

# A Beginner's Guide to Reading Gregorian Chant Notation

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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.

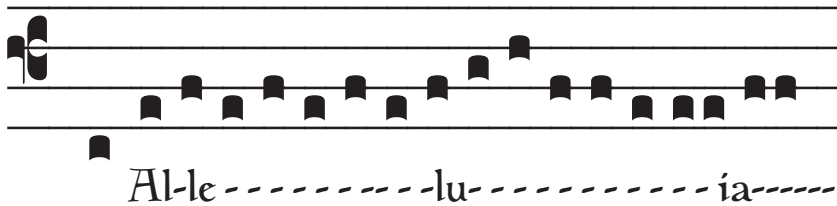
The next two pages are an overview. You may skip them and go straight on learning to read basic chant on page 4.

## 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

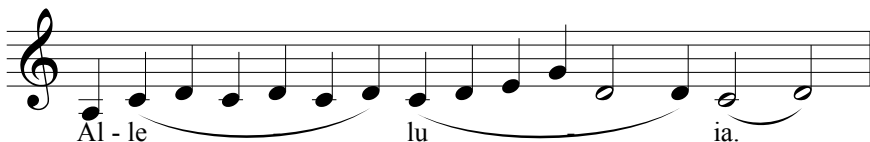
1. An Alleluia written using the basic chant neume, a simple note for each pitch.



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



- 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.



## 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

Length



Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

Two Pulses  
Two Syllables



Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

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

# 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  in modern notation.

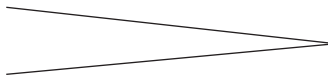
## Decorations



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

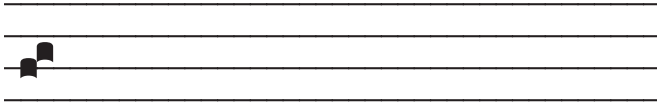


Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

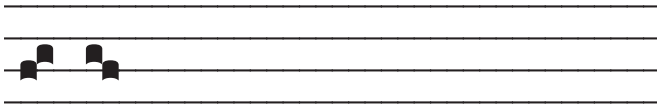
Two Pulses

One Syllable

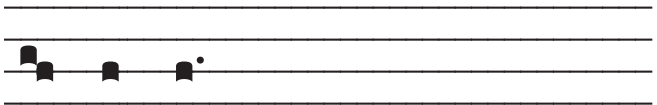




Lord



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



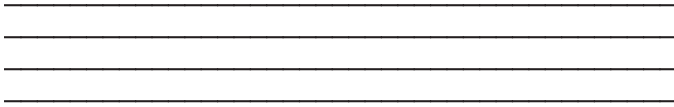
Lord

A-men

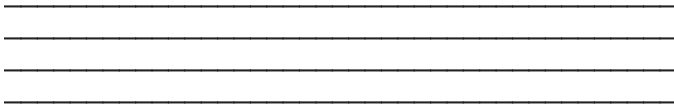
Ho-san-na

Three Pulses

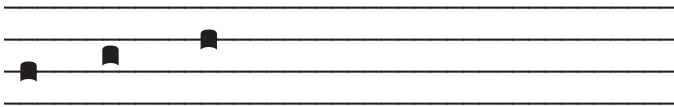
Three Syllables



Lord



A - men



Ho - san - na

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

## Pitch

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Lord  
A-men  
Ho-san-na

No Pulses

No Syllables

Name: Staff