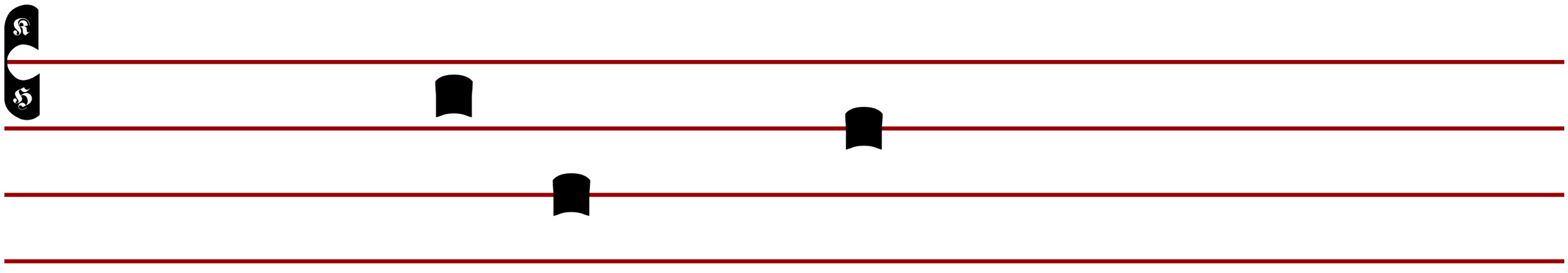
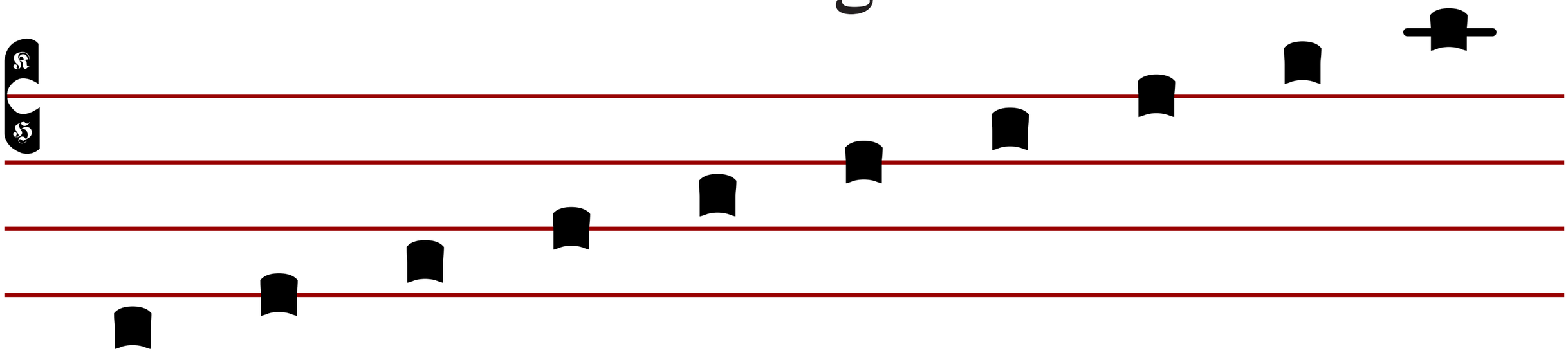
Introduction to Gregorian Chant & Solfege



Gregorian Chant looks different from modern music. There are only 4 lines in the musical staff, whereas modern music uses five lines. The lines are numbered from the bottom up, so the bottom line is line 1 and the top line is line 4.

Solfege



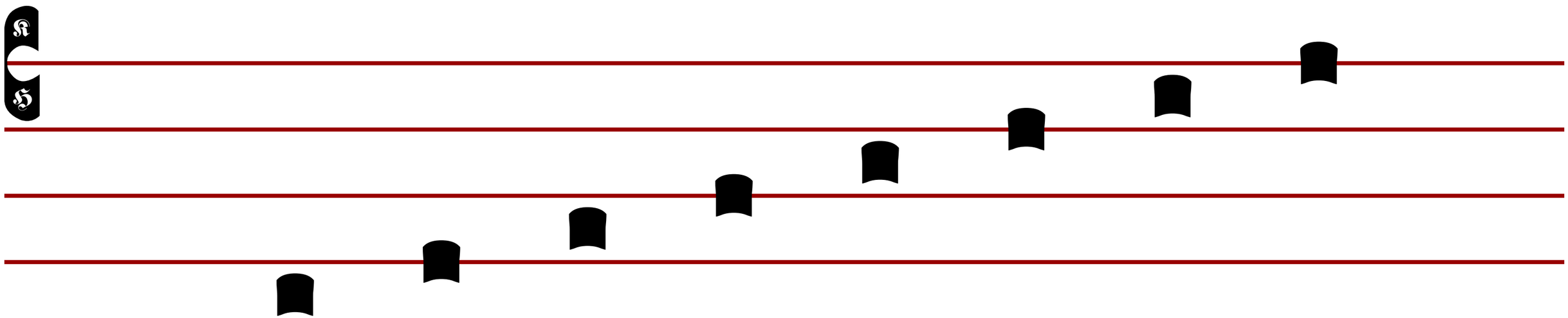
Solfege is the essential starting point to singing Gregorian chant. Through solfege, the chant student learns the names and relationships of the notes employed by Gregorian chant. Just as a child learns the letters of the alphabet in order to identify vocabulary, the chant student must be thoroughly versed in solfege in order to properly sing even the simplest chant melodies.

The first set of slides contain a short introduction to solfege. The next three sets of slides contain solfege exercises, accompanied with mp3s which demonstrate how each exercise should sound.

Do Cleff

Above you see a Do (pronounced “dough”) clef. It tells you where the note called do is notated on the staff. The Do cleff is movable to any line of the staff, and therefore is called ‘movable Do’. In this example the do clef is on line 4.

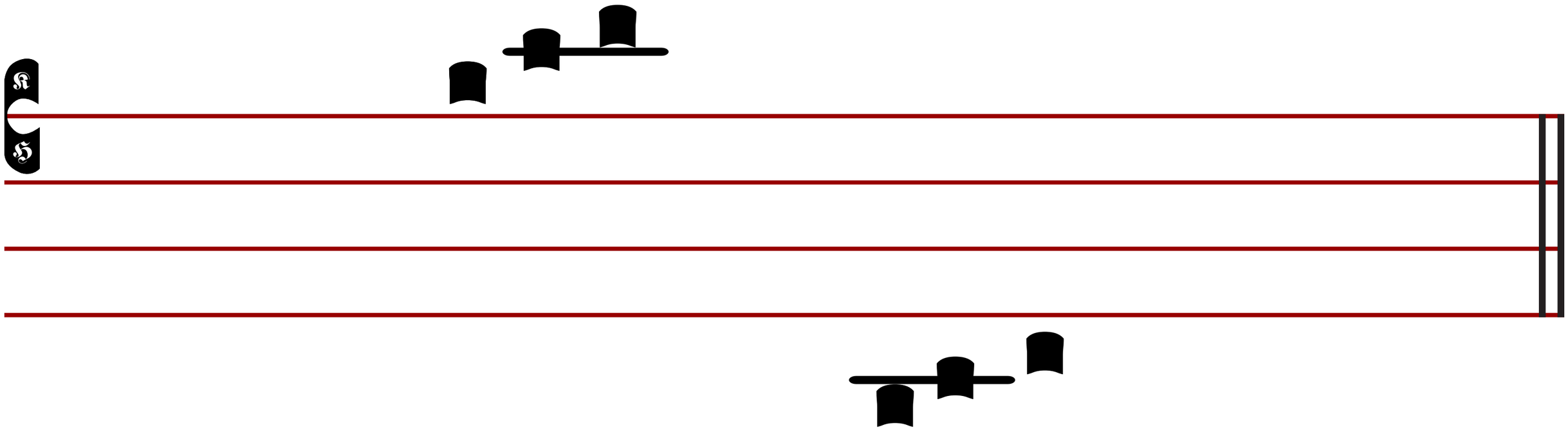
Seven Basic Notes of Gregorian Chant



There are only seven basic notes to learn for chant. If you know the basics of playing a piano or organ, think of do as C, the next note up, re is the next white key, and so on for each of the notes. You only need the white keys to play these notes on the piano or organ. The name for a square not all by itself is called a punctum.

If the music goes very high or very low, the notes start all over again from do, to re, to mi, etc., when going higher, or from do to ti to la when going lower.

Ledger Lines



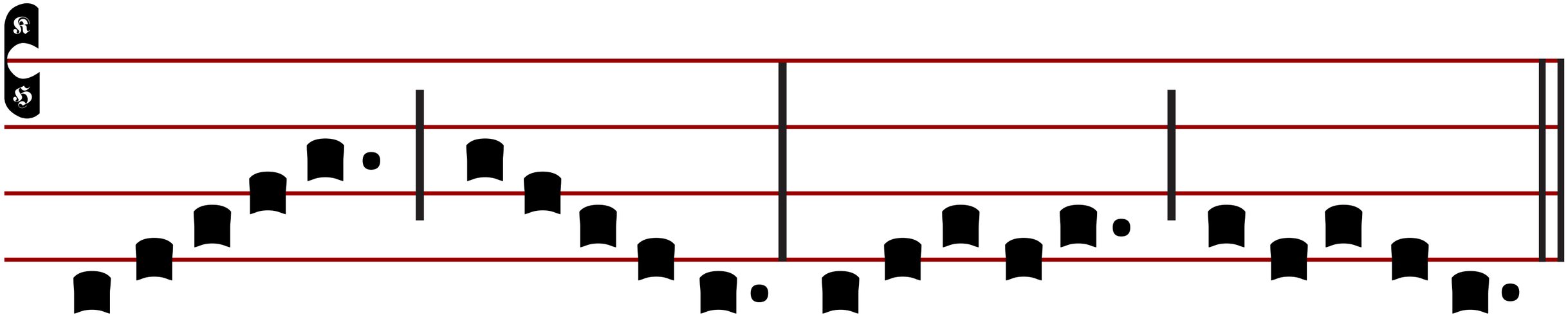
These are lines that go through notes that are two (or in rare cases four) positions above or below the staff.

The two lines at the end of the Gregorian staff form a double bar. The double bar comes at the end of every piece of chant. It is also used in pieces like the creed to show where one group would stop singing and another would start when the singing was divided between two groups, as is often done between the schola and the congregation.

Bars

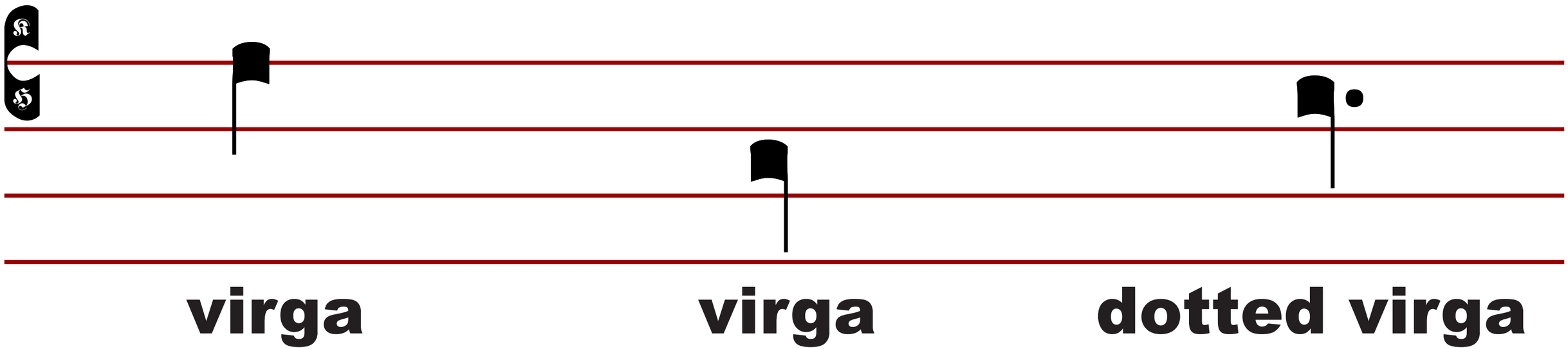
You will see other kinds of bars used in chant. You can see all four possible kinds below. They will be explained in more detail later, but for now realize that at a ***quarter bar no breath is taken***, at a ***half bar you pause just long enough to breath***, but you do not want to change the timing of the piece by pausing there. Make breaths quickly and quietly at the half bars, and keep right on singing. The ***full bar is a place where you come to a stop and take a deep breath***.

Punctum



There is a way to show that a punctum should be sung for twice as long as a normal punctum. To do this a dot is put beside it, and then it is called a dotted punctum. Normally you see that done on the last note before a half bar, a full bar, or a double bar.

Virga



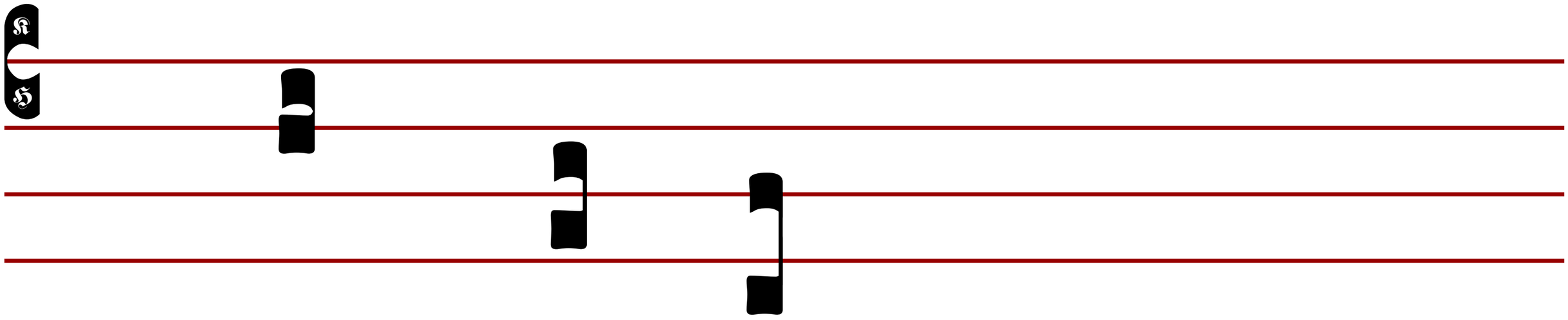
virga
(tail on left)

virga

dotted virga
(tail on right)

Another note used in chant is the virga. It is sung for as long as the punctum, and it also can have a dot put beside it and so become a dotted virga. But the virga is different from the punctum because it is only used when two or more notes are being put right beside each other. Only in the example below will you see it by itself. The tail that hangs down from the virga can be on the right or the left side.

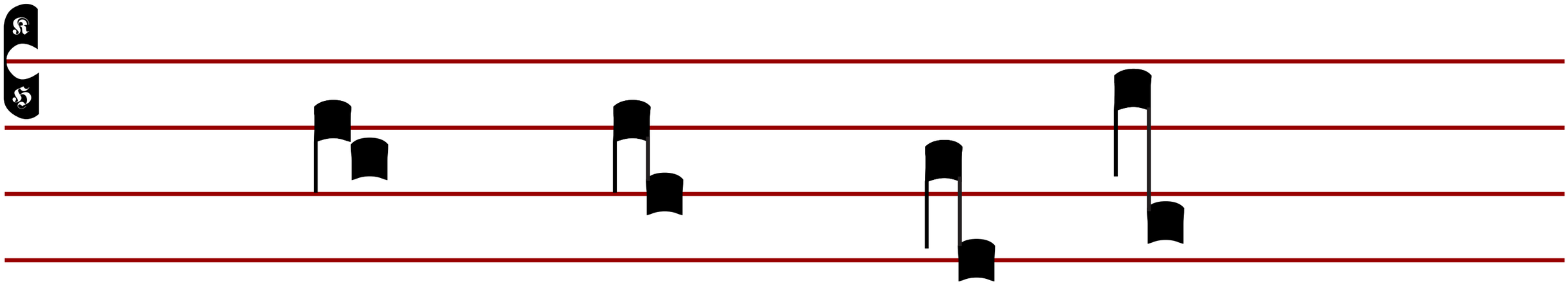
Podatus



A group of two or more notes is called a neum. Following are examples of some of the most important nuems. The instructions for singing the notes are very important, since these little things are what give chant much of its beautiful and mysterious sound.

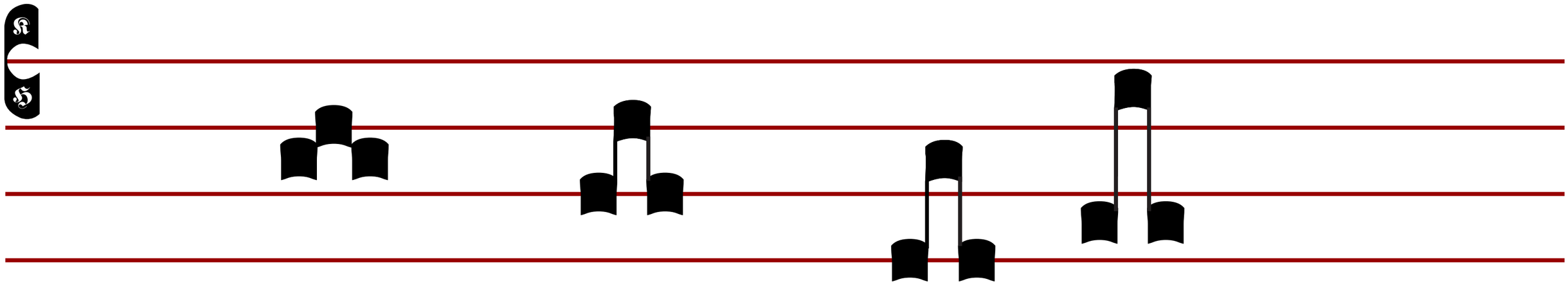
podatus - sing the bottom note first, then the top note.
Make the top note softer.

Clivis



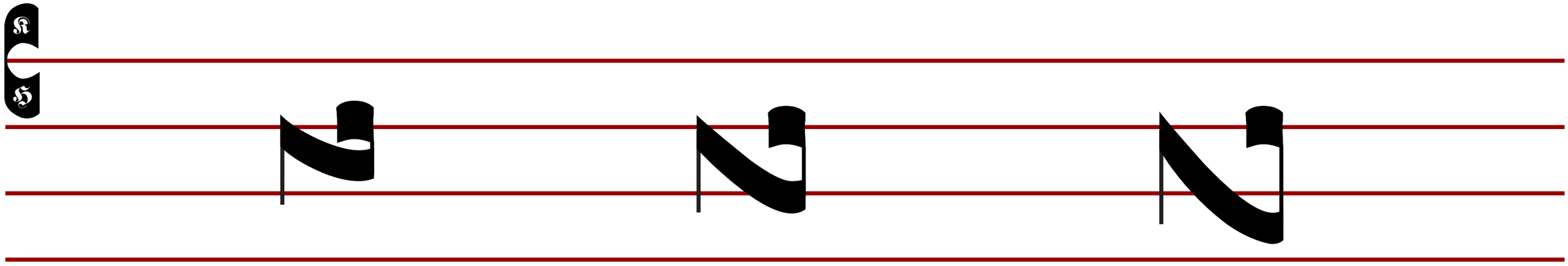
clivis - sing the top note first, then the bottom note.
Make the bottom note softer.

Torculus



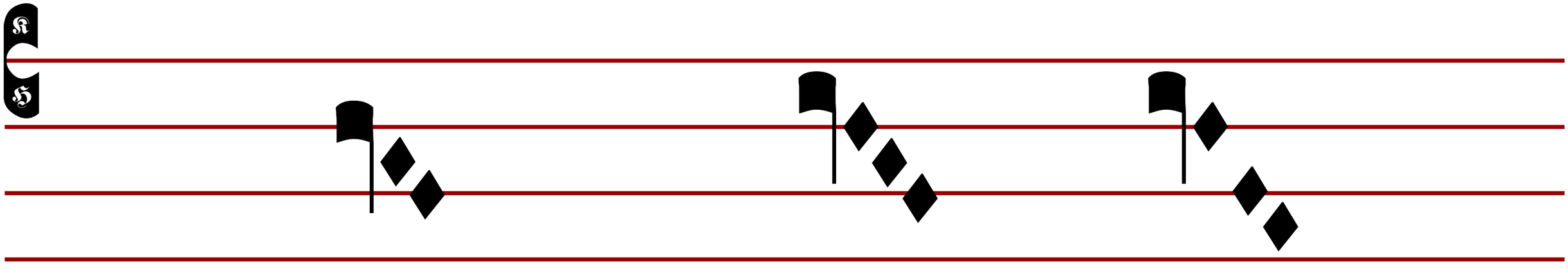
torculus - sing the bottom note on the left first, then the top note, and then go back down and sing the bottom note on the right. Make the middle note softer.

Porrectus



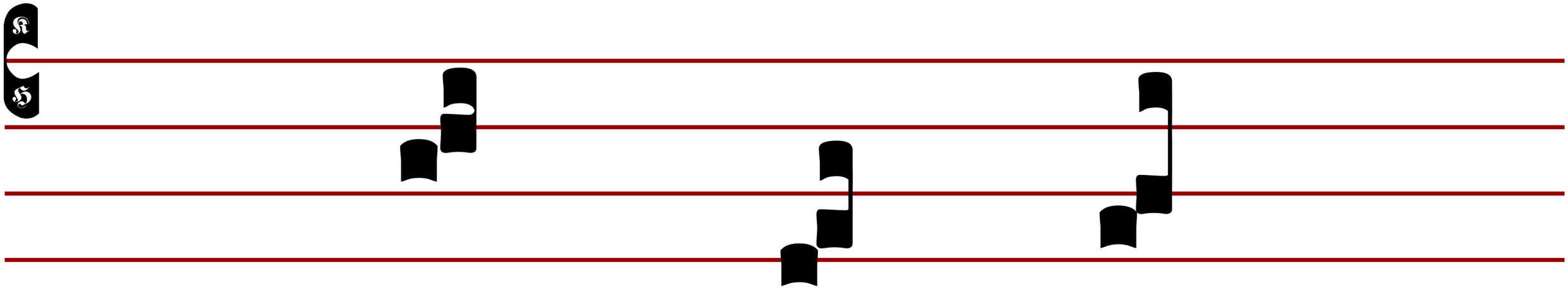
porrectus - this is actually only three notes. The long black swoop marks were originally made by the quill pen going from the first note to the second note without picking up the quill pen. Do not slide your voice from the first note to the second, instead move your voice normally. Soften your voice on the third note.

Climacus



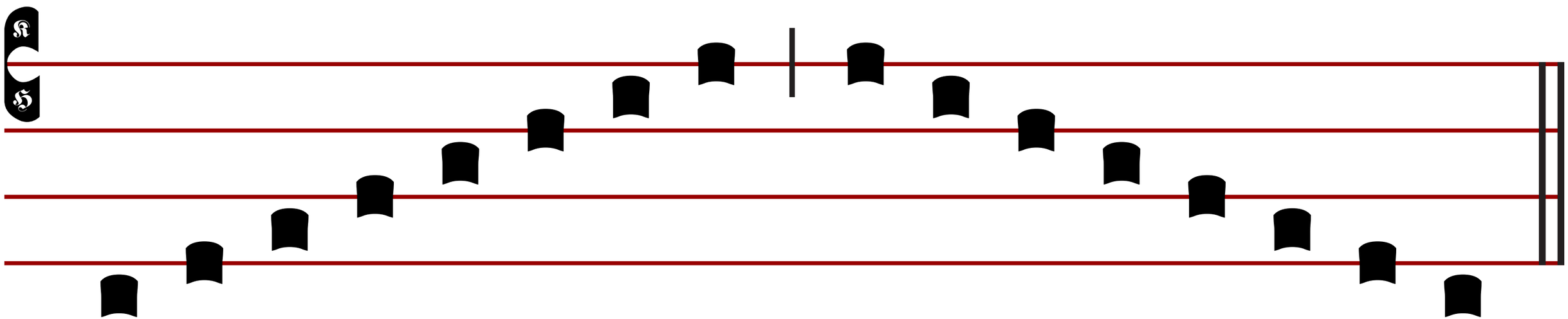
climacus - you see the virga forms a part of the climacus. The virga is sung with a little more volume than the others. The diamond shaped notes which trail behind the virga are each called a rhombus.

Scandicus



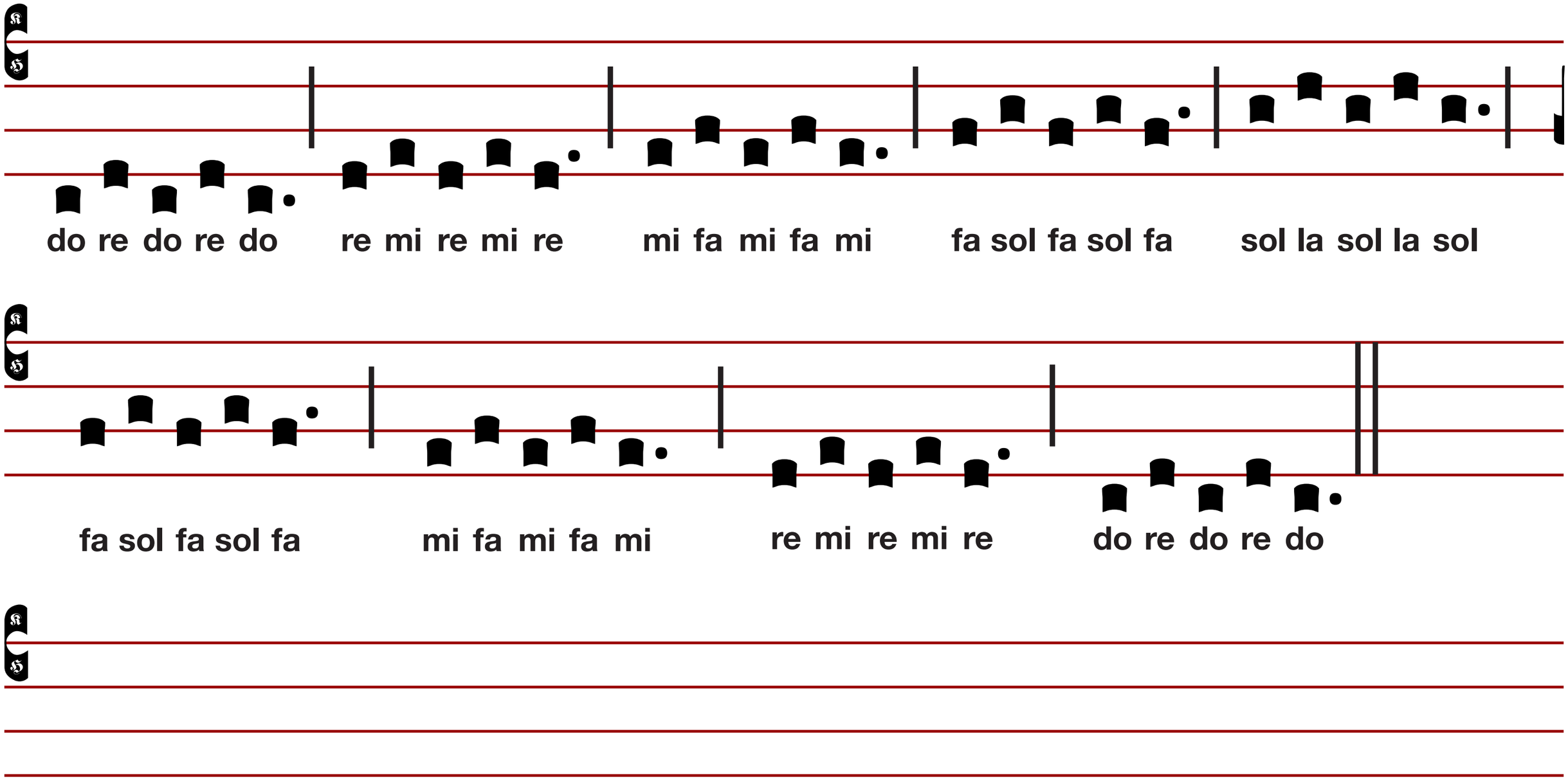
scandicus - sing these from the bottom up, with the first note being a little louder than the rest..

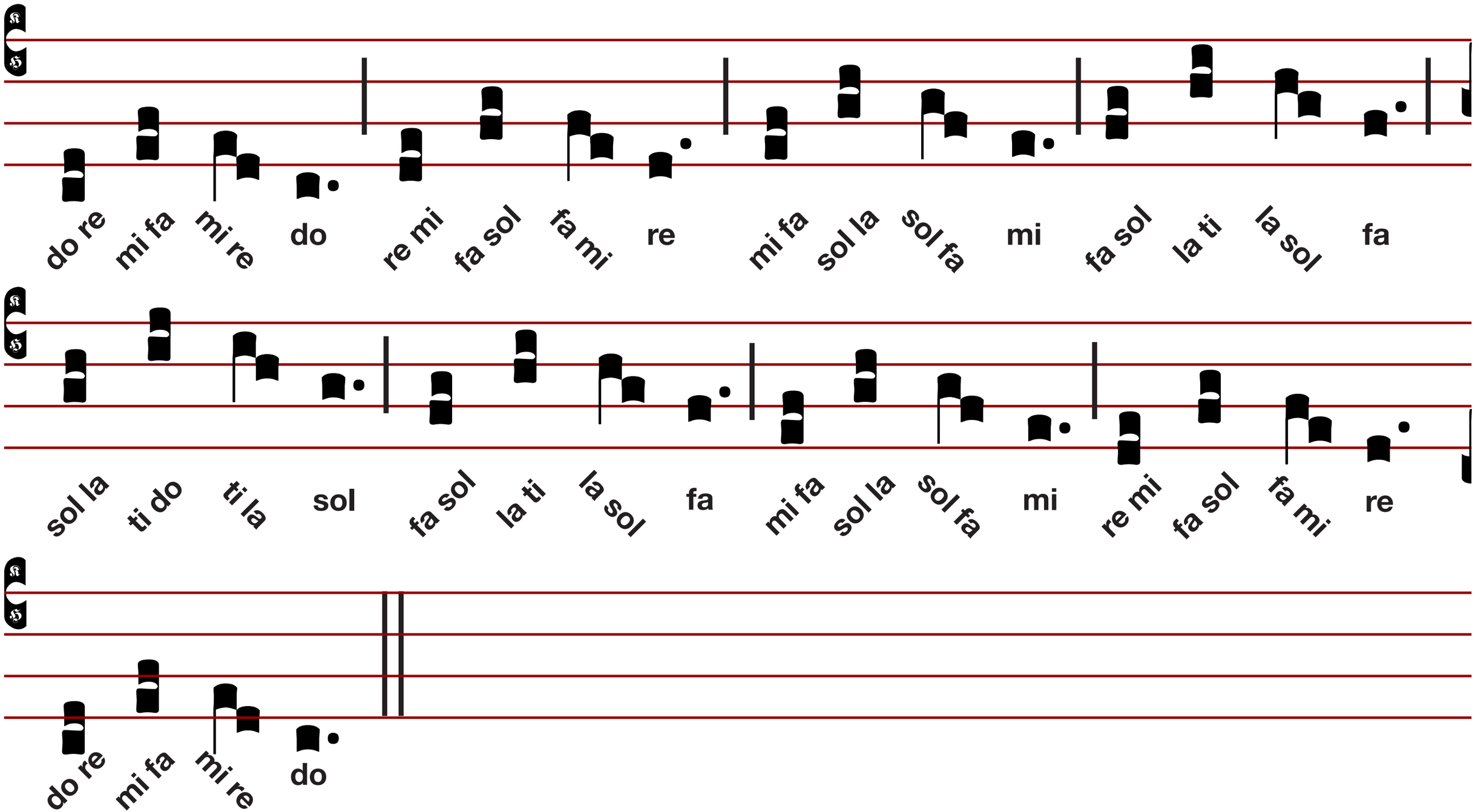
Excersize 1.1



do re mi fa sol la ti do do ti la sol fa mi re do

Excersize 1.2



Excersize 1.3

Excersize 1.4