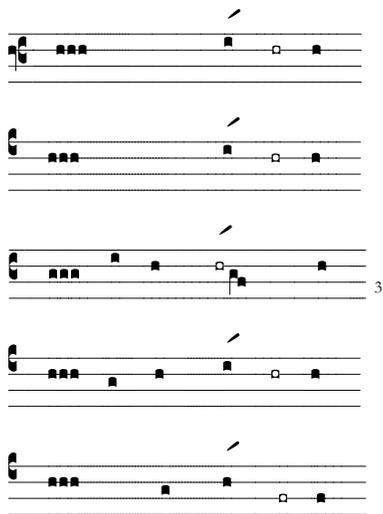


Setting English Texts to Gregorian Psalm Tones: Theoretical Considerations and Practical Suggestions

Bruce E. Ford

The purpose of chant recitation formulas (prayer tones, lesson tones, psalm tones) is to facilitate proper declamation of liturgical texts. Eugène Cardine, his colleagues, and their disciples, have shown that all styles of “Gregorian” chant are in fact, vehicles for declamation. While the declamatory character of florid chant may not be immediately obvious, the declamatory character of these simple recitative formulas is self-evident.

All the cadential formulas of the simple psalm tones accentual. Some are of one-accent; others are of two accents. In certain of them one, two, or three “preparatory syllables” precede the first accent. These formulas are designed to accommodate the accentual patterns that prevail in liturgical Latin prose. In all these patterns the last accented syllable is followed by one or two unstressed syllables.¹ The cadential formulas of one accent take only two forms:²



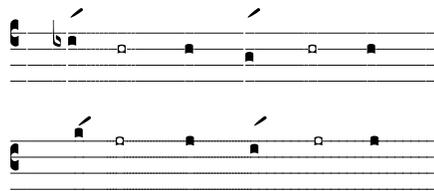
1. Dé- um
2. Dó- mi- num

¹ Those in which one unstressed syllable follows the last accented syllable are called *paroxytones*. Those in which two unstressed syllables follow the last accented syllable are called *proparoxytones*. Those in which the final syllable itself is accented are called *oxytones*. An extra note added to a formula to accommodate the penultimate syllable of a proparoxytone is called an *epenthesis*.

² Abrupt mediations, in which the final note of certain mediant cadences is omitted because the final syllable of the text bears an accent, will be discussed later in connection with accommodation of accentual anomalies.

³ This formula employs an *anticipated epenthesis*, which precedes the penultimate neume instead of following it. The last two syllables of the text are always set to the last two neumes of the cadence. When the text is proparoxytonic, the *accented* syllable is set to the epenthesis.

The cadential formulas of two accents take four forms



1. cór- de mé o
2. nó- men Do- mi- ni
3. spí- ri- tus mé- us
4. tér- ra vi- vén- ti- um

Nevertheless, accentuation of liturgical Latin prose is not *completely* regular. In a few Latin words, such as “adhuc,” the accent properly falls on the final syllable.⁴ Furthermore, throughout history some musicians have held that the original Hebrew (oxytonic) accentuation ought to be maintained in names and words of Hebrew origin when they are used in Latin. Some have also held that final Latin monosyllables ought always to be accented.⁵

Twentieth-century chant books generally direct that most irregularly-accented phrases be made to fit recitative formulas through disregard of some accents. Specimens of fully-notated psalm verses, lessons, prayers, etc. that we find in medieval manuscripts reveal, however, that musicians of the Middle Ages used these formulas with greater flexibility than the rules given in twentieth-century chant books allow. Eugène Cardine, in his *Beginning Studies in Gregorian Chant*,⁶ reproduces the following example from St. Gall 381:



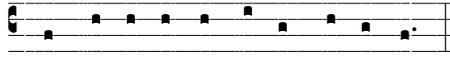
quó-ni-am Dó-mi-nus spés é- ius est.

⁴ See H. Gavel, “À propos des erreurs d’accentuation latine dans les livres liturgiques,” *Études grégoriennes*, I (1954), 83ff.

⁵ Observe, for example, the treatment of the name, “David,” in the Palm Sunday antiphon, *Hosanna filio David*, and the treatment of the name, “Ierusalem,” in the introit, *Laetare Ierusalem*. Others have chosen to accentuate words of Hebrew origin found in Latin texts according to normal Latin rules and to treat final monosyllables as enclitics. Observe the treatment of the name “Sion” in the introit *Populus Sion*.

⁶ Eugène Cardine, *Beginning Studies in Gregorian Chant*, tr. from the Italian and French eds. with editorial comments by William Tortolano (Chicago 1988), 71. Translation of: *Primo anno di canto gregoriano*.

The rules given in modern books call for disregarding the accent on the important word “spes.” If these rules had been applied, the text would have been set thus:



quó-ni-am Dó-mi-nus spés é- ius est

—much to the the detriment of good declamation.

Cardine writes:

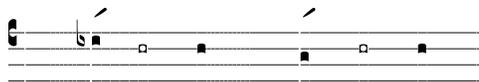
Even in the narrow genre of psalmodic cadences we see the Gregorianists of the true epoch going against their will. They dared to liberate themselves from the general rule when its application would have put both text and melody in too strong a conflict... Could we not act in a similar manner in like cases? It can be wished and even achieved only on *two conditions*

- that the adopted solution be, as in the given examples, altogether in conformity with the norms of the Gregorian composition,
- and that the unity and ease of execution do not suffer therefrom

In fact, it is especially the second point which justifies the simple and fixed rules: a soloist can be successful in pleasant adaptations if he possesses a true knowledge and a good technique; but can it ever be expected that a choir be capable of improvising as a group in order to solve the varied problems presented by the singing of the song? A particular case *noted with precision*⁷ and reserved to a soloist or a small group of well-trained singers such as the verse taken from the MS of St. Gall 381 — does not offer any difficulty. But, unfortunately, one cannot generalize this usage. It is too complicated.

It is, indeed, too complicated if (as the editors of modern chant books suppose) choirs are to sing from **unpointed texts**. Fortunately, pointing the psalms for the singers lessens the complexity, and **notating the psalm verses in full** eliminates it entirely.

The four accentual patterns that these formulas are designed to accommodate occur with some frequency in English :



- | | | | |
|----------|----------|------|----------|
| 1. mý | sal- | vá- | tion |
| 2. shóws | his | hán- | di- work |
| 3. tále | to an- | óth- | er |
| 4. lived | with in- | tég- | ri- ty |

⁷ Italics added.

But five other patterns that are anomalous in Latin occur in English with great regularity.

5. Náme of the Lórd
6. wórds be-hínd your báck
7. greát Gód
8. greát mýstery
9. goód shépherd

The “Procustean bed” approach to pointing that the modern chant books prescribe, when employed with English texts, impairs declamation far more than it does when it is employed Latin texts because the frequency with which the formulas do not fit English texts is much greater. **If we are unwilling to adjust the psalm tones to make them accommodate English texts, we ought not to use them to set English texts, because their very purpose is to facilitate good declamation.** Some contemporary musicians have composed new modal recitation formulas designed especially for English texts. Many who have experimented with these tones, however, find them less satisfying than the “Gregorian” psalm tones. An effort to adjust the “Gregorian” psalm tones to the requirements of English diction, therefore, seems warranted. I have found that the difficulties involved are not insurmountable.

Practical Suggestions

Because certain accentual patterns that are anomalous in Latin occur regularly in English, it behooves us to treat them *consistently*. As John Boe has noted,

The absence of set-form⁸ accentual “rules” make sit much harder to sing a repeated short melody ... Each verse must be consciously learned separately—and re-learned ... There is no relying on how the melody *ought* to behave in relation to the accents of the text.

A set-form, on the other hand, once learned, is easy to retain. It sings itself. A set-form, by codifying and systematizing variations with a repeated pattern, utilizes men’s inclination toward habit and their preference for repeating a pattern of behavior, whether physical or verbal. A set-form is akin to language in origin.”⁹

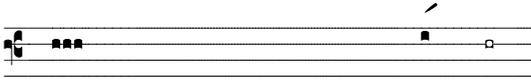
Abundant evidence shows that *at some times and in some* places during the Middle Ages the final notes of the mediant cadences in psalm tones 2, 4, 5, 6, and 8, were

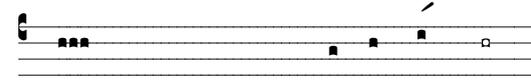
⁸ “Set-form” is Boe’s term for an accentual chant formula.

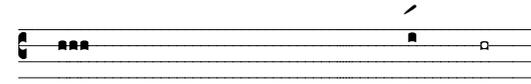
⁹ John Boe, *The Ordinary in English: Anglican Palinsong Kyrials and Their Sources*. (Ph.D. Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1969), 165.

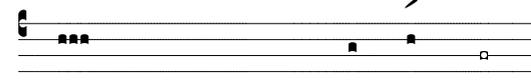
omitted in oxytonic phrases.¹⁰ “Abrupt mediations,” as they are called, may be employed with English texts without any hesitation:

Tone

2 

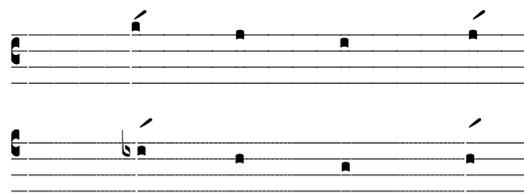
4 

5, 8 

6 

In the mediant cadences of tones 1 and 7 oxytones require more nuanced treatment.

The treatment customarily accorded to Latin texts in which the an accented final syllable is preceded by *two* unstressed syllables is entirely satisfactory.



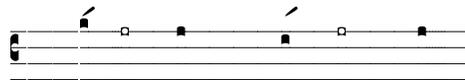
pro-pi-ti- á- ti o ést.
per-se- quén- ti bus mé
Náme of the Lórd

¹⁰ Joseph Pothier, editor of the Vatican edition of the chant, directed the use of the abrupt mediation in these tones wherever the half-verse of the psalm ended with a word of Hebrew origin or a monosyllable. André Mocquereu of Solesmes disapproved of its use and obtained an indult from the Congregation of Sacred Rites, authorizing (where it was preferred) the treatment of all final monosyllables as enclitics and the accentuation of Hebrew words and names according to normal Latin rules. Opponents of the abrupt mediation invoked a medieval maxim: “Musica regulis Donati non subiacet.” (“Let music not be subject to the laws of Donatus.”) Donatus was a grammarian. Recent research, which has underlined the primacy of the text in chant composition, suggests that this maxim’s applicability to chant is more than questionable.

The treatment customarily accorded to Latin texts in which an accented final syllable is preceded by only *one* unstressed syllable is less satisfactory.

Tone

7

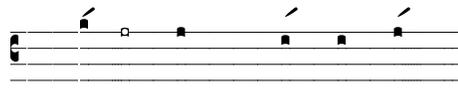
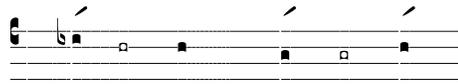


1



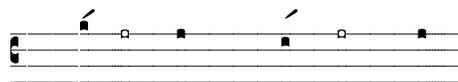
mé- a lau- dá- bunt té
words be- hínđ your bák

Here the final syllable loses its musical accent. . Fortunately a slightly different form of the cadence found in some manuscripts (e.g., the Sarum) places the extra note assigned to the penultimate syllable on *sol* rather than *la*. This arrangement of notes serves beautifully when both the penultimate and final syllable are accented.

wórds be- hínđ your bák
Gód him sélf is júdge

This variant form of the cadence, unfortunately, does not fit texts in which the final accent falls on the antepenultimate syllable because it places a false accent on the final syllable.




líved with in- tég- ri- ty
shóws his hán- di- work

To facilitate good English declamation we need to employ **both** forms of this and similar cadential formulas—the first for accentual pattern #4 and the second for pattern #6.

The same principle obtains with respect to the final cadence of tone “4A.”¹¹ This very ancient formula is “anaphoral chant,” used in the Roman Missal for the institution narrative and for the Mozarabic Lord’s Prayer. It is also used in the *Te Deum*, which was originally part of an anaphora. In the final cadence of this psalm tone psalm tone, as given in modern books, the epenthesis is placed on *mi*, but where the formula is used in other contexts, the epenthesis is often placed on *sol*. When the text is proparoxytonic, it ought to be placed on *mi*, but when the text is osytonic, and *only one* unstressed syllable precedes the accented final syllable, the epenthesis is best placed on *sol*.

lived with in- tég- ri- ty but for God him- sélf is júdge

This felicitous solution encourages us to extend the principle further, establishing additional variations in the final cadences of tones 2 and 5, 6, and 8

Tone

2 lived with in- tég- ri- ty but for Gód him- sélf is júdge

5

6

8

In the example cited by Cardine, here mentioned earlier,

quó-ni-am Dó-mi-nus spés é- ius est.

illustrates the employment of *syneresis*¹² to accommodate proximate accented syllables. Since proximate accented syllables are encountered in English much more

¹¹ The antiphons used with this tone do not belong to the fourth mode. They belong to the *protus*.

¹² *Syneresis* is the assignment to one syllable of two notes that are normally each assigned to a syllable by itself.

frequently than in Latin, syneresis must be employed more frequently with English texts than with Latin. These examples illustrate advantageous employment of syneresis :

Mediant cadence, tone 1 :

greát mýs- te- ry
goód shép- herd

Mediant cadence, tone 4 :

greát mýs- te- ry
goód shép- herd

Here the notes customarily assigned to the two preparatory syllables are fused.

Satisfactorily accommodating accentual pattern #4 (greát Gód) at the mediant cadences of tones 1 and 7 requires a degree of innovation from which some may demur. In the Sarum form of tone 7, however, we find a variant from which we can forge a variant of our own to accommodate this pattern.

From we may derive and and

fác- tus ést greát Gód greát Gód
 mówn fiéld mówn fiéld

Although I believe that notating psalms in full is preferable to pointing them, I recognize that some will prefer to use pointing. To them I recommend the following system :

- Write out the psalm tone without epentheses.
- Use a carat or bracket to link cadential syllables that are to be sung to repeated notes.
- In recitations italicize accented syllables that must be protracted because they are immediately followed by other accented syllables.
- Use **bold face** type and to indicate syneresis.
- Use a dash to indicate the omission of a cadential note.
- When accentual pattern #4 occurs at the mediant cadence of tone 1 or 7, write out the special form of the cadence.

Here is a pointed psalm :

Psalm 72



1 Give the King your | justice, O God, *
and your righteousness | to the King's Son;

2 That he may rule your | people righteous^{ly} *
and the | poor with justice;

3 That the mountains may bring prosperity | to the people, *
and the little *hills* | **bring** right- (eous)-ness.

Refrain

4 He shall defend the needy a- | mong the people; *
he shall rescue the poor and crush | the oppressor.

5 He shall live as long as the | sun and moon^{endure}, *
from *one* generation | to another.

Refrain

6 He shall *come* down like rain upon the | **mown** — field, *
like showers that | water the earth.



mówn fiéld

7 In his time shall the | righteous flourish; *
there shall be abundance of *peace* till the | moon shall
be (no) more.

Refrain

18 Blessed be the *Lord God*, the | God of Isra^{el}, *
who a-*lone* | **does** won- (drous) deeds!

19 And blessed be his glorious | Name for ever! *
and may all the earth be filled with his glory. | **A-** men. (A) -men.

Here is the same psalm, fully notated.