

1.0 CUSTOMARY FOR PLAINCHANT

(according to the use of The Order of Julian of Norwich)

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Those who have no experience in singing plainchant (or "Gregorian chant," or "plainsong" as it is sometimes called) will find the mechanics of plainchant notation pleasantly simple and easy to master. However, in no way should the simplicity of the following comments lead beginning chanters to think that plainchant is not the subtle, complex, and absorbing study that scholars find it. Rather, these few observations are the minimum that will allow beginners to sing somewhat accurately.

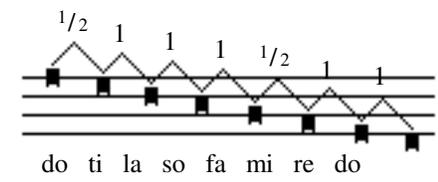
1.2. NOTATION

1.2.1. The different appearance of the plainchant page from a page of modern music may cause beginners to feel apprehensive, but there are several advantages to this ancient music script which they should find encouraging.

1.2.2. The range between the highest and lowest note of a Psalm tone is so narrow that the notes can be fitted onto a four-line staff instead of requiring the modern five-line staff.

1.2.3. The notes on the staff do not represent absolute pitch: the pitch of the plainchant tone is "relative" — that is, the notes of the Psalm tone need not start on one particular line or space of the staff, and, therefore, singers can choose any comfortable pitch to start on which is appropriate for the range of the melody.

1.2.4. Only one scale is used, with an invariable sequence of whole tone and half-tone intervals. The illustration shows the basic sequence.



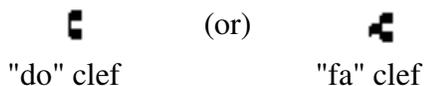
Since the notes on the staff do not reflect pitch, the traditional names "do-re-me-fa-so-la-ti-do" are used here rather than C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. However, any one chant may use only a portion of this sequence of intervals to create a special scale or mode (e.g., from mi to mi, rather than from do to do). Such modes create the distinctive sound of plainchant.

1.2.5. There are no "key signatures" as in modern musical notation. However, singers will note that in some tones the "ti" is flatted by means of the familiar flat sign. This flatting of "ti" is the only accidental allowed in plainchant.

1.2.6. Nor are there any time signatures — as is pointed out below, the words of the Psalms supply the rhythm and beat for plainchant.

1.3. CLEF SIGN

1.3.1. Singers do have one important task: the first thing they must discover in order to sing the tones correctly is the location of the halftone intervals in the melody. This crucial information is provided by the location of the clef sign at

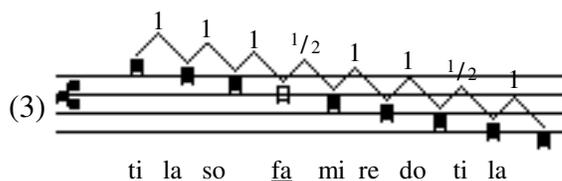
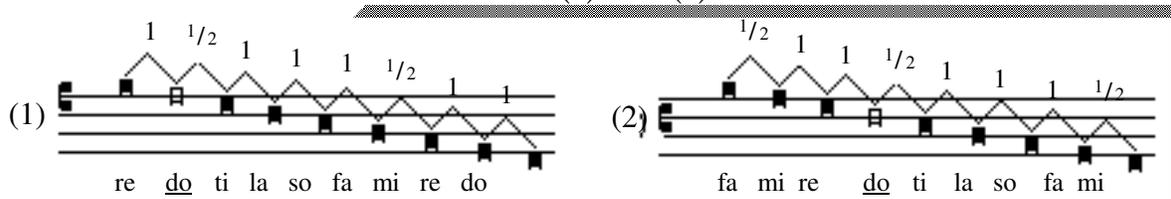


the beginning of the staff:

The "arms" of the clef enclose the line on which "do" or "fa" is written, thus indicating the "do-ti" or "fa-mi" halftone interval; the other halftone interval is then easily located. Since there is no fixed pitch, the clef sign may fall on different lines of the staff as is most convenient for the range of the melody. Therefore, the position of the halftones, as written on the staff, will vary according to the placement of the clef.

Only three clef positions are used in these Masses:

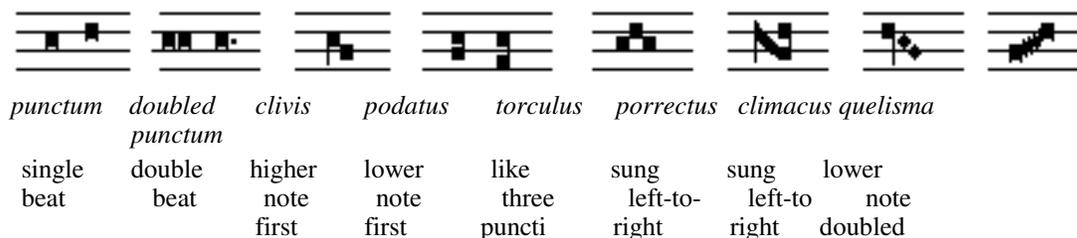
— Two of the clefs enclose the "do" line (1) and (2):



— The other clef encloses the "fa" line" (3)

1.4. NOTES.

1.4.1. As for the forms of the notes, the simple *punctum* is used most of the time, and other note groups are called neums:



2.0 GUIDELINES FOR CHANTING

2.1. CHARACTER

Plainchant is what its name implies. All words are chanted plainly, carefully, distinctly, and flowingly at the pace of normal, slow conversation. A mechanical and false equality of notes is not to be sought, but plainchant should have an evenness to it, without significant rushing of the light or unaccented syllables, nor lengthening of the heavy or accented syllables. Unlike more familiar musical styles and settings, the pace and rhythm of plainchant is determined and guided by the sense and normal emphases of the words, rather than the words being subjected to the music.

3.0 STYLE IN CHANTING

3.1. SCHOOLS

It is noted that there are at least two schools of thought about the rules of plainchant — one of which tends to encourage a flowing and "natural" character, and the other a more strictly regimented approach. The rules and recommendations here tend to follow the former, and represent the practice and standards used by the Order of Julian of Norwich.

3.2. TEXT AND SILENCE

Singers who are familiar with a more popular "romantic" music will have a tendency to slow down and drag the text, while hurrying and abbreviating the silences. The meditative and transcending character of plainchant is completely lost if this happens.

[Editor's Note on Silence: In personal correspondence with me, Fr. John-Julian discussed the pause at the Asterisk in the Psalter:

"Our antiphonal singing is very important - and we keep a full THREE second pause at the asterisk - rather longer than most. (NB: Silently saying 'Lord Jesus' takes just one second - we time our breaks by saying it silently thrice.) and then the alternate side tries to "shingle" just a tiny bit - so there is absolutely no silence between verses. ...One other spiritual dimension to our "asterisk breaks" at the monastery - it is incredibly transforming in the mind to keep inserting "Lord Jesus" in the midst of the Psalms. Sudden insights galore..... E.G.: Ps. 89: "Your love, O Lord, for ever will I sing (Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus, Lord Jesus) from age to age my mouth will proclaim your faithfulness."]

3.3. NO PUNCTUATION

When chanting, all literary punctuation is ignored (unless a Flex or Asterisk occurs).

3.4. LOUDNESS

Plainchant is most effective if it is sung at half-voice rather than “bellowed”. Ideally, it is always done *a capella*. A very faint, barely-audible organ accompaniment or a very restrained occasional use of a hand-bell may be permitted to avoid flatting.

3.5. QUALITY

Chant is to be light, delicate, thin, floating, sere, gentle, subtle, fragile, dry, and exquisite. The voice should be thin and high, sung up in the mouth and head, rather than in the throat and chest. There should be absolutely no tremolo or vibrato. Plainchant should be sung quietly—at just about half-voice. Noticeable *coloratura* is especially to be avoided.

3.6. BLENDING

In plainchant, the ultimate goal is for the individual voice completely to disappear, and for the choir to sound like a single voice. Great care must be taken to blend the voice subtly and carefully with the others. (A good rule of thumb is to listen to the person beside you; if you cannot hear that person's voice, you are singing too loudly.)

3.7. COMMON ERRORS

1. Starting to sing below the note and "scooping" the voice up to it.
2. Adding notes between the written notes so as to slide between notes in legato instead of singing each note distinctly.
3. There is a peculiar and widespread tendency among those who chant the Psalms regularly to use the glottis as a "starting gun" and to begin a nasal "...ng" sound before one sounds the first note in a line — especially if the first word begins with a vowel (particularly an "I").
4. If the choir is mixed, a deep bass will sometimes be tempted to take a note two octaves below the treble chant note, and that must be eschewed completely. Plainchant sound is much truer if a mixed choir is divided antiphonally between male and female voices rather than mixing the voices.
5. The meaning of the words in plainchant must be completely overlooked in singing them. There must be no interpretive emphases other than what the music itself provides, no emotive treatment of any words, no "feeling" or "interpretation" should ever be heard.

4.1. RECOGNITION AND CREDIT

The extensive popularization of plainchant in the Anglican tradition in America can be virtually laid at the feet of one man: The Reverend Canon Winfred Douglas. In the 1930's, it was his trail-breaking work of translation, editing, and interpreting which was the basis for most of the serious work done with plainchant in the Episcopal Church until the late 1970's. This present work reflects the fruits of his labor, and the settings will be familiar to those who have known and loved the plainchant tradition for the past fifty years. We offer our work in deep appreciation of his life and labor, and pray for the gentle repose of his great soul in the heavenly kingdom whose halls must certainly ring with the music to which he dedicated his life.

"The above rules have been drawn from the holy Fathers,
some of whom learnt this way of singing from the Angels,
while others received it from the teaching of the Holy Spirit
speaking to their hearts in contemplation.
If we set ourselves to practice these principles with diligence,
we too shall appreciate the subtle charm of the Chant,
singing to God in our heart and spirit and mind."
(Liber Usualis, Page xiv)