

NOTES ON THE PLAINCHANT OF THE PSALTER

§ 1. *The Essence of Plainchant.*

PLAINCHANT is monophonic: that is, it consists only of the melody, with no harmony and no accompaniment. It is sung rather lightly, smoothly, gracefully, and never too slowly. Compared with modern music, its contrasts are greatly understated. A very slight *crescendo* may occur in a few ascending notes for the grand musical climax of a composition. The composition may end with a slight *diminuendo* and a hardly noticeable slowing of the pace for the grand finale. The words and notes are intimately wedded in plainsong. The music is always the handmaiden of the words. The music always enhances the meaning of God's Word, never attracts attention to itself, and never detracts from that meaning.

§ 2. *Psalm Tones.*

A GREGORIAN PSALM TONE consists of an Intonation, used only in presenting the first Verse of each Psalm, and in each Verse of the Gospel Canticles; two Recitations (Reciting Notes); and two melodic Cadences, called the Mediation (Mediant) and the Ending (Final Cadence). Sarum Psalm Tones are, to a large extent, identical with the continental Tones, but very old, uniquely British features persist.

The notes of the Intonation, Recitations, Mediation, and Ending are sung at the same pace, even when two or more notes are sung to one syllable in certain Endings: except that the final notes of both Mediation and Ending are lengthened as indicated in the music.

All of the words are to be read distinctly, deliberately, smoothly, and naturally: but also evenly, not hurrying little syllables; nor delaying heavy ones, unless two accented syllables occur together, in which case the first is naturally lengthened. The notes of the chant take their rhythm from the words, not the words from the notes. Care must be taken that the usual, natural accents in the words always take precedence over suggested accents in the music.

Single notes written in the chant are never slurred together on a syllable; nor are connected notes in the chant ever divided between syllables. The natural rhetorical accent of the words is always to be kept, unaltered by the music.

The two verses of *Gloria Patri* are sung precisely like the others; without preliminary retard in the preceding Verse or pause after it; and without the use of the Intonation. The signs used in the pointing are as follows:

The Dot · which is placed before the first syllable of each Mediation and Ending. The singer need remember only that with the syllable following the Dot he leaves the reciting note and begins a melodic cadence.

The Asterisk * marks the *Caesura*, the central pause in each Psalm Verse, whether read or sung. The single bar in the music always corresponds with the

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Asterisk. In singing, this pause should be long enough for a leisurely plentiful breath, and should be rhythmically related to the preceding cadence. Both in singing and reading the Psalms, congregations are much more likely to clip the Caesura too short than to prolong it unduly.

The Flex † always indicates a short pause for breath in the first half of a Psalm Verse. A breath is always taken at the Flex. It is customary, since ancient times, to inflect the voice on a weak syllable or syllables preceding the Flex. An accented syllable before the Flex does not change from the Reciting Note. In every instance, the syllable(s) immediately before a Flex are marked for remaining on the Recitation, *or* for inflexion. This mark [¯] is used when the syllable is strong (accented) and therefore uninflected. This mark [ˇ] is used to indicate weak (unaccented) syllables which are inflected.

In Tones I, IV, VI, VII, Peregrinus, and Irregular Tone C, a weak (unaccented) syllable or syllables immediately before the Flex are sung a whole tone below the Reciting Note. (The first two notes in *The First Nowell* are a descending whole step.) In Tones II, III, V, VIII, and Irregular Tones A and B, a weak syllable or syllables immediately before the Flex are sung a minor third below the Reciting Note. (The first two notes in the *Star Spangled Banner* are a descending minor third apart.)

§ 3. Directions for Chanting the Psalms and Canticles.

1. THE INTONATION is sung by the Precentor (Cantor) at the same pace as the Recitation he sings alone through the Mediation: after the Asterisk, the full Choir or full Congregation completes the first Verse. The second Verse is sung by the *decani* (Epistle side) half of the assembly. The third Verse is sung by the *cantoris* (Gospel side) half of the assembly. Succeeding Verses are sung alternately from side to side.

If the singers are few or uncertain, it may be preferable not to sing antiphonal from side to side but rather to alternate between the Cantor and all others. In that case, The Intonation is sung by the Precentor (Cantor). He sings alone through the Mediation: after the Asterisk, the full Congregation or full Choir completes the first Verse. The second Verse is sung by all the Congregation (or Choir). The third Verse is sung by the Cantor. Succeeding Verses are sung alternately between the Congregation (or Choir) and the Cantor.

In Psalms and Canticles, on occasion, it may not be unseemly for the first half of the first verse to be sung by the Cantor, then the remainder of the Psalm or Canticle to be sung by all without antiphony.

2. The Reciting Note is sung neither faster nor slower than any other part of the Chant. It is joined to the Cadence without any rhythmical break. If a punctuation mark in the Recitation cannot felicitously be ignored, it is observed only by a very slight prolongation of the previous syllable, not by a break in the tone for breath.

3. The *only* distinct pauses are made between verses and at the *Caesura*, marked by the Asterisk, (and by the infrequent occurrence of the Flex). Except for the occurrence of a Flex, each Verse is allotted only one internal pause, the Caesura, which is to be distinct and unhurried.

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4. The syllable following a Dot is sung to the first note of the Mediation or of the Ending as the case may be. Accented syllables after the Dot are normally, but not invariably, attracted to notes in the cadences which are marked with accents. Where extra unaccented syllables occur, the parenthetic notes (the hollow “white” notes) will be used, as needed. In some instances, as in Latin and Greek, the accents in the English text cannot be conformed to the suggested accents marked in the tunes. In those cases, the natural accents of the words, never the suggested accents in the music, are carefully observed.

5. All phrases should close with a very slight *diminuendo*: this should be slightly more marked when the final syllable is weak.

6. In the Mediations of Tones II, IV, V, VI C, and VIII, the notes following the notes marked with an accent are omitted when the first half of the Psalm Verse ends with an accented syllable. Only the number of notes required by the number of syllables in the words is sung.

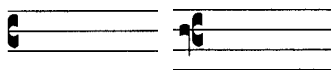
7. The pitch and pace are set by the Precentor in the first half of the first Verse. If helpful, he should not hesitate to use a pitch pipe or musical instrument to give him the pitch(es) he desires. A congregation of basses will require a low pitch. A mixed congregation will need a moderate pitch. In a religious house of women only, the Precentrix will choose a high pitch.

8. In both Mediations and Endings, frequently the tonal cadence concludes with two dotted notes, with or without an intervening optional (“white” or “hollow”) note. When an unaccented syllable falls on the first of these two dotted notes, its dot conveniently may be ignored, as in the Mediation of Psalm 137:1 or the Ending of Psalm 91:5. Conversely, in the Mediation of Tone VI C, the first and/or second notes of the Mediation are not dotted but one or both advantageously may be doubled in length when the syllable is accented. For example, in Psalm 92:1, the second note is doubled in length. In Psalm 9:1, both the first and second notes of the Mediation may be doubled. In a few instances, a choice is ambiguous, as in the Mediation of Psalm 150:1. Here the penult receives the secondary accent of the word *sanctuary*. In this Psalter it is arbitrarily dotted. As the same congregation sings Offices together regularly, these matters become second nature, requiring no analysis by the singers. In the few ambiguous instances, the worshippers will settle into a pattern which is “the way we sing it here.”

§ 4. Plainsong Notation.

PLAINSONG is noted on a four-line staff. The bottom line is called the first line. The first space is the lowest of the three. Two clef signs are used, the “C” clef and the “F” clef. The “C” clef indicates the line of the staff which is the tonic note of the (major) diatonic scale, the *do* of the scale, tone number one of the scale. The “F” clef indicates the line of the staff which is the subdominant note of the diatonic scale, the *fa* of the scale, tone number four of the scale. The written music gives no hint of the pitch to be used, only the relationship among the notes, which may be pitched high or low or “in between”.

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*The Staff of Four Lines,
with the two Clefs, C and F.*

Modern music, for the most part, restricts itself to two modes (scales), Major and Minor. The eight pitches of the Major Scale are a whole step apart, except that a half step occurs between the third and fourth, the seventh and eighth notes of the scale. In the Minor Mode, the half steps are between two and three, then five and six. Modern musical notation, “round notes”, *always* indicates the pitch to be used; middle “A” is at 440 vibrations per second or thereabouts. Plainchant notation, “square notes”, *never* indicates the pitch to be employed. The plainsong relative pitches are called by letters, C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C, with a whole step between all letters, except E-F and B-C which are a half step apart. Unlike modern notation, “C” indicates the tonic note, the doh of the diatonic scale, the first tone, but does *not* indicate any particular pitch. *Nor do these letters indicate that a particular composition is necessarily in the Major Mode.* One of the several disadvantages of noting plainsong in modern notation is that it necessarily fetters the tune to a particular pitch.

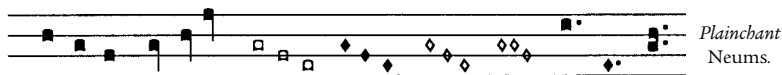
Plainsong employs many more Modes than modern music. Medieval musical theorists identify eight Modes and number them so. In actuality, at least ten can be identified. Plainchant is much richer in its modal use than modern music. It is not necessary to know the names of the Modes nor the theoretical analysis of them for a singer to recognize their haunting beauty and melodic opulence.

Giving a date for the beginning of modern music is quite arbitrary. It may be convenient to use Columbus’ sailing the ocean blue, in fourteen hundred ninety-two, as the beginning date. Modern music has made scant use of the Modes, and today hardly any besides Major and Minor are heard. Two compositions in Modes other than Major or Minor are “Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair” and “I Wonder as I Wander.” Persons familiar only with modern music can sing or play the following little exercise to illustrate for themselves the modal richness of plainchant. Do not think of these as different phrases in the key of D. Think of them as beginning and ending each in its own Mode. Each little tune is a complete composition in itself, not to be related to any other. The last note brings finality to the seven-note composition.



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Written plainsong notes are called *neums*. Individual notes of whatever shape are of equal length. A dot after a note, however, doubles the length of the note.



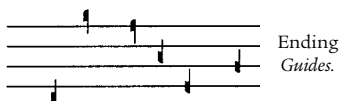
The lower note of a perpendicular group is always sung first:



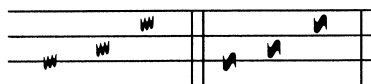
The upper note of a diagonal group is always sung first:



The guide at the end of each line indicates what the first note of the next line will be.



Plainchant, like other arts and disciplines, has its own vocabulary. The names of the symbols used in plainsong notation are beyond the scope of this volume, but it is useful for choristers to know two of them. *Quillisma* is the Latin word for *little feather*. Whenever the quillisma appears, the note *before* it is doubled in length and firmly accented. The quillisma itself is sung lightly and without delay. Depending on the typeface used and how small it is, the *quillisma* and the *oriscus* can be confused. Some plainchant theoreticians suggest that the note preceding the oriscus be given a soft, slight prolongation. This subtle nuance is observed by expert monastic singers, but not always by parish congregations. The oriscus is not to be mistaken for the quillisma.



Quillismae Orisci

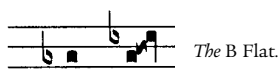
Four bars are used: quarter bar, half bar, full bar, and double bar:



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A quarter bar indicates that a breath may be taken, but only if necessary. The one exception in observing the quarter bar is that a breath is always taken at a Flex. A half bar indicates a breath. A full bar indicates a stop within a tune, such as at the *Caesura* in a Psalm Tone. A double bar indicates the end of a Psalm Verse, a change in singers, or the end of a composition.

The only accidental is the flat. It occurs only on the note “B” of the scale and lowers the pitch one half step. The flat occurs in Psalm Tones, but the natural, which cancels the flat, does not appear in any of the Psalm Tunes. Infrequently, the flat is used as a clef sign, indicating B-flat, but this clef is not used in the Psalm Tunes.



§ 5. Pronunciation.

THE TRANSLATION of the Psalms is substantially that of the Great Bible (1539), which is but little different from that of Miles Coverdale (1535). The last word in the Mediant or Ending may be a past participle, ending with the syllable “-ed”. At the time of the translation, this “-ed” was pronounced as a separate syllable. Thus the Coverdale Psalter traditionally has been pointed accordingly. In today’s speech, this syllable is usually elided into the previous syllable. So that singers are not distracted by frequent need to remember to use the antique pronunciation, this *Psalter* hyphenates this syllable throughout, whether within cadences or not. The hyphen printed is rather longer than is usual in printing to reduce the likelihood of its being mistaken for the Dot in dim light.

A few words in the Psalter are somewhat uncommon. *Betimes* (accent on the second syllable) means *early*. A *buckler* is a type of shield worn on the arm. *Eschew* is pronounced as spelled, *es-chew*. The verb *err* rhymes with *her*, not with *hair*. *Potsberd*; a *sherd*, sometimes spelled *shard* elsewhere, is a piece of broken earthenware; a *potsberd* is a broken piece of such a pot. The past tense verb *purposed* is a different verb from *proposed*. *Runagate* is not common these days; compare with *renegade*. Never confuse *saith* and *sayeth*. The word *sayeth*, which is pronounced exactly as it is spelled, does not occur in the Psalter. The word *saith* does occur and is always pronounced *seth*. A *shawm* is an oboe-like instrument with a double reed. *Tabret*: a small hand drum. Do not mistake *thoroughly* for *thoroughly*. The interjection of impatience or disapproval *Tush* rhymes with *brush*. *Victuals* is never pronounced as spelled but as if *vittles*.