

Laon Level 1 Group 4-1

Three-note Neums – Explanation

Transcript

A three-note neum is a neum that sets a single syllable of text with a three-note figure of music.

There are four of these neums in simple, unaltered forms: the Scandicus, the Climacus, the Torculus, and the Porrectus.

The Scandicus

The Scandicus is a figure of three rising notes. It consists of two puncti and a virga, all in a diagonal line from lower left to upper right. With its first two notes as puncti and the last note as a visually longer note, that is, a virga, instead of a third punctum, the neum has a certain emphasis implied on the last note, or perhaps it might be better to say that the musical movement, or the impetus of the neum, is toward the last note. Indeed, in the Laon notation, the virga always implies a longer or more important note.

A scandicus of just three rising puncti does not exist in Laon. If the scribe of Laon 239 wanted to write a scandicus in which the last note was not lengthened or emphasized in some way, he would put a “c” by the virga, for *celériter*, or “quickly,” like this.

The modern equivalent of the scandicus is any figure that represents three rising notes. It could be like this, or this, or any of a number of similar configurations. The notes do not need to progress step-wise, as these examples do. The intervals between any two of the notes can vary widely.

Here is an example of a scandicus in the manuscript Laon 239, taken from the Tract *Sicut Cervus* from the Easter Vigil. The Scandicus is here, over the very first syllable *i*. Here is a modern transcription.

You can hear this energy toward the last note of the neum in this recording.

(singing) *ita desíderat ánima mea...*

This is a good moment to talk about the directionality of the Laon notation. While the notation is not pitch specific, it does rather carefully delineate the direction of the melody. If the melody is rising, the notes of the neums move upward from left to right in about a 45 degree angle. The scandicus is a perfect example of this.

If the melody is descending, the neums move downward in a straight line. The next neum, the climacus, is a perfect example of this.

The Climacus

The climacus is a figure of three descending notes. It consists of three puncti in a straight vertical line.

Its modern equivalent is any figure that represents three descending notes. Typically, the figure is a stemmed square note followed by two diamond-shaped notes. It could look like this, or this, or any of a number of similar configurations. The notes do not need to progress step-wise. The intervals between any two of the notes can vary widely. You can also see in the modern notation that, visually, the first note, with its stem, seems to take on a certain importance, or subtle weight, and the truth is that this neum as shown is virtually non-existent in the Laon 239 manuscript as an isolated neum over a single syllable. When we do see it, it is invariably part of a larger compound neum. The isolated climacus in Laon almost invariably appears with some kind of emphasis given on one or more of the notes. For example, here we see a climacus with the last note as an uncinus rather than a punctum, implying an emphasis or lengthening on the last note. Here we see a climacus with a virga as the first and an uncinus as the last note, and here we see a climacus with all three notes as uncini. These, however, all constitute altered forms of the neum, and we will study them a little later.

The Torculus

The torculus looks like this. It consists of a lower note, represented by the lower stroke of the quill, followed by a higher note, represented by the upward stroke of the quill, followed by a lower note again, represented by the final downward stroke of the quill.

The Latin *torculus* is an adjective referring to the twisting action of a wine press. It is not hard to see how the neum, with its twisting configuration, got this name.

Here are some examples of the torculus in modern notation. The actual pitches of the torculus can vary widely, just as long as they create a pattern of a lower note, followed by a higher note, followed by a lower note.

I'll show you an example in a moment.

Torculus *inítkio débilkis*

While we are looking at the torculus, I need to show you a particular form of this neum. It is called the torculus *inítkio débilkis*, literally, a torculus with the first note weak. It looks like this. We can see that it has the basic low note, high note, low note shape of the torculus, but it is much more rounded in its features.

This neum indicates a very light first note. Its modern equivalents would look like this, and here is an example in the manuscript Laon 239. This is beginning of the Offertory chant for the third Mass of Christmas, or the Mass of Christmas Day. Toward the end of the example, we see the word *tua*. The torculus *inítkio débilkis* is here, over the first syllable.

Here is a modern transcription.

(singing) *Tui sunt Caeli et tua est...*

Just a note before we leave this neum. In the exercises, the torculus *inítkio débilkis* is treated as a regular torculus. That is a mistake that we'll correct in a later version of the program, when we will put it with the altered forms of the torculus. For now, just remember that, as far as the exercises go, the torculus *inítkio débilkis* is treated as a regular torculus.

The Porrectus

The porrectus, which looks like this, represents just the opposite motion of the torculus. It consists of a higher note, represented by this higher motion of the quill, followed by a lower note, represented by the lower motion of the quill, followed by a higher note again, represented by the upward motion of the quill.

In fact, it looks a bit like a clivis (high note followed by a low note) with a virga attached to it, representing the third note moving back up.

Here are some examples of the porrectus in modern notation. The actual pitches of the porrectus can vary widely, just as long as they create a pattern of a higher note, followed by a lower note, followed by a higher note.

In this example, taken from the manuscript Laon 239, we can see examples of both the torculus and the porrectus right next to each other. Here is the porrectus, over the syllable *ve-*. There is a torculus immediately following this porrectus, here, over the syllable *-ni-*, and here is a modern transcription.

You can see and hear the high-low-high movement of the porrectus, and the low-high-low movement of the torculus.

(singing) *nunc autem ad te vénio....*