

A Practical Lesson: Detailed Application of the Principles of the Method

Dom Lucien David
Translated by Charles Weaver

June 2024

Translator's note: *This is a translation of chapter 11 of Dom David's Méthode pratique de chant grégorien. In this chapter, David applies his method to Agnus III. Page numbers in the text refer to the relevant sections earlier in the book where the principles underlying the practical analysis are described more fully.*



A- gnus De- i, * qui tol- lis peccá- ta mun- di : mi- se- ré- re no- bis.

1 Recitation of the Text

1.1 General Observations

Look first of all for good posture in the singers (p. 6) and recommend a good placement of the vocal organs, both in particular the opening of the mouth for the vowels and the necessary muscular movements for a forthright and clean articulation of the consonants (pp. 7 to 10).

If the formation of the singers leaves too much to be desired on these points, one can first recite the vowels alone, on a fermata, afterwards accompanied by the consonants: a-u, a-gnus; e-i, De-i; A-gnus De-i.

Insist, from the beginning and on each word, on the accent, to which one will give all the necessary *force* and *elasticity*. It will often be appropriate, especially in the beginning, to exaggerate this double effect of intensity and elasticity temporarily (pp. 18 and 19, remarks section) and to ensure that every *final* syllable is set down *gently*, without the vowel losing any of its clarity.

1.2 Observations on the Vowels

Pay particular attention, in the recitation and afterwards in the singing, to:

1. **The vowel “u.”** We have this vowel accented in “mundi” and unaccented in “agnus.” The mouth should be opened almost as if one were going to pronounce the vowel “o.” One can, as an exercise, pronounce the sounds “o” and “u” in alternation, keeping the opening of the mouth almost in the same position. The sounds will be formed further back for “u” and closer to the lips for “o.”
2. **The vowel “i.”** This is unaccented in “Dei,” “mundi,” and “nobis,” and it receives a secondary accent (p. 19) in “miserere.” In final syllables, there is too much of a tendency to muffle it by letting the sound lose itself in the nasal cavities and almost closing the mouth. Elsewhere than in the final syllables, the defect consists rather of separating the lips and giving the “i” a sharp sound without resonance. To give the “i” its maximum sonority (whether accented or not) one should bring it closer to the vowel “é” (lips not separated) [English speakers could substitute “i as in give” here], as was just said about the vowels “u” and “o.”
3. **The vowel “e.”** This is accented on the third syllable of “miserere” and is weak in the second and fourth syllables of that word and in “pacem.” It should be given a rather open sound, above all in the tonic vowels or in those where the vowel is distinguished by a closing consonant (“pacem”). In the final syllables of “miserere” and “pacem,” the mouth will remain open for the entire time necessary to lay down the vowel with clarity, while reducing its intensity.

1.3 Observations on the Consonants

1. **Agnus.** We pronounce the gn as in “agneau” [English “ny” as in “canyon”]. However, the pronunciation with the hard g (“ag-nus”) can be tolerated without any trouble for singing. This pronunciation, in fact, while it is uncustomary for French speakers, corresponds to the ancient Roman pronunciation.
2. **Tollis.** The double “l” should be pronounced doubly like the double “c” in “peccata,” without needing to introduce a schwa between the two. It is the presence and the joining of the two “l” sounds in a kind of prolonged pronunciation that gives rise, in the melody, to the liquescent neume, the *epiphonus* (p. 32). One should not say “tolis” or “pecata.”
3. **Mundi.** The correct pronunciation of the “u” will bring out the articulation of the “n,” which disappears in the French nasal vowel. It is likewise the double articulation “n-d” that explains the liquescent character of the *climacus* (p. 33).

2 Sense and Character of the Piece

If one wants to chant an *Agnus Dei* well, one has to know the sense and character of this prayer, both in its entirety and in its parts. (*V. Analyse grégoriennes pratique, quatrième série. Cf. Revue du chant grégorien*, vol. 22, no. 6.)

The *Agnus Dei*, in its form and its proper liturgical place, is a prayer of preparation for Eucharistic Communion.

It can be divided into three parts: “Agnus Dei—qui tollis peccata mundi—miserere nobis.” (“Dona

nobis pacem” in the third invocation.) That is to say: “Lamb of God—who removes the sins of the world (and carries their weight)—have pity on us.” (Or “give us peace.”)

1. In the Eucharist, we find Christ in the role of the sacrificial victim, offered for us on the altar as He was on the Cross for the love of God. He is the Lamb of God: “Agnus Dei.”
2. By communion with the divine Victim, we will be purified from all stain, for the Lamb of God, in bearing the burden of our iniquity, has merited to wipe out the sins of the world: “qui tollis peccata mundi.”
3. To obtain the fruits of this communion, we should first of all, considering our misery, recognize our need for divine mercy, which alone can fill the abyss opened between our unworthiness and the fullness of divine love. We beg the pity of the Lord: “miserere nobis.”

As a consequence:

1. In singing *Agnus Dei*, let us fix the eyes of the soul on the infinite sweetness and the perfect abnegation of Him who is presented to us in the symbol of the innocent Lamb.
2. In singing *qui tollis peccata mundi*, let us be penetrated by a living sorrow in recalling our sins and the Passion of the Savior as well as a burning trust in Him who comes to purify and save us by the gift of the Eucharist.
3. In singing *miserere nobis*, let us have a sentiment of our unworthiness, and let us beseech the Savior to take pity on our poverty.

Only this understanding of the liturgical prayer will allow us to understand the sense and the details of the musical composition. And only the actualization of the prayer in the soul of the singer will enable him to find the true accents that will give the performance of the melody all its artistic beauty and its maximum religious power.

3 Performance of the Melody

Before beginning to sing a piece of Gregorian chant, it is good to warm up the vocal cords by singing scales or chains of intervals (thirds, for example). One can also perform some relaxation exercises by holding out notes with a crescendo or diminuendo. This can be followed by series of neumes well accented (*podatus* or *torculus*, etc.).

One should then solfège the chant to be sung, at least if the expertise of the singers does not allow you to pass directly to the words.

For studying the singing of our *Agnus Dei*, we will look successively at each of the three parts described above.¹

¹It goes without saying that the observations that follow do not necessarily need to be discussed in full detail in the course of a lesson. But one should know enough of the substance to be able to take stock of the least defects of a performance and to be able to apply a useful corrective.

3.1 Agnus Dei



A-gnus De- i,

In this slightly elaborated chant, the unity of the word must be considered above all. This unity will be realized by the accent. The accent should completely govern the melody of the word. It falls on the tonic syllable, and within this syllable, on the first note of the neume with which it is associated.

3.1.1 Agnus

The melodic accent of the whole word is on the first note of the *climacus*, the initial F. The vocal impetus given to the accented note should, so to speak, encompass and support the singing of not only of the other two notes of the first syllable but the two notes of the second syllable as well.

Doubtless, this *podatus* can be considered as a melodic word of two notes, just as the *climacus* is a word of three notes. And each of these two melodic words will have its accent. But the second should be clearly subordinate to the first. Also, in practice, in this weak *podatus*, as in neumes of a similar type, one should consider the first note as simply a little more important than the second rather than as accented properly speaking.

If one pays too much attention to the accent of every neume, without exception, one obtains a simple succession of binary and ternary rhythms, leading to the disappearance of the unity of the words and the well-ordered hierarchy of accents, which, together with the pauses, are the foundations of the rhythm of the Gregorian phrase and the secret to its beauty.

On the first syllable of the word “Agnus,” one should attack the F quite cleanly, with a vocal aperture corresponding precisely to the vowel, and not by progressively opening the mouth (p. 9). This point is to be observed with every attack, but most particularly when one attacks the vowel directly, without a consonance of articulation.

One should give to this first and accented note a little fullness [of length] without going so far as to double its duration, and one should avoid rushing through the other two notes of the *climacus*.

On the second syllable, the small rhythmic group formed by the two notes of the *podatus* should have its impulse on the first of these notes, but, as we have said, this accent should be barely audible and much less important than the accent of the *climacus*.

The second note of the *podatus* will be weak; indeed it is the weakest note of the word, because it is at once the last note of the word, the last note of a neume, and, here, a simple connecting note preparing the accent of *Dei*, which is on the same pitch.

It might be said that this *podatus*, with its weak syllable, represents the element of repose or of thesis, just as the *climacus*, with its accented syllable, represents the element of impulse or arsis, in the rhythm formed by these two neumes.

3.1.2 Dei

In this new rhythmic group, the arsis is represented by the *torculus* of the first syllable and the thesis by the single note (long by position) of the second.

The unity of the whole will be strengthened by the accent of the word, which is carried by the first note of the *torculus*. And the voice will come, as in a single impulse, to rest on the E of the second syllable, having passed softly, in an equal movement with neither lengthening nor acceleration, over the second and third notes of the *torculus*.

On the four notes of “Dei,” one should observe a slight effect of slowing down (by comparison to “Agnus”) demanded by the pause marked with the quarter barline and above all by the quite audible independence, at once grammatical and musical, of the invocation “Agnus Dei.” One could take note, from the musical point of view, of the character of finality evoked by the formula of “Dei,” with its three notes resting on the tonic or final of the mode.

The last note of “Dei” should be a little elongated (pp. 52 and 53).

The pause marked after “Dei” by the quarter barline is a minimal pause (pp. 52, 56, and 57). As a result, after the words “Agnus Dei,” which form the intonation of the piece, the choir should take up the following notes immediately after the final elongated note of “Dei.”

3.1.3 Agnus Dei

In addition to the unity of each word, one should respect and put into relief the unity of the group of words.

In a simple recitation or speech, the close grammatical link between the words “Agnus Dei” should be observed, and the unity of the expression should be put into relief by the prevalence of one of the two accents over the other. Here, as in the majority of similar cases (p. 21), the accent of “Dei” will be more important than that of “Agnus.”

In singing, this subordination of accents will be observed insofar as the seriousness or the character of melodic development will permit. The more a chant is simple and approaches recitation, the more it will be marked. Thus, it will be very audible in Agnus XVIII (or of the dead) and X. It will be a little less audible in Agnus IV and less still in Agnus VIII and in the one that we are looking at. We should also add that the melodic shape of the accent of “Dei” will play a large part in the predominance of this accent. Thus, in the accent of “Dei” in Agnus IV or Agnus VIII (second invocation), there will be a more marked predominance than in our Agnus III.

3.1.4 Nuances of Expression

For the tempo of the chant and its relative intensity, one should take account of the soft character suggested by the words, and of the small compass of the melody, consisting of three notes, and of the low modal ambitus. This softness and calm are also implied by the continuity of the melodic line, which is not even interrupted even by a single skip of a third.

The tempo should be rather tranquil and a little slow, but without heaviness. And the accents should be pronounced moderately, more with softness than with brilliance.

3.2 Qui tollis peccata mundi

The four words of this phrase are grouped naturally two by two by the sense. This division will be scarcely noticeable in either declamation or in a simple melody (in the Agnus for the dead, for example). But in our case, the melodic development is rich enough to arrest the spirit at greater length on each idea that composes the thought of the whole phrase: the effort of the Savior (“qui tollis”) and the universality and cruelty of sin (“peccata mundi”). It transforms at once each of these two subdivisions into a sort of little phrase with a distinct personality.

The construction of “tollis,” whose closing *pressus + podatus* arrives strongly at the tonic of the mode, leads naturally to a cadence of repose or of rest, which justifies the presence of the quarter barline in the notation.

Let us examine therefore in turn the two parts of this phrase.



3.2.1 Qui

This relative pronoun does not have, properly speaking, a tonic accent. But the *clivis* with which it is set increases its value and forms, with these two notes, something like a new word, more important, which has a right to an accent. One should therefore place an accent, moderate however, on the first note of the *clivis*. The second note will be light, especially as it serves as an introduction to the accent of the following word.

3.2.2 Tollis

On the first syllable there is a composite neume, which we may recognize as a *scandicus sub-bipunctis* forming a *pressus* of juxtaposition with a *podatus* (p. 35). The *podatus* is liquescent; it ends in an *epiphonus* for the pronunciation of the double liquid consonant.

The four-note *scandicus* breaks down naturally for the rhythm into two superimposed *podatus*. The attack, well articulated, will be made on the D (first *podatus*), but the principal accent will be on the F (second *podatus*), in the manner of a crescendo. The voice must, in fact, carry though without new effort all the way to the *pressus*. An accent on the first D would be too far away to achieve this. Besides, the low placement of this accent should cede its priority to the accent of F as more culminating (p. 36, remarks 1 and 2).

After the accent of F, the voice should pass softly and without rushing over the two following notes, to take on a new force, a new impulse, on the *pressus*. From this new departure point, the voice will bring itself to rest on the E of the final syllable.

One should take care not to abbreviate the note of the *epiphonus*. The quarter barline indicates a quite short rest, the length of one syllable and no more.



peccá- ta mun- di :

Care must be taken to safeguard the unity of each of these two words, reserving to one of their notes a principal accent that will govern the others.

3.2.3 Peccata

The first note of the *torculus*, on the accented syllable, will be well accentuated, prepared as it is by the note of the first syllable and the strong articulation of the two “c” consonants. However the principal accent, which one should not be afraid of singing with force and even with a certain brilliance, will fall on the C of the *podatus*.

The particular force of this accent, which is like the culminating point and the center of attraction of the whole *Agnus Dei*, will allow the voice to pass softly, without renewed effort, not only over the D of the *podatus* but over the whole *climacus* on the final syllable of the word, which is naturally weak.

One should highlight less the relative importance of the initial *virga* of the *climacus* than the weakness of the entire syllable and descend without any rushing through the three steps of the *climacus*.

We find after the last note of the *climacus* an added single note, called an *oriscus*, which should be neither emphasized nor lengthened (p. 37, 2). This note simply allows us to better distinguish the two words by a light *mora vocis* (if possible, without stopping the voice) and to provide a transition between the descent of the *climacus* and the renewed ascent of the *scandicus* that follows.

3.2.4 Mundi

The composite neume of the first syllable is a *scandicus* with *quilisma* followed by an *ancus* or a liquescent *climacus*. According to the rules, the voice will place well the G, which will be a little bit lengthened (p. 38, 2), and it will pass lightly over the *quilisma* (p. 38, 1) and over the following note to dash to the culminating *virga* (p. 38, 3, ex. 4 and p. 35, 2), which will be the center of accentuation of the whole neume and of the whole word. This accent on the C should be given a roundness, but it should not have more brilliance than the principal accent of *peccata*.

One should come back down with suppleness and softness on the two liquescent notes of the *ancus* (p. 33) by articulating completely the “n” before passing to the *clivis* of the second syllable.

The first note of the *clivis* will be endowed with an accent, but one that is relatively weak, as is the syllable itself. The two notes will be elongated to mark the final cadence signalled by the half barline.

3.2.5 Peccata mundi

In simple declamation and in a syllabic or very slightly elaborated melody, it is the word “mundi” that will be the more important of the two from the point of view of accentuation. In our *Agnus*,

the melodic construction gives, on the contrary, more importance to the word “peccata.” The musical formulation of this word is even, as we have said, like the keystone of the whole piece. Around this arises progressively, with a growing force of *élan*, “Agnus Dei” and then “qui tollis.” From it also descends, with diminishing brilliance, “mundi,” then “miserere,” and finally “nobis.”

3.3 Miserere nobis



mi- se-ré-re no-bis.

In this very slightly elaborated melody, one will follow the principles of declamation for the rhythm of each word. In “miserere,” all the notes of the word will be grouped around the F that carries the tonic accent, and the first syllable will be endowed with a secondary accent on its initial note G.

This accent, somewhat less important than that of the tonic syllable, is here far from negligible, on account of the number of weak notes that must be brought to life by its impulse (four notes before the accented F). Because of their disposition in descending degrees, these are assimilated as a sort of *climacus* beneath the G that serves as the initial *virga*.

The role of the initial accent on G will fit more neatly with the word “dona,” which is sung to the same notes in the third invocation. The accent of “dona” is, still, less important than that of “nobis,” which corresponds to the tonic accent of “miserere.”

On the first syllable of “miserere,” one should guard against emphasizing the *oriscus*. One will pass, on the contrary, lightly and almost a little rapidly over the first F, bending down, if necessary, almost a semitone on this note (p. 37).

The clivis E–D of the second syllable will be weak, with a hardly audible secondary accent.

The single note of the third syllable, which carries the tonic accent, will be well highlighted and a little lengthened. The *torculus* that follows, whose undulation simply prolongs the suspension of the voice on F with a discrete dynamic nuance of lament, will be sung with softness, lengthening the notes a little rather than shortening them into a triplet, as one would have a tendency to do to balance the single note on the preceding syllable. A quite marked and somewhat broad accent on the third syllable will allow a light renewal of impulse on the first note of the *torculus*.

In the word “nobis,” both notes will be lengthened, first of all because it is a binary rhythm followed by a rest and also because it is the end of a melodic phrase. On the word “pacem,” which ends the entire piece, the effect of slowing can be still more marked.

The expression of the singing of “miserere nobis” reverts to the calmer nuance of “Agnus Dei.” However, even as the melody returns to unfolding on the lower pitches, the accents of “miserere” are more energetic and quicker than those of “Agnus.” This applies particularly to the tonic accent, leaping quickly back up by a third after the slow and sorrow descent from G to D. The should be treated accordingly, and the humility of supplication should be tempered by an ardent confidence.