GUIDE TO SINGING CHANT

This collection uses the traditional square notation, and includes the rhythmic markings of the classic Solesmes editions. For a detailed explanation, consult the introduction to the *Liber usualis* or any one of several chant textbooks. The following guide, which follows the classic Solesmes interpretation, is necessarily brief.[1]

Notes and Groups of Notes

Traditional chant notation uses various types of individual notes and groups of notes. Each note, either alone or in a group, receives a single, *equal pulse*, regardless of its shape. The classic Solesmes method does not recognize different *proportionate note values* (half-notes, sixteenth-notes, etc.) among the different shapes.[2] The basic individual pulse can be considered the equivalent of an eighth note in modern music. It may be stretched by the use of various *rhythmic markings* (see below).

Of the individual notes, the most basic are the *punctum* and *virga* . These are combined to form groups of notes, called *neumes*, which are sung in consecutive order. For the *clivis* , the first and higher note is sung first, followed by the second, lower note. For the *podatus* , the bottom note is sung first, followed by the top note. These two-note groups may describe an interval of a second, third, fourth, or fifth.

The three-note groups include the *torculus* , for which the three notes are sung consecutively, the middle note always being the highest. For the *porrectus* , the extended diagonal element represents the progression of two descending pitches from one end to the other, while the higher single note at the end is sung third in the series. The *climacus* uses a series of smaller notes. Each *rhombus* receives the same standard pulse, and the shape merely indicates the downward progression of the notes. For groups of three or more notes, any of the constitutive intervals may describe a second, third, or fourth (rarely larger).

Repeated single notes in proximity are customarily rendered as a single note of proportionate value: two punctums (*bistropha*) equal a note two pulses in length; three punctums (*tristropha*) equal three pulses. The same applies to neumes that contain repeated notes, like the *pressus* . Though repeated notes are treated as a single composite tone, the passage of the individual notes may be marked by a slight swelling of the voice (*crescendo*).

The final note in a two- or three-note group may sometimes appear smaller than normal . This small note is a *liquescent*, and is used for

[1] For this guide, I have borrowed freely from the work of Dr. Lila Collamore.

[2] This method follows the classic Solesmes interpretation, which is equalist. Some theorists do recognize proportionate values in the manuscript notation.

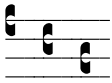
Latin syllables whose final consonant is voiced (*l, m, n, j,* etc.) or whose vowels are treated as a diphthong (*au*). It is rendered by singing the regular notes of the group on the vowel (*a*, in the case of *au*), and closing to the voiced consonant or auxiliary vowel on the liquescent note. Some conductors advocate closing to the auxiliary for the entire value of the liquescent note, and an unusually warm acoustic might call for this. Others may find it excessive, and will prefer to wait until roughly halfway through the note before closing to the auxiliary. When the liquescent takes the consonant *t,* it is best to treat it as a normal note. The liquescent note receives the same rhythmic pulse as any other note.

Additional neumes with special rhythmic properties appear below. Beginning singers need not be overwhelmed by the terminology, but they should learn to recognize the basic shapes and how to sing them. (See the *Table of Neumes*, p. 177)

Staff and Clef Signs

Chant is notated on a *four-line staff*. Notes fall on lines and spaces, as they do on the modern five-line staff, and moving from a line to a space represents the movement of one degree in the scale, at the interval of either a whole step or a half step. The staff can be extended by the use of *ledger lines*.

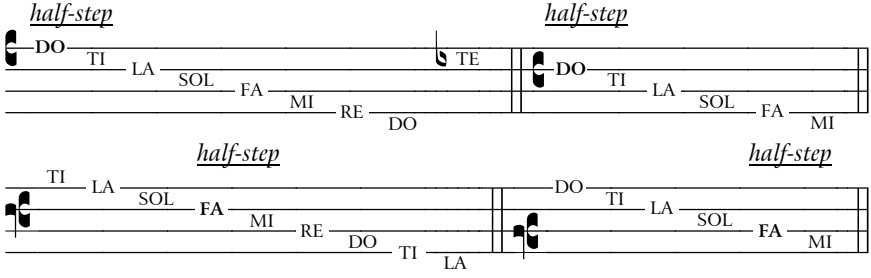
The chant staff accommodates melodies of varying range by using two types of moveable *clefs:*



Do-clef
marks *do* on the staff

Fa-clef
marks *fa* on the staff

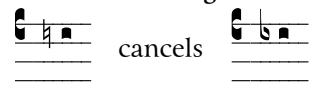
Clef signs are placed first on every line of chant. They mark the position of either *do* or *fa*, on the staff (and thus the position of the semitones, or half-steps, in a diatonic scale), and from these the singer determines the relative positions of all the other degrees in the scale. In longer pieces, the range might shift part way through the piece, and may require a *clef change*. The new clef appears following a double bar, and *do* is repositioned accordingly. The various placements of the different clefs can be confusing, but they are necessary to keep the majority of notes for a given melody on the staff. In time, with consistent use of *solfeggio* (*do-re-mi*), finding the relative position of notes on the different clefs will become second nature.



Other notational signs include the *flat, natural,* and *custos:*

flat sign
creates *te* (*ti*-flat)
lasts for word or incise,
whichever is smaller

natural sign



custos
cue to the first pitch of
the next line

The only *accidental* in chant is the one flat on *ti,* which lowers that tone a half step (to *te*). The flat remains in effect until the end of the word or until the next barline, whichever comes first. The natural sign is used to cancel the flat, if necessary.

The *custos* (or *guide*) appears at the end of every line of chant. It is not a note, but a visual cue for the first pitch on the next line.

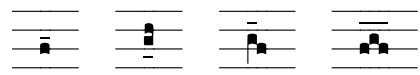
Rhythmic Markings and Expressed Notes

Most characteristic of the classic Solesmes method is its use of special *rhythmic markings*. These markings are not present in the chant manuscripts (though they are sometimes inferred), but are added as an aid to singers in order to achieve an artful and coherent rendering of the chant melodies.

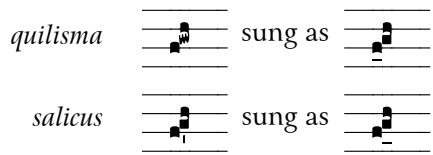
As we have said, individual notes receive the same rhythmic value, irrespective of their shape. However, notes can be *expressed* in several different ways, which may affect their relative *length*:

1. by the addition of a ***dot***:

2. by the addition of a ***horizontal episema***:



3. in the context of a ***special neume***:



The most fundamental rhythmic marking is the *dot*, which doubles the length of the note it follows (whether punctum, virga, or rhombus), giving it two pulses instead of one. Dotted notes often precede a barline, in which case they receive a slight relaxation (*ritardando* and *diminuendo*). Those that appear in the middle of the phrase may mark the end of a sub-phrase, and also may receive a slight relaxation of the tone; however, this is followed by a re-energizing of the tone on the dot, to propel the voice into the rest of the phrase.

The *horizontal episema* affects the sound of the note by adding *expression*. Such expression is best understood as a slight pressure and lengthening (as in the description of the *quilisma* and *salicus* below). It is *not* an accent, as understood in modern music. It is *not* a doubling of the note value. It is much more nuanced and subtle, and should never affect the overall rhythmic flow of the melody. Often, beginning singers adopt too rigorous an interpretation that does, in effect, double all the notes marked with a horizontal episema. It might be more fruitful for beginners to wait to include episemas until the melody itself, in its rhythmic integrity, has been well absorbed.

The amount of expression given by the horizontal episema depends on its context. It chiefly affects the note it is over (in the case of a *podatus*, the first note of the group). However, as with the quilisma and salicus, the horizontal episema should never be rendered rigorously or mechanically. Expressed notes of all types may need to be prepared by a slight anticipation, and their effect may need to linger by a slight reluctance to return to tempo. The musical and textual context, the shape of the phrase, and rules of good taste will, with practice, guide their ultimate interpretation.

Longer episemas extending over two or more notes affect all the notes, but with decreasing strength. The first note receives the most obvious expression, and each subsequent note less expression. Long episemas at the ends of phrases are most marked; those in the middle of the phrase less so, and in this case, the final note of the group generally should return to the regular tempo.

The *quilisma* is a special note; as customarily rendered, it gives expression to the note preceding it (a slight pressure and lengthening). Otherwise, the quilisma itself is sung like any other note. Despite appearances, it is *not* treated as a vocal trill.[3]

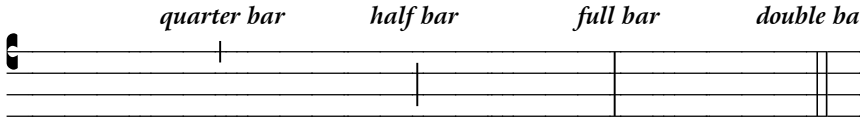
The *salicus* is a special neume; it can be recognized by the vertical stroke that marks the middle note of the group (the same as an *ictus mark*, described below, but in this context, it is called a *vertical episema*). Like the quilisma, the salicus is rhythmically modified, with expression given to the note marked with the vertical episema.

Except as part of a *salicus,* the *vertical episema* (*ictus mark*) does not affect the rendering of the notes to which it is attached, either through length or stress. As discussed below, it is added purely as a guide to ensure proper grouping of musical pulses into two- and three-note rhythms.

[3] The *Liber usualis,* in its guide to interpretation, hints at the possibility of a trill, but recommends this more practical rendering "if one has not learnt how to execute these *tremolo* or shaken notes, or, knowing how to render them, has nevertheless to sing with others." Most conductors consider this very good advice.

Barlines

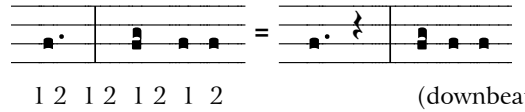
Chant is not measured; its notes fall into unequal groups of twos and threes. *Barlines* in chant mark the ends of various types of phrases:



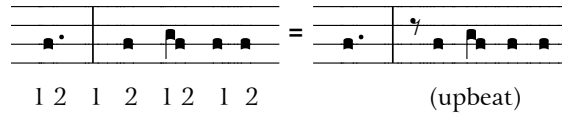
Full and double bars mark the end of a significant phrase. They are treated as full stops and preceded by a slight *ritardando*. Half bars mark less significant sections; breath may be taken, but the rhythm should not be significantly interrupted. Quarter bars mark shorter musical phrases. The rhythm should not be interrupted, and breathing, if needed, should steal time from the note preceding the barline.

Full barlines also serve as musical *rests*. Following the barline, time is added using rests that are equal in value to either a single or double pulse (where the punctum receives a single pulse, equivalent to an eighth note). The value of the rest depends on the rhythm of the phrase following the barline. If the first note of the next phrase receives an ictus, it is treated as a *downbeat*, and is prepared by two pulses (quarter rest). If the first note of the next phrase does not receive an ictus, it is treated as an *upbeat*, and is prepared by one pulse (eighth rest). This affects counting as follows:

if the note following a full or double bar is ***ictic:***



if the note following a full or double bar is ***not ictic:***



In a psalm recitation, the next known ictus following the full or double bar may be many notes away. *Counting back* (described below) may yield a result that seems especially counterintuitive, or that contradicts the textual rhythm in a particularly unnatural way. In this case, the conductor is free to add the value of rest that seems most natural.

It is important that the note before a full or double bar (invariably a dotted note) be given its full value. Singers can enhance the sense of cadence at these points by singing into the barline, placing any final consonant on it, or even slightly after it.

The *asterisk* * is generally used to signal the end of an *intonation* (the opening phrase of a piece, usually sung by a cantor) and the entrance of all the singers. Some conductors treat the asterisk as a full or double bar, always adding a rest after it. However, in cases where the note

before the asterisk is not dotted or lengthened in some other way (*e.g.*, the first *Kyrie* from *Mass I*, page 46), it may be better not to add time, but to keep the rhythm flowing, and have the singers enter as if they had already been singing. Experience will judge whether this is practical.

Plainsong Rhythm

Nothing is more characteristic of the classic Solesmes method, nor has been the source of more scholarly controversy, than the topic of *plainsong rhythm*. Even a cursory discussion is beyond the scope of this guide, but a thorough understanding of the Solesmes rhythmic method is essential for the proper and artful singing of chant.[4]

Of basic consideration is the proper arrangement of notes into two- and three-note groups, which form the basic pattern of "beats" in chant rhythm. The beginning of each group receives the rhythmic *ictus*, or touching point. Of itself, the ictus is purely *organizational*, and indicates *no qualitative change* in the rendering of the note—not emphasis, not lengthening. The basic rhythmic groups of twos and threes are further combined to form larger groups that either tend to rise (*arsis*) or fall (*thesis*). It is up to the conductor to expresses this pattern of rise and fall. See a more detailed method for a complete discussion of chant conducting (*chironomy*).

The *musical* ictus may or may not correspond to a *textual* ictus, the strong syllable of the word. This subtle interweaving of the musical and textual ictus is the defining characteristic of classic Solesmes rhythm, and once grasped, it is the key that unlocks the magic of plainsong.

As a practical matter, the proper marking of the rhythmic ictus is invaluable for keeping a schola together and moving forward at a steady, deliberate pace. Within this firm, ictic framework, the rhythmic markings (horizontal episemas and special neumes) provide subtle, supple points of relaxation and expression to the melody. Conductors and singers both need to know the exact placement of the ictus and how to find it, when it is not marked.

[4] Consult one of the following:

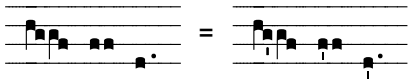
Gajard, Joseph. *The Rhythm of Plainsong According to the Solesmes School*. New York: J. Fischer and Bro., 1945; reprint ed., Richmond, VA: Church Music Association of America, 2007.

Mocquereau, Dom Andre. *A Study of Gregorian Musical Rhythm (Le Nombre Musical Gregorien).* Volume 1. Solesmes, trans. Aileen Tone, 1989; reprint ed., Church Music Association of America, 2007.

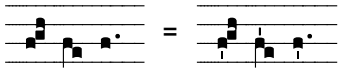
There are four ways to *find the musical ictus*, which are presented in order of precedence:

1. as indicated by the ***ictus mark:***

2. as it falls at the ***beginning of a long or doubled note:***

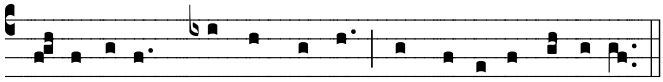


3. as it falls on the ***first note of a neume:***



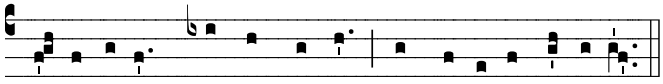
4. by counting ***backward by twos*** from next known ictus:

written:



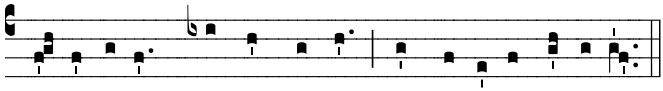
A-ve verum Corpus na-tum de Ma-rí- a Vírgine:

known, using rules 1–3:



A-ve verum Corpus na-tum de Ma-rí- a Vírgine:

added, counting back by twos:



A-ve verum Corpus na-tum de Ma-rí- a Vírgine:

Conductors may need to modify this rule for the sake of musical sense, or to preserve a good ensemble. They must also determine how much of this information they want to provide to their schola, or how much they want to rely on conducting alone to communicate the rhythm.

Order of precedence means, for instance, that a note marked with an ictus takes precedence over the first note of a neume; the first note of a double note also takes precedence over the first note of a neume; etc.

Marking all the ictuses helps the conductor and singers see the groups of twos and threes that form the basis of chant rhythm. This is further reinforced by *counting out* the resulting patterns, beginning with *one* on the ictus, followed by *two* and, as necessary, *three* on the non-ictic notes. Just as *solfeggio* reinforces the relative pitches of a melody, counting instills a clear sense of its underlying rhythm.

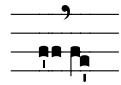
Repercussions

For groups of repeated notes that appear consecutively and slightly separated, the second group receives a fresh impetus, called a *repercussion*, which should mark, but not interrupt, the flow of the sound. The same effect applies when a group of repeated notes precedes a

neume, or when it precedes the same note marked with a vertical episema. Some cases of repercussion follow:

1. on a **new ictus**:

2. before a **new neume**:



The *repercussion* is best rendered subtly. Should the effect prove too strong when sung by the whole group, the conductor might want to assign the task of rendering the repercussions to only a few singers.

Modal melodies

Chant melodies are *modal,* and each is given a modal classification (which appears as a Roman numeral on the first line of each chant), based on one of the eight ecclesiastical modes.[5] These eight modes correspond to the first four modes in the ancient Greek system, with each of the four appearing in two forms, either *authentic* or *plagal*, depending on the range of the melody (higher or lower, respectively) and the prevailing *dominant* (or *tenor*) of the scale. The *final* (or *tonic*) of the mode is usually the last note of the chant, and gives the mode its tonality.

Ecclesiastical mode	*Greek mode*	*Final*	*Dominant*	
I and II	Dorian	RE	I: LA	II: FA
III and IV	Phrygian	MI	III: TI (DO)	IV: LA
V and VI	Lydian	FA	V: DO	VI: LA
VII and VIII	Mixolydian	SOL	VII: RE	VIII: DO

Modes are most easily understood as they correspond to scales played on the white keys of a piano, starting on D (Dorian), E (Phrygian), F (Lydian), and G (Mixolydian). This exercise shows how modal scales are characterized by their arrangement of whole steps and half steps, which fall in different places depending on the starting note, but it is only for demonstration. In practice, modal scales can be sung starting on any pitch. Chant does not have key signatures like those of modern music. The modal classification, and the pattern of whole and half steps it implies, is the only tonal information given. Chant notation represents *relative* pitch only, not *absolute* pitch.

For this reason, it is essential that beginning students of chant use the classic *solfeggio* system (*do-re-mi*) when learning a new melody, always remembering that *do* is *moveable*, and corresponds to whatever pitch is chosen. It is up to the conductor to choose the absolute pitch for *do* (or

[5] The corpus of Gregorian chant employs additional modes, but they do not appear in this collection.

for the *final* of the mode), based on the melodic range of the piece, and how it falls within the vocal range of the singers.

Although the eight ecclesiastical modes do not correspond to the major and minor scales of modern music, each features either a major or minor third, and can be described as *major* (V–VIII) or *minor* (I–IV). With practice, singers can begin to recognize the special *character* of each of the modes, including certain characteristic melodic gestures.

Table of Neumes

The following table lists the most basic notes and groups:

punctum

virga

podatus *(pes)*
bottom note sung first

clivis
higher note sung first

torculus
all notes are of equal value, sung consecutively

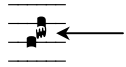
porrectus
three notes, the first two at either end of the diagonal

climacus
all notes, including the small *rhombus*, are of equal value, and are sung consecutively

bistropha *(distropha)*
repeated notes sung as a single note of double length

tristropha
repeated notes sung as a single note of triple length

pressus
repeated notes sung as a single note of double length

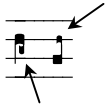


quilisma
middle note of a three-note group; the note before is expressed

scandicus
all notes are of equal value

salicus
the last *two* notes form a podatus; the note marked with the ictus is lengthened

when the first interval of the ***salicus*** is a 5th, the *first* two notes form the podatus; the note marked with the ictus is lengthened



liquescent notes
pronounce a diphthong (a-*u*) or voiced consonant (*l, m, n, j*, etc.) on the small note