

# A Beginner's Guide to Reading Gregorian Chant Notation

Noel Jones

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To my aunt  
Mary Jones,  
who has always  
encouraged me.



The *Musica Sacra* website at [www.musicasacra.com](http://www.musicasacra.com) has a long list of chant book resources that may be downloaded on the internet. They also are publishing and reprinting books on the subject. Their “An Idiot’s Guide to Square Notes” by Arlene Oost-Zinner and Jeffrey Tucker is not to be missed.

This short book is an effort to quickly outline and explain the simple system of writing and reading chant. Prior to organization of the writing of chant into this form there were squiggled signs above words that were the first attempts to preserve the oral tradition of sung chant.

We hope that this book serves to answer questions, give you confidence and encourages you to study further the music of the Church.

The next two pages are an overview. You may skip them and go straight on learning to read basic chant on page 4.

## A Brief Overview of Chant Notation

- The foundation of modern written music notation
- Easier to read than modern notation
- Takes less space on the page than modern notation.
- Chant is made up of small groupings of organized notes
- Each group has a different and consistent purpose
- Music staff covers just the range of the human voice
- There are only four lines in the staff
- Notes are always directly above the vowel that is sung
- There are only two clef signs
- There is only one sign, a flat, that alters the pitch of a note
- All chant may be written with the same note, a neume
- Neume groupings organize notes over their word syllables

## Sample

1. An Alleluia written using the basic chant neume, a simple note for each pitch.

Al-le - - - - - lu - - - - - ia - - - - -

2. This Alleluia using chant neumes that clearly show the grouping of pitches above the syllable being sung, as well as interpretation...

Alle- lu- ia

3 The same Alleluia using in modern notation. Note the amount of space this takes, a major issue when writing on expensive vellum in medieval times. Chant notation is compact and to the point.

Al - le lu ia.

# Neumes - Notes



Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

One Pulse

One Syllable

[one part of a word]

Name: Punctum



Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

The punctum is the only note needed to write out any chant.

As we study we will find that the additional neumes and neume groupings that we are learning either:

1. Serve to tie a group of neumes together over one syllable
2. Indicate how to sing the neume

6

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Length



Lord

A-men

Ho-san-na

Two Pulses

Two Syllables



Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

A space between *nuemes* over one word tells us that each one is sung to a different syllable of the word.

8

---

Length



Lord  
A-me  
Ho-san-na

Two Pulses

One Syllable



Lord





A - men



Ho - san - na

Two neumes almost touching lengthen the amount of time the syllable below is sung by the number of neumes above.

Chant notes are sung to an equal pulse, so distinctions we make in modern music notation of whole notes, half notes, eighth notes, sixteenth notes and their equivalent rests are not needed. In modern music the neume would be a  note, two neumes close together a  note.

# Length



Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Three Pulses

One Syllable

■ ■ ■

Lord

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

A - men

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

Ho - san - na

This indicates the vowel is sung on one pitch for three pulses in what would be a dotted half-note  $\text{d.}$  in modern notation.

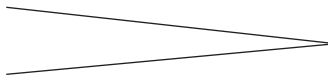
## Decorations



Lord  
 A-men  
 Ho-san-na

Two Pulses  
 One Syllable

Also, at the end of a chant designates:



and is then called a Punctum Mora



Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

The dot indicates that this neume is interpreted in a special manner. This is the first “interpretation” chant sign we study. They may be called decorations.

This tells us to lengthen the neume to two pulses.

However, at the end of a chant this dot also means to soften the singing of the neume

# Pitch

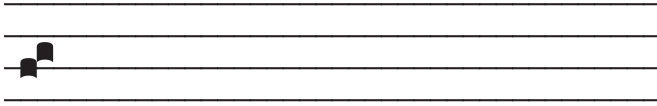


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

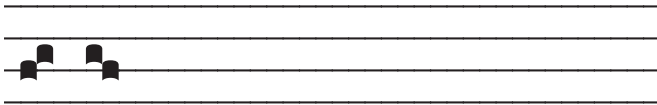
Two Pulses

One Syllable

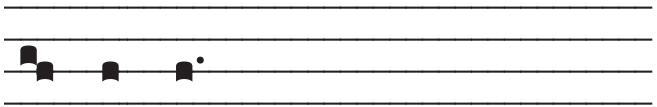




Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

Two notes touching are both sung to the same syllable.

They are always sung in order from left to right.

## Pitch



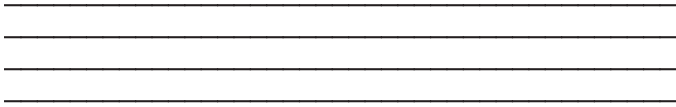
Lord

A-men

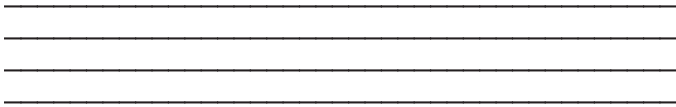
Ho-san-na

Three Pulses

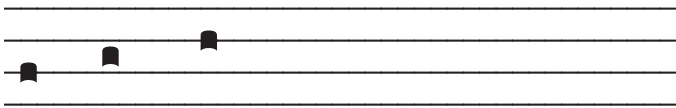
Three Syllables



Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

Three notes not touching are sung in the direction they are arranged...rising or falling in pitch.

## Pitch

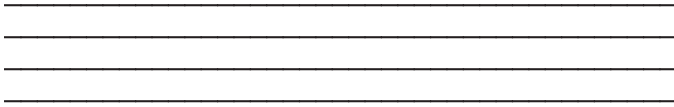


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

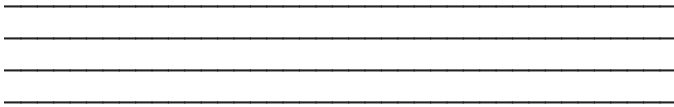
No Pulses

No Syllables

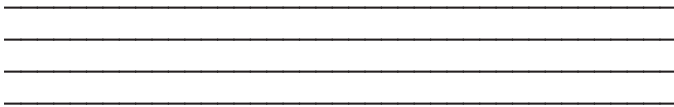
Name: Staff



Lord



A - men

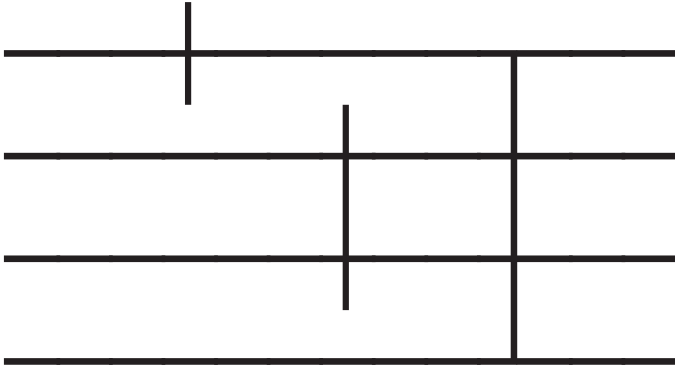


Ho - san - na

Each note is placed on a Staff. The Staff covers the natural range of the human voice, 9 pitches up and down. Notes may be placed on the spaces between lines and on the lines.

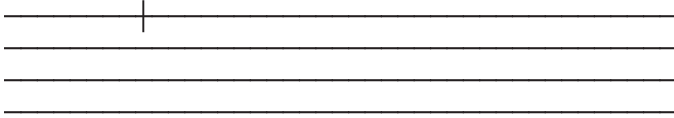
Occasionally an extra short line may be drawn in above or below the staff for permit the writing of a chant that goes beyond the usual range of the voice.

Pauses

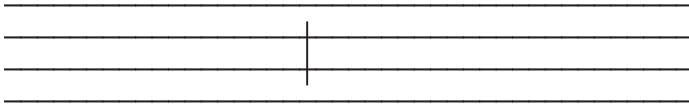


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

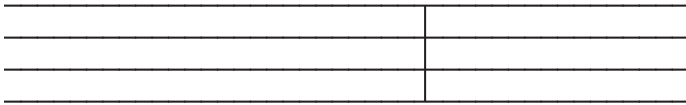
Quarter Line, No Break  
Half and Full Line May Permit Breath



Lord



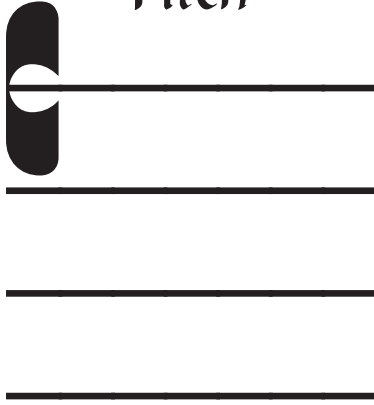
A - men



Ho - san - na

The pauses serve to break up the long lines of chant to make them easier to read and understand. The simple one cutting across one line has that purpose alone. The next two cutting through two lines or all four may also indicate that this is a place where a breath may be taken.

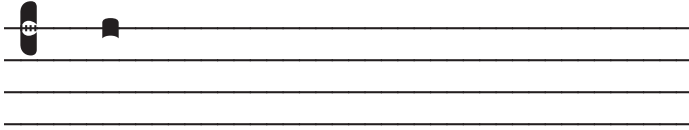
Pitch



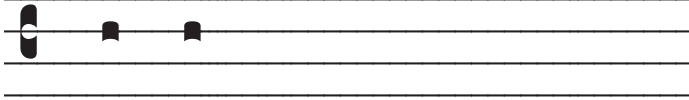
Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Name: DO Clef

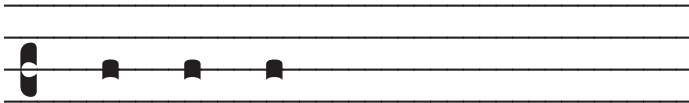




Lord



A - men



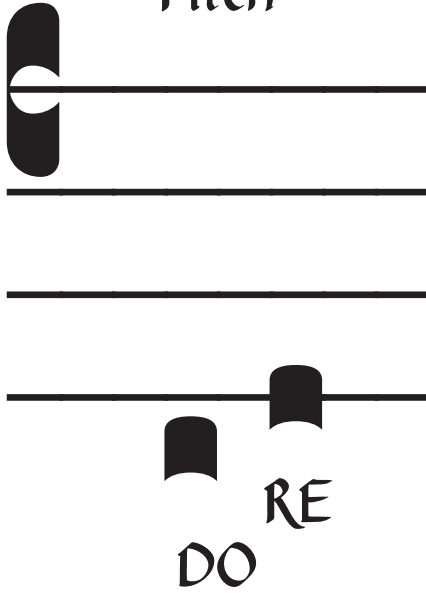
Ho - san - na

The DO may appear on just these three lines.

All the neumes above are the same pitch, DO.

This makes it possible to keep the notes of the melody centered on the four lines and three spaces of the staff.

Pitch



Lord

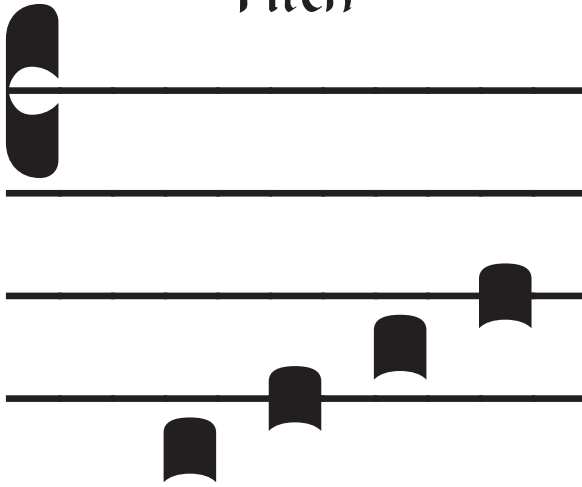
A - men

Ho san na

The image shows three musical staves. Each staff has a four-line structure. The first staff begins with a C-clef on the first line. The second staff has a C-clef on the first line. The third staff has a C-clef on the first line. The notes are represented by small black squares with stems. The first staff has one note on the first line. The second staff has two notes: one on the first line and one on the second line. The third staff has three notes: one on the first line, one on the second line, and one on the third line.

The first two intervals are DO and RE.

Pitch



DO

RE

MI

FA

Lord

A - men

Ho san na

This is half of an octave stretching from DO to DO.. These neumes are evenly spaced in pitch until you reach the fourth. FA is half the pitch difference that you hear between DO, RE and MI.

This interval, the Perfect Fourth, is the building block of the octave.

Sing DO RE MI and then feel the urge to end on FA. MI “leads” you to FA. It’s called a Leading Tone.

Pitch

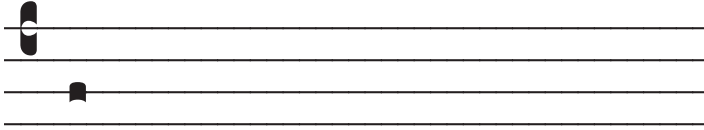


FA

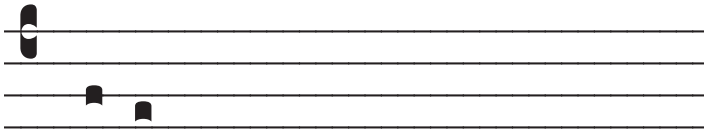
MI

RE

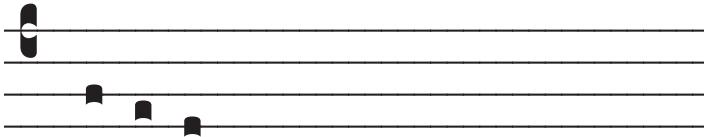
DO



Lord



A - men



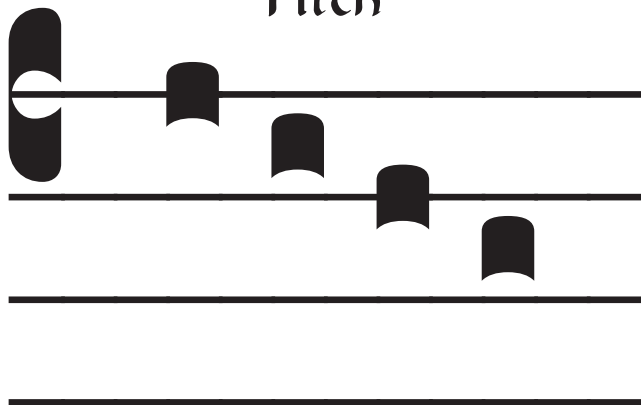
Ho san na

Singing down the scale of notes the effect of the FA - MI half-step is not as pronounced to the ear.

Composers of chant write whole-steps and half-steps in 8 different patterns called modes.

- Modern music uses only two modes commonly - that we call Major and Minor. Heavy emphasis on the TI DO is common, rarely do sections of pieces and endings ever not follow the TI DO pattern.

Pitch



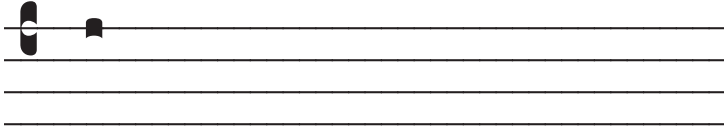
DO

TJ

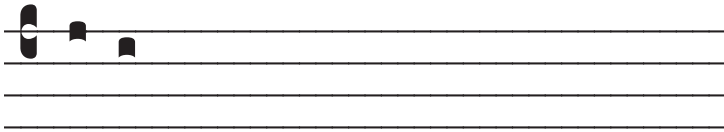
LA

SO

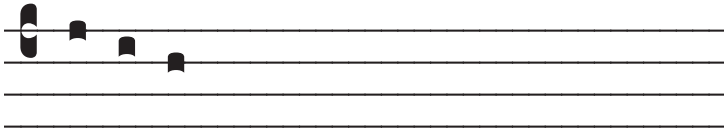




Lord



A - men

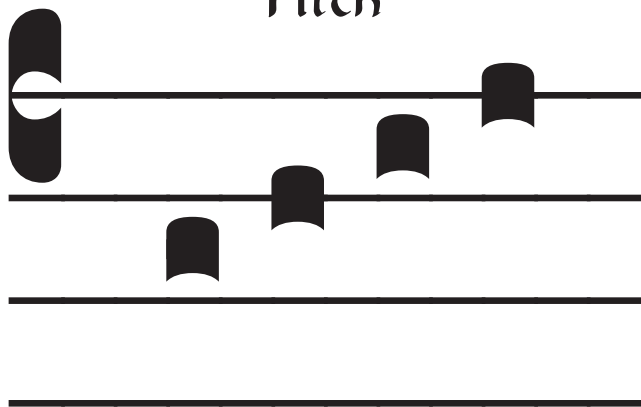


Ho san na

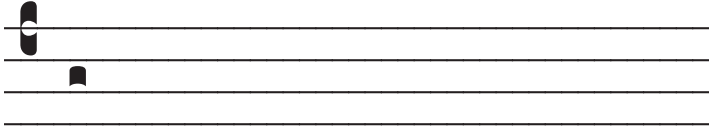
The second half of the octave is the second interval of four pitches that are stacked on top of the first set, to make an 8 note scale.

The Leading Tone here is T]. It's effect is not as pronounced here either as this is a descending scale.

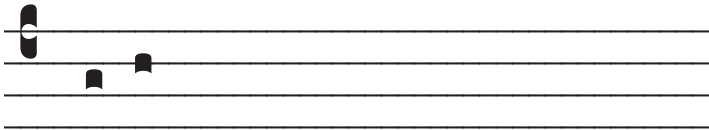
Pitch



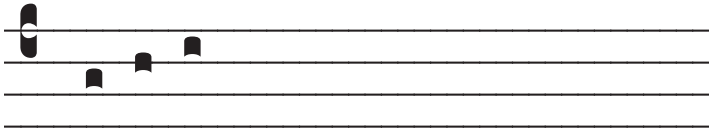
SO LA TJ DO



Lord



A - men



Ho san na

Here you will feel the pull from T) to resolve up to DO.

Pitch



DO

Lord

A - men

Ho san na

Count down eighth positions (lines and spaces) of the staff from the DO Clef to find another DO an octave (8 notes) lower.

Pitch



DO

TJ

LA

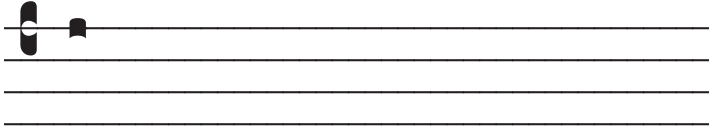
SO

FA

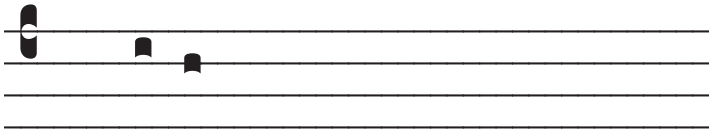
MJ

RE

DO



Lord



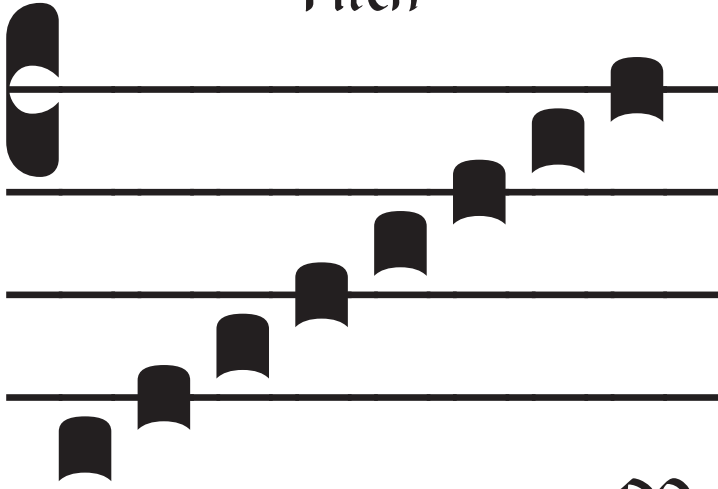
A - men



Ho san na

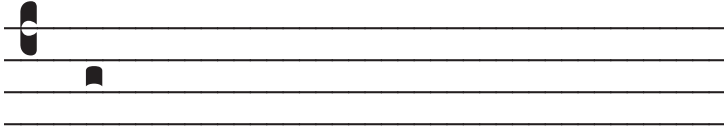
A full octave of pitches descending.

Pitch

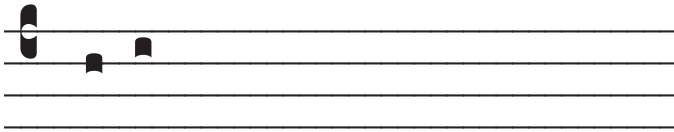


DO  
RE  
MI  
FA  
SO  
LA  
TI  
DO

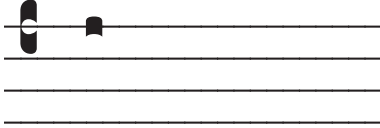




Lord



A - men



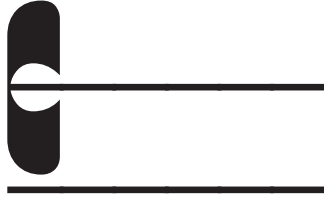
Ho san na

There are 8 Modes...that are used when writing chant melodies. Instead of ending on DO as many modern melodies do, chant melodies may begin and end on any note of the scale.

Some think this gives chant its “floating” character, as it is not bound to the modern major/minor tonality.

Music written from the time of Bach on all tends to only be in only two of the modes, what moderns call the Major and Minor.

Pitch



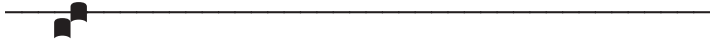
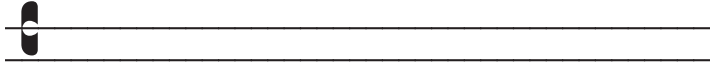
Lord

A-men

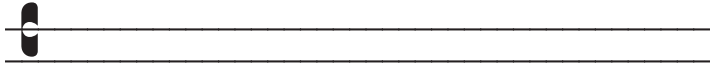
Ho-san-na

Two Pulses

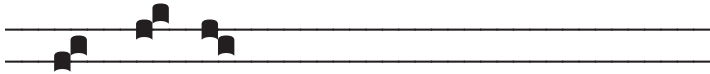
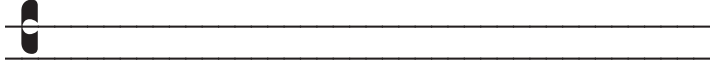
One Syllable



Lord



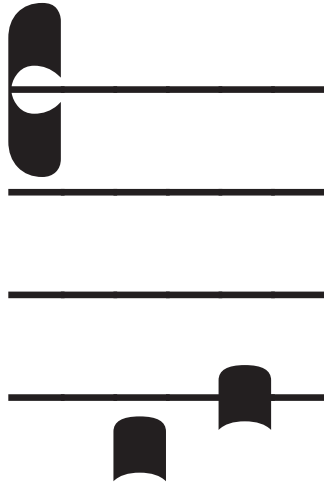
A - men



Ho - san - na

We review...two neumes sung on one syllable.

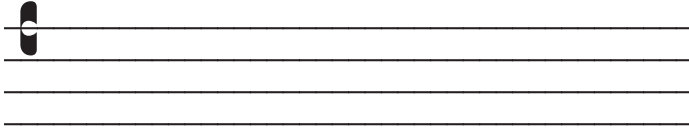
Pitch



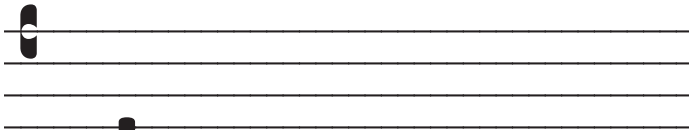
Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Two Pulses

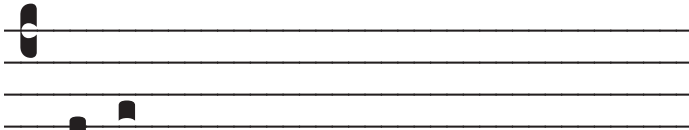
Two Syllables



Lord



A - men



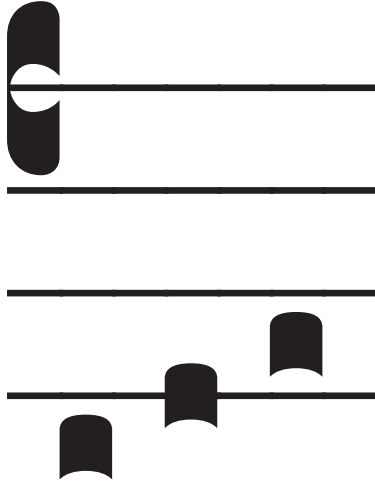
Ho san na

We review...one neume sung per one syllable.

The pulses that are the sung notes remain constant like the ticking of a clock.

In some editions space between neumes has a meaning. For more information about this, research *Morea Vocis*.

Pitch



Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Three Pulses

Three Syllables



Lord



A - men



Ho san na

Pitch



Lord

A-men

Ho-san-na

Three Pulses

One Syllable

Name: Torculus

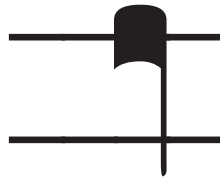
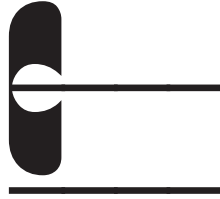


The image shows three musical staves, each with a single neume on the top line and a corresponding syllable below it. The first staff has a vertical neume with a white dot in the center, labeled 'Lord'. The second staff has a neume consisting of three square notes: the first is on the top line, the second is on the second line, and the third is on the second line with a white dot below it, labeled 'A - men'. The third staff has a neume consisting of seven square notes: the first is on the top line, the second is on the second line, the third is on the second line, the fourth is on the top line, the fifth is on the second line, the sixth is on the second line, and the seventh is on the second line with a white dot below it, labeled 'Ho - san - na'.

The Torculus is one of the common neume arrangements that you will find. When you see it, glance down, read the syllable, and then look up and sing the three neumes above it.

These neume combinations are like common road signs that trigger a response in the brain.

Pitch

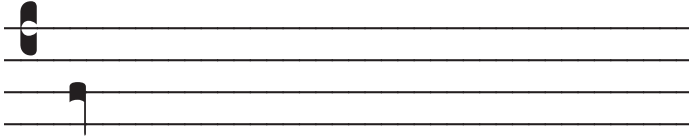


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

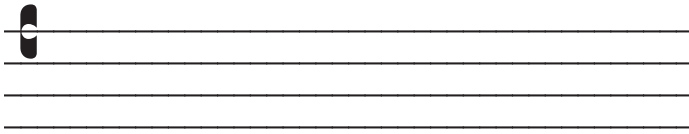
One Pulse

One Syllable

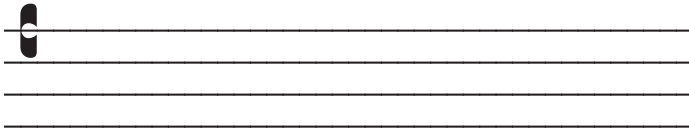
Name: Virga



Lord



A - men



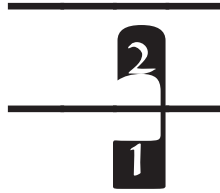
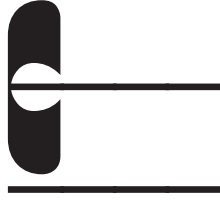
Ho - san - na

Note how the line on the Virga leads your eye.

It tells us the next neume we sing will be lower in pitch than this one.

50

Pitch



Lord

A-men

Ho-san-na

Two Pulses

One Syllable

Name: Podatus

Lord

A - men

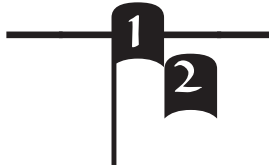
Ho - san - na

A line connects the two notes in this note configuration called *Podatus* or *foot*.

The lower note is sung first followed by the upper.

So our brain will understand we sing the same syllable on two notes, one lower and the next higher every time we see a *Podatus*. *Podatus* is “foot” in Latin.

Pitch



Lord

A-men

Ho-san-na

Two Pulses

One Syllable

Name: Clivis

The image shows three musical staves, each with a vertical line (Clivis) at the beginning. The first staff has a Clivis on the top line, followed by a note on the second line. The second staff has a Clivis on the top line, followed by a note on the second line, then a note on the third line, and finally a note on the second line. The third staff has a Clivis on the top line, followed by a note on the second line, then a note on the third line, and finally a note on the second line.

Lord

A - men

Ho - san - na

The Clivis starts with a vertical line that leads our eye to a higher pitch, almost always followed by a lower pitch.

Pitch



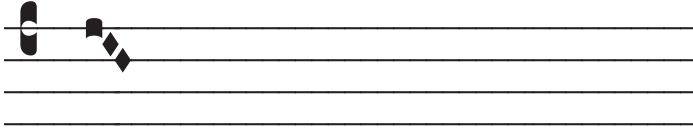
Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Three Pulses

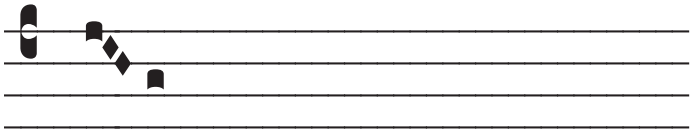
One Syllable

Name: Punctum Inclīnatum

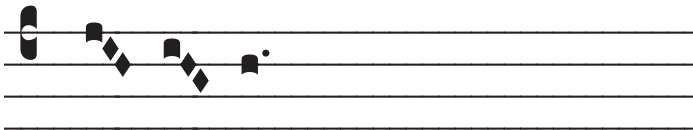




Lord



A - men

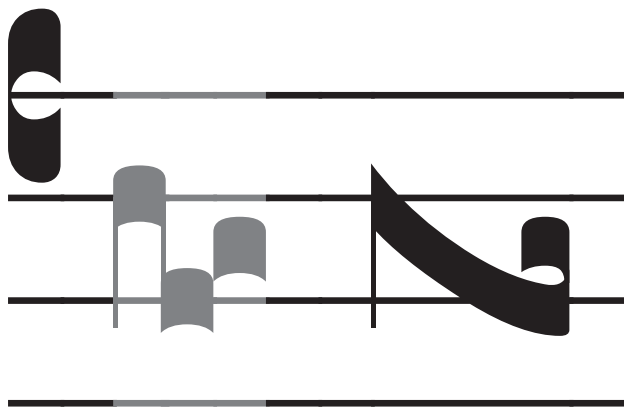


Ho - san - na

The *Inclinatorum* is a dead give-away that we are singing more than one pitch on a syllable.

As you may have already discovered, while all of the forms of neumes we have seen could be represented by individual neumes strung across a page, the clumping of them in structured forms gives us a heads up and simplifies the reading of chant.

## Pitch

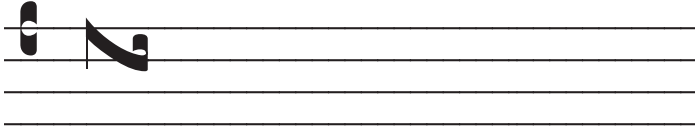


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

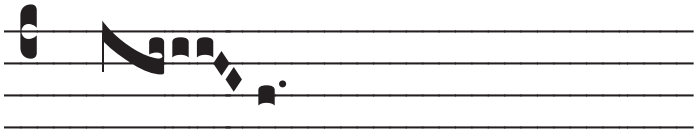
Three Pulses

One Syllable

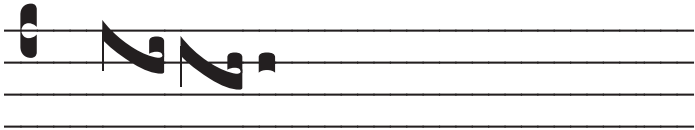
Name: Porrectus



Lord



A - - - - - men



Ho - san - na

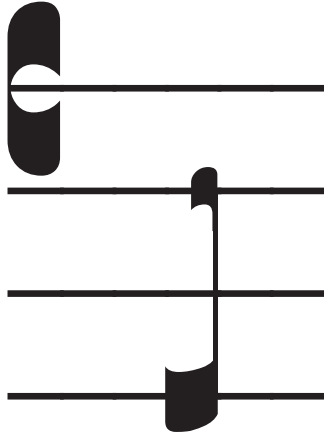
For some the most difficult of neumes to read, it's simply an easy way to write a group of three neumes that follow a pitch pattern of high, low and back to mid.

The grey notes on the left page shows the same notes that are in the Porrectus that follows it.

It was easier for those writing chant to write without lifting the pen from the score than three neumes. And it clearly defines a unique yet common musical pitch pattern.

58

Pitch

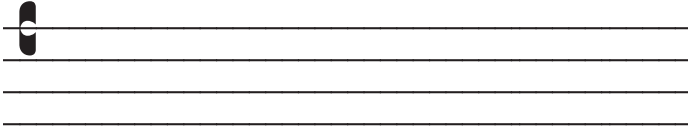


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

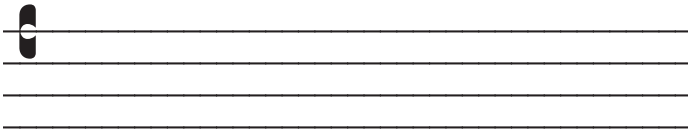
Two Pulses

One Syllable

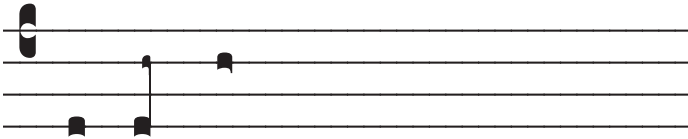
Name: Liquescent



Lord



A - men

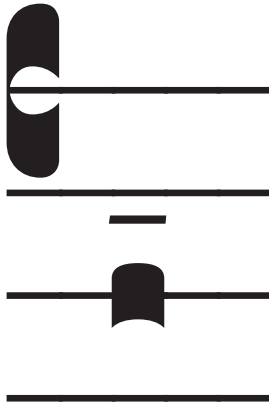


Ho - san - na

The tiny note of the Liquescent is always a consonant that may resonate when sung....quietly.

Think Sa Ahn. Say it, let your tongue flip to the roof of your mouth to make the soft AHN sound.

Modern Decoration

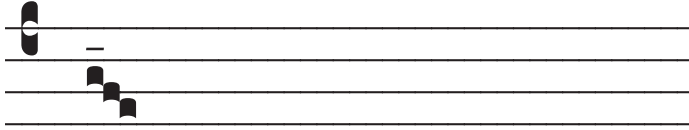


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

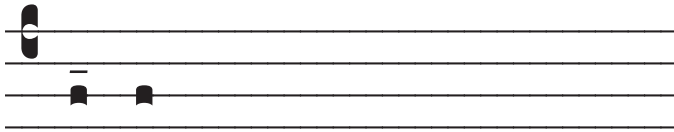
A Lengthened Pulse

One Syllable

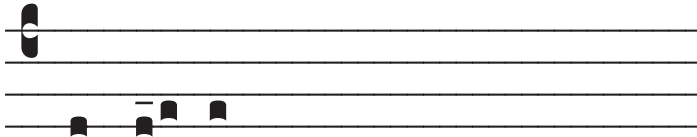
Name: Horizontal Episema



Lord



A - men



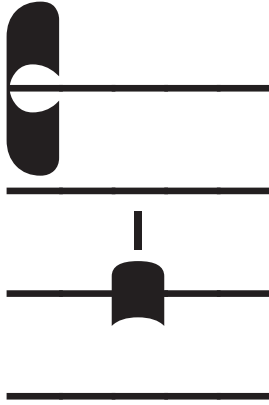
Ho - san - na

Emphasis, usually thought to be stretching of the neume in time.

Just one of the additions made to more modern chant notation to more fully guide us in the interpretation of chant.

These signs were created and added to chant in response to a desire to try and write down the musical things that were sung and passed down as tradition.

## Modern Decoration

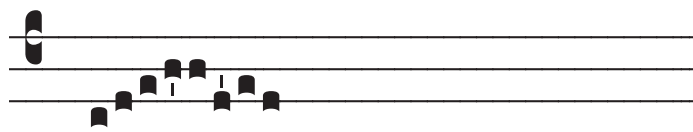


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

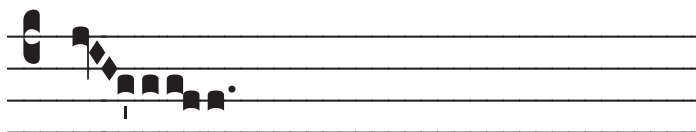
Indicates initial note of 2 or 3 note group

Name: Vertical Episema

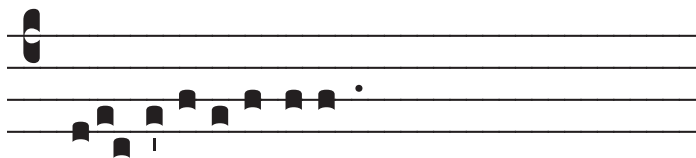




Lord



A - men

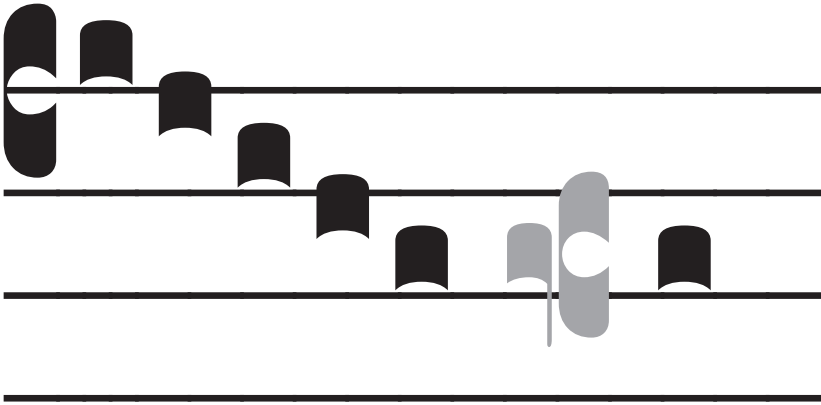


Ho - san - na

Just one of the additions made to chant notation to more fully explain interpretation.

The Monks of the Abbey of Solesmes were charged with the mission of further editing chant to assist those singing in understanding the underlying rhythm...groups of two and three neumes, that are the heart and soul of chant. They used the vertical mark shown to point out the Ictus.

## Pitch



DO

TI

LA

SO

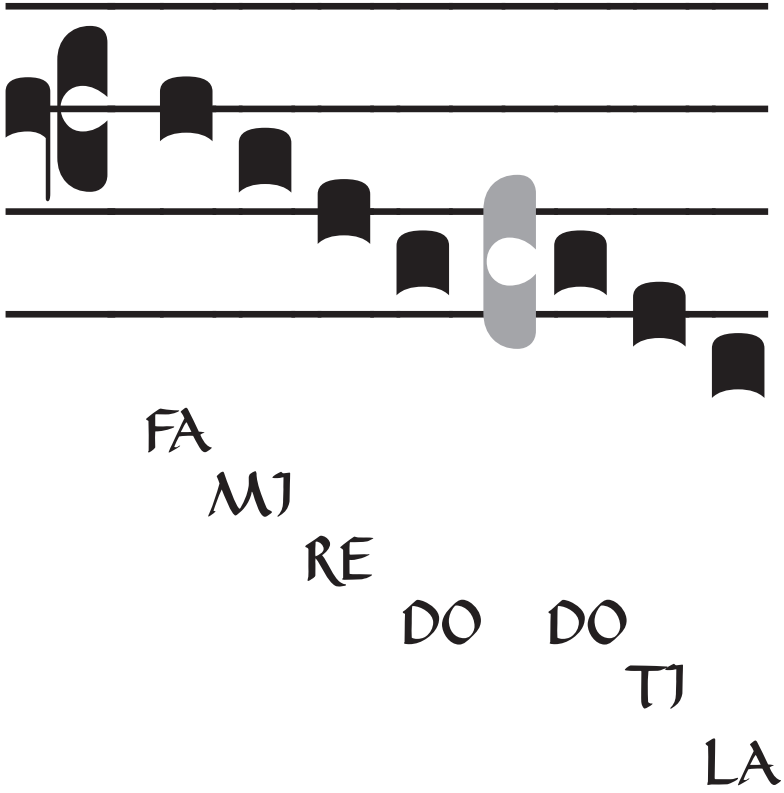
FA

FA

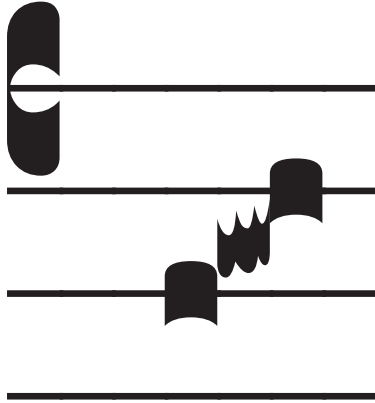
Do and Fa Clefs Center melody on Staff

Name: FA Clef

## Pitch



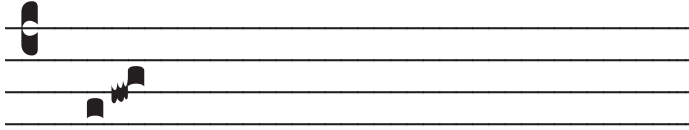
Pitch



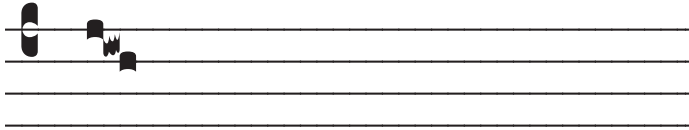
Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

One Syllable

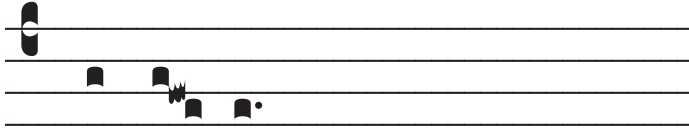
Name: Quilisma



Lord



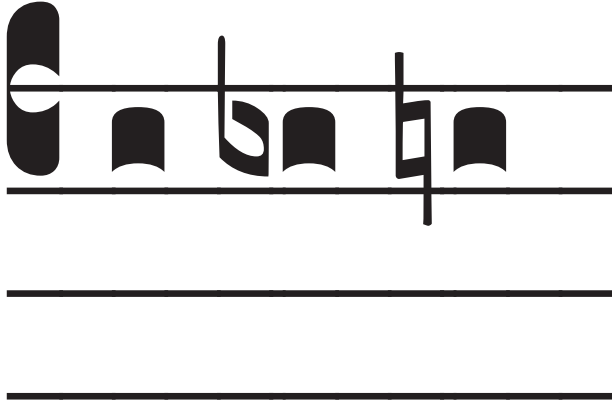
A - men



Ho - san - na

It is generally accepted that the squiggle indicates that the note prior to it is sung as a lengthened note.

## Pitch



TJ

TE

TJ

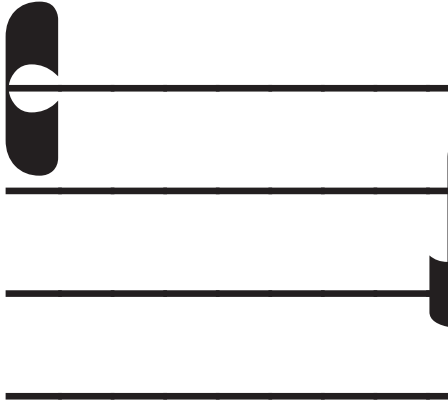
Flat lowers TJ one-half step to TE

Natural resets it back to TJ.

It only appears on the pitch TJ.

Name: Flat & Natural

Pitch



Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Silent - Not Sung

Indicates First Note coming up to be sung  
on next Lower Staff

Name: Custos

## Definitions


Clivis	Higher note comes first in group of two
Custos	Indicates next pitch on next staff.
Divisions	Ends of phrases and lines where breaths may be taken.
DO Clef	Shows location of DO on Staff.
FA Clef	Shows location of FA on Staff
Flat	Pitch of T) is lowered to TE, a half-step.
Ictus	First "lift" note in groups of two or three.
Inclinatum	A note that is leaning rather than straight.
Natural	Raises Flatted TE back up to T).
Neumes	Notes
Podatus	"Foot", the basic neume or note.
Porrectus	High note then lower note and high note
Punctum	"Point", a single note or neume
Inclinatum	A note that is leaning rather than straight.
Punctum Mora	A note that is longer and dies away.
Quilisma	Three notes, first lengthened.
Repercussive	The same syllable sung more than once on same pitch
Staff	Four Lines
Torculus	Opposite of Porrectus
Virga	Descending notes




Clivis.....	52
Custos .....	70
Divisions.....	20
DO Clef.....	22
FA Clef.....	64
Flat .....	68
Horizontal Episema.....	60
Ictus.....	56
Natural .....	68
Pauses.....	20
Podatus .....	50
Porrectus .....	56
Punctum.....	5
Punctum Inclinatum.....	54
Punctum Mora .....	12
Quilisma .....	66
Staff.....	18
Torculus.....	46
Vertical Episema .....	62
Virga.....	48

MASS XI, *Orbis factor*


I



**K** Y-ri- e \* e- lé- i-son. *ij.* Chri-ste



e- lé- i-son. *ij.* Ký-ri- e e- lé- i-son. *ij.*

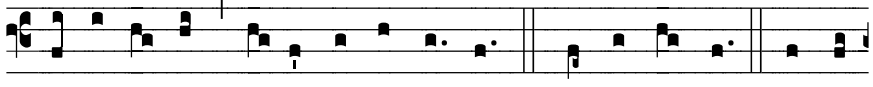


Ký- ri- e \* e- lé- i-son.

II



**G** Ló-ri- a in excélsis De- o. Et in terra pax



homí-ni-bus bonæ vo-luntá-tis. Laudámus te. Be-ne-



dí-cimus te. Ado-rámus te. Glo-ri-fi-cámus te.



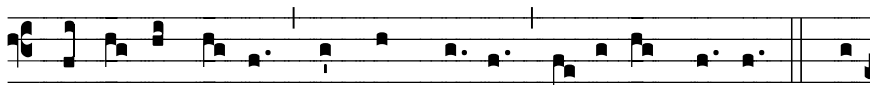
Grá-ti-as á-gimus ti-bi propter magnam gló-ri- am tu- am.



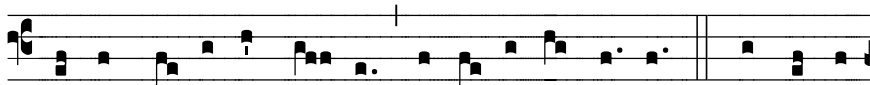
Dómi-ne De- us, Rex cæ-lé-stis, De- us Pa-ter omní-pot-



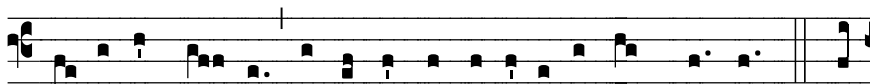
ens. Dómi-ne Fi- li u-ni-gé-ni-te Je-su Chri-ste,



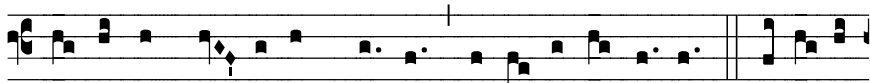
Dómi-ne De- us, Agnus De- i, Fí- li- us Pa- tris. Qui



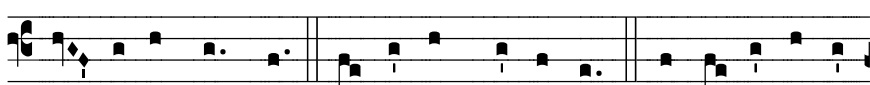
tol- lis peccá- ta mun- di, mi- se- ré- re no- bis. Qui tol- lis



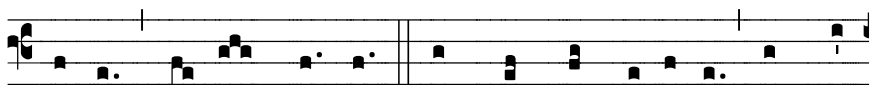
peccá- ta mun- di, súsci- pe depreca- ti- ó- nem nostram. Qui



se- des ad déx- te- ram Pa- tris, mi- se- ré- re no- bis. Quóni- am



tu so- lus sanctus. Tu so- lus Dómi- nus. Tu so- lus Altís-



simus, Je- su Chri- ste. Cum Sancto Spí- ri- tu, in gló-



ri- a De- i Pa- tris. A- men.

These two sample chant pages are used with permission of the Church Music Association of America. They are pages from *The Parish Book of Chant*. We highly recommend this book for your schola, choir and congregation.

Visit the CMAA website at: [www.musicasacra.com](http://www.musicasacra.com).

Noel Jones first sang chant in a choir of men and boys and followed that up by chanting daily masses before he was a teenager in a small town in Ohio.

Summer studies with Benedictine monks took him further along the chant path prior to his leaving for New York City where he directed Catholic choirs and was organist at the Church Center for the United Nations as well as accompanist for the United Nations Singers. Later in Germany he was organist for the English masses at the DOM Cathedral in Frankfurt.

Picking up work as a chor-repetiteur in Germany he was involved in vocal coaching as well as a musical direction in Frankfurt, Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen and Munich. Of the three Broadway musicals he led there, he conducted two recordings and the European premiere of one. Having experience setting translations to scores, he was engaged to do so in Germany, the United States and eventually Italy, where he set the Italian text for Sir William Walton's opera *The Bear*. He also served as chor repetiteur and rehearsal conductor for that performance under the supervision of Sir William.

During this time he played for masses at Il Duomo in Barga, Italy, as well as producing and conducting the town's annual San Cristoforo Day celebration concert in the 11th century church.

Working as a church organ designer, he eventually located in Tennessee, where he joined the staff of a Catholic church as director of music involved in returning church music to chant and polyphony. He along with Mary C. Weaver have founded Musicam Sacram, a CMAA chapter in East Tennessee.

His first chant book, *A Beginner's Guide To Reading Gregorian Chant Notation*, has been one of the most frequently books on chant purchased on Amazon.com.

*A Beginner's Guide To Reading Gregorian Chant Notation*

*A Beginner's Guide To Singing Gregorian Chant Rhythm*

*A Beginner's Guide To Singing Gregorian Chant Using Solfeggio.*