

# What the heck are arsis and thesis?



## *Solesmes Says...*

The beginning of the rhythm, the period of elan. The arsis demands the thesis which is the ending of the rhythm, the part which rests or tends towards rest. All rhythm from the simplest to the most complex consists essentially of the close relationship of the arsis, whether simple or composite, with the thesis, whether simple or composite.

## *Mr. Williams says...*

Do not ask Mr. Williams what the “period of elan” is. Perhaps it is some sort of elvish.

It is easier to understand arsis and thesis if we compare it to something else. Suppose you and a friend are bouncing a ball back and forth on the ground, like a basketball pass. When you throw the ball, that is the arsis. The resulting bounces, as many as there may be, are individual theses.

In Gregorian Chant an arsis is typically used when the music “rises”. It is always used at the beginning of a chant. Eventually, feeling the difference between arsis and thesis becomes natural.

There are two kinds of thesis. One is called “masculine” and the other is called “feminine.” When the rhythm makes a hard stop, or rather when the ball you are bouncing drops dead on the floor before being picked up again, that is called a “masculine” thesis. If the music keeps moving, and the ball bouncing, the thesis is feminine.

### **Multiple Arsis and Thesis**

You may never have more than 3 arses in a row. That is because rhythms once begun must come to a rest, just like the ball. Also, the conductor would look a bit ridiculous waving his arms in circles for an entire chant. Both reasons are pretty good, if you ask me. If you throw the ball without it touching the ground, and it gets thrown back the same way, then you have two arses in a row. You may have as many thesis in a row as you want, but you may never begin a chant with the thesis.



### **What this all looks like.**

You may have noticed by now that conducting Gregorian Chant, which is called “chironomy”, actually resembles a bouncing ball. Here is an example, with the arses and theses marked.

## *Three arses and one thesis.*

