chapter 2

plainsong

Plainsong is a monophonic form of music embodying a vast literature, much of which reflects a refined and sophisticated concept of melody. Large collections of secular and sacred monophonic music exist that date from the Middle Ages and have a number of unifying characteristics.

The linear concept of this literature is strongly conjunct, i.e., many seconds and thirds, fewer fourths and fifths, very few sixths and octaves, practically no sevenths, and no intervals larger than an octave. Its range normally remains within the comfortable span of the human (male) voice — approximately a tenth. Only one chromatic alteration (Bb) is used and that to avoid a linear tritone and to provide subtle nuances of line. The natural and flat forms of the B are never used immediately adjacent to each other (a practice referred to as *degree inflection*).

As suggested in Chapter 1, there is no formal rhythmic scheme, but performance practices have resulted in some consistency of interpretation. Relatively short phrases characterize this music. These may vary in length from a few notes to as many as twenty pitches. The tempo is usually not indicated in the manuscripts but has been described as being derived from the speed of such human functions as heartbeat or a walking pace — what today may be interpreted as approximately a moderato tempo.

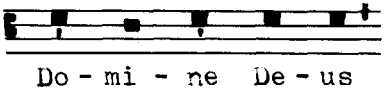
The form or broad architectural design of the music of this period is usually determined by the text. However, some purely musical structuring elements can be identified (e.g., return to musical phrases with or without the same text). The modest levels of linear pitch-determined tension and resolve

which may assume a structural function derive their relative value from the respective positions of the pitches in the prevailing ecclesiastical modes. There is a sense of internal unity and logic in this modal music.

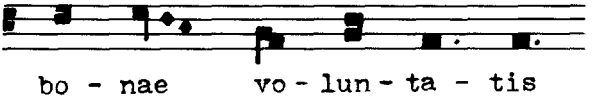
Dynamic variation is not shown in the music but is left to the performer who, traditionally, departs only slightly from the *mp-mf* performance levels. Some dynamic variation results naturally from the frequent use of alternating soloist and choir.

Plainsong is further characterized by three melodic styles and three performance classes. The former refers to the number of individual pitches sung to a single syllable of text in any given section of a chant or in the piece as a whole. The latter provides a basic architectural or form delineation. The melodic styles of plainsong – *syllabic*, *neumatic*, and *melismatic* – are demonstrated in Example 2.1

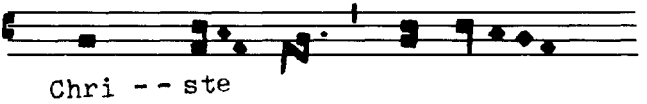
Syllabic: usually confined to one note for each syllable



Neumatic: a few notes are sung for most syllables (usually neumes of two or more notes)



Melismatic: a florid passage with many neumes (of all types) sung to single syllables)



Example 2.1. Melodic Styles of Plainsong. The Syllabic and Neumatic are from the *Liber Usualis*, Gloria, p. 86, and the Melismatic is from the same volume, Kyrie IX (*O Pater Excelse*), p. 85. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

The three basic performance classes of chant, which will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 3, are: *strophic*, in which all stanzas of a text are sung to the same music (e.g., hymns); *psalmadic*, including both responsorial and antiphonal psalmody, in which sections are repeated, with choir answering soloist or two choirs answering each other; and *through-composed*, in which

new musical ideas unfold from the beginning to the end of the piece (e.g., the typical Gloria and Credo sections of a Mass).

The Ecclesiastical Modes

All the factors considered to this point are finally dependent upon the fundamental distinguishing characteristics of the modal system, which largely make it possible to distinguish one chant from another. At the same time, certain of these characteristics also serve to establish groupings of melodic figures resulting from the relationship between tones and the varied functions of the tones that comprise the ecclesiastical modes. Although the names of these modes are derived from the Greek melodic modes, there is only a limited relationship between the two. See Example 2.2.

Each ecclesiastical mode has certain defining components beyond the simple scale patterns shown in Example 2.2. Some of the elements that contribute to the definition of these modes are:

finalis: the tone that functions as the focal point for the mode. It is often used as the final tone, although this is not essential.

reciting tone: (also referred to as *tenor* or *confinalis*). This tone serves as a primary focal point in the melody (particularly internally) and as a substitute for the finalis; it is also the reciting tone in the psalms.

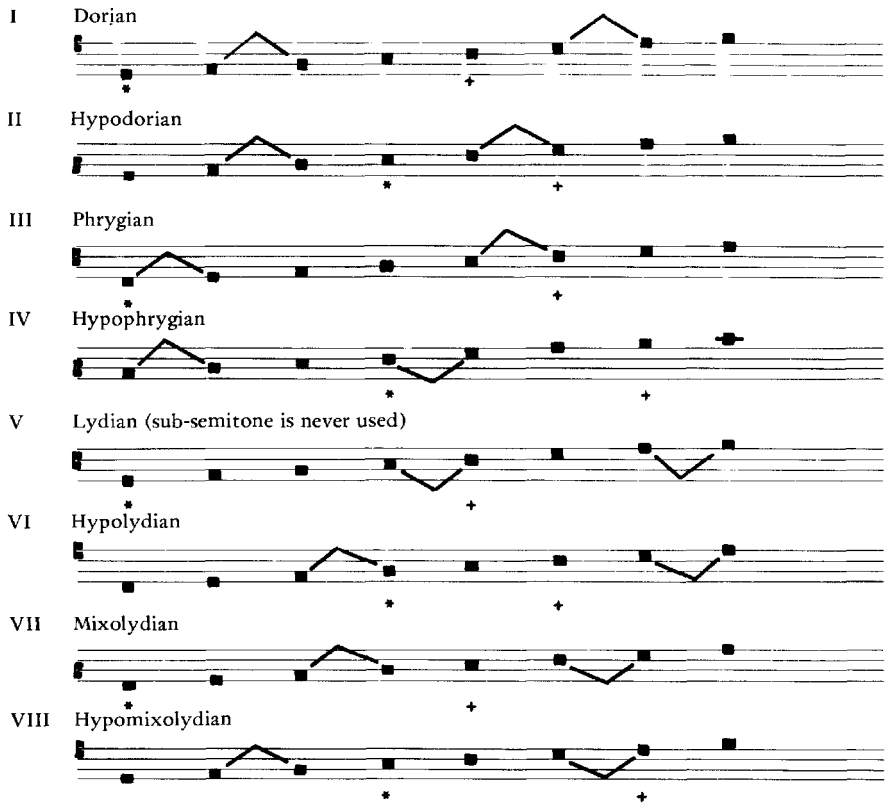
range: the prescribed range of each mode is rarely exceeded by more than a tone above or below.

musica ficta: the use of an altered tone (only Bb in plainsong) often in Modes I and V, frequently in Modes II and VI, and virtually never in Modes III, IV, VII, and VIII.

melodic patterns: the melodic figures associated with the mode that contribute to its unique quality.

absolute initial: a confusing term used by at least one author to refer to one of the many possible starting tones characteristic of each mode—for some modes as many as six of the possible seven tones are defined as "absolute initials."

The first four components listed above are presented for convenient reference in Table 2.1 (the fourth is shown indirectly in the Half-Step Locations column). The fifth component will be discussed more fully below, and the sixth



Example 2.2. The Ecclesiastical Modes. An asterisk indicates the finalis; a plus, the reciting tone; and the large and inverted carets, the location of the half steps. Plagal modes (II, IV, VI, and VIII) seldom use the notes below the finalis.

Table 2.1. Characteristics of the Ecclesiastical Modes

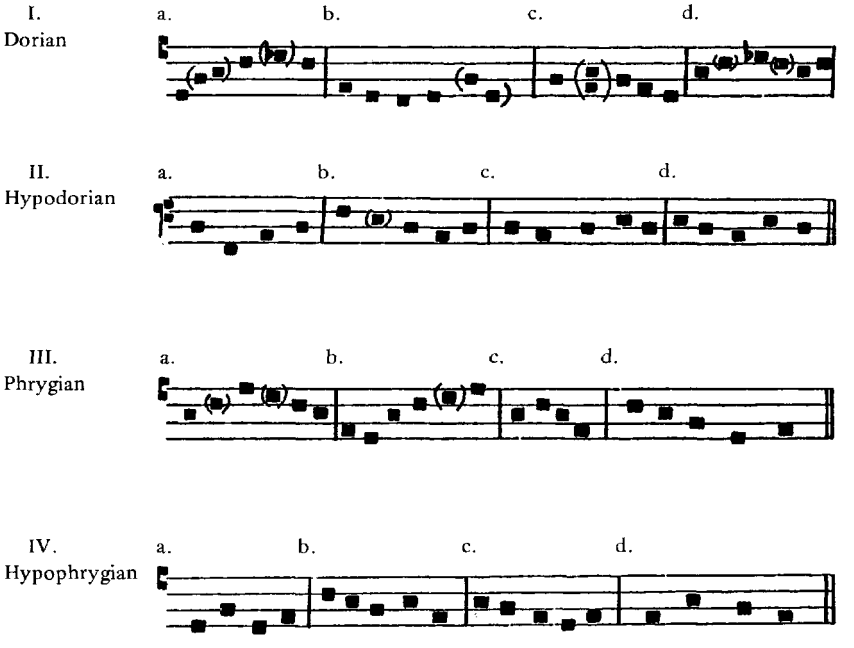
Mode	Authentic	Plagal	Range	Finalis	Reciting Tone[a]	Half-Step Locations
I	Dorian		d-d′	d	a′	2-3 and 6-7
II		Hypodorian	a-a′	d	f	2-3 and 5-6
III	Phrygian		e-e′	e	c′	1-2 and 5-6
IV		Hypophrygian	b-b′	e	a′	1-2 and 4-5
V	Lydian		f-f′	f	c′	4-5 and 7-8
VI		Hypolydian	c-c′	f	a′	3-4 and 7-8
VII	Mixolydian		g-g′	g	d′	3-4 and 6-7
VIII		Hypomixolydian	d-d′	g	c′	2-3 and 6-7

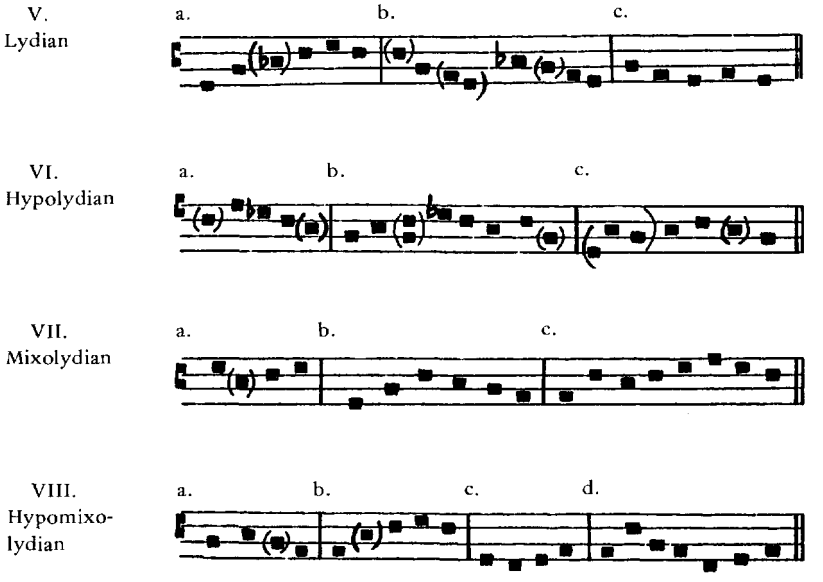
[a]The reciting tone is referred to by some authors as either the *confinalis* or the *tenor*.

will be dropped from further consideration since it seems to contribute confusion rather than clarity.

It should be noted that the modes, as they appear in Example 2.2, are more closely akin to our tonal representations than to modal representations. Little more than a convenient reference to the most basic modal attributes can be provided in such an example. Scale associations are so integral to the tonal system to which most of us have been conditioned that this approach may be helpful in terms of our orientation, but it can be quite misleading when considering the spirit of the modes. The principal attributes of the modes are not simply those associated with their scale-pattern intervallic relationships. The modes are more accurately represented by the elements that contribute to the sense of mood with which each mode can be identified – that is, the elements delineated in Table 2.1 – and the melodic figurations, such as those provided in Table 2.2. The latter may historically have greater significance and may be more subtle than the former. Also such a practice can be shown to be closely related to the musical practices of Hindu and Arabic cultures in which small

Table 2.2. The Ecclesiastical Modes: Characteristic Melodic Figures[a]





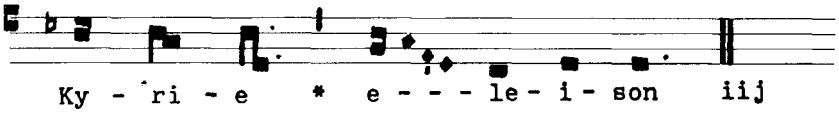
[a]These melodic patterns occur often enough in the respective modes that they may be considered characteristic and may contribute to the definition of the mode. The note (or notes) enclosed in parentheses may or may not appear and thus may be considered relatively incidental in the figure. The basic melodic contour and the notes of arrival at the principal positions in that contour are the most important elements.

melodic components provide the bases for lengthy compositions through various embellishments and extensions.

The melodic figures shown in Table 2.2 are examples from the numerous possibilities that exist for each mode. The use of figures such as these is necessarily subject to considerable discussion and to flexibility in interpretation. Some figures appear in different modes in the same or similar forms, and some seem, by their very nature, to be universal as simple melodic figures. However, those in Table 2.2 appear more consistently in prominent melodic positions in the respective modes and seem to have a more definitive function in these modes. Particularly important are the patterns that appear either at the beginning of a given mode or at a cadence (internal or final). The largest number of the figures provided are employed in this manner.

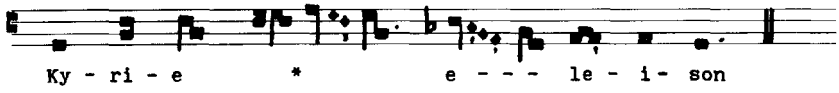
Although these melodic components are found in some form in many examples of plainsong, it is unusual to find them in close proximity or relatively unadorned. The first section of the *Kyrie Orbis Factor* provides a clear, me-

lodic Dorian scheme. In Example 2.3 three of the four patterns listed in Table 2.2 for this mode are given: patterns *d*, *a*, and *b* (in order of their appearance). The *d* pattern is quite straightforward; the *a* pattern is a free interpretation of the skip of a fifth in close proximity with the notes *g* and b^b in something of a free retrograde form; and the *b* pattern is complete and unadorned.



Example 2.3. *Kyrie Orbis Factor* (first section). *Liber Usualis*, p. 85. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

Another example which is reasonably clear and employs the three figures provided for Mode V in the order they appear in Table 2.2 is *Kyrie Altissime* (see Example 2.4). None of these are unembellished and some flexibility is necessary when interpreting the passage in this fashion.



Example 2.4. *Kyrie Altissime* (first section). *Liber Usualis*, p. 81. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

The first of these, to the asterisk, uses all the required tones from the pattern provided but is elongated by the *c'*-*a'*-*c'* motion (notes four, five, and six) before stating its two final notes. The *b* pattern is most obscured by the embellished descent to the *a'* which is suggested in Table 2.2 by the optional notes. The *c'* of the climacus is again an embellishing tone before the balance of the pattern is stated. The *c* pattern interlocks with the end of the preceding pattern and is elongated by embellishing oscillations between the member notes.

These two examples should make it apparent that the patterns (and these are but a sampling) can vary in value from providing great clarity to requiring considerable freedom of interpretation.

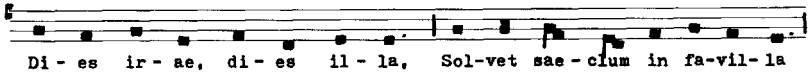
Plainsong Line

The principles of good plainsong line provide the foundation for evolving concepts of linear writing throughout the ensuing history of Western music.

Each era has molded and shaped these principles to suit its own concepts of beauty and to express its own historical temperament, but all owe their basic premises to this literature.

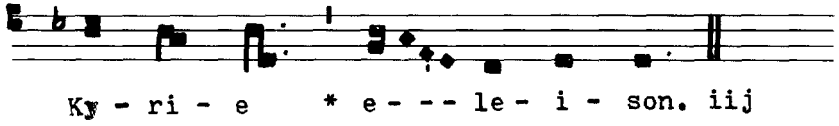
The first principle in the search for beauty in any time and with any style is freedom of expression and avoidance of rigidity. Rules that theorists have established in retrospect must be understood to be no more than honest efforts to explain the creative processes which led to the resulting styles. The creative mind never works in a vacuum but always enjoys rich resources of knowledge. However, it also enjoys and vigorously protects the privilege of free choice and the exercise of personal aesthetic judgment. It is in light of this first principle that all suggested guides to the study of style must be interpreted.

Plainsong line has been described as essentially conjunct—lines unfold mostly in steps with a moderate number of thirds. The thirds do not detract from but rather contribute to this conjunct sense by providing a modest shading of variety of effect within a narrow intervallic context. A fluid line with a distinguishable sense of forward motion must always be sought.[1] That exquisite linear flow can be achieved within such limitations is clearly reflected in the excerpt in Example 2.5, a piece which has intrigued composers for a thousand years and has been used in the works of many, even in electronic music.



Example 2.5. *Dies Irae* (first two incises). *Liber Usualis*, p. 1810. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

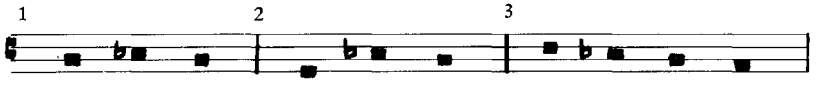
Larger intervals should be used freely but with discretion. It is relatively rare to find several large intervals in close proximity. More commonly they are used to emphasize the effects of a contour, to create a stronger sense of motion, and to provide variety in the flow of a line. The *Kyrie* in Example 2.6 demonstrates the beautiful and typical use of a single large skip (a fifth) in a conjunct setting.



Example 2.6. *Kyrie Orbis Factor* (first two incises). *Liber Usualis*, p. 85. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

The principal tones in a line are the primary tones in the mode in which that line has been conceived – that is the finalis and the reciting tone. However, it is not uncommon for the tones located a third or fourth above the finalis to assume roles of prominence. Definitive rules for such selections are impractical and would require so many qualifications that they would be useless. It is better for students to work initially with the finalis and reciting tones as focal points until they become more confident and have developed a sensitivity to the spirit of the literature. Then as each line unfolds it should be permitted to provide its own reference points to perceptive and sensitive composers. This kind of flexibility, predicated upon as extensive an exposure to the plainsong literature as possible, should produce the desired results for the music students.

The tritone should be avoided at all times, both directly and indirectly. Consequently it is necessary to insert the Bb in the modes in which both the *b* and *f* have melodic prominence. Certainly this is not going to be true with the appearance of every *b*. Such generalizations are dangerous if interpreted literally for every occurrence. However, three characteristic uses can be delineated: (1) between two *a*'s as an upper neighboring tone; (2) to avoid a tritone skip (i.e., from *f* to $b^{\flat}$ instead of *f* to *b'*); (3) in a descending scale line from above the *b'*. The second of these three possible uses of the flat is observed strictly, the first and third more freely. It should also be understood that the use of this flat is restricted to Modes I, II, V, and VI. It rarely occurs in the other modes, except when a passage becomes modally unstable and a sense of Modes I, II, V, or VI is sought. Characteristic uses of the B flat are shown in Example 2.7.



Example 2.7. Use of the B Flat in Plainsong.

Placement of Text

A few simple guides should be sufficient for the intelligent placement of a text to a plainsong line. Of primary importance is that no change of syllable or word can take place in the middle of a neume. This should immediately suggest the graphic appearance of the several performance styles. That is, melismatic plainsong will have many multipitched neumes to each syllable or word whereas the syllabic type will exculisvely have punctus with an occasional two-note neume (rarely more). Neumatic plainsong will, of course,

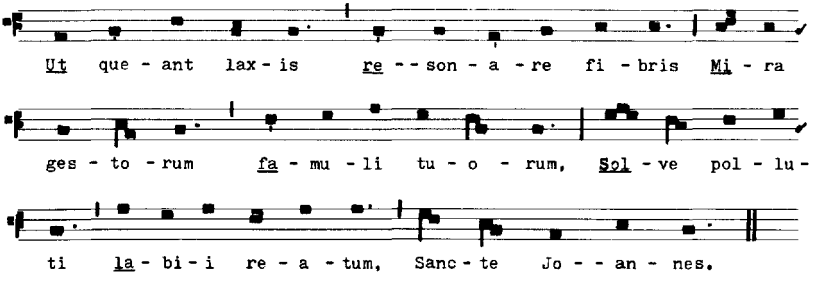
have a syllable or word for longer neumes or small groupings of simpler neumes.

In the Kyrie section of a Mass, the last syllable of both the Kyrie and the Christe (i.e., the *e* sound) is usually treated melismatically. In that same section the first syllable of *eleison* is treated melismatically which often produces the effect of a single word (e.g., *Kyrieleison*). The extension of a word over many pitches in melismatic and neumatic singing is always done with an open vowel sound. In the *alleluia*, the second syllable (the *le*) is usually treated very melismatically.

No strict practice appears to have been defined regarding whether the beginning, middle, or end of a word should receive the most melismatic treatment. Although there is consistency of practice in such instances as those described above, in general the division of a word is left to the good taste of the composer. An effort should certainly be made to have these changes occur at points in the melody that are compatible with its contour, with the relative degree of openness of the sound of the syllable to the pitch possibilities, and with the smooth sense of the line. Abruptness should be avoided in all aspects of plainsong writing because it is diametrically opposed to the spirit of the style.

Solmization

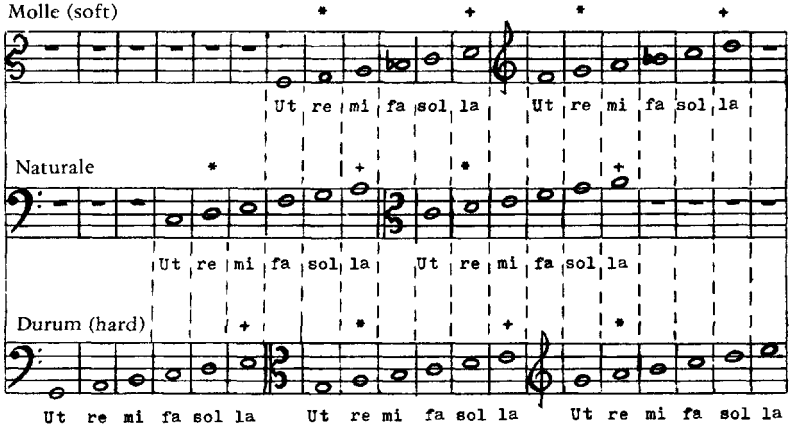
In an effort to facilitate learning and memorizing the melodies of the plainsong literature, especially needed for the long melisma sections, Guido d'Arezzo developed a system of neutral syllables which could be used in any mode, could move freely between modes, and provided each interval with a specific set of possible syllable relationships. A particular emphasis was placed on the half step and on the maintenance of the same syllable pattern for that interval



Example 2.8. *Ut queant laxis. Liber Usualis*, p. 1504. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

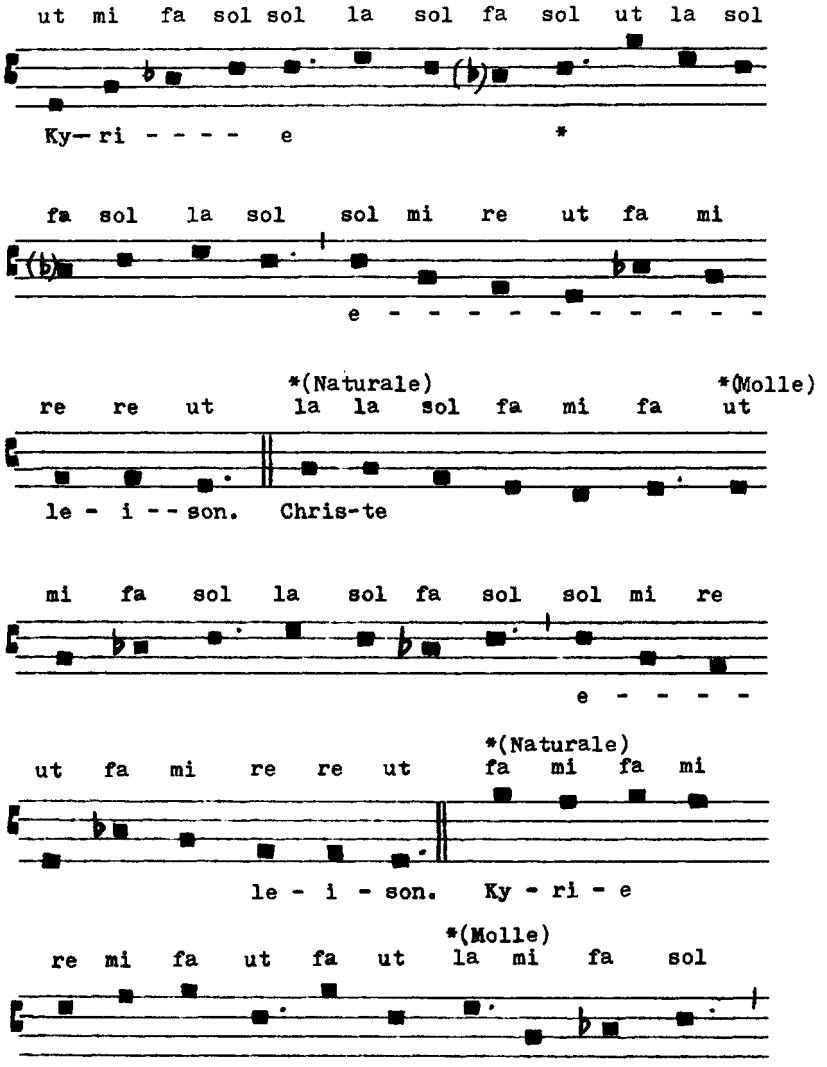
throughout the system. The syllables he used were taken from the first syllable of each incise of the hymn *Ut queant laxis*. In Example 2.8 this hymn is shown with the syllables underlined that were extracted to produce this system.

This is known as the *Hexachord System* because it employs a set of six syllables which is moved from one order of six notes to another, as necessary, to retain the position of the mi-fa (half step) relationship. Three such hexachords are identified by the presence or absence of *b* and the form of that note. If no *b* is present (i.e., the hexachord that begins on *c*), the hexachord is called *naturale* (natural). With a *b* natural present (i.e., the hexachord that begins on *g*), the hexachord is called *durum* (hard). The final hexachord, beginning on *f*, is referred to as *molle* (soft) owing to the presence of the *b flat*. No other hexachords are possible for they each contain the pattern two whole steps, one half step, and two whole steps, and are limited to the use of a single altered tone—*b* flat.



Example 2.9. The Hexachord System. An asterisk indicates common points of mutation ascending; a plus, common points of mutation descending.

Movement from one hexachord to another, frequently necessitated by range and variance between *b'* and *b'* flat in relatively close proximity, is referred to as *mutation*. Certain syllables in each of the hexachords serve as convenient points of change from one hexachord to another. The three hexachords together with the points of most convenient change are shown in Example 2.9. Often a repeated pitch may provide the most convenient position



Example 2.10. *Kyrie de angelis* (excerpt). *Liber Usualis*, p. 37. Reprinted with permission from the 1963 edition of Desclee & Co., Tournai-Doornik, Belgium.

for change from one hexachord to another. Example 2.10 demonstrates hexachord usage with mutation between molle and naturale.

Summary

The monophonic literature of the Middle Ages exists in large quantity, was reasonably consistent in compositional practice, and was notated in a system

that proved to be the foundation of the notational evolution that continued into the twentieth century.

Three notable performance styles developed which were largely dictated by the length or function of the text. The entire literature is conceived within the bounds of the ecclesiastical modes which essentially define patterns of intervallic relationships and tone functions within each mode.

Plainsong line is predominantly conjunct, but there is a discreet use of some wide skips. It should be relaxed and free-flowing within the comfortable range of the male voice and should never create a sense of strain which could detract from the central purpose of the music – i.e., serving as a vehicle to reinforce the textual idea.

To facilitate the process of learning the plainsong literature, Guido d'Arezzo devised a solmization system of six syllables which, by retaining the identity of the half step and adjusting pitch names, permitted free motion with intervallic security throughout the possibilities of the modal system.