



Paléo

Gregorian chant and its neumes, explained step by step

A plain-language journey through six chants from the *Graduale Triplex* : *Puer natus est*, *Viderunt omnes*, *Lux fulgebit*, *Victimæ paschali laudes* and the two *Alleluias* of Christmas and Easter.

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Contents

1. Introduction

2. What do we mean by “Gregorian”?

3. The basics of the notation

4. The Graduale Triplex

5. Example 1 — Puer natus est · introit · T. p. 47

6. Example 2 — Viderunt omnes · gradual · T. p. 48

7. Example 3 — Lux fulgebit · introit · T. p. 44

8. Example 4 — Victimæ paschali laudes · sequence · T. p. 198

9. Example 5 — Alleluia. Dies sanctificatus · Christmas · T. p. 49

10. Example 6 — Alleluia. Pascha nostrum · Easter · T. p. 197

11. Glossary & bibliography

12. About the authors

Gregorian chant and its neumes, explained step by step

*This blog is for anyone who is curious : no knowledge of music, of Latin or of medieval history is required. Step by step, we are going to learn how to « read » Gregorian chant as it is written in a fascinating book, the *Graduale Triplex*.*

I magine a chant more than a thousand years old, handed down first by word of mouth, then written with little signs traced by hand : the **neumes**. These signs look nothing like our present-day notes ; they are drawings that suggest the *gesture* of the voice — rising, falling, lingering, bouncing. Learning to read them is rather like learning to decipher an ancient script : strange at first, then surprisingly logical.

What is this about ?

Gregorian chant, in a nutshell

Gregorian chant is the official chant of the Roman Catholic liturgy, fixed between the 8th and the 9th century. It is sung **in Latin, in a single voice** (we call it *monodic* : everyone sings the same melody) and **without any instrumental accompaniment**. It is a « bare » chant, entirely at the service of the sacred text. *cré*.

DEFINITION — NEUME

A **neume** is a sign noting one or more sounds sung on a single syllable. The word comes from the Greek *pneuma*, « breath ». A neume may be worth a single note... or a whole little spray of notes thrown out on one vowel.

Why a « triple » book ?

The ***Graduale Triplex*** (published by the abbey of Solesmes in 1979) is a chant book that superimposes **three scripts** for one and the same chant — hence its name « triplex », triple :

- in the centre, modern **square notation**, on a staff, giving the exact pitch of every note ;
- above, the **neumes of Laon**, copied from a manuscript of the 9th century ;
- below, the **neumes of St Gall**, taken from other early manuscripts.

Looking at all three at once, you get both *the right note* (thanks to the square notation) and *the way to sing it* — lively, weighty, light, drawn out — thanks to the two early scripts. We shall go into all of this on [the page devoted to it](#).

HOW TO READ THIS BLOG

If you are starting out, follow the order of the tabs : begin with **The basics**, then **The Graduale Triplex**, before tackling the six sample chants. Each chant illustrates different neumes, from the plainest to the most ornate.

Our six sample chants

To keep things concrete, we start from six famous chants : four pieces from Christmas and Easter, completed by the **two Alleluias** of those same Masses — enough to run through the whole palette of neumes, from the soberest to the most jubilant.

EXAMPLE 1 · INTROIT · P. 47

Puer natus est

The entrance chant of the Mass of Christmas Day. Ideal for reading your first neumes.

EXAMPLE 2 · GRADUAL · P. 48

Viderunt omnes

A highly ornate chant : dozens of notes on a single syllable (the melisma).

EXAMPLE 3 · INTROIT · P. 44

Lux fulgebit

The entrance chant of the Christmas Mass at dawn. Perfect for nuances of duration.

EXAMPLE 4 · SEQUENCE · P. 198

Victimæ paschali laudes

The Easter sequence : a later form, almost a sung dialogue.

EXAMPLE 5 · ALLELUIA · P. 49

Alleluia. Dies sanctificatus

The Alleluia of Christmas Day : the jubilus, that great melisma of joy on the final « a ».

EXAMPLE 6 · ALLELUIA · P. 197

Alleluia. Pascha nostrum

The Alleluia of Easter Day : the same form, another mode — a chance to compare two jubili.

What do we mean by « Gregorian » ?

Before reading the neumes, let us go back in time. Where does this chant come from ? Why does it bear the name of a pope ? And why did an alphabet have to be invented in order to write it down ? A short history, without jargon.

1. What exactly is Gregorian chant ?

Gregorian chant is **plainchant** : a **single melodic line**, sung **in unison** (everyone on the same note), **with no instrumental accompaniment whatever**, and in Latin. No harmony, no orchestra : nothing but voices and a sacred text. This plainness is not poverty ; it is a choice, turned wholly towards prayer and towards making the words intelligible.

DEFINITION — PLAINCHANT

Plainchant (from the Latin *cantus planus*, « even chant ») is the monodic liturgical chant of the Latin Church. « Gregorian » is the name of its most widespread form, the one that established itself in the Carolingian period.

2. A misleading name : Pope Gregory

Gregory I, known as « the Great », was pope from 590 to 604. He is one of the great figures of late antiquity : a tireless reformer, the organiser of the Church of Rome, a considerable spiritual author (we owe him the *Pastoral Rule* and the *Dialogues*). Tradition also credits him with reorganising the Roman liturgy and its *schola cantorum*, the pope's school of singers. From there to making him the *author* of all the chant that bears his name was but one step... which the Middle Ages cheerfully took.

The legend of the dove

Around 873, nearly three centuries after his death, a *Life* of Gregory tells a scene that was to make its fortune : the pope receives the melodies directly from the **Holy Spirit**, in the shape of a **dove** perched by his ear, while he dictates them to a secretary. Medieval iconography seized on the story and repeated it endlessly : Gregory writing, the dove on his shoulder, and often a scribe spying on him from behind a curtain, astounded to see him break off... and then resume, inspired.



Gregory the Great receiving the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove while dictating to a scribe — the so-called "Gregorblatt" miniature, Registrum Gregorii, Trier, Stadtbibliothek, Hs. 171/1626, circa 983. Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

What history says

It is a **fine legend** — but a legend. Gregory died in 604 ; yet the repertory as we know it only took shape in the 8th-9th centuries, from the meeting of *Roman* chant with *Frankish* usage (we speak of a « Romano-Frankish » synthesis). Gregory may well have set liturgical reforms in motion ; he did not « compose » these melodies, and he never saw a neume — they would appear only two and a half centuries after him.

Why the name stuck

So why « Gregorian » ? Because the attribution was **useful**. When the Carolingians set out to impose Roman chant on the whole of Europe (see below), there was nothing like placing it under the patronage of a prestigious pope : that gave it the authority of Rome and the prestige of sanctity. The « Gregory » *label* served as a seal of authenticity. The name has stuck ; the reality is more collective, later — and, let us say it, more interesting.

KEY POINT

Gregory the Great is the **symbolic patron** of Gregorian chant, not its author.

Remembering that is to understand that Gregorian chant is a **collective work**, shaped by generations of singers, and not the miraculous dictation of one man.

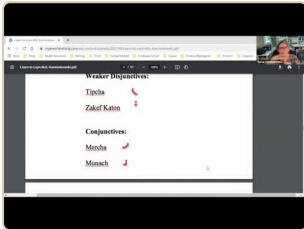
3. Before Charlemagne : eastern roots

Christian chant did not come out of nowhere. The very first Christians were, for the most part, **Jews** familiar with the chant of the **synagogue** (*Hebrew cantillation*) : for them, singing the word of God went without saying. Around the Mediterranean they were also steeped in other traditions — **Byzantine**, and later **Arab-Muslim** (*Quranic cantillation*) — all of which share the same reflex : the sacred word is *sung*, it is not simply read.

Musical examples

TO LISTEN SIDE BY SIDE

Three pieces of listening are enough to hear the family likeness : a **cantillation of the Torah** (with its *te'amim*), a **Byzantine hymn** and a **call to prayer** (*adhan*), then a **Gregorian psalmody** for comparison.



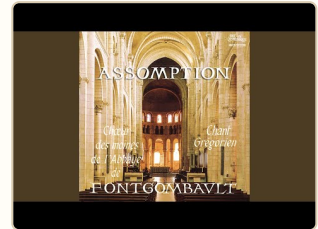
Cantillation of the Torah (*te'amim*) — My Jewish Learning
youtu.be/4EbEUZGGgOU



Byzantine hymn (psalm verses) — Cappella Romana
youtu.be/SFaCxjH78H0



Call to prayer (*adhan*) — Masjid al-Haram, Mecca
youtu.be/MaEzj5eRmjc



Gregorian psalmody — Choir of the monks of Notre-Dame de Fontgombault Abbey
youtu.be/uabV1Bvpf_0

The legacy of the synagogue : psalmody

At the heart of Gregorian chant are the **psalms** — those 150 poems inherited from the Hebrew Bible, sung for more than two thousand years. Christians inherited from them the practice of **psalmody** (singing a psalm to a simple melodic formula), but also its two great ways of doing so :

- **responsorial** : a soloist sings the verses and the assembly answers with a refrain ;
- **antiphonal** : two choirs answer one another in alternation — a practice the West (St Ambrose in Milan) did indeed import from the East.

More striking still : some Hebrew words passed unchanged into the mouths of Latin singers. When you hear **Alleluia** (from the Hebrew *Hallelou-Yah*, « praise the Lord »), **Amen**, **Hosanna** or **Sabaoth**, you are hearing a direct thread linking the synagogue to the choir of the monks.

Byzantium and the Christian East

The other great neighbour is the **Byzantine world** (the Greek-speaking Christian East). To it we probably owe one of the most structuring features of Gregorian chant : the organisation of the melodies into **eight modes**. The Byzantines had their system of eight « tones » (the *oktoechos*) ; the Carolingian theorists set up, in parallel, the eight modes of the West. A direct borrowing is hard to prove — but the kinship of spirit is plain.



Byzantine musical manuscript (**Pantokratoros**, Mount Athos, codex 214), copied in 1433 by the domesticus **David Redestinos**, notated in neumes. Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.



Excerpt from the hymn « Ἠγάπησας Θεοφόρε » (*Igapisas Theophore*), composed by **Kassia of Constantinople** (9th century), one of the few known Byzantine women composers — ensemble **VocaMe**, CD *Kassia: Byzantine Hymns of the First Female Composer* (Christophorus, 2009).
youtu.be/Jx4pp9VLkc



Saint **Kassia** (Kassiani, 9th century), Byzantine hymnographer and composer — one of the few medieval women composers whose music survives. Orthodox icon, artist unknown. Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

From the East too comes a certain **taste for ornament** : those long vocalises on a single syllable (the **melisma**, see the gradual *Viderunt omnes*) call to mind the fervour of eastern chants. It is no accident that ensembles such as **Organum** (Marcel Pérès) embrace, in their performances, this colouring from the East.

One and the same gesture : the sacred word sung

As you can tell : three different worlds, one and the same fundamental gesture — carrying a sacred text on a melody, to engrave it in the memory and lift it above ordinary speech. Gregorian chant is one branch of that great Mediterranean tree.

A HISTORIAN'S CAUTION

Talking about « influences » calls for modesty : since everything was handed down **orally**, we have no recording of these ancient chants. We reason by *kinship* and by clues (words, structures, written testimony), not by evidence of sound. So keep « family likeness » rather than « copy ». Let us not forget the presence of the Arabs on the Iberian peninsula (*al-Andalus*) for 7 centuries (711-1492), and the many commercial, political, religious and cultural exchanges that took place between Christians, Jews and Muslims during this period.



A Christian and a Muslim musician playing oud side by side : miniature from the Cantigas de Santa Maria (cantiga 120), commissioned by King Alfonso X of Castile, 13th century — direct evidence of the musical exchanges of Iberian convivencia. Source: Wikimedia Commons, public domain.

YOUR QUESTION — CAN THE SCRIPTS BE COMPARED?

Yes, and it is fascinating ! Several traditions independently invented signs « above the text » very close, in spirit, to our neumes :

- the Hebrew **te'amim** (cantillation accents of the Torah) : little signs placed around the words to guide the melody — exactly the same idea of a gestural aide-mémoire ;
- **Byzantine notation** (« palaeo-Byzantine » neumes), likewise at first indicating the gesture, before becoming more precise ;
- the **Arab-Muslim** tradition, long essentially oral (handed down from master to disciple).

In other words : everywhere, people first *memorised*, then wrote down *reminders* — never, at the outset, a complete score.

4. The Carolingian unification

By the 8th century the Christian liturgy was everywhere in Europe... but in **very different forms from one region to another** : « Old Roman » chant, Gallican in Gaul, Ambrosian in Milan, Mozarabic in Spain, Beneventan in southern Italy. As everything was handed down **orally**, each region sang « its own way », and the melodies drifted.

Charlemagne (following his father Pepin) wanted to unify his empire — through chant as well. He imposed « **Roman chant** » as the standard. From the meeting of that Roman chant with Frankish usage was born the repertory we call **Gregorian** today. The unification was as political as it was spiritual.

5. 9th century : the invention of neumes (about 850)

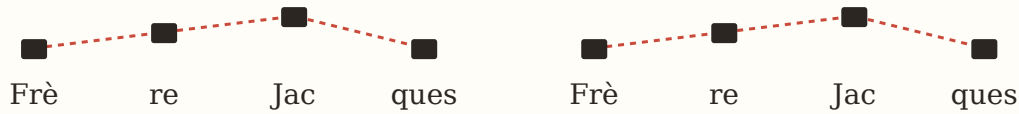
One large problem remained : how to make sure that everyone sang the *same* thing, when nothing was written down ? The answer appeared around **850** : people began adding little **signs above the text**, the **neumes**.

Careful, this is the crucial point : these first neumes **note neither the exact pitches, nor the intervals, nor a measured rhythm**. They indicate only *how each syllable is to be sung* — rising, falling, pressing, lightening — and certain vocal effects. They are **aides-mémoire** : they serve to *recover* a melody one already knows by heart, not to discover it.

A demonstration : « Frère Jacques » in neumes

To get a real feel for this, let us play a game : here is the beginning of *Frère Jacques* written « in the old manner », with neumes floating above the syllables, with no staff. The dotted line

stands for the **gesture** of the voice.



*Frère Jacques in « adiastrmatic » neumes (without a staff) : you **recognise** the tune... but only because you already know it ! There is no way of deciphering it without having it in your head.*

THE POINT TO TAKE AWAY

That is the *whole* logic of the first neumes : a singer who knows the melody finds his bearings in it instantly ; a beginner is left helpless. What is still missing is the information about **precise pitches**. That is exactly what square notation was to bring.

This need to pinpoint the pitch of the notes already appears, even before square notation, in older manuscripts from other regions (**Aquitaine**, for instance).

6. 11th century : square notation

From the 11th century onwards a decisive step was taken : the signs were aligned on a **staff**, which gradually settled at **four lines**. From then on, the height of a sign on the staff indicated the pitch of the sound. The notation does not give an *absolute* pitch (the choir adapts it to its voices), but it notes precisely the **intervals** between the notes. Here is the same beginning of *Frère Jacques*, this time « set down » on a staff :



*The same « Frère Jacques » (do · re · mi · do) in square notation : now it can be read even by someone who does not know it. The details of this script are in *The basics*.*

7. Solesmes : the great restoration

Let us leap forward in time. Over the centuries Gregorian chant had become **disfigured** : melodies shortened, weighed down, « modernised » editions full of mistakes. In the 19th century a small abbey in the Sarthe was to change everything and give the chant back its authentic face : **Solesmes**.

Dom Guéranger and the Benedictine revival

In **1833**, **Dom Prosper Guéranger** refounded the abbey of Saint-Pierre de **Solesmes** and restored there the Benedictine life, almost extinct in France after the Revolution. Passionate about the liturgy, he wanted to be done with the corrupt versions then in use and to **go back to the sources** : to recover the melodies as the early manuscripts had preserved them. That is the starting point of a scholarly adventure that would last more than a century.

Scholarship at the service of the chant

Two monks were to turn that intuition into a rigorous method :

- **Dom Joseph Pothier** compares the manuscripts and reconstructs the melodies ; his *Mélodies grégoriennes* (1880), then his *Liber gradualis* (1883), mark the return of « true » Gregorian chant.
- **Dom André Mocquereau** launches in **1889** the *Paléographie Musicale* : a monumental collection of **photographic facsimiles** of manuscripts from all over the world. By publishing side by side dozens of witnesses to the same chant, it proved, evidence in hand, what the original version had been. It is the direct ancestor of the *Graduale Triplex*.



The abbey of Saint-Pierre de Solesmes, birthplace of the revival of Gregorian chant since Dom Guéranger. Source: Wikimedia Commons, photo by Cliatop, public domain.

The Vatican edition and the motu proprio of Pius X (1903)

The work of Solesmes received a resounding endorsement. In **1903**, Pope **Pius X**, in his motu proprio *Tra le sollecitudini*, proclaimed Gregorian chant the **model for all sacred music**. Hard on its heels came the **Vatican edition** — the *Kyriale* (1905), the *Graduale* (1908) — prepared with the help of Solesmes : it is the official reference in **square notation**.

DATE	EVENT
1833	Dom Guéranger refounds the abbey of Solesmes.
1880	Dom Pothier, <i>Les Mélodies grégoriennes</i> .
1889	Dom Mocquereau launches the <i>Paléographie Musicale</i> .
1903	Motu proprio <i>Tra le sollecitudini</i> of Pius X.
1908	Vatican edition of the <i>Graduale Romanum</i> .
1979	<i>Graduale Triplex</i> (the fruit of semiology).

8. Today's performing styles

How are these melodies sung nowadays ? There is no single answer, but several schools — and that is precisely what makes listening so absorbing.

The classic « Solesmes method »

To make the chant teachable, Dom Mocquereau devised a system of **rhythmic signs** (little dots, episemas, « ictus ») added to the square notation. The result is the style most people have in mind : a **flowing, even and serene** chant, with notes of equal length grouped in twos and threes, of great purity (one thinks too of the chant of the abbey of **Silos**, in Spain). This was long the way taught everywhere.

From method to semiology

In the 20th century, still at Solesmes, **Dom Eugène Cardine** pushed the study further : he scrutinised the **earliest neumes** (St Gall, Laon) to read in them nuances of rhythm and expression that square notation had erased. This is **Gregorian semiology** — and it is exactly what gave birth to the *Graduale Triplex* in 1979. In other words, « Solesmes » is not frozen : the house that fixed the even version is also the one that reopened the question of nuance.

Historically informed approaches

Other artists go further still in restoring the old details, with more **ornate** performances, sometimes tinged with the eastern influences mentioned above. Such is the case of ensembles like **Organum** (Marcel Pérès) or the **Ensemble Anne-Marie Deschamps** (*Venance Fortunat*). Between the serenity of Solesmes and the exuberance of Organum there is no « good » and « bad » chant : there are two ways of bringing the same signs back to life.

HEAR THE DIFFERENCE FOR YOURSELF

Each chant page brings together **several performances** to compare : Solesmes, Organum, the Ensemble Deschamps... Start with **Puer natus est**, where the monastic style of Solesmes and the approach of Organum can be heard side by side. The theory then takes on its full meaning.

9. Going further

Want to dig deeper ? Here are a few doors in, from the most accessible to the most scholarly. (Always check the conditions of reuse of images, recordings and scores before publishing them on your site.)

Books and references

- **Daniel Saulnier, *Le chant grégorien*** (Solesmes) — a short, limpid introduction, ideal after this blog.
- **Eugène Cardine, *Gregorian Semiology*** (Solesmes, 1970) — the founding work on reading the early neumes ; more technical.
- ***Graduale Triplex*** (Solesmes, 1979) — the book at the heart of this blog, to be kept in front of you ; and the *Graduale Romanum* for the square notation alone.
- **Willi Apel, *Gregorian Chant*** — a classic survey of the history and the forms.

Digitised manuscripts (open access)

- **e-codices** (virtual library of the manuscripts of Switzerland) : it holds the great witnesses of **St Gall** — the *Cantatorium* (ms 359), the antiphonary of **Hartker** (ms 390/391) — and **Einsiedeln 121**.
- **Gallica** (BnF) and the portals of municipal libraries : for many manuscripts, including the **Laon** tradition.
- **GregoBase** and the **Cantus Database** : scores and catalogues of Gregorian chants online, useful for tracking down a particular piece.

Listening and comparing

The best teacher is still the ear. Listen again to the performers mentioned here — Solesmes, Silos, **Organum** (Marcel Pérès), **Ensemble Anne-Marie Deschamps** — straight from our chant pages : **Puer natus est**, **Viderunt omnes**, **Lux fulgebit**, **Victimæ paschali laudes** and the two **Alleluias**.

WHAT TO REMEMBER

Gregorian chant is a **plainchant** unified in the Carolingian period, with eastern roots, wrongly attributed to Gregory the Great. It was first written down in **neumes** (an aide-mémoire for the gesture, 9th c.), then made precise thanks to **square notation** on a staff (11th c.). Today several schools bring it back to life. You now have the whole context : let us move on to reading the signs themselves.

The basics : learning to see a neume

Before opening the Graduale Triplex, let us set up a few simple landmarks. By the end of this page you will recognise the Gregorian staff, its clef, and about a dozen fundamental neumes.

1. The four-line staff

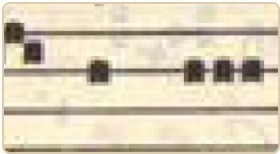
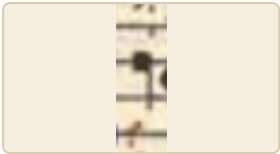
Our modern staff has five lines. Gregorian chant, by contrast, is written on a staff of only **four lines** (the *tetragram*). That is enough, because Gregorian melodies move within a fairly narrow range. As today, the *higher* a sign sits on the staff, the *higher* the sound ; the *lower* it sits, the *lower* the sound. One peculiarity worth knowing : **the clef can sit on different lines** — it is not fixed once and for all as in modern music, and it sometimes even changes in the middle of a piece.

DEFINITION — THE CLEF

A **clef** is a marker placed at the start of a line that names one of the lines. In chant, two clefs are mainly used : the **C clef** (do)  and the **F clef** . They do not fix an absolute pitch (the choir adjusts the pitch to its voices), but they show where the semitones fall, which is enough to sing in tune.

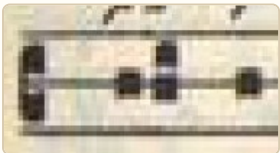
2. The basic note : the punctum

In square notation the commonest single note is the **punctum** — literally a « dot », drawn as a small square. A variant, the **virga** (« rod »), is a square extended by a small stem ; it often notes a higher note. When reading, *punctum* and *virga* are both worth a single note.

GRADUALE TRIPLEX	GRADUALE TRIPLEX
	
SQUARE NOTATION 	SQUARE NOTATION 
MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 	MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 
tus	le-
Punctum	Virga
1 note — "na- tus ", p. 47	1 note (often high) — "Al- le -luia", p. 199

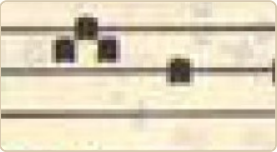
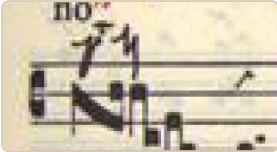
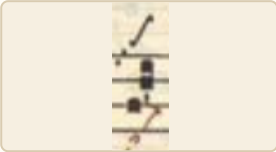
3. Two-note neumes

Things get more complex — and more interesting — when several sounds are sung **on a single syllable**. They are then grouped into a single drawing. The golden rule for reading : **a neume is read from bottom to top and from left to right**, following the stroke.

GRADUALE TRIPLEX	GRADUALE TRIPLEX
	
SQUARE NOTATION 	SQUARE NOTATION 
MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 	MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 
da-	li-
Pes (<i>podatus</i>)	Clivis (<i>flexa</i>)
2 notes going up — " da -tus", p. 47	2 notes going down — "fi- li -us", p. 47

4. Three-note neumes

With three notes you draw small « waves ». Remember these four above all — you will meet them constantly :

GRADUALE TRIPLEX	GRADUALE TRIPLEX	GRADUALE TRIPLEX	GRADUALE TRIPLEX
			
SQUARE NOTATION 	SQUARE NOTATION 	SQUARE NOTATION 	SQUARE NOTATION 
MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 	MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 	MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 	MODERN TRANSCRIPTION 
na- Torculus low · high · low — "na- tus", p. 47	bis Porrectus high · low · high, one curved stroke — "no- bis", p. 44	ho- Scandicus notes going up — "ho- die", p. 49	rit Climacus 1 note then a descent — "e-rit", p. 45

5. Two signs that change the colour of the chant

Some small signs do not change the note, but the way it is sung. Here are two essential ones, which we shall meet again in the examples :

- **The *quilisma*** — a note drawn as a zigzag, light and fleeting, which acts as a springboard to the next note ; traditionally the preceding note is slightly lengthened.
- **The *episema*** — a small horizontal stroke added above (or beside) a neume to indicate that the note is *settled on, broadened*. It is the equivalent of a slight « leaning » of the voice.

GRADUALE TRIPLEX



SQUARE NOTATION



MODERN TRANSCRIPTION



De-

Quilisma

light note, springboard

— "De-i", p. 48

GRADUALE TRIPLEX



SQUARE NOTATION



Episema

settle / broaden —

"De-i", p. 48

KEY POINT

A neume = a drawing read from left to right and from bottom to top. Its **shape** tells the movement of the voice ; a few added signs (episema, quilisma) tell the **manner**. You now have all the basic vocabulary needed to tackle the book that brings them together.

The *Graduale Triplex* : three scripts for a single chant

Why three stacked notations ? Because none of them says everything on its own. Together they give both the right note and the soul of the chant.

When the monks of Solesmes published the *Graduale Triplex* in 1979, they were answering an old problem. The oldest chant manuscripts (9th–11th century) are of extraordinary musical subtlety : they notate the nuances, the leanings, the impulses of the voice. But they have one major flaw : they **do not give the exact pitches**. Conversely, modern square notation gives precise pitches... but has lost much of those nuances. The solution ? Superimpose the two worlds.

THE KEY WORD — DIASTEMATIC

A notation is **diastematic** when the height of the signs precisely indicates the pitch of the sounds (as on a staff). It is **adiastematic** (or « in campo aperto », in the open field) when the signs float above the text : they show the melodic *gesture* without fixing the intervals. The old neumes are adiastrumatic ; square notation is diastematic.

The three « storeys » of the page

On a line of the *Graduale Triplex*, for each syllable of the text, you will find three pieces of information aligned vertically :

● Above : neumes of **Laon** ■ In the middle : **square notation** (Vatican edition)

● Below : neumes of **St. Gall**

In the middle : the square notation (the Editio Vaticana)

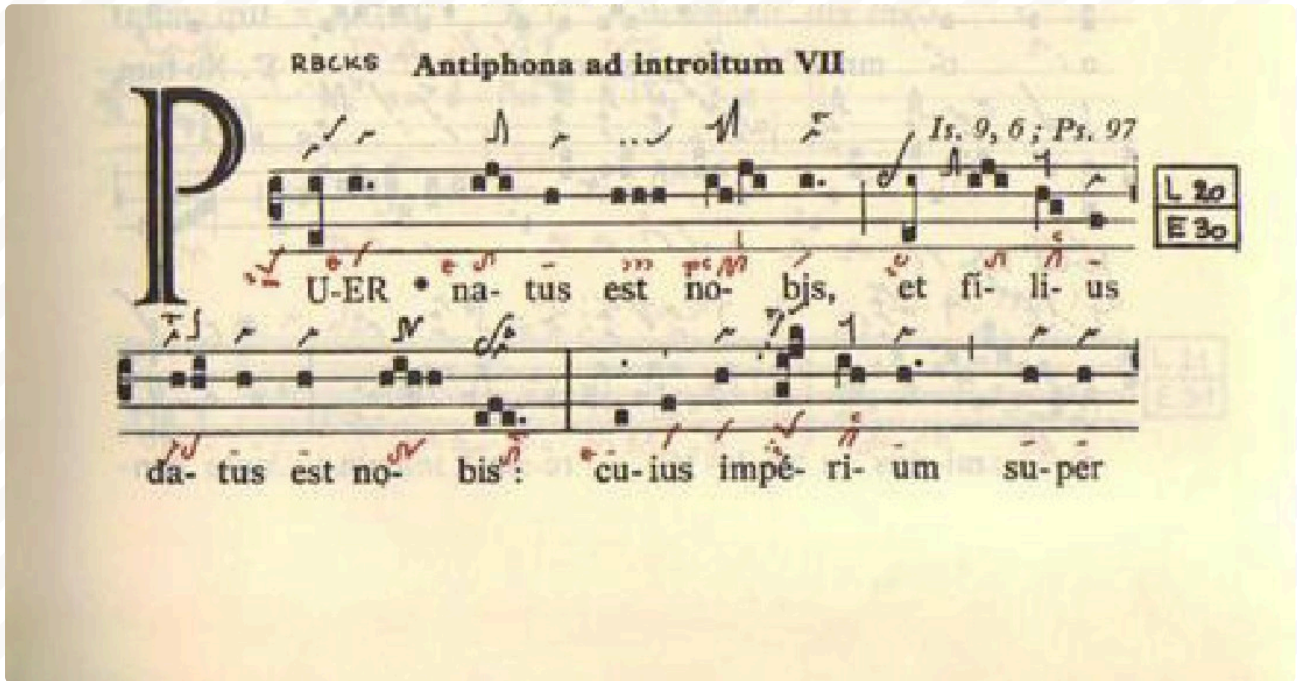
This is the reference layer for **pitch**. On its four-line staff, with its clef, it tells you exactly which note to sing. It is the one we learned in **The basics**. If you were to read only one layer to « get out » the melody, it would be this one.

Above : the neumes of Laon

They come from a 9th-century manuscript kept at Laon (the « manuscript 239 ») and are printed **in black**. This family of writing, called *Messine*, is famous for its **rhythmic** precision : it distinguishes short from long notes very finely, notably thanks to added letters (see below).

Below : the neumes of St. Gall

They come from manuscripts of the abbey of St. Gall (in present-day Switzerland), such as the *Cantatorium* (manuscript 359) or the Einsiedeln 121 manuscript, and are printed **in red**. This script is admired for the clarity with which it draws the **gesture** of the melody and its articulation, likewise enriched with small letters.



An extract from the *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes, 1979), p. 47 : the introit "Puer natus est", with the Laon neumes in red above the square notation, and the St Gall rhythmic markings in red below.

The « significative letters »

A delightful detail : the old copyists added **small letters** beside the neumes to specify the intention — rather like our markings « softly », « hold back » above a score. They are called *litterae significativae*. Here are some of the most frequent :

A FEW SIGNIFICATIVE LETTERS (USAGE VARIES BETWEEN LAON AND ST. GALL)

LETTER	LATIN WORD	MEANING FOR THE SINGER
c	<i>celeriter</i>	quickly, without dragging
t	<i>tenete</i>	hold, lengthen the note
a	<i>altius</i>	higher (go well up)
i / iu	<i>iusum / inferius</i>	lower
l	<i>levare</i>	lifting, lightening
m	<i>mediocriter</i>	moderately (neither too much nor too little)
e	<i>equaliter</i>	at the same pitch

HOW TO USE IT IN PRACTICE

There is no need to decode everything at once ! The comfortable method : first read the **note** in the square layer in the middle, then look above and below and ask yourself « should I press on, settle, lighten ? ». The two old layers often confirm each other — and when they diverge, that is precisely where the chant becomes fascinating to interpret.

KEY POINT

Triplex = 3 layers. The centre (square notation) gives *the notes* ; Laon (on top) and St. Gall (below) give *rhythm and expression*. We shall now see all of that come alive in six concrete chants.

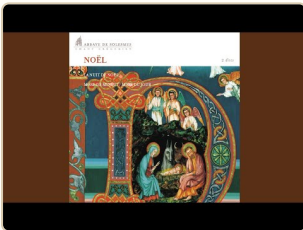
Example 1 — *Puer natus est*

The entrance chant (introit) of the Mass of Christmas Day. A luminous, welcoming chant, perfect for reading your very first neumes.

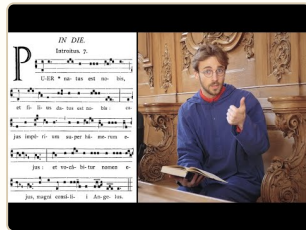
GENRE	Introit (entrance chant / <i>antiphona ad introitum</i>)
OCCASION	Mass of Christmas Day (<i>in die</i>), 25 December
TEXT	After the prophet Isaiah (Is 9, 6) and psalm 97
MODE	Mode VII (<i>sol</i> mode, called « angelic », bright and soaring)
STYLE	Rather neumatic : a few notes per syllable
IN THE <i>TRIPLEX</i>	p. 47

♪ LISTEN TO THE CHANT

Two interpretations, from the monastic style to a hands-on tutorial — ideal for comparison.



Choir of the Monks of
Saint-Pierre de
Solesmes Abbey
youtu.be/Kz1IUxAxYRw



Tutorial : « How to sing the
introit *Puer natus est* ? »
youtu.be/yt9PKLNIIMA

The text and its translation

LATIN

*Puer natus est nobis,
et filius datus est nobis :
cujus imperium super humerum ejus :
et vocabitur nomen ejus magni consilii
Angelus.*

ENGLISH

*A child is born to us,
and a son is given to us ;
sovereignty rests upon his shoulder ;
and he shall be called the Messenger of
the great design.*

What to look at first

Let us start gently, with the first word : *Pu-er*. It has two syllables, so at least two « packets » of neumes. The beauty of Gregorian chant is that a single syllable can carry several notes. Our job : for each syllable, to spot *how many* notes there are and *which way* they move.

METHOD IN 3 STEPS

1) Find the syllable in the text. 2) In the middle (square notation), count the squares and follow them up and down. 3) Glance above (Laon) and below (St. Gall) : should you press on, settle, lighten ? That is all.

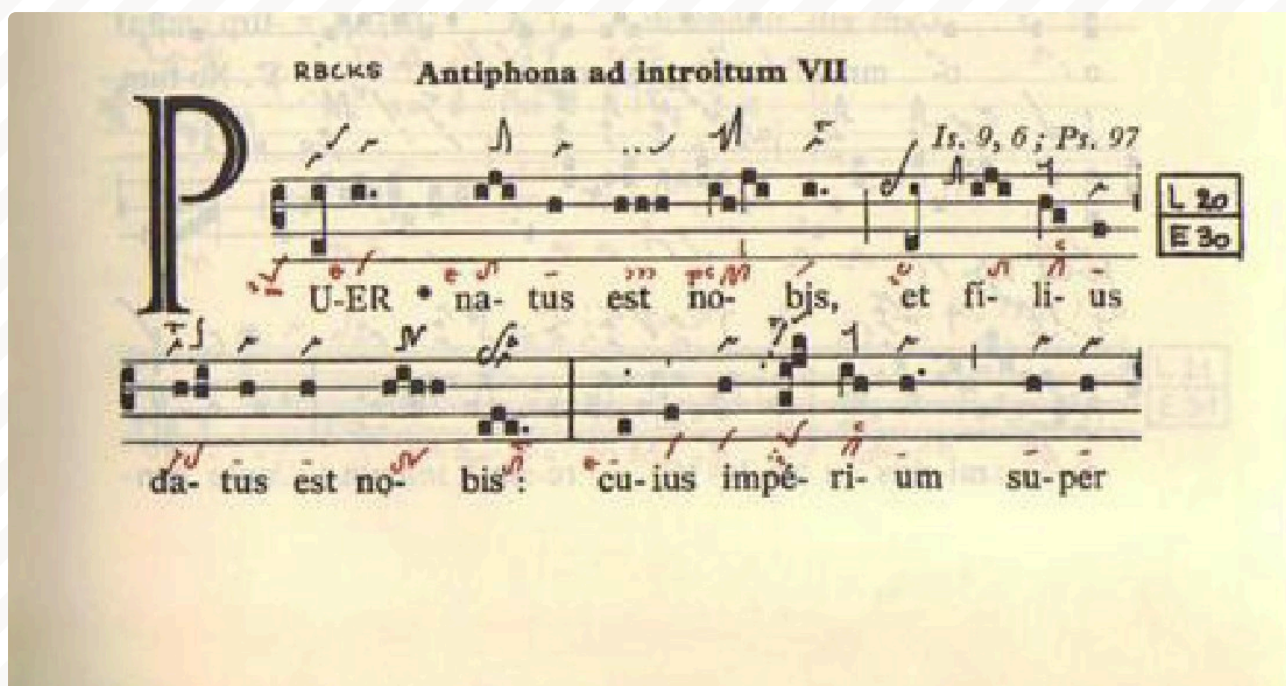
Syllable by syllable (start of the chant)

- **Pu-** : the chant typically takes flight with a rising movement. Look here for a **pes** (two notes going up) — the voice « takes off ».
- **-er** : the voice settles, often with a **clivis** (two notes going down) or a small group coming back down to the supporting note.
- **na-tus** : listen to how the word « born » is brought out ; the neumes become more generous here (several notes), underlining the most important word of the sentence.

REMINDER — ACCENT AND MUSIC

In chant the music follows the meaning of the text : important words (*Puer*, « the child ») often receive more notes or a slight leaning. This is not decorative : it is a way of *proclaiming* the text.

Seeing the three notations



The introit "Puer natus est" in the Graduale Triplex (Solesmes, 1979), p. 47.

● Laon, above (the rhythm) ■ Square notation, centre (the notes) ● St. Gall, below (the gesture)

KEY POINT FOR THIS CHANT

Puer natus est is a **neumatic** chant : small groups of 2 to 4 notes per syllable. It is the ideal training ground for recognising the **pes**, the **clivis** and the **torculus** without being overwhelmed. The next chant will multiply the notes...

Example 2 — *Viderunt omnes*

A gradual for Christmas Day, and one of the summits of Gregorian art : here a single syllable can carry dozens of notes. Welcome to the world of the **melisma**.

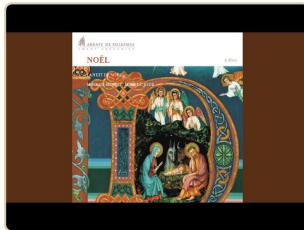
GENRE	Gradual (meditative chant, after the 1st reading)
OCCASION	Mass of Christmas Day
TEXT	Psalm 97 (98), verses 3 and 4, then verse 2
MODE	Mode V (<i>fa</i> mode, solemn and radiant)
STYLE	Melismatic : long garlands of notes per syllable
IN THE <i>TRIPLEX</i>	p. 48

♪ LISTEN TO THE CHANT

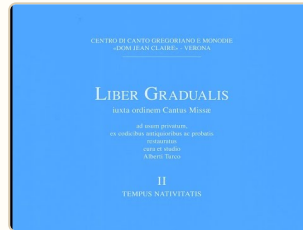
Listen to how a single syllable stretches into a long vocalise, depending on the performer.



**Ensemble Aliénor
Voices**
youtu.be/d-Bt8skYKrg



**Choir of the Monks of
Saint-Pierre de
Solesmes Abbey**
youtu.be/bUJgWibSgrE



**Letizia Butterin,
præcentor**
youtu.be/pppZucvGOc

The text and its translation

LATIN

*Viderunt omnes fines terræ
salutare Dei nostri :
jubilare Deo, omnis terra.*

VERSE *Notum fecit Dominus salutare
suum :
ante conspectum gentium revelavit
justitiam suam.*

ENGLISH

*All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God ;
acclaim God, all the earth.*

VERSE *The Lord has made known his
salvation ;
in the sight of the nations he has revealed
his justice.*

DEFINITION — MELISMA

A **melisma** is a group of many notes sung on a single syllable (sometimes twenty, thirty notes or more !). It is the opposite of « syllabic » chant (one note per syllable). The melisma is the voice *rejoicing*, drawing out a vowel as one draws out a joy.

Why so many notes ?

A gradual is not made to be understood « word by word » like a reading : it is a chant of contemplation, entrusted to a soloist or a small, highly trained group. On key syllables — for instance the last one of *om-nēs* or of *ter-ræ* — the melody blossoms into long vocalises. So do not try to « read fast » : here, one savours.

How to read a long melisma without getting lost

Faced with a garland of notes, the key is to **cut it up into familiar little neumes**. A melisma is never more than a sequence of bricks you already know :

- **climacus** figures (a note then a descending cascade of diamonds) — very frequent in descents ;
- linked **pes** and **clivis** figures, which make the line undulate ;
- sometimes a **quilisma**, that zigzag note which serves as a springboard in the middle of an ascent.

THE ROLE OF THE OLD NOTATIONS HERE

In such a dense melisma, the square notation in the middle shows clearly *which* notes follow one another. But it is above all the layers of **Laon** and **St. Gall** that rescue the performer : they show where to *speed up* (letter **c**, *celeriter*), where to *settle* (letter **t**, *tenete*, or an episema), so that the vocalise breathes instead of turning into a mush of notes.

DID YOU KNOW — THE JUBILUS

The great melisma of joy is sometimes called the *jubilus*, typically the one that blossoms on the final « a » of *Alleluia*. Saint Augustine described it as the song of a heart too full to find its words. *Viderunt omnes* belongs to that same family of exuberant writing.

Seeing the three notations



The gradual "Viderunt omnes", with its long melisma on "-nes" of "omnes", in the *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes, 1979), p. 48.

● Laon, above (the rhythm) ■ Square notation, centre (the notes) ● St. Gall, below (the gesture)

KEY POINT FOR THIS CHANT

Viderunt omnes illustrates the **melismatic** style. The right reflex : **cut up** the long vocalises into familiar neumes, and rely on the significative letters for the rhythm. After this feast of notes, let us return to a more intimate chant : the dawn of Christmas.

Example 3 — *Lux fulgebit*

The entrance chant of the dawn Mass at Christmas. A chant of half-light, all delicacy : the perfect occasion to hear the **nuances of duration**.

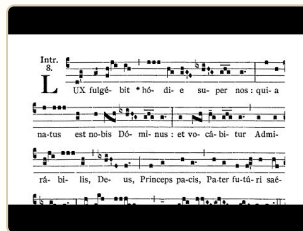
GENRE	Introit (entrance chant)
OCCASION	Mass at dawn on Christmas Day (<i>in aurora</i>), in the early morning of 25 December
TEXT	After Isaiah (Is 9, 2 and 9, 6) and psalm 92
MODE	Mode VIII (<i>sol</i> mode, peaceful and settled)
STYLE	Neumatic and measured : ideal for observing durations
IN THE TRIPLEX	p. 44

♪ LISTEN TO THE CHANT

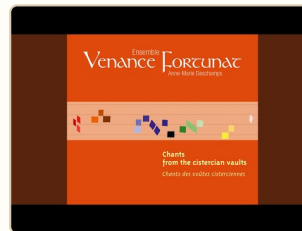
As you listen, spot the *settled* notes and the *flowing* ones.



Schola Gregoriana Vratislaviensis — *Lumen de lumine*
youtu.be/qRx08y4rs2Q



Choir of the Monks of Solesmes, dir. Dom Jean Claire
youtu.be/X6Sx6K3GJOk



Venance Fortunat · Ensemble Anne-Marie Deschamps
youtu.be/laXNboqoFU0

The text and its translation

LATIN

*Lux fulgebit hodie super nos :
quia natus est nobis Dominus :
et vocabitur Admirabilis, Deus,
Princeps pacis, Pater futuri sæculi :
cujus regni non erit finis.*

ENGLISH

*A light shall shine upon us today ;
for a Lord is born to us ;
and he shall be called Wonderful, God,
Prince of peace, Father of the world to
come ;
and his reign shall have no end.*

The real subject here : the duration of the notes

So far we have asked « how many notes ? » and « do they go up or down ? ». *Lux fulgebit* invites us to a subtler question : « how *long* does each note last ? ». For in chant, not all notes have the same duration : some are light and fleeting, others settle and broaden.

DEFINITION — SHORT NOTE, LENGTHENED NOTE

Chant alternates **short** notes (the ordinary, light flow) and **lengthened** notes, on which the voice lingers for a moment. This is not a « square » rhythm like a military march : it is a supple breathing, guided by the meaning of the text.

Where do you read these durations ?

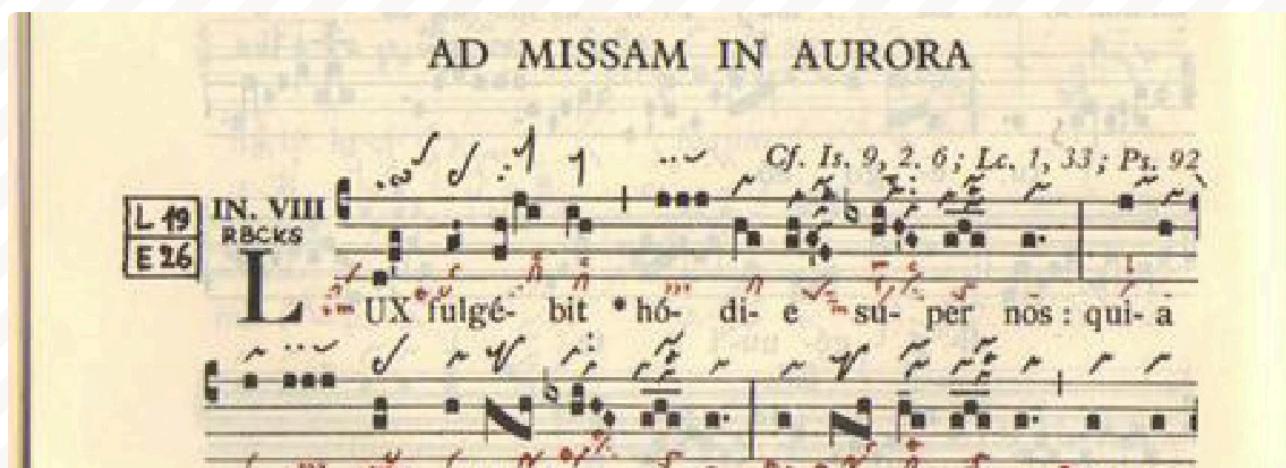
This is precisely the area where the old notations of the *Triplex* shine :

- **The episema** (small stroke) above a St. Gall neume : « settle, broaden ».
- **The letter *t*** (*tenete*) : « hold the note ».
- **The letter *c*** (*celeriter*) : on the contrary, « pass quickly, do not lean ».
- In the notation of **Laon**, the very shape of the stroke (rounded, « hooked »...) already distinguishes short from long with remarkable precision.

A VERY SIMPLE EXERCISE

On the word *Lux* (the « light ») and then on *fulgebit* (« will shine »), ask yourself : does the upper layer (Laon) or the lower one (St. Gall) tell me to *settle* the voice, or to *flow on* ? You will find that the moments of leaning often fall on the words the text wants to highlight : the light, the birth, the peace.

Seeing the three notations



The introit "Lux fulgebit" in the *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes, 1979), p. 44.

- Laon, above : the shape of the stroke tells short/long ■ Square notation, centre : the notes
- St. Gall, below : episemas, letters *t* / *c*

KEY POINT FOR THIS CHANT

With *Lux fulgebit* we move from the question « which notes ? » to the question « what duration, what leaning ? ». This is the heart of what makes the *Graduale Triplex* so precious : the two old layers make audible what square notation alone leaves mute.

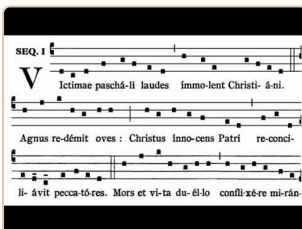
Example 4 — *Victimæ paschali laudes*

The great Easter sequence. With it we change period and style : a later chant, closer to the text, and even built like a little dialogue.

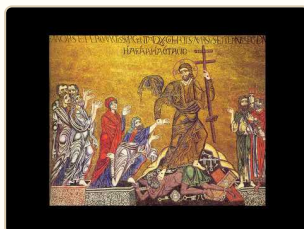
GENRE	Sequence (<i>sequentia</i>), sung before the Gospel
OCCASION	Easter Day (and its octave)
AUTHOR	Attributed to Wipo of Burgundy (11th century)
MODE	Mode I (<i>re</i> mode, at once grave and luminous)
STYLE	Rather syllabic : often one note per syllable
IN THE <i>TRIPLEX</i>	p. 198

♪ LISTEN TO THE CHANT

Follow the dialogue « Dic nobis Maria... » by ear : question, then answer.



Choir of the Monks of
Saint-Pierre de
Solesmes Abbey
youtu.be/AneBNAmTyr8



Venance Fortunat ·
Ensemble Anne-Marie
Deschamps
youtu.be/KFFJ7mBkdB0

The text and its translation

LATIN

*Victimæ paschali laudes
immolent Christiani.*

*Agnus redemit oves :
Christus innocens Patri reconciliavit
peccatores.*

*Mors et vita duello
confluxere mirando : dux vitæ mortuus,
regnat vivus.*

QUESTION *Dic nobis Maria,
quid vidisti in via ?*

ANSWER *Sepulcrum Christi viventis,
et gloriam vidi resurgentis...*

*Scimus Christum surrexisse a mortuis
vere :
tu nobis, victor Rex, miserere. Amen.
Alleluia.*

ENGLISH

*To the paschal victim
let Christians offer their praises.*

*The Lamb has redeemed the sheep ;
Christ the innocent has reconciled
sinners with the Father.*

*Death and life fought
a prodigious duel : the Lord of life, having
died, reigns alive.*

*Tell us, Mary,
what did you see on the way ?*

*The tomb of the living Christ,
and I saw the glory of the Risen One...*

*We know that Christ is truly risen from
the dead ;
have mercy on us, victorious King. Amen.
Alleluia.*

What is a sequence ?

Our first three examples go back to the heart of the old Gregorian repertoire. The **sequence**, by contrast, is a later genre (from the 9th-11th century) and of a different spirit. It is a **strophic** chant : it proceeds in pairs of phrases (*verses*) which, two by two, share the same melody. One idea is sung, then taken up again to the same tune with a new text.

DEFINITION — SYLLABIC

A **syllabic** chant sets (most often) *a single note per syllable*. It is the opposite of the teeming melisma of **Viderunt omnes**. As a result, the text remains very intelligible — one « follows » the words easily.

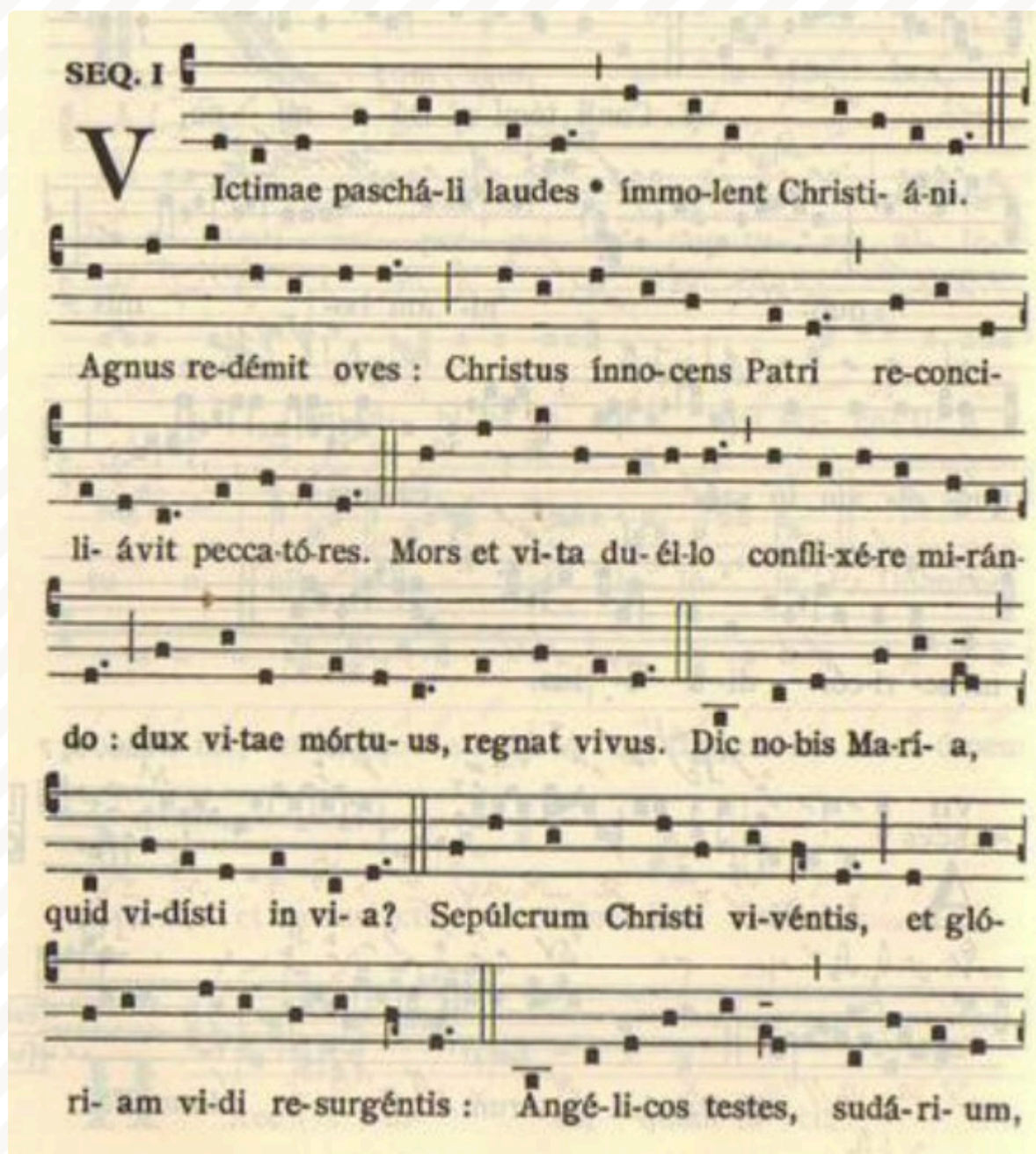
What changes when reading the neumes

Good news : because the sequence is largely syllabic, the neumes are easier to spot here ! You will mostly meet isolated **puncta** (one note per syllable), punctuated now and then by a **pes** or a **clivis** at important joints. It is an excellent chant for *consolidating* what you have learned, without the density of the graduals.

LISTEN FOR : THE DIALOGUE

Find the passage « *Dic nobis Maria...* » (« Tell us, Mary... »). The text stages a **question** put to Mary Magdalene and her **answer**. The melody underlines this dialogue : it is a little sung theatre, almost a scene. Notice how, in this passage, the neumes stay sober so as to let the words speak.

Seeing the three notations



The sequence "*Victimae paschali laudes*", with its "*Dic nobis Maria...*" dialogue, in the *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes, 1979), p. 198.

● Laon, above (the rhythm) ■ Square notation, centre (the notes) ● St. Gall, below (the gesture)

KEY POINT FOR THIS CHANT

Victimae paschali laudes illustrates the **syllabic** style and the **strophic** form of the sequence. After the abundance of the graduals, it is a return to clarity : one note, one syllable, one word — and the Easter text offering itself almost as a narrative.

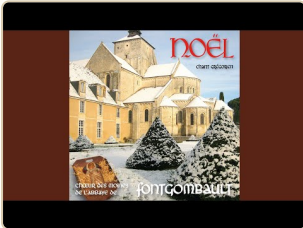
Example 5 — *Alleluia. Dies sanctificatus*

The acclamation that precedes the Gospel on Christmas Day. A chant built on a single word — *Alleluia* — and on the long vocalise that prolongs it : the **jubilus**.

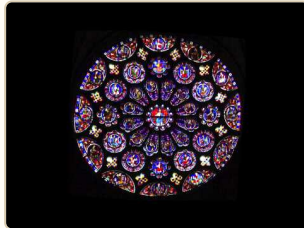
GENRE	Alleluia (acclamation before the Gospel)
OCCASION	Mass of Christmas Day (<i>in die</i>), 25 December
TEXT	Proper verse for Christmas : <i>Dies sanctificatus illuxit nobis...</i>
MODE	Mode II (low <i>re</i> mode, recollected)
STYLE	Melismatic : the word is short, the vocalise long
IN THE TRIPLEX	p. 49

♪ LISTEN TO THE CHANT

Watch for the return of the *jubilus* : it opens the chant, then comes back after the verse.



Choir of the monks of Notre-Dame de Fontgombault Abbey — in the tradition of the Solesmes method.
youtu.be/q958qiRt_ZM



Ensemble Organum (Marcel Pérès) — an ornate version in medieval organum style (Notre-Dame school), to compare with the monodic version above.
youtu.be/lZE5jeOpl0M

The text and its translation

LATIN

Alleluia.

VERSE *Dies sanctificatus illuxit nobis :
venite gentes, et adorete Dominum :*

*quia hodie descendit lux magna super
terram.*

ENGLISH

Alleluia.

VERSE *A sanctified day has shone upon
us ;*

*come, you nations, and adore the Lord ;
for today a great light has come down
upon the earth.*

DEFINITION — JUBILUS

The *jubilus* is the long vocalise that prolongs the final « a » of *Alleluia*. Saint Augustine gives it its finest definition : the song of a heart too full to find its words. It is the **melisma** in its pure state — the notes no longer carry a text, but a joy.

How an Alleluia is built

An Alleluia is not a chant « in a straight line » : it is a there-and-back. The soloist launches the word *Alleluia*, the choir takes it up and prolongs it with the jubilus ; the soloist then sings the **verse** ; then everyone returns to the starting point, jubilus included. This **responsorial** form — a soloist, a response — is exactly the one we met in the heritage of psalmody.

What that changes for reading

- The text is **tiny** (one word, then a short verse) : all the attention goes to the drawing of the neumes, not to the syllables.
- The jubilus is read like any melisma : you **cut it up** into familiar neumes — pes, clivis, climacus, quilisma.
- The return of the jubilus after the verse offers a rare opportunity : comparing **the same line of neumes twice**, a few centimetres apart.

THE ROLE OF THE OLD NOTATIONS HERE

In such a long vocalise, square notation gives the notes but not the breath. It is the layers of **Laon** (above) and **St. Gall** (below) that cut the jubilus into breathable little units : a **c** (*celeriter*) to flow on, a **t** (*tenete*) or an episema to settle. Without them, the jubilus is sung flat.

DID YOU KNOW — ONE ALLELUIA FOR SEVERAL FEASTS

Alleluia melodies travel : one and the same melodic line often serves several verses through the liturgical year. The Alleluia repertoire is thus a wonderful field for observing the **reuse** of melodies — a common procedure in chant, where a known model is adapted to a new text.

Seeing the three notations



"Alleluia. Dies sanctificatus", with its jubilus on "-ia", in the Graduale Triplex (Solesmes, 1979), p. 49.

- Laon, above : where to press on, where to settle
- Square notation, centre : the notes of the jubilus
- St. Gall, below : the gesture, the episemas

KEY POINT FOR THIS CHANT

The Alleluia is the form in which **the melisma becomes the subject** : one word, an explosion of notes, a verse, and off we go again. Now listen to the same genre at the other great pole of the liturgical year : Easter.

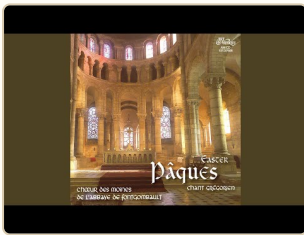
Example 6 — *Alleluia. Pascha nostrum*

The Alleluia of Easter Day. The same form as the Christmas one, but a wholly different brilliance : the ideal occasion to **compare two jubili** and hear what the mode changes in a melody.

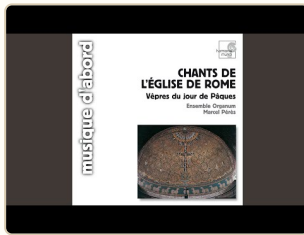
GENRE	Alleluia (acclamation before the Gospel)
OCCASION	Mass of Easter Day, and throughout Eastertide
TEXT	1st letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 5, 7)
MODE	Mode VII (<i>sol</i> mode, bright and soaring)
STYLE	Melismatic : a brief verse, an ample vocalise
IN THE TRIPLEX	p. 197

♪ LISTEN TO THE CHANT

Listen first to the Christmas Alleluia, then to this one : mode II gathers itself in, mode VII soars.



Choir of the monks of Notre-Dame de Fontgombault Abbey — the same ensemble as for the Christmas Alleluia.
youtu.be/sIKiksKvEVw



Ensemble Organum (Marcel Pérès) — Old Roman chant for the Easter Mass, to compare with the monodic version above.
youtu.be/n21dVddbJT8

The text and its translation

LATIN

Alleluia.

VERSE *Pascha nostrum immolatus est Christus.*

ENGLISH

Alleluia.

VERSE *Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed.*

REMINDER — THE MODE

The **mode** is the « family of notes » in which a melody moves : its resting note, its favoured degrees, its colour. Chant has eight of them. Two chants of the same form and the same length can thus produce opposite impressions : that is exactly what happens between the mode II of Christmas, grave and inward, and the Easter mode VII, luminous and rising.

Two Alleluias, the same mechanism

Go back to the previous page and set the two chants side by side : you will see the same architecture. The word *Alleluia*, its jubilus, a verse entrusted to the soloist, then the return of the jubilus. What Eastertide adds is breadth : the vocalise stretches further, as if the joy of Easter needed more air.

A comparison exercise

- Count the neumes of the jubilus in both chants : the difference can be seen before it is heard.
- Look for the **resting note** (the one the melody falls back to) : *re* for Christmas, *sol* for Easter.
- Spot the **quilismas** : in the Easter ascents they are numerous — the voice gathers momentum.

THE ROLE OF THE OLD NOTATIONS HERE

Now is the moment to check something amusing : across two different jubili, the **significant letters** come back at the same strategic places — just before an ascent, at the top of a curve, right at the end. Laon (above) and St. Gall (below) do not decorate : they **articulate**.

Seeing the three notations



"Alleluia. Pascha nostrum" in the *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes, 1979), p. 197.

● Laon, above : the rhythm of the jubilus ■ Square notation, centre : the notes

● St. Gall, below : the gesture and the leanings

KEY POINT FOR THIS CHANT

With these two Alleluias you have been round all the styles : syllabic, neumatic, melismatic, and the responsorial form that sets them in dialogue. All that remains is to keep the vocabulary at hand : on to the [glossary](#).

A short glossary of Gregorian chant

All the key words met throughout the blog, gathered here and explained in one sentence. Keep it at hand as you read.

The styles of chant

TERM	IN PLAIN WORDS
Syllabic	One note per syllable. The text stays very clear. E.g. : the sequence <i>Victimæ paschali</i> .
Neumatic	A few notes (2 to 4) per syllable. E.g. : the introit <i>Puer natus est</i> .
Melismatic	Many notes on a single syllable. E.g. : the gradual <i>Viderunt omnes</i> .
Melisma	The long garland of notes itself, sung on a vowel.
Jubilus	The great melisma of joy, typically on the « a » of <i>Alleluia</i> .

The basic neumes

SQUARE NOTATION	NEUME	MODERN EQUIVALENT	MOVEMENT OF THE VOICE
	Punctum		One note (small square).
	Virga		One note (square with a stem), often higher.
	Pes <i>(podatus)</i>		Two notes going up.
	Clivis <i>(flexa)</i>		Two notes going down.
	Torculus		Three notes : low · high · low.
	Porrectus		Three notes : high · low · high.
	Scandicus		Three (or more) notes going up.
	Climacus		One note then a descending cascade of diamonds.

The following table, taken from an online course by the University of Basel, also compares these neumes across several old scripts — St Gall, Messine, Aquitanian...

Names	punctum	virga	pes	clivis	torculus	porrectus	climacus	scandicus	quilisma
Modern equivalent									
French Square Notation									
St Gall									
Messine									
Breton									
Aquitanian									
Palaeo-Frankish									
Beneventan									

Notice the differentiated precision in the Messine neumes (Laon manuscript), which stand out for using several different shapes for the same neume. By comparison, we also note a certain lack of precision in square notation and modern notation.

The signs of nuance

SIGN	WHAT IT ASKS FOR
Quilisma	A light zigzag note, a springboard to the next note ; the preceding note is slightly lengthened.
Episema	A small stroke : the note is settled on, broadened.
Letter c	<i>celeriter</i> — quickly, without leaning.
Letter t	<i>tenete</i> — hold, lengthen.
Letter a	<i>altius</i> — higher.

A few additional definitions

TERM	IN PLAIN WORDS
Neume	A sign notating one or more sounds on the same syllable (from the Greek <i>pneuma</i> , breath).
Staff / tetragram	The four lines on which square notation is written.
Clef	A marker at the start of the line (<i>C</i> or <i>F</i> clef) that locates the semitones.
Diastematic	Notation that indicates exact pitches (square notation).
Adiastematic	Notation « in the open field », showing the gesture without precise pitches (the old neumes).
<i>Litteræ significativæ</i>	The small letters added to the neumes to specify rhythm or expression.
Mode	The « family of notes » and the colour of a melody (eight modes in chant).
Graduale Triplex	Book from Solesmes (1979) superimposing three notations : Laon (top), square notation (centre), St. Gall (bottom).
Laon (ms 239)	9th-c. manuscript ; <i>Messine</i> script, famous for its rhythmic precision.
St. Gall	Swiss manuscripts (<i>Cantatorium</i> 359, Einsiedeln 121) ; a clear script for the melodic gesture.

The genres of chant encountered

GENRE	ROLE IN THE MASS
Introit	Entrance chant. E.g. : <i>Puer natus est, Lux fulgebit.</i>
Gradual	Meditative chant after the 1st reading. E.g. : <i>Viderunt omnes.</i>
Sequence	Strophic chant before the Gospel, on great feasts. E.g. : <i>Victimæ paschali laudes.</i>
Alleluia	Acclamation before the Gospel, prolonged by the <i>jubilus</i> . E.g. : <i>Dies sanctificatus, Pascha nostrum.</i>

GOING FURTHER

The best teacher remains the ear : listen to recordings of these six chants (many monasteries share them freely) while following the text, then while following the neumes. Little by little, the drawing and the sound will come together.

Where they fit in the Mass

These chants aren't interchangeable : each has its precise place in the order of the Mass. Two categories are traditionally distinguished :

- the **Proper** (*Proprium*) : the text changes according to the feast of the day — this is where our six chants belong ;
- the **Ordinary** (*Ordinarium*) : the text stays the same all year round (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei...).

Here is the order in which these pieces are sung during Mass :

CHANT	PROPER OR ORDINARY ?
Introit	Proper
Kyrie	Ordinary
Gloria	Ordinary
Gradual — followed, on certain feasts, by an Alleluia, a Tract, or a sequence	Proper
Credo	Ordinary
Offertory	Proper
Sanctus	Ordinary
Agnus Dei	Ordinary
Communion	Proper
Ite missa est	fixed text

Where to find these texts : the **Proper** is in the *Graduale Romanum* or the *Graduale Triplex* (Solesmes ed.), the **Ordinary** in the *Kyriale Romanum* (Solesmes ed.).

Chronology up to the First Crusade

The key dates leading from ancient Christianity to the “Gregorian” chant as fixed by the Carolingian era, up to the eve of the First Crusade — the full story is told in **What do we mean by « Gregorian » ?**

DATE	EVENT
313	Edict of Milan : Christianity becomes a lawful religion in the Roman Empire.
4th c. (c. 386)	Ambrose of Milan introduces antiphonal singing in Milan ("Ambrosian" chant).
590 – 604	Pontificate of Gregory the Great ; reorganisation of the Roman liturgy and its <i>schola cantorum</i> .
711	Beginning of the Muslim presence on the Iberian Peninsula (<i>al-Andalus</i>).
732	Charles Martel halts the Saracen advance at Poitiers.
768 – 814	Reign of Charlemagne : Roman chant is imposed across the empire ; its encounter with Frankish practice gives birth to the "Gregorian" repertoire. The unification of Gregorian chant begins with <i>Chrodegang</i> , bishop of Metz, who founds a <i>Schola Cantorum</i> .
800	Charlemagne is crowned emperor in Rome by the Pope.
9th c. (c. 850)	The first neumes appear : simple memory aids for the vocal gesture, without precise pitches (the Laon manuscript, Messine neumes).
9th c.	Kassia of Constantinople , Byzantine hymnographer and composer : one of the few medieval women composers whose music has survived.
c. 873	A <i>Life</i> of Gregory tells, for the first time, the legend of the dove of the Holy Spirit.
10th c.	The Einsiedeln manuscript (Stiftsbibliothek, codex 121) : one of the oldest neumed witnesses (St. Gall notation) of Gregorian chant, recording among others the introit <i>Puer natus est</i> .
2nd half of the 10th c.	The first staff lines appear, to make the pitch of notes more precise (in Italy and Aquitaine).
1054	Schism between the Eastern and Western Churches. The two liturgies (Roman and Byzantine) develop independently from each other from then on.
11th c.	Square notation on a staff appears : pitches finally become clearly readable.
1066	Norman Conquest of England by William the Conqueror.
1095	Council of Clermont : Pope Urban II preaches the First Crusade.
1099	Capture of Jerusalem : end of the First Crusade.

Bibliography & resources

A selection for going further, from the most accessible to the most specialised.

Introductory works

SAULNIER, DANIEL. *Le chant grégorien*. Solesmes.

A short, clear and accessible synthesis : the ideal sequel to this blog.

HILEY, DAVID. *Gregorian Chant*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

The standard introduction in English, highly pedagogical.

Specialised works

CARDINE, EUGÈNE. *Sémiologie grégorienne*. Solesmes, 1970.

The founding book on reading the old neumes (St. Gall, Laon) ; technical.

APEL, WILLI. *Gregorian Chant*. Indiana University Press, 1958.

A classic survey of history, genres and forms.

SOLESMES ABBEY. *Paléographie Musicale* (series, from 1889).

Annotated manuscript facsimiles ; the origin of the modern restoration.

Chant editions

SOLESMES ABBEY. *Graduale Triplex*. Solesmes, 1979 — and the *Offertoriale Triplex* (Solesmes, 1985) for the offertories and their verses.

The edition at the heart of this blog : square notation + neumes of Laon and St. Gall.

SOLESMES ABBEY. *Graduale Romanum*. (Vatican edition).

The official gradual in square notation only.

Digitised manuscripts & online resources (freely accessible)

E-CODICES. Virtual manuscript library of Switzerland.

Major witnesses from St. Gall : *Cantatorium* (ms 359), Hartker antiphonary (ms 390/391), and Einsiedeln 121.

GALLICA. Digital library of the BnF.

Many liturgical manuscripts, including the Laon tradition.

GREGOBASE ; CANTUS DATABASE. Databases of scores and Gregorian chants.

To find, catalogue and transcribe a particular piece.

LISTENING

The interpretations mentioned in this blog (Solesmes, Silos, **Organum** / Marcel Pérès, **Venance Fortunat** / Anne-Marie Deschamps) are gathered, ready to compare, on each chant page — start with **Puer natus est**.

Your suggestions

A remark, a typo you spotted, an idea for another chant to add ? This blog is meant to keep growing : feel free to write to us.

Name (optional)

Email (optional, for a reply)

Your message

Send

About the authors

***Marie-Noëlle Kreilos** — musician, teacher, and the author of this blog. **Paléo** grew out of her own path, between the classroom and the study room.*

WHERE THE NAME “PALÉO” COMES FROM

Marie-Noëlle Kreilos taught music in Schaffhausen (Switzerland) and in Germany. She founded the small medieval-music ensemble *Hexacordum*. For several years, this ensemble gave workshops and courses on medieval music in Alsace, Germany and Switzerland. Holding a postgraduate diploma in musicology from the **University of Strasbourg**, Marie-Noëlle Kreilos studied **musical palaeography** : the discipline that deciphers old musical writing — the very one that gave this blog its name. That taste for neumes and old manuscripts never left her : *Paléo* is its continuation, meant to pass it on simply.

One foot in music teaching, the other in the study of old manuscripts : this dual background gives *Paléo* its particular tone — that of a teacher used to making technical knowledge accessible, applied here to a thousand-year-old script.

***Joël-Marie Kreilos**, musician, musicologist and computer scientist. He holds a First Prize in baroque flute from the conservatoire and a bachelor's degree in musicology from the Sorbonne. He handled the technical side of this blog and contributed a critical reading of the text.*

A WORD ABOUT THIS BLOG

Paléo was born from the wish to share a script as beautiful as it is little-known, without jargon or prerequisites. A remark, a question ? The suggestion form at the bottom of the **glossary** is open.