

## St Gall Level 1 Group 1-1

### Single-note Neums

#### Transcript

In the St. Gall manuscripts, there is a small number of 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, the Tractulus, the Virga and the Gravis. We'll look at each one individually.

#### **The punctum.**

In fact, this neum is relatively rare in isolation. We find it used this way in only two of the St. Gall manuscripts. When it is used, it signals a note that is not just lower – like the tractulus – but also a note that is sung lightly, or not too heavily. It almost always appears in specific contexts such as pretonic syllables, as it does in the opening of the Gradual *propitius esto*. This is how the melody appears in the Graduale Romanum, and this is how it appears in the manuscript St. Gall 359, the famous *Cantatorium*. The first note is a punctum. Like a tractulus, it is a lower note, here lower than the next note, but it is also the pretonic syllable, that is the syllable just before the tonic – or accented – syllable of the word. As such, it is sung lighter, in order to give proper motion toward the tonic syllable and to establish the proper hierarchical relationship between these two syllables.

(singing) *Propítius esto*

Typically, the punctum is found more often as part of a neum of several notes. Its modern equivalent is a single square note.

Because of its highly specialized use, the punctum is not included in the exercises of this unit, except to identify it with its modern equivalent.

#### **The Tractulus.**

As I just mentioned, the tractulus represents a “lower note.” Just like the punctum, its modern equivalent is a single square note. This lower note can be lower than the following note – here shown as the red note in modern notation – or – lower than the previous note – here shown as the red note in modern notation.

It can also represent a note in a series of repeated notes, each one on a different syllable of text. We'll at an example in just a moment.

#### **The Virga**

The virga represents a “higher note.” Its modern equivalent is a single square note with a stem. However, in reality, what we see as a virga in the early manuscripts often gets transcribed as a single square note in modern notation, too.

This higher note can be higher than the previous note – or – higher than the following note.

Like the tractulus, the virga can also represent a note in a series of repeated notes, each one on a different syllable of text.

So, remember, the tractulus represents a lower note; the virga represents a higher note. Here is a short example: a phrase from the communion chant, *Comédit pinguis*. On the bottom of the screen in the chant as it appears in the manuscript Einsideln 121. Above it is a modern transcription. We see that the first six notes comprise a series of higher notes and lower notes, and as we would expect, every higher note is represented by a virga, and every lower note is represented by a tractulus. However, when we look at the seventh and eighth notes, which continue the sequence of alternating high and low pitches, we see not a virga, and a tractulus, but two virgas. The eighth note is represented by a virga, because even though it is lower than the previous note, it is also higher than the following note. I'll explain this ambiguity more fully in a moment.

(singing) *santus enim dies Dómini est.*

## The Gravis

This neum, as you can see, is an altered tractulus. It looks like a tractulus, but it is pointing downward. It represents a note that is lower by a significant interval – particularly an interval that is larger than you might expect in the context of the piece. It's something of a warning. "Don't forget! This note drops a lot. – or – this note is lower than you might be tempted to sing."

## Special Cases

Sometimes there will be situations that might seem ambiguous – that either a tractulus or a virga might apply. For example, here is a set of three notes in ascending order. The first note is the lowest note of the series, so the use of a tractulus would be normal. The last note is the highest note of the series, so the use of the virga would be normal. But the middle note is both higher than the previous note *and* it's lower than the following note. What to do?

Here is another example, a set of three notes in descending order. It presents the same problem, but in reverse order. The first note is the highest note of the series, so the use of a virga would be normal. The last note is the lowest note of the series, so the use of the tractulus would be normal. But the middle note is both lower than the previous note *and* it's higher than the following note. What to do?

In these two situations, the more common – if not exclusive - solution would be to use a virga.

Here is another combination – two repeated notes followed by a lower note. (Now remember: each of these notes sets a different syllable of text.) Well, the last note would be a tractulus. It's lower than the note before it.

The second note is reasonably a virga, reminding the singer that this note is higher than the next note; but what about the first note? We have already seen that each note in a series of repeated notes can be notated with either a tractulus or a virga.

Well, you might see it notated with either a tractulus, like this, or a virga, like this. The actual situation would depend on what came before.

## **Manuscripts I**

Let's take a look at a few examples of these neums in a manuscript. This is the Communion chant, "Visionem quam vidistis."

On the upper left side of the screen we have the chant in modern notation as found in the *Graduale Romanum*. On the lower right side of the screen we have the chant as found in the manuscript St. Gall 390, which is also known as the Hartker Antiphonary – often just called Hartker.

Let's take a look at the very first word, "Visionem." Here on the left in modern notation we see a single note followed by two higher notes. In Hartker, this first note is a tractulus because the following neum of two notes is higher.

The third syllable of the word is also set with a single note. It is the highest note of the incise, that is, the highest note of this small melodic grouping of notes. It is followed by a lower note for the last syllable of the word. In Hartker, this highest note is a virga, and the following lower note is a tractulus.

Now let's look on the left at the second line of music at the text, "Donec a mortuis resurgat." The first syllable is set with a two-note figure, which we'll study later. Then, the next six syllables are each set to a single note. The first of these six syllables is higher than the previous note, so when we look at it in Hartker we see it set as a virga.

Back on the left, the third note of these six is the highest note of the series. It is higher than the note before it AND higher than the note that follows it. Logically, when we look at it in Hartker it is a virga.

One more time, back to the left - the sixth note of the series is just the opposite. It is lower than the note before it AND lower than the note that follows it. So, logically, when we look at in Hartker we see it as a tractulus.

But what about the other notes in this series? They are simultaneously both higher and lower notes. For example, on the left, the second note, over the syllable "a" is both higher than the previous note AND lower than the following note. The fourth and fifth notes, over the syllables "tu -is" are each lower than the previous note AND higher than the following note. In Hartker every one of these notes is expressed as a virga.

Now before we leave these examples, I want to show you something a bit unusual. If we look back on the left, up on the first line of music – at the word "nemini," we see that the first note is

higher than that last note of the previous word AND it is lower than the next note. As we might expect, this note in Hartker is a virga. (It also happens to have the letter “L” written next to it, to indicate “levate,” or “lift up” – to remind the singer that this note is quite a bit higher than the previous note.

And, back on the left, if we look at the last syllable of the word, “ni,” we see a note that is lower than both the preceding note and the following note. And as we would expect, Hartker gives us a tractulus for this note.

Now the curiosity. The note for the middle syllable of the word, “mi,” is higher than previous note AND higher than the following note. When we look at Hartker, we would expect to find a virga, but, in fact, we find a tractulus. Why?

The most likely answer is that the notation in Hartker represents a melodic tradition that is slightly different from what is preserved in the Graduale Romanum. Indeed, most scholars today believe that the Hartker notation reflects this melody – which conforms perfectly to the ancient notation.

Let’s look at an example of the second special case where two repeated notes are represented by two virgas. Here is another phrase from the communion chant, *Comédite pinguis*. Again, on the bottom is the chant as seen in the manuscript Einsiedeln 121. Above it is a modern transcription. We see that the last three notes are this exact pattern: two repeated notes followed by a lower note. In this case the first of these three notes is represented by a virga, because it is higher than the previous note. In fact, it is the highest note in a series of three rising notes, which is perhaps why the letter L, for *leváte*, perhaps best translated here as, “higher yet,” is added to the virga.

(singing) *et mittere partes*

## Summary

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

There is the punctum, a lower, light note;  
the tractulus, a lower note;  
the virga, a higher note;  
and the gravis, a much lower note.