

Laon Level 1 Group 1-1

Single-note Neums - Explanation

Transcript

In what we call Messine notation there is one principle manuscript with a nuanced notation that informs our interest in the interpretation of chant. That manuscript is Laon 239. In this manuscript there are only two simple, single-note neums, that is, neums each of which represents a single note of music for a single syllable of text.

These include the Punctum and the Uncinus. We'll look at each one individually.

The Punctum.

In Laon 239, the punctum always indicates a light note. It will often appear on pretonic syllables, as it does in the opening of the Gradual *Univérsti*. This is how the beginning of the chant appears in the *Graduale Romanum*, and this is how it appears in Laon 239. The first two notes are puncti, because they precede the tonic syllable *-ver-*.

Notice how there is a slightly upward movement in the neums indicating an upward movement in the melody. The Laon notation differs from the St. Gall notation in that it does show the direction of the melody. We will examine this aspect of the notation a little later.

(Singing) *Univérsti...*

The punctum also appears over syllables that are not specifically pretonic, but like pretonic syllables, they are to be sung lighter in the context of more important syllables. There is a good example of this in the Introit *Gaudéte*. This is how the beginning of the fourth phrase of this chant appears in the *Graduale Romanum*, and this is how it appears in Laon 239. The phrase begins with the words *sed in omni oratione*. The two single-syllable words *sed* and *in* are technically not pretonic syllables in a single word, but they function in just the same way. They move toward the important syllable *om-* of the word *omni*. They are notated with puncti to show this light, preparatory movement. Here, too, there is a slight upward movement in the neums that shows a rising melody.

(Singing) ...*sed in omni*...

The punctum is also found often as part of a neum of several notes, but we'll look at those neums in a later video. Its modern equivalent is a single square note.

The Uncinus.

The uncinus is a normal single note. It can be a high note or a low note, that is, the neum itself does not indicate even relative pitch. Its length is determined by the normal length of the syllable it sets. This is how it looks typically, but it may appear in slightly varied forms, such as this, or this. In modern notation it may appear as a virga or as a punctum.

If we go back to example we just saw, *sed in omni oratione*, just as the words *sed in* were set with puncti to indicate a lightness, the syllables *orati-*, while they are pretonic syllables, are to be sung, comparatively, with a little more deliberation, because the entire word, *oratione*, that is, “prayer,” is more important than the words *sed in*, a conjunction and a preposition. They are not exaggerated – just sung in what would be the normal context for this word in the phrase, considering both its place as the object of a preposition and its meaning in the overall message of the passage. Therefore, they are notated with uncini.

Again, notice how the three uncini here rise in a roughly 45-degree angle. They are indicating a rising melody.

Summary

Here is a quick summary of these two single-note neums.

There is the punctum, a light note, and the uncinus, a regular note.

Neither sign has an implied meaning – in and of itself – with regard to pitch, that is, whether the note is high or low. There is, however, an indication of relative pitch by the way the musical line moves. A rising line of neums, at a roughly 45 degree angle from lower left to upper right, generally indicates a rising line, while a straight line down of neums generally indicates a descending melody.