

An Introduction to Plainsong for Choral Directors

This is a summary of a webinar from the 13th of May 2020 as part of Sing for Pleasure's KnowledgeHub series. I hope you find some of the contents helpful or interesting, whether you've worked with plainsong a bit in the past or are a complete newcomer. It's intended as an introduction to plainsong from the perspective of the choral director, so it's not exhaustive, but we cover some of the issues I found most important to learn about when I first started working with chant. There are further resources listed at the end if you'd like to do some more research. I used to find plainsong really boring until a couple of years ago, and since having to work with it regularly at the Cardiff Oratory, where I'm Director of Music, I've come to love its colours and beauty. I hope the same will be true for you!

What we'll cover:

- What is plainsong?
- Notation
- Some brief thoughts on style and interpretation
- Considerations for choral conductors

So what even is plainsong?

Plainsong (also known as plainchant or Gregorian chant) has a long history which stretches back to the very earliest years of the Christian church. It's thought to have arisen from improvised psalm singing, and the repertoire was codified somewhere between the 9th and the 12th centuries (if you like a good story, it was dictated to Pope Gregory the Great by the angels). The history of chant between that time and the 19th century is very interesting, but at the moment, we're most interested in the historical revival that happened in the late 19th and early 20th century, when scholars hoped to standardize practice. If you'd like to know more about the history of chant, there are some good options in the Further Reading/Listening section.

Notation

Chant notation works in much the same way as modern music notation: it's printed on lines, and the higher up the page the notes are, the higher the pitch, and vice versa. One major difference is that the Gregorian stave has four lines, rather than five.



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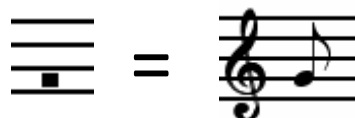


There are two clefs in chant notation, C (or Do) clef, and F (or Fa) clef. They tell you where those notes are, so that you can work out where the semitones are in a particular chant: like on a piano, the note below C is B, which is only a semitone away, and likewise the note below F is E, which is only a semitone away. The other intervals are whole tones.

The one on the left is a C clef,  and the one on the right is an F clef. 

Once you know where C or F is, you can work out all the other notes and the intervals between them. The important thing is to remember that the interval between the clef note and the note immediately below it will always be a semitone.

The notes or clusters of notes in chant are called *neumes*. This one is a *punctum*, one of the most common, and it basically equals a quaver.



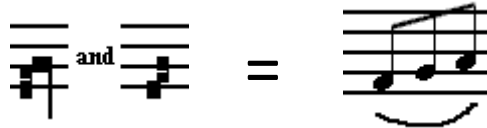
An easy way into working out chant notation is to treat the punctum as your basic unit of measurement. Other neumes can be thought of as lots of punctums strung together. This one, for example:



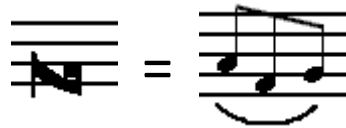
Sounds like this:



And likewise:

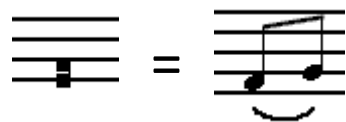


There are, of course, lots of other neumes, but we don't need to meet them yet. There are, however, a few others that it might be worth knowing about before we look at some actual chant.



This one is called a *porrectus* and looks scarier than it is. You just follow the movement of the pen!

The last one it would be useful to know is this one, because it illustrates a helpful principle. When two notes are stacked on top of one another, you sing the bottom one first.



There are a few final bits of notation to look at before we get to some full pieces of chant:



Dots or horizontal lines indicate lengthening.



For the moment, ignore any vertical lines. They can indicate lengthening in certain contexts, or units of rhythmic measurement.



This is a B-flat, the only accidental in chant.



This is a *custos*, or guide-note. It tells you the next pitch after the end of a line.

Some golden rules of chant notation:

1. Use the clef (C or F) to find out where the semi-tone is in a particular piece of chant.
2. Think of punctums as your basic unit of measurement. Most other neumes are just punctums dressed up fancy.
3. If there are notes stacked on top of one another, you sing the bottom one first.
4. If you see dots or horizontal lines, lengthen those notes.

These golden rules aren't exhaustive, but they're helpful principles to follow when you're first getting acquainted with chant notation. You'll be able to tell what the pitches are and follow some rough rhythmic principles too.



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Ant.
1.



S Al-ve, * Re-gí- na, máter mi-se-ricórdi- ae :
 Ví- ta, dulcé- do, et spes nóstra, sál-ve. Ad te
 clamá-mus, éxsu-les, fí-li- i Hévae. Ad te suspi-rá-
 mus, geméntes et flén-tes in hac lacrimá-rum välle.
 E- ia ergo, Advocá- ta nóstra, íllos tú- os mi-se-ri-
 córdes ócu-los ad nos convér-te. Et Jésum, benedí-
 ctum frúctum véntris tú- i, nó-bis post hoc exsí-li- um
 os-ténde. O clé-mens : O pí- a : O dúlcis
 * Vírgo Ma-rí- a.

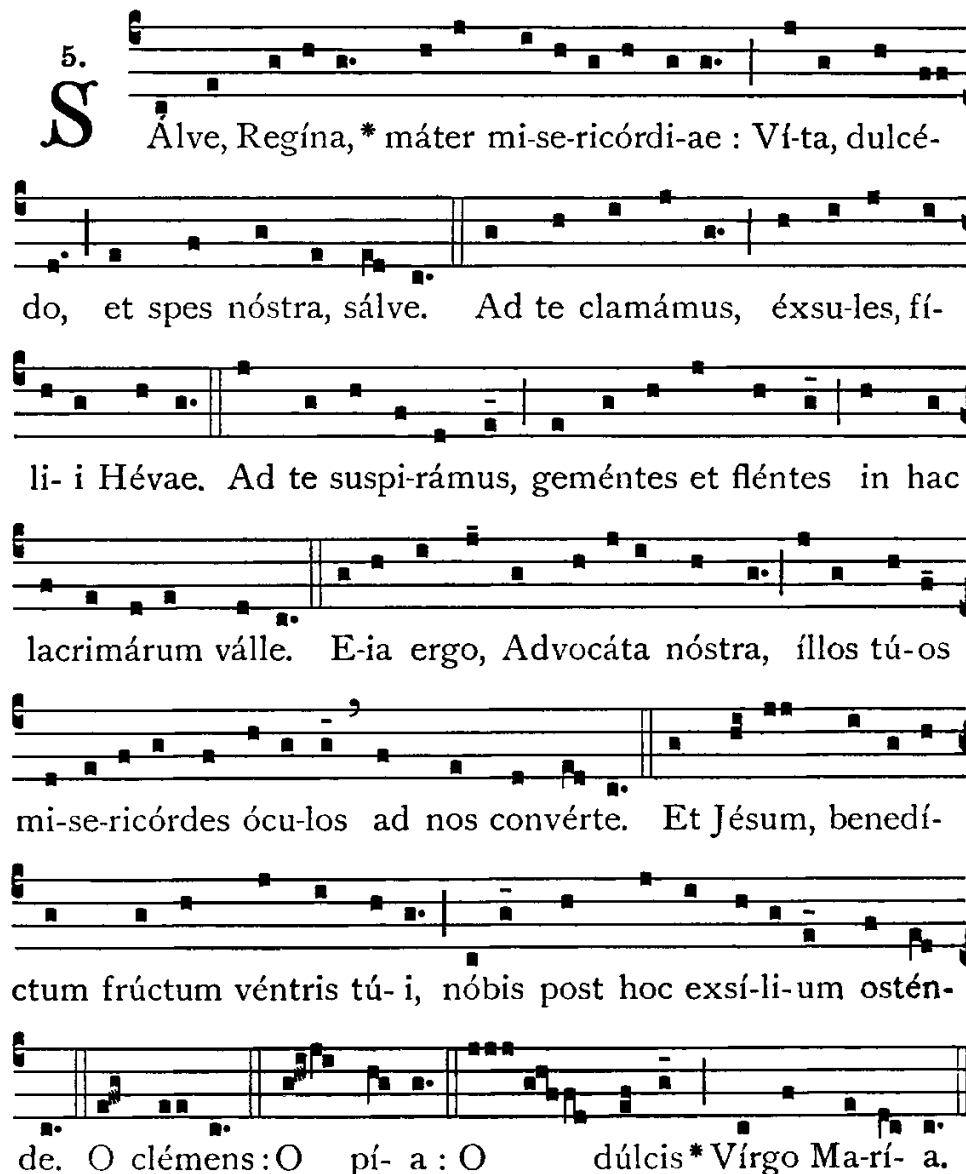
Let's have a look at the beginning of this piece of chant. The clef tells you where C is, so we can work out the first note by counting down from there. C is on the line, B is in the gap below, so our first note is A. The second is G, then D. The next phrase returns to A, then G, F, E, F, G, F, E and D. The last two notes are lengthened. As you can see, the second phrase, 'Regina,' though comprised of different neumes, can be read as a series of punctums joined together.

One final thing to note is barlines: very simply, the more ink they use, the longer the pause/breath they indicate. So the quarter-barline after 'Salve' is shorter than the one after 'Regina' and the double-barline after 'misericordiae' is longer again.

(There are other features you can note here, like horizontal lines and dots and a B-flat towards the end. You could have a listen to it through this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0OIDAc-zFkY>)

Here's another chant setting of the same 'Salve Regina' text.

5.
S Alve, Regína, * máter mi-se-ricórdi-ae : Ví-ta, dulcé-
do, et spes nóstra, sálve. Ad te clamámus, éxsu-les, fí-
li- i Hévae. Ad te suspi-rámus, geméntes et fléntes in hac
lacrimárum välle. E-ia ergo, Advocáta nóstra, íllos tú-os
mi-se-ricórdes ócu-los ad nos convérte. Et Jésum, benedí-
ctum frúctum véntris tú- i, nóbis post hoc exsí-li-um ostén-
de. O clémens: O pí- a : O dúlcis * Vírgo Ma-rí- a.



There are a few different ways you can get involved with this:

1. Label each note with its note name (A, B, C and so on). In this case, the clef denotes C, and the first note is also C.
2. If you have a piano handy, once you've labelled the note names, play it through on the piano. Take care of the semitone from C to B natural.
3. You could listen to it on the Squarenote app and follow along (it should be available in the Apple and Android app stores).
4. You could listen to it on Squarenote and *sing* along.
5. Or you could have a go working it out and singing it yourself, checking against a piano or the app.

In case you have any difficulty finding the app, here's a Youtube recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAmydVsNMqM>

Some brief thoughts on style and interpretation

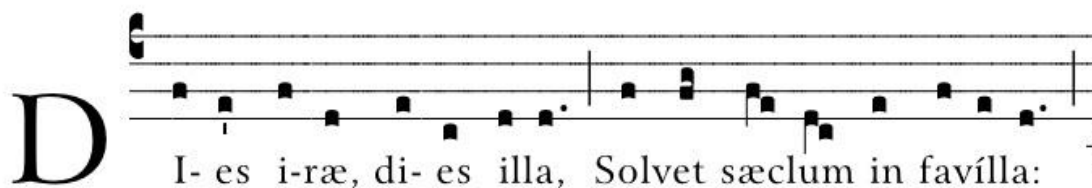
Gregorian chant can feel a bit obtuse to make musical sense of, but here are a few thoughts that might help expand your toolkit when dealing with it.

Thinking about text

As I mentioned earlier, chant's origins are much longer ago than much of the music we tend to work with as choral conductors, so the relationship between the text and the music might not quite be what we expect. It might not be obvious, or might have several different layers working at once. There are instances of very obvious symbolism, such as rising pitch on the words 'surgere' (meaning 'arise') or 'gaudeamus' (meaning 'let us rejoice'), or we may draw more obtuse meanings. Some have argued that 'Dominus dixit,' a piece of chant for Christmas Midnight Mass, contains a very interesting instance of this, where the words 'Dominus' (meaning 'Lord') and 'Ego' (meaning 'I') are set to the same music because God is narrating this particular bit of text in the Bible. Be creative in how you respond to the text!

Gregorian phrase arches

It can be helpful to think of phrasing chant in arches, where each phrase starts slower than the basic pulse, accelerates into a broad peak, then slows down again at the end.



We can think of ‘Dies’ as one little phrase, followed by ‘irae,’ another. Those two phrases together make a slightly longer phrase, and then the whole first bar could be thought of as one longer phrase comprising two middling and four short phrases. You can apply this principle to any section of chant. It really helps singers (and conductors) make sense of what’s going on.

Particular considerations for choral directors

Chant presents us as choral conductors with particular challenges. These thoughts aren’t exhaustive, they’re just a couple of things that have occurred to me in the time I’ve been working with chant.

Chant needs as much rehearsal as music in parts

It’s easy to underestimate chant (especially when it’s written in modern notation), since the intervals are usually pretty straightforward, and everyone’s in unison. Don’t be fooled! It takes practice to achieve the ebb and flow that is (I think) the hallmark of good chant singing, and the more exposed the musical texture, the more obvious any blemishes become. Be sure to set the time aside to rehearse chant thoroughly.

Men don’t have a monopoly on chant

I’m sure the archetype many of us have of chant in our heads is of monks or priests all singing it together: i.e. all men, but beyond the particular traditions of some churches, there’s no reason to confine chant singing to men. At the Cardiff Oratory, we share the chant between all the singers, half of whom are women and half men. Obviously this is, on the one hand, simply an issue of fairness – I’m sure there would be firm grounds to challenge the strictly single-sex stereotype many of us hold on to in any case – but moving beyond the idea that only men can chant also opens up the expressive and creative possibilities of chant. To that end:

Remember that there are as many different interpretations and approaches as there are conductors/singers

We will all have slightly different ways of approaching particular bits of music, whether chant or in parts. Chant singing may fall into certain schools and styles, but in our own performance what is important is that we make our creative decisions with integrity. With such an arcane tradition as chant the worry (at least a worry that I have) is of being told that one is doing something ‘wrongly,’ but remember, there is, withing reason, no wrong! A justifiable creative response to chant is just as valid as any other. A number of recent performances and recordings of chant have done really colourful and artistic things, particularly with the music of Hildegard von Bingen, involving instruments, drones, harmonisations and reharmonisations and so on. The possibilities are endless.

If you’re in any doubt, you may ask yourself: **does my decision pass the STF Test?**

Sarah Tenant-Flowers (a fellow SfP tutor, and my teacher at College) would press us on our creative decisions.

If we could come up with a convincing answer to why we were thinking of something in a particular way (even if it were ‘this is a sad moment and I think *legato* here is a sadder articulation than not’) then she would say okay, and help us achieve that in the best way. A good question to ask ourselves at all times is ‘why do I think this should go like this?’ If you can give yourself a convincing answer, then go for it!

But how might I actually conduct chant? (How do I make it go?)

Again, the thoughts below aren’t exhaustive, and only loosely constitute a systematic method (moving from conducting to help a choir sight-read to some a bit more artsy).

1. **Be rhythmic!** In the first instance conducting chant, be rhythmic, but be careful that you know the pulses well, since chant doesn’t have a set meter. Strong rhythmic leadership can really help your singers sight-read and get to know a particular piece of chant. You might find it helpful to organise chant into beat patterns.
2. **Pitch pattern!** Don’t be afraid to pitch pattern if the rhythms become a bit delicate to beat out. The small rhythmic inflections of a *quillisma*, for example, can be more easily achieved with pitch patterning than beating.
3. **Phrase!** When your singers are confident with the pitches and rhythm, help them by leading them through the ebb and flow of the phrasing.
4. **Keep things moving!** Unsupervised chant will *always* (in my experience) slow down. Encourage your singers not to ponder every single note, but to sing in arcs and sentences.
5. **Conduct!** It’s a truism that music (particular chant) is ‘always better uncondacted’: unless your choir are experienced chant singers, this may not be the case. It took us a good few years for us to get really comfy with it at the Oratory. Don’t be afraid to get your hands dirty to give your singers confidence and to achieve a better performance!

Further reading/listening

Below is a list of good sources for further reading or listening. Chant is a huge and fascinating tradition, full of musical and historical colour. Dip a toe into the water and you may find yourself splashing around in the Gregorian sea in no time.

<https://www.ccwatershed.org/gregorian/> - a very thorough guide to recent history and practice, though it does sometimes have strong opinions on the ‘right’ way to do things.

<http://gregorian-chant-hymns.com/>

Textbook of Gregorian Chant According to the Solesmes Method, Sunol, Dom G., and Durnford, G. M. Kessinger Publishing.



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Gregorian Chant: A Guide to the History and Liturgy, Saulnier, Dom D., transl. Berry, M. Paraclete Press.

The Song of Prayer: A Practical Guide to Learning Gregorian Chant, The Community of Jesus, Paraclete Press.

The 'Squarenote' app is a free and very helpful resource, including many 'major' chants. It has a great little feature that plays you the pitches, so no more guesswork!

Some examples of the 'cathedral' style:

Westminster Cathedral Choir: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zz6ahWHf2yU>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_N6am_IRDW8

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkL4dMUkKXY&t=32s> (from Papal Mass with Pope Benedict XVI)

And the 'monastic' style:

Abbaye de Fontgombault:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdGZxit7Eis> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGZvxl2muw>

And a final curve-ball, to encourage you to think creatively about how to perform chant:

Ensemble Organum, dir. Marcel Peres

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmkhk9Z8Lu4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGZJ8XQJcmk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IgEV42RKf6E>

Tomos Watkins May 2020