

# CHANTS OF THE ROMAN MISSAL: A REVIEW

This impressive volume is the comprehensive completed work of ICEL's music committee on the Missal. One would like to know who its members were, but there are no personal names to be found anywhere in the book, not even a foreword from a bishop congratulating and thanking them for their considerable labours – an undeserved omission.

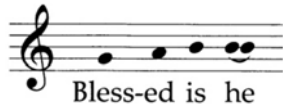
It falls into two sections. The second is a collection of all the chants set by the committee, i.e. English versions of all the texts set to music in the typical edition of the *Missale Romanum*. These can be found in the altar editions approved by the various bishops' conferences of ICEL countries.

The first section is a 60-page introduction explaining in detail the principles under which the ICEL music committee worked. Although structured as a single text, it falls into two parts (pages 1-37 and 38-60), the first being more pastoral in tone, the second more analytical. As both treat the same content, there is a good deal of overlap and cross-referencing between the two.

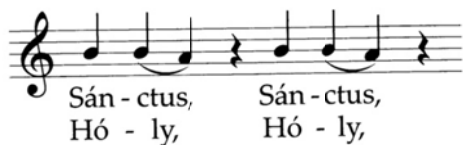
I warmed to the practical, pastoral tone I read as early as the second page of text: "A fully sung liturgy is a praiseworthy ideal, but its implementation calls for prudence and pastoral sensitivity. The chants of the liturgy are sung when it is possible in a given pastoral situation, when the participants are blessed with the resources to do so well, and when it is judged that this will truly glorify God and sanctify the worshippers." The prime consideration is rightly the "full and active participation by all the people".

Moreover, the writer is insistent on the primacy of the texts. Clearly this refers principally to the variable texts sung by the priest, rather than the responses and acclamations of the people. "The focus of the singer, therefore, is the sacred text, especially its meaning. Preparation for singing these chants, moreover, will involve a careful study of the text, so that when sung in a style of cantillation (a form of sung recitation or heightened speech) the meaning of each word and phrase is clearly communicated and heard in its proper context." This statement is the most important of the whole book. There are plenty of optimistic hopes expressed about music enabling worship, but when it comes to the priest chanting a Collect prayer or a Preface or Eucharistic Prayer, if the worshippers present cannot distinguish the words – i.e. hear them, identify them, mentally absorb them and then (and only then) pray them with the priest – then they might just as well be sung in Latin. The question must be asked bluntly: do the chants provided by ICEL facilitate the participation of the faithful by assisting the communication of the texts? Much depends, evidently, on the ability of the priest singing them, and the first substantial chapter of the work is entitled 'Singing Well'. But has ICEL given him a practical and helpful instrument to use for this purpose?

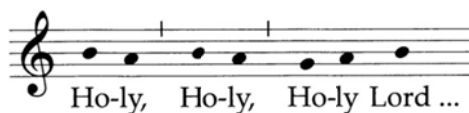
The author observes that the notation used employs exclusively black note heads without stems “to help the singer attend to the natural rhythm of the text”. This is fine when the singer is the solo priest or cantor but breaks down for congregational acclamations, where someone has to decide which notes should be lengthened and which should not. The point is conceded in relation to the ‘Holy, holy’, where one finds:



Incidentally, the following advice is offered for the *Sanctus*: “It is important that the natural accentuation of the text be preserved in the singing of this chant... One practical way... is to sing the first three notes rather like quarter notes/crotchets:”

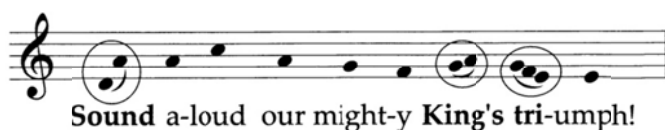


This is a welcome correction for those who would wish to sing in what may be described as ‘old-style Solesmes’ fashion, with a short note on the accented syllable and two long notes on the unaccented one. But there are many – this reviewer included – who regret the decision of the ICEL committee to consciously prefer imitation of the Latin to the simpler version in the previous missal:



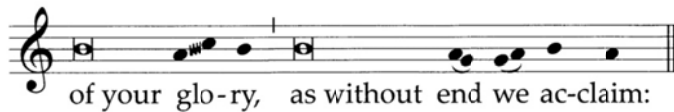
The proposed treatment of note-groups – more than one note on a single syllable – surprised me. It is suggested that, following the practice of the Pontifical Institute of Sacred Music in Rome “since the 1950s”, “note groups are sung with movement towards the last note of the group... This final note is perhaps a bit louder than the preceding note(s) in the note group, but above all it is rhythmically longer than the preceding note(s)... The final note is the primary carrier of the syllable.” I find this extraordinary.

The example given is:



Now “sound” must have the accent on the first note because of the English diphthong. And accenting the final note of “tri-“ gives an unwelcome ‘oomph’ to “-umph”!

Something similar applies to the quilisma, which has been re-introduced into the end of the Prefaces, e.g.



where it is said to be “customary” to lengthen the note before the quilisma “with forward movement toward the final and most important note (always a C). Here is a loose approximation of how it is sung:”



This would seem to be confirmed in Dom Eugène Cardine’s authoritative treatment of Gregorian semiology; certainly in melismatic melodies the melodic movement tends towards the note following the quilisma, which, as examination of the ancient manuscripts shows, is always to be lengthened. Nevertheless, it seems to my British ear that, in the context of a cantillated Preface, it is the first note of the group that more naturally carries the English accent.

There are some helpful hints for priests on how to pitch their reciting note, notably for the Preface in relation to the following setting of the ‘Holy’, whichever that might be. The different intervals in the solemn and simple tones for the dialogues are explained, the former consisting of a whole tone, the latter having a compass of a minor third. The same difference distinguishes the two Gospel tones. However – and this sounds like a late editorial decision – in the Order of Mass the standard tone for the Introductory and Concluding Rites is the solemn tone, whereas the simple tone is provided for the introductory and concluding dialogues of the Gospel. No wonder priests reading from the Order of Mass confuse ‘The Lord be with you’ (tone interval) at the beginning of Mass with ‘The Lord be with you’ (minor third) before the Gospel – and lead their congregations to confuse their response!

There is also useful advice on how to ‘point’ Collect and other prayers for chanting. Although both solemn and simple tones are illustrated, the solemn tone is recommended. This has only one intermediate inflection at the mediant. The possibility of repeating the entire melodic formula “if the prayer is longer than usual”, as suggested in my trusty *Liber Usualis* of 1960 vintage, is not mentioned. In contrast, the simple tone has not only a mediant cadence but also a flex, which serves to break up prayers according to their syntax more satisfactorily.

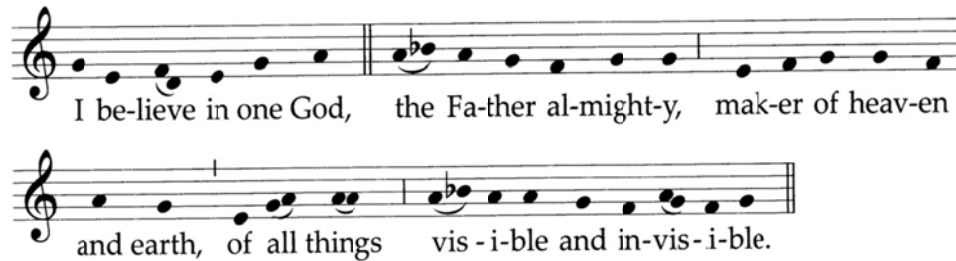
One might go on to ask whether, given the complexity of the texts of Presidential Prayers in the new translation, there needs to be provision for more cadences to guide the listeners in the structure of the text and therefore convey better the meaning of the prayer being sung. The traditional Latin tone for the Gospel is particularly successful because the short Gospel sentences are easily ‘punctuated’ by the tone cadences in accordance with the syntax of the text. But where a prayer has a complex structure of many clauses or phrases, a single mediant cadence for the entire sentence is insufficient. This is particularly obvious in the case of the Eucharistic Prayers – for which the Latin tones were never intended. The music committee has in fact recognised this, for, in contravention of their stated rules, they have provided two mediant cadences in the first sentence of Eucharistic Prayer III; however, this is still insufficient to convey the complex syntax of the text.

The opening pages of the second part of the text are identical to the Introduction to the Missal music that has been available on the ICEL website for some time – currently accessible as [www.iceleweb.org/ICELMusicIntroductionRev809.pdf](http://www.iceleweb.org/ICELMusicIntroductionRev809.pdf). Here we read that “the committee found it helpful to look at other vernacular chant adaptations such as Spanish, French, and German... [and] examined the English language chant of other Christian traditions, as well as the previous work of English chant adaptation” in previous editions of the Missal. The ‘nature of the English accent’ is described and discussed; although the writer seems sympathetic to the view that English accents are heavier than Latin ones, he records that “some scholars do not acknowledge this difference”. Were some of them on the music committee? One wonders. “For the most part”, the writer records, “the ICEL music committee has set the Missal chants with attention to the weight of the music syllables. That is to say, English texts are not simply made to fit Latin melodies.” Instead, adaptations are made to suit English accentuation – but not always, due to the need for ‘modal stability’ or ‘the avoidance of distracting melodic motifs’, or the need to render the resulting adaptation pastorally practical.

These points are well made. However, the lure of the traditional Latin chant has, siren-like, led them in too many cases to fit the English to the chant, not the chant to the English. One detects a hankering of the heart rather than of the head for the preservation of some musical phrasing more suited to Latin than English. I have already pointed this out regarding the ‘Holy, Holy’. Before I point to some more examples, let me say something about the rhythm of the English language. The author recognises that there is a problem regarding the nature of English accentuation in comparison with that of Latin. In my opinion, this has not been considered seriously enough.

Latin has, at best, two lengths of vowel, long and short, though the accepted practice when I was learning and using ecclesiastical Latin in the 1960s was to make all vowels semi-long. English has not two but three lengths of vowel – long, short and reduced. Reduced vowels are totally absent from many languages, including Latin, but are very much a feature of English. They are the various types of ‘schwa’ or

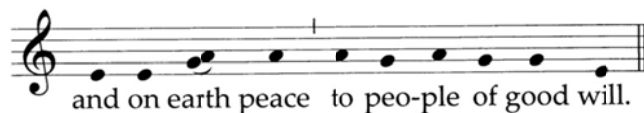
neutral vowel, notably ‘the’ (except when it occurs before a vowel or is lengthened for emphasis). There are variations of colour: consider ‘about’, ‘synthesis’, ‘family’, ‘catholic’, ‘medium’. Vowels can get even further reduced, as in baptism (syllabic /m/) and (in)visible (/l/). What you can do with these vowels musically is very limited. They are almost swallowed in normal speech: you certainly cannot give them either a note group or an accent, yet in the setting of Credo I we find:



The setting of ‘the’ on two notes is sacrificing language for chant, and the phrasing of ‘visible and invisible’ unerringly places secondary accents on the reduced vowels. It’s just ugly. Credo II, being almost entirely syllabic, is better suited to English adaptation than Credo I.

The rhythm of English prosody is complicated, as the writer willingly admits. Latin only has trochees (long-short) and dactyls (long-short-short), often with an anacrusis at the beginning of a sentence. Rarely you might find a ‘hanging’ accented vowel at the end of a sentence, as in ‘dignatus es’.

With English, though, we are immediately up against it in the Gloria: ‘and on EARTH PEACE to PEOPle of GOOD WILL’ – two instances of consecutive stressed syllables, the first being two long vowels, the second two short vowels. There is nothing like this in Latin. No wonder there is difficulty using the melodic formula of Gloria XV:



‘Peace’ really needs the doubled note as in ‘blessed is he’, noted above, but the real problem is with ‘people of good will’. Singing this as notated almost inevitably sounds as ‘PEOPle OF good WILL’.

More serious problems of adaptation are encountered when one attempts to set to English words a Latin melody, as distinct from a melodic formula. Sometimes one can ‘get away with it’. Sanctus XVIII is more melody than formula, but, apart from the initial two words, can be accommodated to English reasonably well. The ‘Pater noster’ is much more difficult. There were fierce battles in the early 1970s between the various national music bodies, with the result that the 1973 ICEL missal contained no less than four English settings of the Latin melody, two American (one

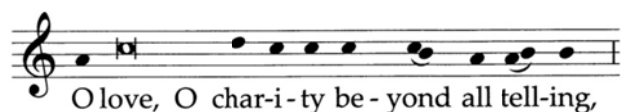
not based on the Latin chant), one Australian and one British. The latter, at least, was rarely heard: more satisfactory settings eventually issued from Dom Chrysogonus Waddell OCSO and Dom Gregory Murray OSB.

This time ICEL decided to provide yet another setting of the traditional melody, but even this did not find favour with the US Bishops' Conference: it decided to retain "the already-known setting" in the Order of Mass (the 'American' Latin-based one from the 1973 Missal), relegating the new composition to the Appendix, along with two new settings not based on the traditional melody.

Incidentally, the simple and practical Mozarabic tone given in the Appendix is the only one that fits the Embolism setting printed in the Order of Mass – and indeed requires it as a natural *segue*. But how impractical it is to have to heave over half the pages of the missal (or even of this book) to continue from '...deliver us from evil' to 'Deliver us, Lord...'!

Now here comes an inescapable question. The music committee has limited itself to applying existing Latin melodies or melodic formulae to the English text. How much did its members perceive the need to develop or extend the formulae to suit the requirements of the English language?

Ditching the existing formulae and composing entirely new ones would certainly have been seen as too iconoclastic. But where the committee did put a toe in the water and 'extend' the existing Latin formulae, the results are rewarding. For example, the Exultet has been very carefully crafted to retain as much as possible of the panache of the traditional Latin, but it is not slavish. Occasional ascents to D from reciting note C are not necessarily where the Latin text has them, but where the natural accentuation of the English words demands them, e.g.:



The rise on 'CHARity' is an excellent example of how the natural accentuation of English can be reflected in the chant that serves it. The same sensitivity is evident in the setting of the words of institution in the Eucharistic Prayers.

It is a great pity that similar 'extension' of the Latin formulae is not used more often. I have already commented upon the complex structure of English syntactical accentuation, compared with Latin. This gives rise to a more complex rhythmical utterance of sentences – immediately obvious to listeners whose mother tongue is not English. With the primary view cited by the author (and other scholars), I would maintain that English prosody is stress-timed rather than syllable-timed, the latter being the case with Spanish, and with the conventional ecclesiastical pronunciation of Latin.

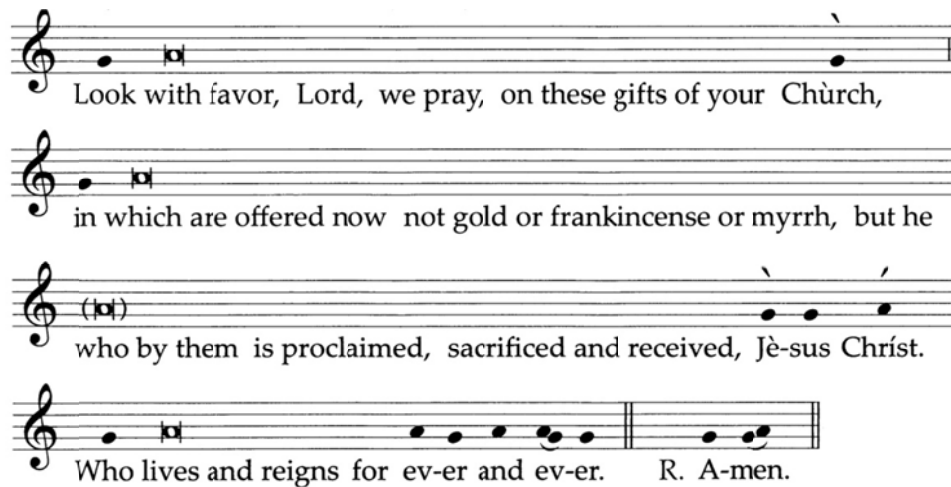
And there is another obvious factor: Latin is to all intents and purposes a dead language. We do not know how it sounded at any time in its history as a living language. The current convention of even, neutral, unemotional utterance not only illustrates its status but also contrasts it with English and other living Germanic stress-related languages.

But besides inter-lingual differences of stress, there is an even more important consideration – the function of ritual utterance. When using Latin, the mere utterance of the text in accordance with the rubrics might be deemed to satisfy the ritual requirement. Except in the case of specialist assemblies, listeners will not be so familiar with Latin as to understand the uttered text as it is pronounced, and thus pray the words with the priest or reader, except with the aid of a printed text in a missal or leaflet.

With the introduction of vernacular texts and the expectation of participation by the assembly, texts must be so uttered as to be comprehensible to the listeners in such a way as to enable them to pray the prayer as it is being uttered. As already noted, our Introduction requires that “the meaning of each word and phrase is clearly communicated and heard in its proper context”.

This places a burden on the cantillation of texts that it never had in its Latin days. Are the traditional Latin formulae up to the new requirement?

Take the wonderful Prayer over the Offerings for the Epiphany. This is printed out in full as an example of the solemn tone of Presidential Prayers.



Look with favor, Lord, we pray, on these gifts of your Chùrch,  
in which are offered now not gold or frankincense or myrrh, but he  
who by them is proclaimed, sacrificed and received, Jè-sus Christ.  
Who lives and reigns for ev-er and ev-er. R. A-men.

Sing it through to yourself. Then say it aloud, paying particular attention to the intonation and pitch of the words as you say them. While the phonemic *quantity* of the vowels can (and should) be varied in either sung or said diction, in accordance with good elocution, a single reciting note eliminates nearly all variation in pitch. Cantillation cannot be called ‘heightened speech’ if it levels out its peaks.

What is missing is an appreciation that, besides accent and rhythm, there is a third quality of good prosody – intonation. We are not talking here about tonal languages such as Chinese, but about the natural variation in pitch in the normal utterance of most Indo-European languages, especially in proclamation and public speaking. Now I recognise that we are on contentious ground here. Different regional dialects of English enjoy different renderings of spoken English: some are more sing-song than others. But if you listen to any actor projecting his/her voice, the communication of their text always involves variations of intonation and pitch. These are lost in a chant formula that is dependent on a single reciting note with minimal cadences. The problem can be overcome by a judicious extension of the chant, as I have pointed out in the case of the Exultet. Otherwise, English may be impoverished rather than enhanced by the use of chant, and its communication of the sense of the text as well as the words, justifiably expected by the listening faithful, hindered rather than assisted.

I have already commented on the need for the chant cadences to reflect the phrasing of the text, particularly when sentences are long or complicated, to help the listeners understand and therefore pray the prayer. The rules of Jewish cantillation (in Hebrew, of course) are more sophisticated than the Latin tradition, which enables it to pay greater attention to the structure and syntax of the text, and to convey this to the listeners to facilitate their comprehension of the text.

Some might say that English is not amenable to a chant based on a single reciting note. They might point out that Italian is the language of opera (sung), English the language of Shakespeare (spoken).

Others might consider that the existing tones have an aura which unites the prayers to the long tradition of the Latin Church and therefore justifies their continued use unaltered, even with English.

I would take a constructive view. Should we not consider the further development of cantillation specifically for English ritual use? As far back as the early eighteenth century, English opera-goers complained about the imposition of Italian methods of recitative on English texts. Handel showed how *recitativo secco* could be handled in English, admittedly in a more developed musical form than would be appropriate for liturgical use. And has the contemporary work of John Tavener nothing to teach us?

We read: “The liturgical text itself – its rhythm, its syntax, its structure and its semantic elements – has informed and shaped the way the chants have been applied to it. The nature of these chants calls for a style of singing that, like the chants themselves, is at the service of the text in all its aspects – rhythm, syntax, and, above all, meaning.” Quite so. If only we had a chant system that could take full advantage of the inflections of our English language and thus enhance and beautify the expression of the liturgical texts for the benefit of those who listen to and (hopefully) pray them! The author speaks of ‘developing English chant from Latin models’. Good! Let the process continue! *Procedamus in pace!*



The presentation of the book puzzles me. Its hardback binding with gold-blocked covers and large format (page size 8½ x 11 inches) are worthy enough to have it take its place on the altar. But the publishers have left the music settings underlaid with 11-point text type. This is too small to be read easily from a distance of 2 or 2½ feet, which is what one would expect of a priest standing at the altar. They could have used the generous 1½-inch margins to enlarge the music settings by up to 30% without re-setting them, thus making them easier to read and more inviting to sing. They could also have provided at least two ribbon markers.

On the other hand, the book is branded a 'study edition' – and the Introduction is, as far as I am aware, not currently available anywhere else. \$49.95 is a lot to pay if all you want to do is to learn how to sing the chant well, given that the chant settings are all available elsewhere in various editions of altar Missals. I hope that Liturgical Press will issue the Introduction in a format more suited to the student pocket. Everyone who sings the chant should have it, study it and use it!

John Ainslie – London, UK – 24 January 2012