

Reading and Singing the Church's Chant: The Basics

BY ANTHONY RUFF, OSB

Gregorian chant in traditional four-line notation may look daunting and foreign at first glance. In fact, it is not difficult to learn to read this notation. If you get over any initial hesitation and simply make a start, you will be surprised at how quickly the notation becomes familiar and easy to read.

As in any music, chant notation is not an end in itself. It is but a means to the higher end of making music. The goal must be to convey the Latin text convincingly — with confidence, musicality, lack of inhibition, and spiritual dynamism. You might need to go slowly at first, but eventually, as you become familiar with the notation, it won't slow you down or bring about any tentativeness or hesitation.

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The starting point for singing Latin chant is the text: You should always sing so as to express the text. Sing in natural speech rhythm. Let accented syllables be lengthened as in natural speech (but this doesn't mean thumping the accented syllables inelegantly by singing them too loudly). Less important syllables, for example, those leading up to the accent, can be sung more lightly as you naturally accelerate toward the accent.

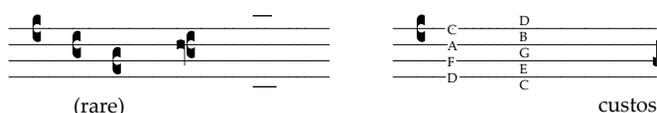
Some singers might be accustomed to an older interpretation of chant notation in which all the notes are sung with equal rhythmic length. Even with this approach, you could begin to introduce, at the very least, greater flexibility and *rubato* with some text-based nuancing.

Clefs, Pitches, Custos

There are two kinds of clefs in chant notation, the C clef and the F clef. These almost look like the letters C

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C Clefs F Clef ledger lines

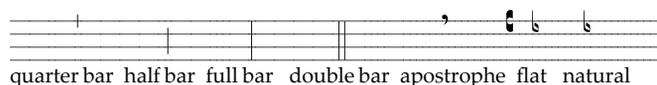


and F. Ledger lines are used when needed.

One assigns the pitches of the scale in order, just as in five-line notation, using the letters of the scale in relationship to the C or F clef. Note that pitch in Gregorian notation is relative, not absolute. One is always free to sing chant in the range most suited to the singers. This means that if the given notes are C, B, A, G, for example, this in effect tells us what the intervals are — down a half step, down a whole step, down a whole step. One is free to transpose these intervals to any range, for example, to A, G#, F#, E, or to G, F#, E, D.

The *custos* (Latin for “guard” or “watchman”) is a small pitch at the end of a line helpfully indicating to the singer the pitch of the following line. The *custos* at the right end of the staff above tells us that the first pitch on the next line would be F.

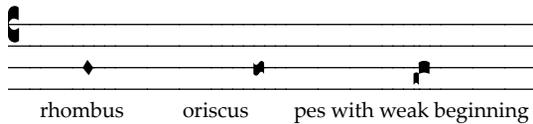
Bar Lines, Accidentals



There are four types of bar lines, indicating successively larger breaks in the text and music: quarter, half, full, and double. Chant does not have “measures” of music; all bar lines are marks of punctuation indicating larger or smaller breaks within the syntax of the text. They are editorial additions. It is sometimes desirable to sing through a quarter bar, if the singers are able, in order not to break up the line too much. There is also an apostrophe or breath mark placed on the top line. It indicates a very quick breath, if necessary, within a longer line.

Customarily, there has been only one accidental in chant notation, B-flat. It lasts until the end of the word, and must be added again if B-flat is needed again. If there is a bar line within a *melisma*, the B-flat lasts only until the bar line. B-natural is used to cancel out a B-flat. As in five-line notation, a B-flat can be given as the key

is half as wide as the normal note.

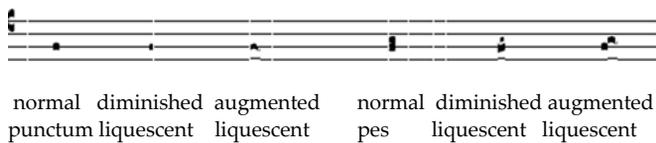


Liquescents

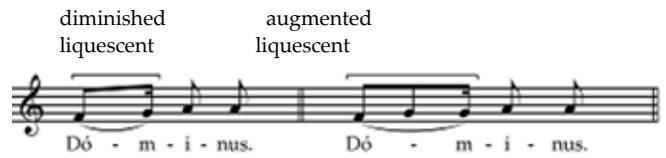
Sometimes the last note in a note group is either smaller than the others, or it has a little tail added to it. These are liquescents, and they appear only on a single note or at the end of a note group. A liquescent is an indication to treat pronunciation carefully at the end of a syllable in the transition to the following syllable.

When the note head is smaller, it is a diminished liquescent. When it has an added tail, it is an augmented liquescent. A diminished liquescent means that the note is shortened as one moves to the last consonant. An augmented liquescent means that the note is lengthened as one sounds the last consonant (usually a liquid consonant such as L, M, or N). Diminished liquescents have long been in use; augmented liquescents have been restored only in more recent chant additions.

Here are the normal, diminished, and augmented forms of the *punctum* and *pes*:

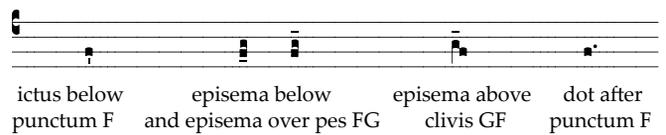


Here is a very rough indication of how one would sing a diminished and augmented liquescent of a *pes* on the first syllable of the word *Dóminus*:



Added Rhythmic Signs

Sometimes one sees added rhythmic signs in older chant editions—the *ictus*, *episema*, and dot. These were used as part of an older system in which every note head received an equal value unless it had a dot or an *episema*.



The *ictus* can simply be ignored; it was used to indicate the first note of two or three notes in the older rhythmic school. The *episema* indicates slight lengthening. When the *episema* is below the *pes*, it indicates that both notes are lengthened. When the *episema* is above the *pes*, it indicates that only the second (higher) note is lengthened. When the *episema* is over the first note of the *clivis* in old editions, one should always feel free to lengthen both



Monks of St. Mary Benedictine Abbey, Morristown, New Jersey, chant evening prayer. Photo by John Stephen Dwyer.

notes of the *clivis*.

How much lengthening the *episema* indicates is always dependent on the text—more lengthening over an accent, less over the syllable(s) leading to the accent or the syllable(s) after the accent rounding off a word or phrase. It is possible that one would sing light pre-accent syllables quite quickly, even if they have an *episema*: The *episema* indicates that these notes are sung quickly rather than being sung *very* quickly if there were no *episema*.

The dot meant to double the rhythmic value. One may still want to lengthen this note, but that decision is based more on the sense of the text and music than a rigid exact doubling.

The asterisk placed after the first few words of the Latin text used to indicate how far one singer would intone. The choir joined in after the asterisk. It is better, if possible, to ignore the asterisk and have the entire choir sing together from the beginning.



Participants in the National Catholic Youth Choir

Putting It All Together: Interpretation

The beginner should not be discouraged by all the unfamiliar terminology and notational signs of Gregorian chant. The basics of pitch reading, without worrying about the names of the notes at first, can be learned rather quickly. One should begin by singing through several easier chants (as found, for example, in the *Graduale Simplex*, *Cantus Selecti*, or the *Parish Book of Chant*). Once you have become familiar with chant notation, you should keep singing through the easier chants but with ever more flexibility, expressiveness, *rubato*, and rhythmic nuance. The line should flow naturally, always moving forward without hesitation.

The rhythmic nuances of the *quillisma*, weak beginning, liquescent, and added rhythmic signs can then be incorporated. If you have already learned to sing with flexibility and expressiveness, these nuances should come rather naturally.

Those seeking further resources will find that two good introductions to Gregorian chant are *A Gregorian Chant Handbook* by William Tortolano and *The Song of Prayer: A Practical Guide to Learning Gregorian Chant*. The author's forthcoming collection of easier chants, *Canticum novum*, will be helpful to beginners because it presents every chant

on facing pages in both four-line and five-line notation.

Resources

Music

Canticum novum. Anthony Ruff, OSB. Forthcoming.

Cantus Selecti. The most common pieces of the Gregorian repertory for the different seasons and principal feast days of the year. Abbaye de Solesmes. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007.

Graduale Simplex in Usum Minorum Ecclesiarum. A secondary source for the processional music at Mass (entrance, offertory, Communion) and for the chants after the first reading and before the Gospel. The number of Mass propers has been streamlined and the music has been simplified considerably from the *Graduale Romanum*, making the *Graduale Simplex* accessible to beginning choirs and to the

congregation. Abbaye de Solesmes. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988.

Parish Book of Chant. Contains the Order of sung Mass for both Ordinary and Extraordinary Forms of the Roman Rite along with chants and hymns for occasional and seasonal use with English translations. Designed for use as a manual of Gregorian chant and a liturgical resource for scholas and congregations. Church Music Association of America, 2008.

STUDY

A Gregorian Chant Handbook. William Tortolano. The fundamentals of reading and interpreting Gregorian chant for the person with no prior experience. GIA Publications, 2005.

The Song of Prayer: A Practical Guide to Learning Gregorian Chant. Developed at The Community of Jesus, an ecumenical community that chants the divine offices in Latin each day. Readers will learn the basics of Gregorian chant, with some preliminary instruction in Latin, chant notation, its history and development, and theology. An instructional forty-five-minute CD accompanies the book. Paraclete Press, 2010.