



The Church of St James the Greater  
Leicester



## Do you get the point?

*Psalm-pointing for beginners*

From the Medieval Monastic traditions, the singing of Psalms has always been an important part of worship. Monasteries all over the world still sing the cycle of all 150 psalms every week in the course of their daily offices.

It is from this tradition that we get Plainsong and its associated tones. Each verse of the psalms is split into two parts. At the beginning of each part there is a reciting note (to which the majority of the words are sung) and a final flourish of notes.



Included in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer was Miles Coverdale's translation of the Psalms of David. As they had been in previous Latin editions, verses were divided into two parts by a colon. These psalms were sung to plainchant tones (patterns of single notes) for many years after the Reformation.

### **ANGLICAN CHANT**

The tradition known as Anglican Chant came to prominence in the 18th Century, which continues the practice of the divided verse, but utilised a more strict set of notes. These notes can be sung in harmony, as opposed to the unison of plainsong. The first note of each half still takes on the role of a reciting note.

A *Single Chant* consists of a 10-note pattern, in the following rhythm.



The notes rise and fall, as with any tune, and they can be harmonised.

e.g.



### **When to change note**

The split-point of the chant is the double barline (after the fourth note), which corresponds to the colon in the text. To instruct a singer when to change note within each half of the chant, vertical lines (corresponding to the barlines of the chant) are inserted between syllables, like this:

Glory be to the Father, and | to the | Son : and | to the | Holy | Ghost.

In the second bar of the chant there are normally two minims, as opposed to one semibreve. These two notes correspond to the words “to the”, which occur between the first two vertical lines. Therefore, “to” is sung on the first note, and “the” on the second. The same applies in the second half of the verse, with the two syllables of “Holy” taking a note each, like this:

and | to the | Ho-ly| Ghost.

As language has a natural rhythm, so does music. It is therefore necessary to get the stronger syllables in a verse occurring on the changes of note. Therefore, sometimes it is necessary to sing two or more syllables on a single note. If there are more than two syllables in a bar with two minims in, the indication to change note is a dot in the middle of the text. If there is no dot but more than two syllables, it is customary to change on the last syllable before the barline:

e.g. My soul doth | magni- · fy the | Lord : (change on ‘-fy’)

or My soul doth | magnify the | Lord : (change on ‘the’)

## **GLOSSARY**

**Colons** denote the spilt point in the verse, where there is usually a breath.  
dwelling : O | **Lord** | **of** | hosts

**Vertical lines** denote barlines in the chant and | to the | Holy | Ghost.

**Dots** tell you when to change note | sound · of the | trumpet

**Words in bold type** mean use two notes on one syllable  
dwelling : O | **Lord** | **of** | hosts

**Long dash** is used to miss out a bar — | Jordan · was | driven | back.

**Double bar lines** are used when the spilt point does not correspond with the double bar line in the chant · ac- | cording || unto | right ·

**Underline** is used to add extra emphasis to a word by lengthening or stressing.  
yea, and abundance of peace

**Asterisk** means take an extra breath  
My God,\* my God,\* why hast | thou for- | saken me :

**Dagger** means use the second part of a double chant  
†30. His seed also will I make to en| dure for | ever :

**Brackets** around the number identifies the use of a double bar line in that verse [12] ... · ac- | cording || unto | right

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## Magnificat

1. My soul doth | magni- · fy the | Lord :  
and my | spirit · hath re- | joiced in · God my | Saviour.
2. For | he · hath re- | garded || the | lowli- · ness | of his | handmaiden.
3. For be- | hold from | henceforth :  
all gener- | ations · shall | call me | blessed.
4. For he that is | mighty · hath | magnifi'd me :  
and | holy | is his | name.
5. And his mercy is on | them that | fear him :  
through- | out all | gener- | ations.
6. He hath shew'd | strength with · his | arm :  
he hath scattered the proud in the i- | magi-nation | of their | hearts.
7. He hath put down the | mighty · from their | seat :  
and hath ex- | alted · the | humble · and | meek.
8. He hath fill'd the | hungry · with good | things :  
and the | rich he · hath sent | empty · a- | way.
9. He re- | memb'ring · his | mercy || hath | holpen · his | servant | Israel.
- 10 As he | promis'd · to our | forefathers :  
Abraham | and his | seed for- | ever.

## Nunc dimittis

1. Lord now lettest thou thy servant de- | part in | peace :\*  
ac- | cording | to thy | word.
2. For mine eyes have | seen · thy sal- | vation :\*  
which thou hast pre- | pared be- · fore the | face of · all | people.
3. To be a light, to | lighten · the | Gentiles:  
and to | be the | glory · of thy · people | Israel.

This pointing for the *Nunc dimittis* uses a triple chant, the penultimate bar of which contains three minims, hence the two dots.

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Psalm pointing can be full of rules, but the overriding concern must be to show the beauty and poetry of the text.

Practices can vary with each church, but if there is any potential ambiguity, there is usually a dot put in to make it clear.

## What happens when the words don't fit?

Occasionally, the speech rhythm of the Coverdale translation does not easily fit to this 10-note model, so sometimes it is necessary to sing one syllable on two notes. This can be identified by a word or syllable being in bold, such as in the first verse of Psalm 23...

The | Lord · is my | shepherd : therefore | can I | **lack** | nothing.

There are also some occasions where the second part of the verse is too short to fit into the six notes it is allocated, without the verse sounding contrived. As a solution, it may be possible to omit one of the bars of the chant.

Take this example from Psalm 114. The omitted bar is signified by the long horizontal line.

The sea | saw that · and | fled : — | Jordan · was | driven | back.

On these occasions there must also be musical considerations, particularly that the movement of the harmony flows in accordance with the numerous associated rules.

As a result, it is sometimes not possible to omit a bar of the music. To that end, the double bar can be moved to occur before the colon, reducing the number of necessary notes in the second half. This is normally quite rare, but there are a few psalms where it becomes necessary. Take this example from Psalm 21 as set out in the Parish Psalter.

He asked life of the and thou | gavest · him a | long || life : |  
even for | ever and | ever.

Musically it would be sung like this:



## Double, Triple and Quadruple Chants

Double chants are two single chants stuck together, which make a more expansive melody, but there are still only 10 notes allotted for each verse. Therefore it takes two verses to sing the chant through once.

Sometimes the structure of the psalm means that it ends with an odd number of verses. If it is being sung to a double chant, the singers will use the last 10 notes of the double chant (i.e. the second half) to finish off the psalm. The instruction to do this can be either the words “2nd part” written in the margin, or the symbol † placed next to the verse.



Sometimes triple chants are used (which take 3 verses to sing the whole chant) and on special occasions quadruple chants (which take 4 verses), but these are rare.

## Other symbols in use

It is not always necessary to breath at each comma when chanting psalms but they can be a good indication. If a definite break is required, an asterisk (\*) means take a breath.

If a note is underlined, it normally means either lengthen or stress the syllable.

If there are bars of music missing, or the split-point has been moved the verse number is put in brackets to alert the singer. e.g. [21] This does not reflect the omission of a verse as is common in some publications.

As to pronunciation of certain words, ‘blessed’ is always pronounced as Bless-ed, a fact that might be reinforced with the use of an accent, i.e. ‘blesséd’. If one syllable is desired, it may be reduced to ‘blest’. All other ‘-ed’ words are normally pronounced in the modern way.

i.e. ‘declared’ = ‘declar’d’, *not* ‘declar-ed’

## Some more examples

### **Psalm 84**

1. O HOW amiable | are thy | dwellings : thou | **Lord | of** | hosts!
2. My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the | courts · of the |  
Lord : my heart and my flesh re- | joice · in the | living | God.
3. Yea, the sparrow hath found her an house,\*  
and the swallow a nest where she may | lay her | young :  
even thy altars, \* O Lord of | hosts, my | King · and my | God.
4. Blesséd are they that | dwell in · thy | house :  
they will be | alway | praising | thee.

### **Psalm 22**

1. MY GOD,\* my God,\* why hast | thou for- | saken me :  
and art so far from my health and from the | words of | my com- |  
plaint?
2. O my God I cry in the day-time but thou | hearest | not :  
and in the night-season | also I | take no | rest.
3. And thou con- | tinu-est | holy : — | O thou | worship of | Israel.
4. Our fathers | hoped in | thee :  
they trusted in thee,\* | and thou | didst de- | liver them.

### **Psalm 150**

3. Praise him in the | sound · of the | trumpet :  
praise him up- | on the | lute and | harp.
4. Praise him in the | cymbals and | dances :  
praise him up- | on the | strings and | pipe.
5. Praise him upon the | well-tun’d | cymbals :  
praise him up- | on the | loud | cymbals.
6. Let every thing | that hath | breath :  
praise | - - | - · the | Lord.

In verse 6 of this psalm, the pointing emphasises the word ‘praise’ by stretching it out over 4 notes. It is certainly an exception to rules, but makes for a wonderful effect.