

AN IDIOT'S GUIDE TO SQUARE NOTES

By Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker

You can't get too far into Catholic sacred music without bumping into "neumes," those little square notes on four lines that look beautiful if oddly antiquated. Most people have no idea how to read them, and most trained musicians are as much at a loss as anyone else. They don't teach this stuff in graduate school.

What to do? There are two typical responses. An ambitious person scrambles to find the same chant in modern notation, and usually fails. A less ambitious person just gives up, figuring that it's too old and complicated to bother with anyway. Either response leads the person out of chant and back into the status quo. Forget about *Alma Redemptoris Mater*; let's hear it for another verse of "One Bread, One Body."

Well, be not afraid. This is your time-saving, one-article, clip-'n'-save introduction to chant.

You Will Be Absorbed

There are serious trends alive today that will eventually require Church musicians at all levels to revisit the chant tradition. Pope Benedict XVI and his predecessor Pope John Paul II have stated this very explicitly. The bishops' synod of 2005 included a clear call for restoring chant to its pride

Chant from a 14th-century antiphony . . . Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

of place in the liturgy. Rome's efforts in this regard, which date back decades (and even centuries), are intensifying to the point where they will touch every musician in every parish in a few short years.

Some people look at square notes and think they are some monkish affectation. Surely modern notes are more "advanced," in the same way that modern English is over Middle English, or the iPod is over the 8-track. Not true. The square notes are precisely appropriate for their purpose. You wouldn't render a Beethoven symphony in neumes (pronounced "noomz" or "nyoomz," meaning notes, from the Greek word for breath) any more than modern notes are a long-term chant solution.

Yes, you can rest on your modern-notation laurels. There are hymn books available that present a handful of some popular chants in modern notation. But that will only take you a small way into the repertoire. You will not be singing the formal chant that built Church music and Western music generally. The psalms and most Mass settings will be off-limits. Meanwhile, the authoritative books of the Solesmes monastery in France will remain forbidding.

Another problem: If you only sing chant with modern notation, the music will never sound quite right. You'll miss out on the phrasing and the inflections, and those "special effects" will be lost. Tempos will drag. It might even be-

come boring and tedious. In any case, it will sound more like modern music than the sung prayer that it should be.

You don't have to be a neume snob to observe that there is no viable substitute for learning how to sing the way the Church has always sung. Musicologists observe that singing square notes comes closest to replicating the timeless sound heard in the earliest centuries of Christianity. That's why they are in use today.

Once reconciled to this reality, the enthusiast faces yet another problem. There are vast numbers of books available on chant, both scholarly treatises and texts written for monastic study. Some books claiming to make chant simple only seem to add unnecessary complications. Even the reader-friendly versions you find at the beginning of old missals seem to be lacking critical pedagogical steps.

And that's the reason for this article. Here you'll find all the information you need to get you up and singing quickly. Of course, this isn't a substitute for more extensive training, intense listening, hours of practice, and careful study. The goal is to get you past the initial intimidation so that the chant books don't look so daunting after all.

If you know how to read music, you have an advantage: You already know what whole steps and half steps are, and you know what it means to sing in tune. Unfortunately, you also face a disadvantage: You will be constantly tempted to translate from modern notation to medieval and back again. This is pointless. The best approach is just to start fresh.

The Notes

Chant is written on four lines, not because it is a different language from modern notes but because most chants do not extend beyond that range. There's nothing odd about this: In modern notation, lopping off the top or bottom line on a treble or bass clef won't make the music itself sound any different.

On the chant staff, the four lines are read just like five lines of modern notes, minus one line. Chant is written specifically for the human voice, which has a more limited range than most musical instruments. There is simply no need for five lines. There are also no time signatures or key signatures.

Otherwise, it is the same. When the printed notes go up, the sung notes go up. When the printed notes go down, the sung notes go down. This is not different from modern notation: In reading from left to right, you may go up or down one whole step, one half step, a major third, a mi-

nor third, a perfect fourth, and so on. The only remaining question is: How do you know if the relationship of a space to a line or a line to a space represents a half step or a whole step?

The trick, then, is to find the half steps among the neumes. Think of a C scale, the white keys of a piano starting on middle C and going to the next C. The scale has five whole steps and two half steps. The half steps occur between E and F (Mi and Fa) and between B and C (Ti and Do).

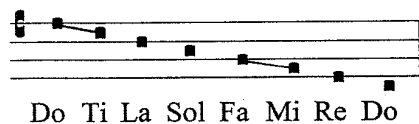
With chant, this sequence of whole and half steps does not vary. Each scale is built on whole steps, with two half steps. The only thing that changes is your starting point. If, for example, you begin on Do and end at Do, the placement of whole and half steps will be as follows: whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half. If you begin on Re, the relationship of the whole and half steps to each other will still be the same; again, only your starting note has changed. Your Re to Re scale will sound like this: whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half, whole. Once you understand this simple "slide rule" principle, you'll be able to sing any chant melody.

The Clefs

The best method for learning the musical notes is *solfege*, the Do-Re-Mi system of singing that Maria used in *The Sound of Music*. That song is a charming Hollywood creation, but it's based on the way people learned chant for centuries. If you don't know that system, there is another way. See the clef marking at the beginning of the chant:



This is the C, or Do, clef. It always rests on a line. The Do clef simply tells you where Do is. The space just beneath this is sung a half-step lower (Do to Ti). The other half step occurs between the Mi and Fa:



Again, the first half step occurs on the space just under the line marked by the clef. From that note, count down three whole steps, landing on Fa. The next space down is another half step. So if we count down from the note marked by the C clef, we get: half, whole, whole, whole, half, whole, whole.

The same holds true if we are using the F, or Fa, clef.

The Fa clef rests on a line and tells you where the Fa is:



The relationship of half to whole steps stays the same. The pattern will be as follows, starting on the Fa and moving down: half, whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole. Chant rarely has a range that extends beyond this. If you get confused, just look at the piano keys and place the starting clef note at C and walk down the white keys to find the half steps and whole steps. If you play a musical instrument, you can think of the notes as they occur in a C scale.

These two clefs work as signals to help you find the melody. They can appear on almost any line, but they're not the tonic or centralizing pitch of the piece of music; they simply orient you to the relationship between the notes.

Why are there two clefs and not just one? Each indicates a different range in the scale where the chant is centered (and that gets us into modes, which we'll talk about in a moment). By carefully choosing a clef and a line on which it is placed, the entire line of notes can fit on the staff and be read easily.

Another helpful hint: Don't be distracted by terms C and F. We are better off thinking of them as Do and Fa. Unlike with modern notation, the singer enjoys complete freedom of choice when placing these notes within the comfort zone of his singing range. The clef sign indicates C or F, but the sound you make (or hear) can start anywhere that feels right, which is to say that chant can be transposed into any range.

It's fine to begin the discovery process by using the piano or some other instrument, but it's important to move away from the piano soon after. You can move the pitch up or down as much as needed to accommodate the voice. Any voice of any range can sing the chant if you choose the starting notes properly.

Most musicians ask: Where is the tonic—the resting note of the chant—in all of this? Well, it *isn't* dictated by the clef. Rather, it emerges as you get to know the chant. It is sometimes the starting note, more often it's the ending note. If you feel you must know the "note of repose" before you sing, the last note or the "final" is a good place to start.

Chant's Got Rhythm

In chant, there's a basic, constant pulse that underpins all melody, upon which the various melodies are then hung. You don't hear this pulse; you feel and sense it.

Let's begin with some examples. The chants below include the following rhythm figures.



The *punctum* gets a pulse for one syllable.



The *podatus* is two notes, each with one pulse. The lower note is sung first, and may be sung on one syllable or two.



The *clivis* is two notes on one syllable, each with a pulse, top note sung first.



The *torculus* is three notes on one syllable, each with a pulse.



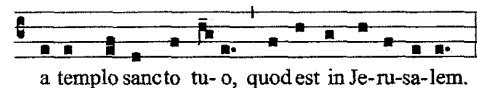
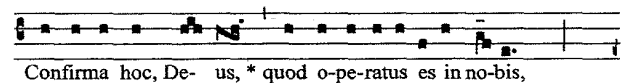
The *porrectus* is three notes on a syllable. It begins up, goes down, and goes up again, for a total of three pulses. It's written with that sliding look because the early transcribers didn't want to lift their quill pens to write the figure, and it later became a convention. But there's no slide in the sound. It is just three clean, legato notes, each of which is held for one beat.

Two additional rules: Notes with a dot are held two pulses, and notes with a line on top (the *episema*) are held a bit longer with a warming of the tone. You'll develop a feel for it before long.

Even though some of the neumes look unlike anything we see in modern notation, with seemingly complicated strokes and squiggles, remember that chant is always read from left to right, just like modern-day music.

Now you have all the tools you need to read:

Mode VIII



Which is:

C C C C CDC CBC
Con - fir - ma hoc De - us

C C C C C A C BA G
 Quod o - pe - rat - us es in no - bis,

G G GA F A CB G
 A temp - lo sanc - to tu - o,

A C B C A G G
 Quod est in Je - ru - sa - lem.

(Confirm, O God, what Thou hast wrought in us; from Thy temple, which is in Jerusalem.)

From time to time, you may see something that looks like a flat sign:



It is precisely what it looks like: a flat. It is the *only* "accidental" that you see in chant. It does exactly what it appears to do: lowers the *Ti* by one half step. The resulting note is called a *Te*. There is no other note to which you can apply it. The flat applies to the note for the whole word and as far as the next bar line. There is no such thing as a sharp in chant.

Here is the *Da Pacem*, written in the Fa clef:

Mode II

Da pa-cem Domi-ne in di-e-bus nostris: qui-a
 non est a-li-us qui pugnet pro no-bis, ni-si tu
 De-us no-ster.

(Give peace, O Lord, in our time: because there is no one else who will fight for us, if not You, our God.)

A few other rhythm rules:



The *quilisma* looks like a squiggle, and some scholars believe that it was sung in the past with a slight tremolo. But the standard practice today is to treat it as a sign to begin, lengthen the first note of the three, and then move through the next two with energy.

The final notation effect we need to know for our purposes

is the *liquescent neume*. You see a smaller note attached to a larger note, as is the case with this podatus:



The smaller note addresses the special treatment of the consonant on which it is sung.

Here is an example of a liquescent neume occurring in a familiar Sanctus:

Ho-sanna in excel-sis

The "n" in "hosanna" should occur exactly on the smaller note of the two notes in "san." The same goes for the "cel" in "excelsis": The instant you start to sing the smaller note, you should be on the "l" in "cel."

In the case of the "n" in "san," sing it as sonorously as possible, without allowing it to lose its tactile quality. Think of putting your tongue on the roof of your mouth and singing a clean and glorious "nnnnn."

The same goes for the "l" in "cel," although here you will be placing a different part of your tongue a little farther forward on the roof of your mouth. It pays to experiment a little until you develop the proper feel and sound. Use your best Latin pronunciation, and don't be afraid to make funny faces.

It is important to note that a podatus is not the only kind of liquescent neume. Be on the lookout for the small notes in different neumes you come across, and pay close attention to the consonant to which they are attached.

As for accented syllables, don't worry about those. The tiny marks that look like apostrophes throughout the Solesmes editions are the *icti* (or singular *ictus*). Those are just to help in the organization of rhythm.

Here is a familiar chant that you can now read with understanding:

Mode III

Pange lingua glo-ri-o-si Cor-po-ris myste-ri-um,
 Sanguisque pre-ti-o-si Quem in mundi pre-ti-um

Notice the tiny smudge that appears at the end of the first line. This is called a *custos* and is not sung. It is simply a singing aid to help you know what the note on the next line will be.

Style

Our modern notions of what music should sound like are the great enemy of chant. You have to throw out all stylings that you hear on the radio, or even in classical music. Forget vibrato, bar lines, and jazzy inflections; forget singing in a punctuated note-by-note manner, or holding long notes that build to dramatic cut offs.

Most of all, forget your own singing personality. The chant is sung as a prayer that is spoken privately—with self-surrender, deference, and humility—except for one difference: It uses music. If you can remember that, the rest will fall into place.

Think of yourself praying in private, but audibly. Perhaps it is the rosary. Now add notes and move them up and down. Your style is always legato. The chant is the same—always smooth and extended. If you break the legato, the chant will be ruined.

This is especially important when you have moving notes on one syllable. You have to concentrate on not adding extra sounds, like an “h” or a “w.” Never sing *vo-ho-biscum*; always *vo-biscum*. The Kyrie should not sound like *Kee-ree-ay-bey-bey-bey*, but rather one long vowel sound, such as in the following:

Mode I



The sound should swell up to the middle of phrases and fall toward the end of phrases. That creates the effects of waves within waves of sound.

The Many Modes of Chant

Modern music is written in major and minor scales. By medieval standards, that's pretty narrow, like a year that includes only summer and winter. Of course, you can add a few accidentals and deviate from the two types of scales, but the more you do, the messier it gets.

Chant has many more possibilities and moods, from grave to joyful and everything in between, built into the eight modes of Gregorian chant. The mode is marked

at the beginning of the chant in a Roman numeral. (An Arabic numeral indicates the century of composition.)

The Kyrie above, for example, is in Mode I. Each mode creates a certain musical coloring. You can discover the mood by going to the piano and playing just the white keys. Mode I starts on D and marches up the white keys to the next D. Mode II begins a fifth (i.e., four notes) above that, on A. You can remember the mode sequences by going up a fifth with each advance from Mode I to VIII: D, A, E, B, F, C, G, D. In our schola, we use a silly mnemonic device to remember this: Don't Always Eat Bacon For Calorie Gain, Darnit! But you can make up your own memory trick. Since chant can start on any pitch, you don't have to adhere to the piano, so long as you preserve the whole-step, half-step sequence.

Strictly speaking, you don't need to know the mode of the chant to sing it. But it does help to remember the sound and feel of each mode. You will get to know them in time.

Pronunciation

Why not sing the chant in English? The short answer: It's just not the same. Even in the most competent hands, the text cannot and will not work as well with the music. The delicate dance of music and text is missing. Also, the vernacular always introduces struggles over text, many of which can become political.

As long as you're going to the trouble of learning chant, why not embrace the real thing? It has the merit of authenticity and a full and compelling sound.

You can learn the basics of pronunciation quickly. The vowels:

- U = oo
- O = oh
- A = ah
- E = ay
- I = ee

The consonants are just as they are in English except:

- C = hard K, unless it is before e, ae, i, and y. Then it is the soft “ch”
- Y = ee
- TH = t
- GN = ny
- R = slightly rolled
- H = silent except in mihi and nihil. Then it is a K.

Knowing the meaning of what you are singing can only improve the chant. You begin to see the way the words are illustrated in the music. Rising pitches indicate Heaven, and a note struck three times can indicate the Trinity; descending notes can suggest sadness or peace or some other emotion.

Now You Can Chant

Want chants to start with? The chant hymns are a great starting place for practice. Try the *Pange Lingua*, the *Jesu Dulcis*, the *Adoro Te Devote*, *Ave Maria*, or any of the others that congregations used to sing regularly.

For parish use, start with the Mass settings: the Kyrie, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. The most familiar ones are the Missa de Angelis and Orbis Factor. But don't feel hemmed in by these settings. One advantage of "starting over," as it were, is that we don't have to feel stuck in certain paths. Explore the full range of settings of the Mass Ordinary.

The next step in liturgy is to attempt the *Communios*. You can expect to spend an hour or so on each, just to get the sense of them. They are the easiest part of the sung propers of the Mass, but they are still rather difficult for those starting out.

Your group or congregation will not sound like the Solesmes monks right away. Maybe you never will. No matter: You are making an effort in that direction. Even a little bit of chant done with attention to style is better than the alternative.

You will need some materials such as the *Liber Cantualis* and *Gregorian Missal* from Solesmes (available from most Catholic publishers). You should acquire the *Gregorian Chant Master Class* book from the Abbey of Regina Laudis, by Theodore Marier and edited by Scott Turkington.

Many other resources are available online, including from the St. Cecilia Schola Web site: www.ceciliaschola.org. From here you can download the *Jubilare Deo* issued by Pope Paul VI, a Kyriale for printing, many chants, and articles galore.

The Perfect Music

Singing chant requires an intellectual adjustment. Singers typically approach music with a critical eye, trying to determine if they like the piece or not. We naturally want music to impress us, and we dismiss it if it doesn't.

The chant is different: It is a perfect musical expression of perfect prayer. The challenge it presents to a

musician is part of its universal appeal. Thus you can approach the chant with the foreknowledge that it's beautiful, provides flawless integration between text and music, and offers aesthetic illumination unlike any music you'll ever encounter.

Spiritually, too, you can look forward to something completely unexpected: The chant will bring you peace of mind, heart, and spirit. Like the liturgy, and even like a sacrament, singing the chant will bring you grace. Like the Faith itself, chant requires that we trust and believe in its truth and beauty.

How valuable is the chant? Consider the words of Dom Gueranger, the founder of the Solesmes monastery:

Lo, who has not been startled a thousand times by the accents of this grave music, whose severe character, nevertheless, animates itself with the fires of passion and throws the soul, enlarged, into a religious reverie a thousand times more inebriating than the imposing voices of the great waters of which the Scriptures speak? Who has not tasted the charm of so many pieces sublime or original, stamped by the geniuses of the centuries past, who are no more and who have not left any other traces? Who has not shuddered at the simple planning of the Office of the Dead where the tender and the terrible are so admirably mixed? What Christian has ever been able to hear the Pascal chant of the *Haec Dies* without being tried with that vague sentiment of the infinite, as if Jehovah Himself was having His majestic voice heard? And who has not heard, during the solemnities of the Assumption of All Saints, an entire congregation making the sacred vaults of the roof resound with the inspired accents of the *Gaudeamus*, without his being brought back through the ages, to the epoch when the echoes of subterranean Rome resounded with this triumphant chant, when the Empire was painfully terminating its course, and the Church was starting its eternal destinies?

Can this be said about any other form of music? Think about that the next time you're singing "On Eagle's Wings." ■

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