

How to Read Gregorian Chant

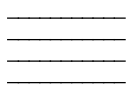
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version 1.2 of this work

01. The customary notation of Gregorian Chant preserves an intermediate state of development toward modern, common-practice musical notation. The development of musical notation in the West has much in common with the earlier history of written language. Paleography is the study of ancient writing, of both language and music. The history of writing is characterized by the gradual isolation and representation of the constituent sounds of language. Likewise, the history of musical notation consists of the gradual recognition and representation of the constituent notes within a tonal system. “Constituent” here means the set of sounds or notes which the listener recognizes as significant (*i.e.*, “belonging” to a specific language or musical scale. The following represents Gregorian notation as it was restored and refined by the Benedictine monks of the Abbey *St-Pierre de Solesmes* (France) in the 19th and 20th centuries, and which remains the standard for Roman Catholic liturgical use.

NOTATION



01a. staff



01b. quarter-bar



01c. half-bar



01d. full bar

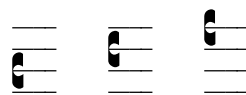


01e. double bar



01f. apostrophe

- 01a. The Gregorian **staff** (*pl.* staves) has four lines (rather than the five customary in modern notation); they are counted (first, second etc.) from the lowest to the highest.
- 01b. The quarter-bar indicates a brief pause, without releasing the breath.
- 01c. The half-bar allows a brief stop; may “snatch” a breath before resuming at same tempo and volume.
- 01d. The full bar allows a complete stop with a full breath, but with the expectation of resuming the chant.
- 01e. The double bar indicates a complete stop at the conclusion of a piece or a section of a piece; sometimes used with alternating (antiphonal) parts or responses.
- 01f. The apostrophe, usually placed about midway in a prolonged line of text, in some cases called a period (rhetorical term, not punctuation); allows for a brief pause; may “snatch” a breath before resuming at same tempo and volume.



02a.



02b.



02c.



02d.



02e.

02. Just as the *pitch* (but not the intervals) of Gregorian Chant is purely relative, so the **clef** may occur in various places on the staff. The clef is located with respect to the range of the melody which follows. Gregorian chant uses the familiar (and Gregorian in origin) *do re mi* solmization (note names). The relative pitch of all notes within a chant are reckoned in relation to the clef (*do* or *fa*).

02a, b, c. The *do* clef locates that interval on the staff. It may occur on the second, third or fourth lines (a, b or c). Notice that it is a stylized “C”.

02d, e. The *fa* clef locates that interval on the staff. It may occur on the second or third lines (a or b). Notice that it is a stylized “F”.

03. The successive notes within a scale, *i.e.* intervals distinguished by relative acoustic distance rather than absolute pitch, are called *degrees* of the scale; The names given to the sequence of degrees within a scale, regardless of mode, follow:

1st tonic; 2nd supertonic; 3rd mediant; 4th subdominant; 5th dominant; 6th submediant; 7th leading tone; 8th octave

These terms are useful when referring to a scale in generic terms, rather than its particular solmization. The degrees are also called by their ordinal numbers, for example: “*la* is the fifth of the Dorian mode”.

04. The **square notation** of Gregorian Chant may appear obscure or difficult, but that is only because it is unfamiliar; in fact, it is neither. Sometimes, with the intention to facilitate reading, it is transcribed into common-practice notation, in which the basic note, the *punctum*, is equated to an eighth note, and so on. In practice, this only makes singing more difficult, because it is not as well suited to the genre. Square notation is relatively easy to learn. Although it may be cumbersome at first, the best practice method is *solfège* (aka sol-fedge), to identify and sing the successive intervals (*viz.* do, re, mi etc.), or, more simply put, to practice singing the notes by their names. Once acquired, this technique makes sight-singing easier. Within a surprisingly short period of time, mental recognition of the intervals makes the arduous counting up and down from the clef unnecessary.

05. As suggested by the do-re-mi scale mentioned above, Gregorian Chant is diatonic. Although the presence of microtones has been proposed, they are not a defining part of plainsong tonality. The term “diatonic” indicates a scale composed of two intervals: the tone, also called a whole-step, and the semitone, also called a half-step, because it is one-half the acoustic distance of the former. The interval of a semitone is found between the degrees mi-fa and ti-do of the diatonic scale; the first of each pair is called a semitone. The remaining notes, which are five, are also called pentatones for that reason. The eight modes consist of permutations of the diatonic scale, and their differing character is due to the shifting positions of the semitones.

06. Attention may now be directed to the square notation mentioned above. First, it must be emphasized the this notation is not mensural, and, unlike modern common-practice, the notes do not have fixed duration. It is a common and disastrous error, that once the punctum is equated with a single beat, a dot (also called a *mora*) following a punctum is thought simply to double its value to exactly two beats, and the episema – _ (above or below the note) merely to add precisely half again to a note's temporal value. The temporal value of these signs, dot and episema, is relative exclusively to that of the note that either accompanies, and is variable according to context, the sense of the text, the time of day, the mood of the choir director, etc.

07. The rhythm of plainsong (Gregorian Chant) is that of speech, and not that of a clock. The approximate value of a punctum is a single syllable, rather than the *precise* value of an eighth-note. The rendition of plainsong resembles tonal reading aloud, which, in a fairly proximate sense, it is. The rhythm of plainsong may be likened to a continuum in which certain figures or *motifs* (neums, also spelled neume) recur, and which contains occasional tonal excursions (melismáta), or meditations, on a word or syllable.

Visually scan about three notes ahead of what you are singing, in order to maintain continuity. Even if you know a chant by heart, sing from the written score. The memory can be wrong. Also, it helps all the singers to to achieve *ensemble* (unison, the 'continuum' mentioned above) in following the conductor. The most important factor in this regard is that the singers listen to each other, as well as to themselves, while watching the conductor just over the top (not to the side) of the written score. Ideally, it should be difficult to distinguish among the voices.



07a. punctum



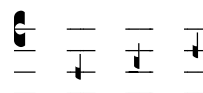
07b. virga



07c. rhombus



07d. flat/natural



07e. custos

07a. A **punctum** generally represents the length of one syllable; as mentioned, its duration is relative rather than absolute. The note is also called a *punctum quadrátum*.

07b. the Latin term **virga** means 'rod'; it is generally the uppermost note of a phrase or group of notes. It is slightly lengthened, too subtly to quantify.

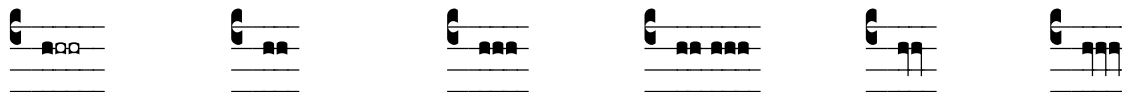
07c. The **rhombus** occurs in descending phrases; hasten slightly, but do not “rush”. The note is also called a *punctum inclinátum*.

07d. As in standard notation, the flat (a stylized “B”) lowers a semitone (usually *ti*) by one half-step; it generally is retained through the balance of the phrase, musical (see §§ 02 – 04, above) or verbal. A natural raises the previously flatted note to its natural “state”.

07e. The **custos** (pl. *custodes*, Latin 'guardian') is not an actual note, but is found at the end of a staff to indicate the first (“pickup”) note in the following staff.

NEUMS

08. As mentioned on the second page, Gregorian Chant is characterized by a set of figures or *motifs*, called “neums” (often spelled “neume”), which recur throughout. A simple (*vs.* compound) neum is composed of two or three notes. Basic notation is introduced in §07 above; following are the neums most frequently encountered, with comments:



09a. apostropha 09b. distropha 09c. tristropha 09d. strophicus 09e. divirga 09f. trivirga

09a. Identical to a *punctum*, the note is called an **apostropha** (not the same as *apostrophe*, 01f) when it is the first of an identical series.

09b. The **distropha** is a set of two consecutive puncta on the same pitch.

09c. The **tristropha** is a series of three consecutive puncta on the same pitch.

09d. The **strophicus** consists of one distropha and one tristropha. It is sung as its appearance suggests.

NOTE: *puncta* is the plural of *punctum*. *Distropha* and *tristropha* are both singular; their plural ends in *-ae*.

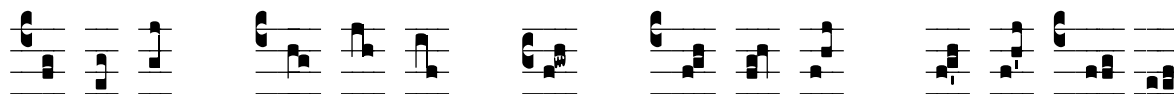
09. Longer series of identical notes occur on occasion in the Gradual, but these are usually subdivided into groups of two and three notes (*distrophae* = Eng. distrophes and *tristrophae* = Eng. tristrophes). *Repercussion* denotes the manner in which members of these groups are distinguished. This is theoretically done by a subtle pulse of the larynx, but is difficult to realize in practice. Above all, *aspiration* (the 'h' sound, = ha-ha-ha-ha) is to be avoided. The safest course is usually to hold the same note for a count of two or three. When there is a series of distrophes and tristrophes, as mentioned above, it is sufficient to “suggest” the very slightest pause between each of them.

09e. The **divirga** is a set of two consecutive, identical virgae.

09f. The **trivirga** is a series of three consecutive, identical virgae.

More so than those of the distropha or tristropha, the notes in both of these are *repercussed* (technically, the term should be *repercuted*, but 'repercuss' is customary).

10. Observe that the precise intervals in the following are variable, and that it is the relative position of the component notes which defines the neum.



10a. podátus (pes) 10b. clivis 10c. quilisma 10d. scandicus 10e. salicus

10a. When two notes are vertically parallel (as in **podátus**, above), the lower note is sung first.

10b. In a **clivis**, the higher note (usually a *virga*) is sung first, and it is placed to the left of the following, lower note.

10c. The middle, jagged note is called a **quilisma**. The preceding note is doubled, and the quilisma is sung as a passing tone to the uppermost note. The quilisma is usually, but not always, a semitone, most often *ti*.

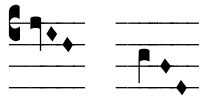
Its shape suggests that it was originally an ornament, such as a sort of trill.

10d. The **scandicus** consists of three ascending notes (sung 1-2-3); the precise intervals may vary.

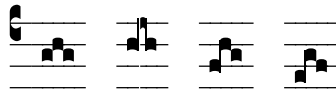
10e. The **salicus** is similar to the scandicus, except that it consists of one + two notes (sung 1-1-2).

The distinction is too subtle to quantify. Simply counting mentally, as suggested, should suffice.

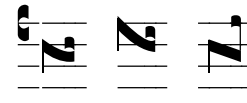
NOTES _____



11a. climacus



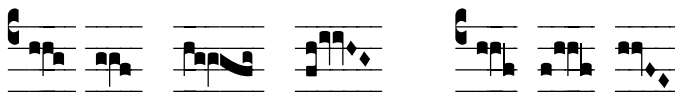
11b. torculus



11c. porrectus

- 11a. A **climacus** consists of three descending notes; cf. 09d. *Scandicus* (above). The top note (a *virga*) receives slight emphasis, but the descending notes which follow should not be “rushed”.
- 11b. A **torculus** consists of three notes, the second of which is higher than the other two.
- 11c. The **porrectus** uses a distinctive notation, but is simply the inversion of a *torculus*: three notes, the second of which is lower than the other two.

12. Certain neums may be conjoined to form a *compound neum*, but precise identification is not necessary for the successful rendition of a chant. The basic neums are described here to facilitate sight-reading through identification of recurrent melodic figures, and to provide a basis for more advanced study of the subject. The example shown below does require explanation:



12a. pressus vs. 12b. apposed 12c. trigon

- 12a. The **pressus** arises when the last note of a neum or group of notes is the same as the first note of the succeeding group, and both notes are on the same syllable. The two notes are sung continuously but not with equal weight. The first note may be said to “press” (not merely *crescendo*) into the second, but without obscuring the first.
- 12b. The *pressus* is characterized by a *punctum* followed by a *virga*; when two *virgae* are conjoined, they do not form a *pressus*, but are said to be in **apposition**, and so are lightly reperfused (cf. §08e & f).
- 12c. The **trigon** is a bit obscure. Its form can resemble a *torculus*, but its exact interpretation is disputed. The *trigon* may contain a nuance of interval (microtone). It is included here mainly for reference.

LIQUESCENTS



13a. epiphonus (pes) 13b. cephalicus (clivis) 13c. ancus (Climacus) 13d. liq. Torculus 13e. liq. porrectus

13. Liquescents are used when adjoining vowels tend to merge into a diphthong, or with certain neighboring consonants. The distinctive notation denotes some *rapport* between neighboring sounds in the text, which are still clearly enunciated.

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