

## The Rhythm of the Vatican Edition

**“In the Vatican edition, the *morae vocis* shall be indicated by a blank space of equal and unchanging width, and four sorts of bars shall be used . . . .”**

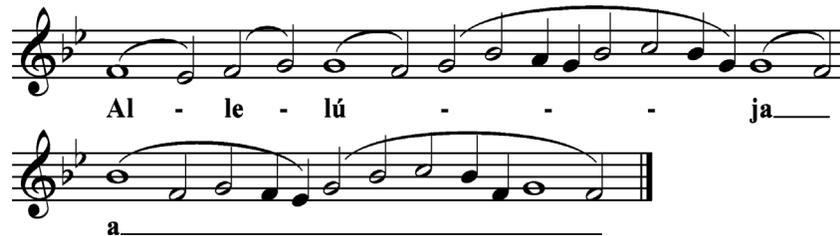
—Resolution no. 8, noted in the minutes of the Commission for the Vatican Edition (29 June, 1904)  
Combe, *The Restoration of Gregorian Chant: Solesmes and the Vatican Edition*, 272.

In spite of the confusion that has existed since its introduction more than a century ago, it must be understood that the Vatican Edition of Gregorian chant is truly a rhythmic edition. With one exception, the “pure” Vatican Edition notates the rhythm by the same means that Dom Joseph Pothier's *Liber Gradualis* employed. This is quite natural because (1) Dom Pothier was in charge of creating the Vatican Edition; (2) his publications were in wide use at the time; and, most importantly, (3) it was ultimately decided to use Pothier's *Liber Gradualis* and *Antiphonale* as the basis for the Vatican Edition. Furthermore, large sections of the Preface to Pothier's *Liber Gradualis*<sup>1</sup> were adopted verbatim for the Preface to the Vatican Edition.<sup>2</sup>

The Vatican Edition presupposes an *equalist* interpretation. Since the late Renaissance, the *mensuralist* interpretation (which assigned different time values to chant notes with different shapes) had been accepted as the correct rhythmic interpretation of chant, and this was a great obstacle to Pothier's work of Gregorian restoration. Today, one can easily see the way the melodies were sung during the nineteenth century by comparing the chant notation of the “corrupt” Gregorian editions to the corresponding organ accompaniment books (written in modern notation).<sup>3</sup> Here is an example:



HABERL/PUSTET 1884 *Graduale* : Page [52] : Mass II for a Virgin/Martyr



SCHILDKNECHT 1892 Page [50] : Mass II for a Virgin/Martyr

Having studied the Medieval manuscripts, Pothier became convinced that the notes were shaped differently in the Medieval manuscripts to make them easier to sing, not because they were intended to be sung with the rhythm of the “measured” music of Renaissance polyphony (with *longa*, *brevis*, *semi-brevis*, etc.). A surprisingly explicit reminder of Pothier's view was published in the Vatican Preface:

**7. In themselves the descending diamond notes, which in certain neums follow the culminating note, have no *special* time-value ♪♫.**

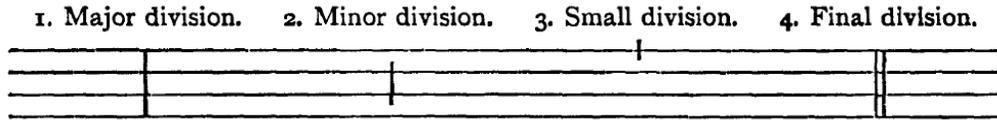
1 Both the 1883 and 1895 editions.

2 The now legendary Preface to the Vatican Edition will be referred to as the “Vatican Preface.” This article focuses on the second part of the Vatican Preface, which gives the “Rules for Interpretation.”

3 Thousands of pages of chant accompaniments were published in the nineteenth century, especially by Friedrich Pustet.

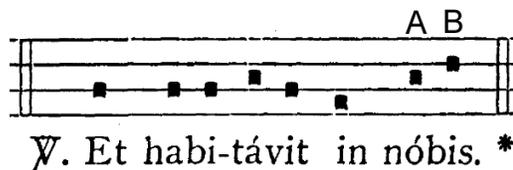
## I. The Rhythmic Notation

The rhythm of the Vatican Edition is not notated by means of dots, lines, dashes, or differently shaped neums. The rhythmic notation is more subtle, and sometimes leaves room for interpretation by the choir director. The first rhythmic sign used in the Vatican Edition is the bar:



Before 1. and 4., a *ritardando* is often taken. Pothier himself seemed to favor a pronounced *ritardando* before the final division (as evidenced by the few precious recordings we have of him conducting chant). Before 2. and 3., a smaller break is required.

The duration of the *ritardando* is not specified, and this has led to various interpretations. One of the major differences among the different schools is what to do with a spondee coming before a bar (whereas all are in agreement when it comes to a dactyl in the same place).<sup>4</sup> There are literally thousands of examples like this one in the *Kyriale*, *Graduale*, and *Antiphonale*:



Some schools will always double the length of both notes on “nóbis” (A & B). Other schools tend to lengthen only the final note (B). Some schools treat each individual case differently. Some schools claim to give a slight emphasis to the tonic accent of “nóbis” (A) and a longer length to the final note (B), but this is difficult in practice.

In conclusion, Dom Pothier seems to have left it up to individual choir directors to decide the length of each *ritardando* before the different bars.

## II. The Melismatic *Mora Vocis*

If one knows that about the *ritardando* required before the various bars, one can sing through almost the entire *Kyriale* and *Antiphonale* without a single problem. However, the *Graduale* is quite different, because of its numerous melismas.

As the Vatican Preface explains, the “blank” space of a notehead or more in the Vatican Edition indicates that one must insert a *mora vocis* (that is, a *ritardando* and/or pause). To distinguish this type of *mora vocis* from the *ritardando* that is required before a bar, the term “melismatic *mora vocis*” will be used henceforth.<sup>5</sup>

4 A spondaic word has the accent on the penultimate syllable (e.g. Páter). A dactylic word has the accent on the antepenult (e.g. Filius).

5 What is remarkable is that the Vatican Preface was not issued with the Vatican Edition *Kyriale* (1905), but with the Vatican Edition *Graduale* (1908). This is akin to publishing a vehicle's operating instructions three years after issuing the vehicle itself. The thought may have been that singers would know to apply the same rules they had been applying to the Pothier books. Still, this approach seems open to criticism: why not clearly state the rules of rhythmic interpretation when the Vatican Edition *Kyriale* was first published? It is unanimously accepted that the Vatican Preface rules for interpretation

The *Nova Organi Harmonia* rhythm is based on the rhythmic system of the *Editio Vaticana*.

For example, the following example has no melismatic *mora vocis*, since there are no melismas with the space of a notehead or more (remember that the syllables change at the star, so it is not a melisma):

Tract.  
II.  
A n-ge-lis su- is \* De

This example is also devoid of any melismatic *morae*:

Tract.  
II.  
B o-num est \*

However, the following example would have a *mora vocis* at the arrow (because it has a blank space of a notehead or more). However, that is the only melismatic *mora vocis* present. There is not a melismatic *mora vocis* at either of the places below a star, because those instances have a change of syllables, and there can be no melisma where syllables change.

Tract.  
2.  
Q UI há-bi- tat \*

This example has a melismatic *mora vocis* on the neum above the word “nos” (because there is the blank space of a notehead or more at the arrow):

Tract.  
2.  
A D-juva nos, \*

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apply “retroactively” to the Vatican Edition *Kyriale* (and, as mentioned above, there are very few melismatic *morae* in the *Kyriale* anyway). It seems probable that the Preface was not issued in 1905 (with the *Kyriale*) due to internal disagreements among members of the Pontifical Commission (of which Pothier was the president). However, this fascinating history will not be treated here, since it is the subject of several books. In this author's view, the most valuable sources (available in English) treating this history are:

Combe, Pierre. *The Restoration of the Gregorian Chant: Solesmes and the Vatican Edition*. Trans., Theodore Marier. The Catholic University of America Press: Washington D.C., 1969.

Wagner, Peter. *Der Kampf gegen die Editio Vaticana Pamphlet*. Graz: Styria, 1907. Published in English as “The Attack on the Vatican Edition: A Rejoinder.” *Caecilia* 87 (1906): 10-44.

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The following example shows the way an editor who put the Vatican Edition into modern notation (there were many such editors!) chose to notate that melismatic *mora vocis*:



DR. F. X. MATHIAS 1911 *Graduale*

For the sake of curiosity, we include Pothier's editions:

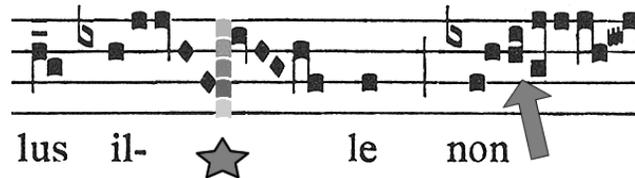


Dom Pothier's *Liber Gradualis* (1883)

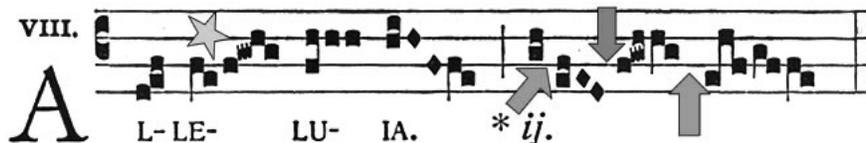


Dom Pothier's *Liber Gradualis* (1895)

When singing, it can be difficult to instantly know where a melismatic *mora vocis* is indicated. For example, there is a melismatic *mora* at the star but not at the arrow in the following example. Above the star, “imaginary” noteheads are added for the reader to verify that there truly is at least one notehead of blank space:



In the following example, there are three melismatic *morae* (indicated by arrows). However, there is not a melismatic *mora* at the star, because there is not the space of a notehead or more.



### III. Different Schools and Interpretations

The student who carefully studies the various editions of the Vatican Edition will notice several things:

(1) Because the rhythm of the chant depended on the spacing, no publisher was allowed to change the official text in any way. In a note from the Vatican publisher,<sup>6</sup> publishers were reminded that they must adhere strictly to the spacing of the official Vatican Edition when it comes to melismas. They were also reminded that the space is measured against the “custos” at the end of the line when the melisma is interrupted and must continue on the next line.<sup>7</sup> Still, instances can be found where publishers got

<sup>6</sup> This note is provided at the end of this document, courtesy of Monsignor Hayburn.

<sup>7</sup> Most publishers did not want to bother doing that, so they almost always end a melismatic line with some kind of bar.

The *Nova Organi Harmonia* rhythm is based on the rhythmic system of the *Editio Vaticana*.

“sloppy,” and, in spite of the injunction from the Vatican, altered the spacing between the notes in melismas. In such an instance (i.e. where different editions have different spacing), one must have recourse to the Vatican Press edition to find out whether a melismatic *mora* was intended.

(2) Most of the editors felt that Vatican Edition was not practical when it came to the notation of the melismatic *mora vocis*, so many invented their own system of notation, which was then superimposed on top of the Vatican Edition. This is understandable, since (as eluded to above) it often happens that the only way a singer can tell if a melismatic *mora vocis* was intended is to place the book by one's nose and gaze outward. Doing this makes it possible to see whether there really is the space of a notehead.

(3) The idea of “space” indicating the *mora vocis* is foreign to modern musicians, but makes more sense when one considers this excerpt from the Preface to the Vatican Edition:

**The reason which demands the joining together of the notes of the same neum, both in the musical text and in the singing of it, also requires that the neums should be marked off from one another alike for the eye and for the ear : and this is done in various ways according to various contexts.**

In other words, the sections of the melisma are apparent to the ears when one hears *morae*, while the same sections are apparent to the eyes when one sees spacing. Dom Pothier dwells on this idea at length in the Preface to his *Liber Gradualis*.

(4) There are often discrepancies between the various editions. Incidentally, out of all the editions, the Solesmes editions published by Dom Mocquereau are the least faithful when it comes to adherence to the Vatican rhythm.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV. Additions and Subtractions from Pothier's Rhythmic Notation

In Pothier's original Preface to his *Liber Gradualis*, he said that if more space is given for a melismatic *mora vocis*, the pause should be longer and vice versa. This seems to have been abandoned with the publication of the Vatican Edition (and could possibly be explained in principle<sup>9</sup> by the quote given at the start of this document).

However, there is one thing that did not appear in Pothier's Preface, but was added in the Vatican Preface, namely example (D):

D B A C D B A C A B

Ky-ri- e \* \*\* e- lé- i- son.

**Observe that a tailed note, (D), immediately followed by a neum which it commands does not indicate a breathing but a rather longer pause.**

<sup>8</sup> The explanation for this is that Dom Mocquereau was trying to match the St. Gall rhythmic markings, rather than adhere to the Vatican Edition. Solesmes published several pamphlets clearly stating this fact (cf. *Plainchant and Solesmes*, by Paul Cagin and André Mocquereau, published in 1905).

<sup>9</sup> N.B. the words “equal and unchanging.”

With regard to example (D) and the explanation for it, it must be understood that this was a very poorly phrased section of the Vatican Preface and has led to serious consequences. As a matter of fact, the Latin wording employed could be translated as either “preceded by” or “followed by” a neum subordinate to it.<sup>10</sup> Some editors translate it as “preceded by” while others translate it as “followed by,” with obvious (conflicting) results. Furthermore, in example (D) Dom Pothier left the required notehead of space, but the explanation does not require that space. Suffice it to say that each and every edition treats instances of example (D) differently, and many are internally inconsistent. Furthermore, one cannot have recourse to the earlier Pothier editions for clarification because (as stated) this rhythmic rule was mysteriously invented for the Vatican Edition.

When the student finds different interpretations for melismatic *morae* in the different editions, one need not necessarily infer sloppiness or ill intentions. Sometimes, the editor was doubtless trying to be rhythmically consistent (when the same melodic passage occurs in more than one Proper, for example). It is also possible that some editors were trying to correct what they perceived to be typos in the Vatican Edition, and having recourse to the earlier “tradition” of the Pothier books in use for decades. The fact that the Vatican Edition contains errors cannot be denied, and typos are entirely understandable, considering how quickly these massive volumes were published. In his book, Joseph Gogniat<sup>11</sup> has pointed out some indisputable Vatican Edition typos; for example, the inconsistent application of *liquescents*.

Finally, with regard to the rhythm of the *quilisma*, it could be noted that the Vatican Preface seems to allow for the possibility of lengthening the first note (as has become traditional) when it says:

**5. There is another kind of *tremolo* note, i. e., the *Quilisma*, which appears in the chant like a “melodic blossom”. It is called “*nota volubilis*” and “*gradata*”, a note with a trill and gradually ascending. 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, he should merely strike the preceding note with a sharper impulse so as to refine the sound of the *Quilisma* rather than quicken it.**

## V. Who Produced the Vatican Edition?

Much confusion exists with regard to whether the Catholic Church officially adopted the “Solesmes Edition” of the chant for the Vatican Edition. To understand the true state of things, one must realize that Dom Joseph Pothier entered the Solesmes congregation in 1859 and published his *Liber Gradualis* in 1883 along with several other important works on chant. In 1893 Dom Pothier was appointed Prior of Ligugé, a Solesmes daughterhouse. Then, in 1895, he became Abbot of St. Wandrille, another Solesmes daughterhouse. When Dom Pothier left Solesmes, his student Dom Mocquereau took over where he left off, and quickly started experimenting with different methods of publishing chant as well as modifying many of Pothier's ideas. It is enlightening to study these early Mocquereau editions and note the evolution of his notation, sometimes changing from month to month. As stated above, Dom Pothier used his editions as the basis for the Vatican Edition (especially the *Graduale* and *Antiphonale*). In this sense, one can say that the Vatican Edition was the “Solesmes chant,” because Pothier published his seminal works while at Solesmes.

<sup>10</sup> The writer owes this linguistic point, along with so much of his knowledge and interest in this subject, to a humble servant of Christ who will be rewarded “in secret.” (Matthew 6:6)

<sup>11</sup> *Little Grammar of Gregorian Chant: to Propagate the Principles Contained in the Vatican Edition*. Fribourg: Switzerland, 1939.

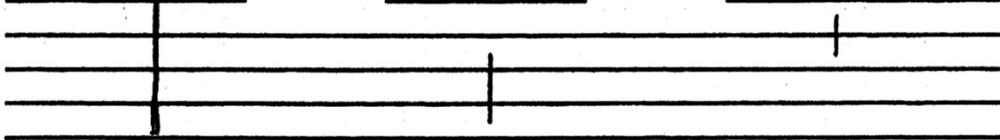


The second letter from the Manager of the Vatican Press deals with the spacing of the notes; the date is September 6, 1906.

Notice to Publishers.

Some explanation has been requested concerning the spaces which separate the notes, in the Vatican Edition of Gregorian Chant, in order to mark the phrasing of the chant.

First of all, there are the bars which divide the staff completely or partly; namely:  
Grande Barre.                      demi-barre.                      quart de barre.



whole rest.                      half-rest.                      quarter-rest.

→ These must be reproduced exactly by the publishers. In the same way, account must be taken of the diverse spaces which must be left between notes or groups of notes over the one syllable.

These spaces correspond to those designated in typography by the terms  $1/4$ ,  $1/2$ , 1.

$1/4$  equals the half of the width of a note.

$1/2$  equals the entire width of a note.

1 equals the width of two notes.\*

→ These spaces are of obligation only in the case in question, that is to say, only between the groups which succeed one another on one and the same syllable.

They are left to the discretion of the composer, for the rectification of his lines, 1) at the end of a group preceding a syllable, and 2) before or after a bar.

GIO. PASQ. SCOTTI,

Manager of the Vatican Press.

Rome, September 6th, 1906.

\*In order to estimate the space to be left between two groups, the latter of which is to be carried over to the next line, one must reckon the space between the former group and the guide.<sup>1</sup>