ALONGSIDE VOCAL COMPOSITIONS, REFLECTING ADVANCEMENTS IN INSTRUMENT DESIGN AND A GROWING SECULAR AUDIENCE. THE PRINTING PRESS'S INVENTION ALSO PLAYED A CRUCIAL ROLE IN SPREADING MUSICAL IDEAS, CONTRIBUTING TO A MORE INTERCONNECTED EUROPEAN MUSICAL CULTURE.

BAROQUE TO CLASSICAL: COMPLEXITY AND FORMALIZATION

THE BAROQUE ERA (1600–1750) INTRODUCED DRAMATIC EXPRESSION AND ORNAMENTAL COMPLEXITY. FIGURES SUCH AS JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH AND GEORGE FRIDERIC HANDEL EPITOMIZED THIS PERIOD'S GRANDEUR THROUGH ELABORATE FUGUES, CONCERTOS, AND ORATORIOS. THE BAROQUE PERIOD WAS CHARACTERIZED BY A CLEAR DISTINCTION BETWEEN BASSO CONTINUO AND MELODIC LINES, UNDERPINNING THE HARMONIC STRUCTURE WITH A FOUNDATIONAL BASS.

BAROQUE INNOVATIONS

THIS PERIOD SAW THE DEVELOPMENT OF TONALITY, SHIFTING FROM MODAL SYSTEMS TO THE MAJOR-MINOR KEY FRAMEWORK THAT DEFINES MUCH OF WESTERN MUSIC TODAY. THE RISE OF OPERA AS A DRAMATIC ART FORM COMBINED MUSIC, THEATER, AND STAGECRAFT, OFFERING NEW AVENUES FOR STORYTELLING. FURTHERMORE, INSTRUMENTAL FORMS LIKE THE SONATA AND SUITE EXPANDED, SHOWCASING VIRTUOSITY AND STRUCTURAL SOPHISTICATION.

THE CLASSICAL ERA: CLARITY AND BALANCE

FOLLOWING THE BAROQUE, THE CLASSICAL ERA (CIRCA 1750–1820) EMPHASIZED CLARITY, PROPORTION, AND FORMAL SYMMETRY. COMPOSERS SUCH AS MOZART, HAYDN, AND EARLY BEETHOVEN REFINED SONATA FORM AND SYMPHONIC STRUCTURE, CREATING MUSIC THAT BALANCED EMOTIONAL DEPTH WITH ARCHITECTURAL PRECISION. THE PERIOD'S HALLMARK WAS ITS PURSUIT OF ELEGANCE AND RESTRAINT, OFTEN REFLECTING ENLIGHTENMENT IDEALS.

THIS ERA ALSO WITNESSED THE RISE OF PUBLIC CONCERTS AND A BROADER MIDDLE-CLASS AUDIENCE, SHIFTING MUSIC FROM EXCLUSIVE ARISTOCRATIC COURTS TO MORE PUBLIC VENUES. THE PIANO BECAME THE CENTRAL INSTRUMENT, REPLACING THE HARPSICHORD, DUE TO ITS DYNAMIC RANGE AND EXPRESSIVE POTENTIAL.

ROMANTICISM AND MODERNISM: EMOTIONAL EXPANSION AND EXPERIMENTATION

THE 19TH CENTURY USHERED IN ROMANTICISM, MARKED BY HEIGHTENED EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION, INDIVIDUALISM, AND NATIONALISTIC THEMES. COMPOSERS LIKE CHOPIN, WAGNER, AND TCHAIKOVSKY INFUSED MUSIC WITH PERSONAL NARRATIVES AND EXPANSIVE ORCHESTRATIONS. THE PIANO'S TECHNICAL CAPABILITIES EXPANDED, AND ORCHESTRAS GREW IN SIZE, ENHANCING THE COLORISTIC POSSIBILITIES OF MUSIC.

ROMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS

ROMANTIC MUSIC OFTEN FEATURED:

- EXPRESSIVE MELODIES AND RICH HARMONIES
- PROGRAMMATIC ELEMENTS TELLING STORIES OR DEPICTING SCENES
- USE OF FOLK THEMES TO EVOKE NATIONAL IDENTITY
- EXPLORATION OF NEW TONALITIES AND CHROMATICISM

THE ERA'S FASCINATION WITH THE SUBLIME AND THE SUPERNATURAL ALSO INFLUENCED OPERATIC AND SYMPHONIC WORKS, PUSHING MUSICAL BOUNDARIES.

TWENTIETH-CENTURY INNOVATIONS

THE 20TH CENTURY SHATTERED MANY TRADITIONAL MUSICAL CONVENTIONS, INTRODUCING MODERNISM'S DIVERSE MOVEMENTS. COMPOSERS LIKE STRAVINSKY, SCHOENBERG, AND DEBUSSY CHALLENGED TONALITY, RHYTHM, AND FORM. SERIALISM, ATONALITY, AND MINIMALISM EMERGED AS CONTRASTING APPROACHES TO COMPOSITION.

TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS SUCH AS RECORDING, RADIO, AND ELECTRONIC INSTRUMENTS TRANSFORMED HOW MUSIC WAS CREATED, DISTRIBUTED, AND CONSUMED. THE RISE OF JAZZ, ROCK, AND POP GENRES FURTHER DIVERSIFIED WESTERN MUSIC'S LANDSCAPE, BLENDING CLASSICAL ELEMENTS WITH POPULAR CULTURE.

THE IMPACT OF WESTERN MUSIC HISTORY ON CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

UNDERSTANDING A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE IS VITAL TO APPRECIATING CONTEMPORARY MUSICAL EXPRESSIONS AND THEIR ROOTS. THE EVOLUTION FROM MONOPHONIC CHANT TO COMPLEX SYMPHONIES AND EVENTUALLY TO ELECTRONIC AND DIGITAL MUSIC REFLECTS BROADER SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL, AND PHILOSOPHICAL CHANGES.

CONTEMPORARY WESTERN MUSIC OFTEN DRAWS ON THIS RICH HERITAGE, WHETHER THROUGH DIRECT QUOTATION, STYLISTIC EMULATION, OR CONCEPTUAL INNOVATION. THE CLASSICAL TRADITION CONTINUES TO INFLUENCE FILM SCORES AND EXPERIMENTAL MUSIC, WHILE POPULAR GENRES INCORPORATE CLASSICAL TECHNIQUES IN ARRANGEMENT AND COMPOSITION.

MOREOVER, THE GLOBALIZATION OF WESTERN MUSIC TRADITIONS HAS LED TO HYBRID FORMS, WHERE INDIGENOUS SOUNDS INTERMINGLE WITH WESTERN HARMONIES AND RHYTHMS, CREATING NEW, DYNAMIC MUSICAL IDENTITIES.

PRESERVATION AND INNOVATION

TODAY, MUSICOLOGISTS AND PERFORMERS STRIVE TO PRESERVE EARLY WESTERN MUSIC THROUGH HISTORICALLY INFORMED PERFORMANCES, USING PERIOD INSTRUMENTS AND TECHNIQUES. SIMULTANEOUSLY, COMPOSERS AND ARTISTS PUSH FORWARD, INTEGRATING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND CROSS-CULTURAL INFLUENCES.

THIS DUALITY HIGHLIGHTS THE ONGOING DIALOGUE BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT INHERENT IN WESTERN MUSIC'S HISTORY — A TESTAMENT TO ITS RESILIENCE AND ADAPTABILITY.

IN TRACING A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN WESTERN CULTURE, IT BECOMES EVIDENT THAT MUSIC SERVES NOT ONLY AS ENTERTAINMENT BUT AS A PROFOUND REFLECTION OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE, CONTINUOUSLY EVOLVING WHILE MAINTAINING DEEP CONNECTIONS TO ITS ORIGINS.

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