

Plainsong is Plain Speech

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version 1.1 of this work

I will sing with the spirit, I will sing also with the understanding. (*I Corinthinans* 14:15, DRA)

Plainsong (Lat. *cantus planus*), describes several related traditions, of which the best known is Gregorian Chant. The latter term is better understood in that context. Pope St. Gregory I, the Great (c. 540–604) edited and anthologized the chants in common use; he did not compose them. Plain speech does not require bombast or bullying. It is simply the use of concise, accurate language to communicate what the speaker intends. Some of the old prayers are quite concise: “Save, Lord; we perish.” (*Mat.* 8:25). Does that preclude metaphor? “But I am a worm, and no man.” (*Psalms* 22:6). Is explication only obfuscation? Does plainsong, then, mean: one note = one syllable? Apparently not.

What if plainsong is not an adornment of the text, but rather is part of the message? What if plainsong *is* prayer? The answer to these questions is better realized in experience than by explanation. The words require care. The music requires care. Sing with all the more attention and reverence when the two are really parts of the same thing, a fact attested since the foundation of Holy Church.

NOTE: All singing can be fairly described as a form of speech. All speech is tonal. The term here is used in the musical sense (relative intervals) rather than semantic (alterations in pitch to specify meaning). In the former sense, singing simply prolongs a tone. A melody assigns various intervals to (and within) successive syllables.

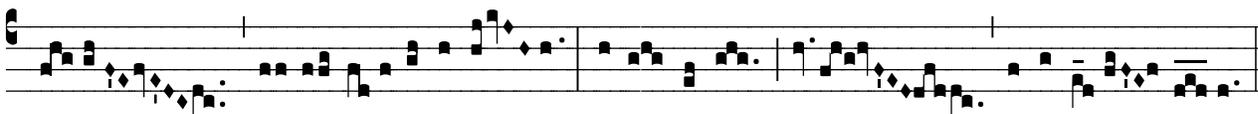
The method described following is not original with the writer, whose intention is to share what was given.

The method can be summarized thus:

1. Sing from the Text.
2. Sing from the Text.
3. Sing from the Text.

How? An abstract list of criteria, however valid, would appear overly complex, and be difficult to apply. The specific details of rehearsal are the product of regular practice rather than prescription. Thus the particular habits of each group may vary. The basic principle stated above, then, may be illustrated best by application to a particular example:

St. Ignatius of Loyola (July 31, Old Calendar)



CO.I I - gnem ve - ni mit-te-re in ter - ram : et quid vo - lo, ni - si ut ac-cen - dá-tur?

“I am come to cast fire on the earth; and what will I, but that it be kindled?” (*Luc.* 12:49, DRC)

Brief notice of the translation, when available, is advisable to provide at least a general sense of the meaning of the text.

Í-gněm vé-ni mít-tě-rè ĭn **tér-rām** : ět quìd vó-lǒ, ní-sĭ ùt àc-cěn-**dá-tŭr**?

The group may then recite the text together, slowly and carefully, to achieve unison (which is only attained by careful listening), to agree on and to be comfortable with the pronunciation: and, indispensably, to note the relative degrees of stress (accent) and their pattern within the text. Like English, Liturgical Latin has three accents (degrees of stress), rather than only two as is sometimes claimed. These consist of primary stress, secondary stress and unstressed. They are indicated by these signs:

primary stress ´ ; secondary stress ` ; unstressed ˘

These can be distinguished in the final word of the text cited above:

àccěndátŭr

Observe also that a usually unstressed syllable may attain secondary stress in relation to the words that follow:

quìd vó-lǒ

The primary stress in each half of the text is indicated in boldface: **tér-rām**

A curve between vowels in successive words: *rè ÿn* indicates *elision* (noun; verb *elide*); the words are not separated by a pause, in particular not by a glottal stop (the “uh” sound).

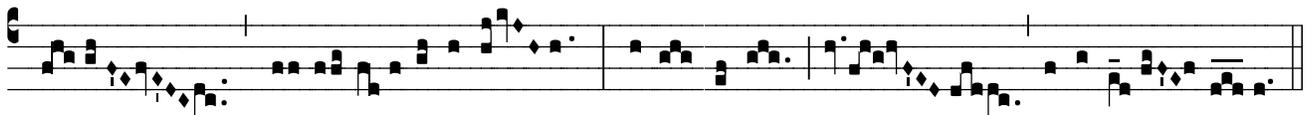
When familiar and comfortable with the text, attention then may be directed to the accompanying plainsong:

CO. (“Communion”) indicates that the antiphon is sung when the celebrant receives communion during Holy Mass.

The Roman numeral I indicates Mode I: the final (tonic) note is *re*; the range is about a octave above the final (here includes the 7th below); and the enor (reciting note) is *la*, a fifth above the final (mostly the case here). The *do* clef locates that interval on the top line, and the other intervals are reckoned in relation to it; thus the opening note is *fa*.

Rhythm and tempo approximate those of speech. A *punctum* (square note) equals about a syllable (a single beat), and can be lengthened by an *episema* (a line over the note(s) about half, and doubled by a following dot. It cannot be overemphasized, however, that duration is *not* absolute, but *relative* and *variable*. It is a common error, a habit acquired from standard-practice notation, to try to quantify the rhythm and to apply a fixed duration (whether long or short) to each note. The effect is mechanical and rote, and reinforces the popular stereotype of Gregorian Chant. It smothers the content and depth implicit in the music as well as the text. This content and depth constitute the beauty of Chant..

The overriding technique in the phrasing of Chant is *crescendo-decrescendo*, which can be illustrated by a bell curve. It is applied first to the entire antiphon, then to each half of the text, and then in successively lesser degrees to each phrase, to each word within the phrase, and finally to each syllable within the word. This is a general principle, and almost impossible to observe to the finest detail. With practice the idea becomes habitual, and can be applied with varying degrees of specificity, to significant phrases, and in particular to cadences, most importantly the final cadence. Attention can then be given to the “counterpoint” of textual and musical accent mentioned above.



1. I - gnem 2. ve - ni mit-te-re in ter - ram 3. et quid vo - lo, ni - si ut ac-cen - dá-tur?

1. 'I', the first syllable of 'Ignem' (fire), is stressed. As the opening syllable, though, it is entered slowly and gradually. Moreover, 'gnem', the second and unstressed syllable, has a lengthy *melisma* (pl. *melismata*; a group of more than several notes on a single syllable), and yet should receive less emphasis than its predecessor. This requires considerable vocal juggling, and there is no algorithm to balance these factors. Then consider the multiple musical accents in relation to the single word: on the second, fourth, sixth (note the *ictus*), eighth and twelfth notes, which do not receive equal emphasis, but are correlated according to the forementioned considerations. The sum of these might appear overwhelming; a certain amount, though, is instinct rather than artifice, or habit acquired by practice, as mentioned above. Yet consideration of the whole does reveal the depth of these compositions, which might otherwise be dismissed as merely decorative.

2. In its second quarter, the melody now proceeds to the highest note of its *ambitus* (range) on 'ter-', the primary stress in this half of the melody. The high note of this phrase, as well of the high notes of most of the other musical phrases mentioned above, is indicated by a *virga*, which has vertical stem, rather than by a simple *punctum*. The *virga* is derived from the older semiology, where such a high note is represented simply by a vertical slash. And this in turn reflects the original chironomy, a vertical motion of the hand. These phrases provide a good example for the *crescendo-decrescendo* principle: the phrase rises relatively quickly; the top *virga* receives a slight emphasis, too subtle to be quantified; having “made its point”, the phrase now eases down to a lower note.

3. The melody now drifts, with various excursions, from its highest note down to the tonic. Notice again the melisma on 'cen-', the least stressed syllable in the concluding word. Keeping in mind the *decrescendo* in conclusion of the melody, care must be taken not to “thump” on the final note (nor on the concluding notes of cadences in general).

The structural characteristics observed in §§ 2 and 3 are typical of plainsong melodies: a rise to the uppermost note, and then a slower drift down to the final. (Obviously, this will be more evident in the authentic than in the plagal modes.) Consider as well the frequent melodic meditations on the unstressed syllables as well as the apparent dramatization of the stressed. Even then, examination of the *melismata* on the stressed syllables as well reveals a subtlety of structure which is not merely melodramatic.