

St Gall Level 1 Group 2-1

Repercussive Neums – Explanation

Transcript

From single-note neums, we move to multiple-note neums, that is, neums in which there is more than one note of music per syllable of text. These multiple-note neums fall into the four different categories that you see on the left menu of the main screen:

- Repercussive neums, in which the multiple notes are of the same pitch;
- Two-note neums,
- Three-note neums,
- And four or five-note neums.

We'll examine the repercussive neums first.

Sometimes a syllable of text is set to a neum with two, three or even more notes all on the same pitch, that is, a neum in which the same note is repeated or repercussed.

Sometimes in modern interpretations of chant these repeated-note figures are treated simply as a means of lengthening notes. However, as we will see in other videos, the early manuscripts had very specific techniques for indicating the lengthening of notes.

It is more accurate to interpret these neums as truly repeated or repercussed notes. We see a type of ornamentation similar to this as late as the Baroque era in what we call, "goat trills."

Indeed, in 1565, shortly after the Council of Trent, the provincial Council of Milan, as it attempted to implement the mandates of Trent, forbade lascivious or profane music and the ornamentation of singing by these so-called "goat trills," or as the Council put it: a manner of

singing in which “the voices are more oppressed by the throat than expressed by the mouth.”

Of course, this raises the question as to why it is that goats are always so maligned. But we’ll tackle that another day.

We also believe that this kind of musical ornamentation is a remnant of Gallican chant, from which, what we call Gregorian chant, developed when Gallican chant and old Roman chant were combined in a kind of hybridization in the late 8th century.

There are six different neums that show this percussive ornamentation: The distropha, the tristropha, the extended stropha, the trigon, the bivirga, and the trivirga.

We’ll look at each of these neums individually.

Distropha

The distropha represents two notes of the same pitch that are sung quickly or lightly. This is what it looks like in an ancient manuscript.

(singing) *Deus mi-*

Its modern equivalent is two square notes without stems. However, sometimes in more recent editions of chant, the distropha is notated like this, with notes that more closely approximate the ancient notation. For the exercises in this unit, we’ll use just the square notes for the modern notation.

Tristropha

By extension, the tristropha represents three notes of the same pitch that are sung quickly or lightly. You see here how it looks in an ancient

manuscript. Notice that this tristropha follows a virga, which we saw in an earlier video.

(singing) *regnum*

Its modern equivalent is three square notes without stems, or sometimes three notes that look like this.

An extended stropha is neum of more than three notes, all on the same pitch that are sung quickly or lightly. Its modern equivalent would also be several square notes without stems, or sometimes several notes that look like this.

Trigon

The trigon is a special neum. It looks like a triangle of three dots. Each of the dots represents a note. The second pitch repeats the first. The third pitch, however, is lower than the second pitch. The interval of this lower pitch can vary. Like the other strophae, this neum is sung quickly or lightly.

Here is an example of an ancient manuscript with two trigons over the same word, one immediately following the other.

(singing) *et liberávit me*

Also, as with the other strophae, the modern notation for the trigon will most often look like this, but it may also look like this.

Bivirga

As with the distropha, the bivirga represents two repeated notes. But in contrast to the distropha, the bivirga represents notes that are sung more deliberately, or with more emphasis.

Here is what a bivirga looks like in one of the ancient manuscripts.

(singing) *dominátor*

Its modern equivalent is two square notes with stems. Sometimes in modern editions, these stemmed notes will have episemas, or horizontal lines, over them to indicate a lengthening. And sometimes, what we see as a bivirga in the early manuscripts gets transcribed into modern notation as two square notes without stems.

Trivirga

The same is true for the trivirga. It represents three repeated notes that are sung more deliberately or with more emphasis than the repeated notes of the tristropha. Its modern equivalent is three square notes with stems, sometimes with horizontal lines – or episemas – over them to indicate a lengthening. And just as with the bivirga, what we see as a trivirga in the early manuscripts often gets transcribed as three square notes without stems in modern notation, too.