

The Pulse of Music

A Beginner's Guide to  
Singing  
Gregorian Chant  
Notation, Rhythm

**SAMPLE**

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# Singing Gregorian Chant Notation



The notes of chant,  
how they appear on the page  
and what they mean.

This  
little book  
is dedicated to  
staff and  
all the members of  
The Church Music Association  
of  
America  
for all the good that they do.

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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.

## 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



# Singing Gregorian Chant Rhythm



I

All notes in chant are sung in the same flowing motion.

We explore the four ways in which the flow is temporarily suspended and the way this is notated in the music.

I'm before the dot,  
before the quilisma,  
above the vertical episema in a salicus,  
above or below the horizontal episema,  
and anywhere at the director's discretion.

Who am I?

I'm the "Note That May Be Lengthened."

## Chant Rhythm

Chant was passed down by word of mouth. All notes are sung at the same even speed until the director of the schola indicates a note that is to be held for a longer length than a normal note. For centuries there was no clear way to indicate these holds. These held notes are what constitute the rhythm of chant.

These are moments of suspension of time.

The practice of marking notes on a staff of four lines has long been the standard. in chant This tells what pitches to sing, but not how long to hold the notes that are commonly stretched.

Different systems were tried, but none caught on. Some were vague, some were so exact that they caused chant to be sung in a metric, unnatural manner.

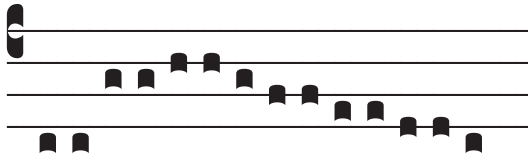
It is not clear why a simple system was not adopted. There is conjecture that this was a way of withholding information, as a form of job security. Only people in the know were able to lead the chants and indicate which notes were lengthened.

The monks of Solesmes came up with a system that some feel is overly restrictive. Recently some are shifting to thinking that this was not a move to restrict the performance of chant but instead to free up the hold others had on chant, and to make singing of it accesible.

## Rhythm



Notes in chant are not all  
sung one after the other  
like a clock ticking.



Chant was memorized and passed down from one generation to the next, totally unwritten for many years. Then church fathers decided it was time to get it on vellum and eventually, on paper.

Chant notation shows only the order of the pitches to be sung.

The above is a very familiar folk song.

By looking at these notes, someone who had never heard this song would sing:

*Twinkle twinkle little star how I wonder what you are.*

All in a row, like a clock ticking.



*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

**Sing this.**



*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

We can tell you exactly how you have sung this.

Without hearing you sing it.



*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

You stretched two notes, held them longer than other notes.

That's rhythm.

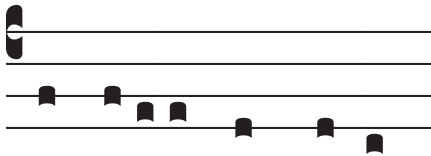
Why did you sing it that way? Because that's the tradition.

Gregorian Chant has its own traditions of held notes, but until the early 1900's, there was no general agreement on how to show this on paper.





*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



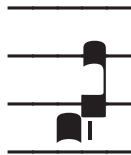
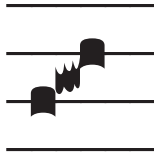
*how I wonder what you are*

Gregorian Chant was the first written music.

In chant, all notes are sung without pause, to a regular pace like drops of water.

But some notes are stretched out, lengthened. There are now four common ways to show this.

## Lengthened chant notes.





*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

How can we indicate which note is to be lengthened?

Scribing two notes close together?



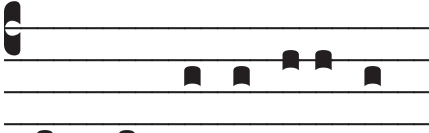
*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

This does not work, as the practice when singing chant is to pulse repeated notes on the same syllable. Here you would get: "ah-ahr."

## Dot



*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

Note that there is a period at the end of the above sentence.

## Dot



*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*

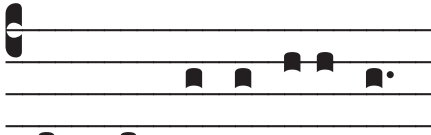


*how I wonder what you are.*

Let's put a period after the last note.

Hold that note twice as long as a normal note.

## Dot



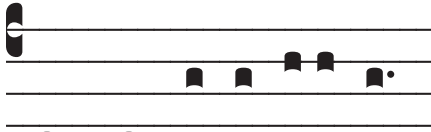
*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

And let's add a period, or dot, at the end of the first line, where singers always hold the note when singing this folk tune.

Hold the note exactly the length of two regular notes.



*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



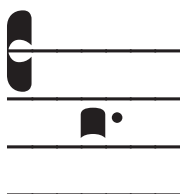
*how I wonder what you are.*

This is one of the simple ways that the rhythms, the lengthening of a note or groups of notes, are communicated when writing chant music.

The dot doubles the length of a note.

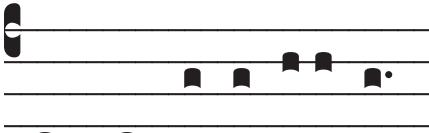
The length of the other three “hold” signs is determined by the director.

## Dot



Dot doubles the length of the note which precedes it.





*Twinkle, twinkle, little star*



*how I wonder what you are.*

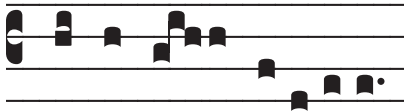
Signs that alter the length of a note in chant are always in the same place in relation to the note it affects.

The dot is always after the note that it affects.

## Samples



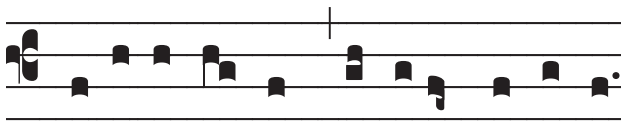
Ky- ri- e, e- le- i- son



de ma-nu pecca-toris.



fu- it vol-un-tas e- o-rum.



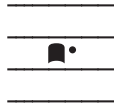
Be- a- ti om- nes, \* qui ti- ment Dominum.

It is a good to mark, above the staff, all notes that are to be lengthened.

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 Dot
 

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Some chant music will show a dot after the last note, some will not. Most last notes will be lengthened, dot or not.

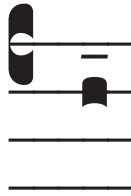
A bit of history:

It is universally understood that the last note of a chant should be lengthened.

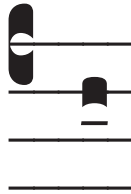
But French monks, in their versions of chant books, decided to use the dot to indicate a lengthening of the last note, and any other note that is traditionally lengthened in singing.

The dot designating the “hold” was created.

## Horizontal Episema



or



Horizontal Episema lengthens the note below or above it.

## Horizontal Episema - Expressive Time Alterations



Playing for opera singers is tough work because opera singers hold some notes out longer than they are written.

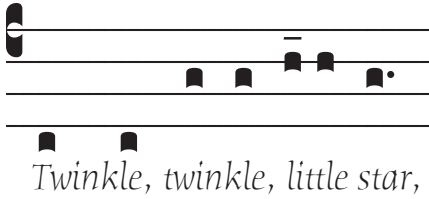
They do this to emphasize the word they are singing or the beauty of the note.

Chant is also sung this way.

Sing the line above and hold “lit” as long as you like.

It is entirely up to the singer when chanting alone, and to the director when a group is singing, how long this note will be held and sung.

## Horizontal Episema - Expressive Time Alterations



How long this note will be held and sung?

We do not know how long it will be held, but we can predict how it might be sung.

It's an expressive device, so you can expect that that it will also either:

1. Get louder.
2. Get Softer.
3. Bloom the sound, later called a *Messa di Voce*.
4. Stay the same - but this is not as common as 1 and 2.