GLOSSARY of Gregorian Chant Terms  by Anthony Ruff, OSB

accentualist – An interpretational approach in which the rhythm comes from the natural text accents. Modern *semiology is accentualist. Also called oratorical.

asterisk – Placed after the first few words of an antiphon to indicate how far a solo singer intones, although it is now recommended that the asterisk be ignored and all begin together; also used to indicate the middle point of a psalm verse.

e u o u a e – The vowels used as an abbreviation for “saeculorum, amen,” the last words of the doxology *Gloria Patri, under the pitches of the variant *terminations of a *psalm tone.

antiphonale – A book for the Liturgy of the Hours (office) consisting primarily of psalm antiphons, canticle antiphons, and hymns. Historically, the Roman office was a different rite than the Benedictine Office.

Antiphonale Monasticum – The 1934 antiphonale issued by *Solesmes for monastic use.

Antiphonale Romanum – The 1912 antiphonale issued by Rome for the Roman office.

authentic – A *mode in which the melody moves primarily in the octave above the *final; this is true of Modes I, III, V and VII. See also plagal.

Cardine, Eugene – The monk of *Solesmes who began the field of *semiology.

Carolingian era – 8th and 9th century; from the L. “Carolus Magnus” (Charlemagne).

common – A chant or set of chants useable for many similar liturgical days; the *Graduale Simplex provides commons for use any time throughout a season.

communion / L. communio - The *proper antiphon sung during communion, with the option of several psalm verses between each antiphon.


custos – The “guide” at the end of a line indicating the first note on the following line.

dominant – In the 8 modes, the *reciting tone which forms the second melodic pole, alongside the *final.

dot – In the *old Solesmes School, a *rhythmic sign indicating doubling of the note value.

episema – In the *old Solesmes school of interpretation, a horizontal line over a note indicating a slight lengthening (in practice, virtually a doubling).

equalist – Schools of interpretation in which the notes are of equal value. The *old Solesmes school is semi-equalist, with even eight notes that are lengthened by the *episema or *dot.

final – The last pitch of a piece, which in the 8 modes is determinant of the *mode (along with the melodic range), and in the *ur-modes is identical with the *reciting tone.

final cadence – see termination.

flex – A downward drop in the first half of a *psalm tone, used when the psalm verse has three lines rather than two.

Gajard , Joseph – The monk of *Solesmes who brought the “old Solesmes school” to a high peak in his conducting of the *schola on recordings through the 1960s.
Gloria Patri – L. for “Glory to the Father,” the Trinitarian doxology done after psalms of the Office, and generally as the last verse of the introtit and communio of the Mass.

gradual / L. graduale – 1. The proper psalm after the first reading, at one time sung from the gradus (step). 2. The book containing the Mass proports and settings of the ordinary.

Graduale Romanum – The book issued in 1908 by Rome, and issued also by Solesmes with rhythmic signs added; then revised after Vatican II and issued in a private edition by Solesmes in 1974. Note that Benedictines follow the Roman rite for Mass (not Office).

Graduale Simplex – A book of commons for Mass, creating by drawing from easier psalm antiphons of the Office, issued after Vatican II as called for in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

Graduale Triplex – A version of the 1974 Graduale Romanum with two additional notations added, above and below the staff, from the earliest neumes (for rhythmic interpretation).

Gregory the Great, Pope St. – The legendary author of Gregorian chant who in fact was not involved in the creation or organization of the repertoire.

ictus – In the old Solesmes school of interpretation, a small vertical mark above or below a note indicating the beginning of a melodic rhythmic group of 2 or 3 notes.

intonation – The first few pitches of a psalm tone to which the psalm verse is begun; the text to the intonation is pointed by being in italics in the Graduale Simplex and Psallite Domino.

introit / L. introitus – The proper entrance antiphon of the Mass.

Kyriale – A collection of Mass ordinary settings (named for the first chant in the ordinary).

Liber Hymnarius – The 1983 reformed “hymn book” for the Office; the second volume of the reformed Antiphonale Romanum, of which the first volume has not yet appeared.

liquescent – A notational indication suggesting care in pronunciation and (according to semiology) a corresponding rhythmic addition or reduction in note value.

melisma – A group of several notes over one syllable.

melismatic – A style of chant in which many syllables have longer melismas.

mensuralist – Schools of interpretation in which the rhythms of the notes are in some proportion to each other (such as 2 : 1 or 3 : 1), resulting in a certain recurring “downbeat.” Also known as proportionalist. From the Latin for “measured.”

Missa – L. for “Mass.” The genitive is Missae, as in proprium Missae, “proper of the Mass.”

mediant cadence – In a psalm tone, the melodic formula used at the end of the first half of the tone before the asterisk.

Mocquereau, Andre – The monk of Solesmes who put forth the equalist theory known as the old Solesmes school.

mode – A scale pattern which determines the pitches and their inter-relations within a chant, and also the ethos of a chant. There are 8 modes which are used for most chants. See also ur-mode.

neume – A figure of notation; for semiologists, used to mean all the notes over a syllable.

offertory / L. offertorium – The proper antiphon sung at the preparation of the gifts and altar.

old Solesmes school – An interpretation proposed by Mocquereau and used by Gajard with rhythmic signs for smooth even eight notes in melodic groups of two and threes.

oratorical – see accentualist.
ordinary / L. ordinarium – The unchanging texts of the Mass, consisting of the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus-Benedictus, Agnus Dei.
paleography – The study of manuscripts (literally, “old writings”).
plagal – A *mode in which the melody moves predominantly both above and below the *final; this is true of Modes II, IV, VI, and VIII. See also authentic.
plainsong, plainchant / L. cantus planus – A term first used in the 12th century, probably indicative of the *equalist manner of singing in use by then.
pointing – The indications (by underlining, bold face, or italics) for how a text is matched to a *psalm tone.
Pothier, Joseph – A monk of *Solesmes who advocated *accentualist singing.
proper / L. proprium – The changing texts of the Mass proper to a given day, such as the *introit or *communio.
proportionalist – See mensuralist.
Psallite Domino – A collection of *Vatican edition chants issued by *Solesmes Abbey by Alberto Turco of the Cathedral of Verona for congregations and choirs. L. for “Sing Psalms to the Lord.”
psalm tone – A melodic formula to which a psalm text is *pointed and sung. It consists of an *intonation, (sometimes a *flex,) the *reciting tone, a *mediant cadence, and after the *asterisk, the same *reciting tone, and the *termination.
quilisma – The jagged note (punctum) sung lightly.
reciting tone – The pitch on which most of the psalm verse in sung, however many syllables it has; also called the tenor. In the 8 modes, it is the *dominant.
rhythmic signs – In the *old Solesmes school, the *ictus, *episema, and *dot added to the notation of the *Vatican edition.
schola – Term for a smaller choir of singers, from the Latin “schola cantorum” (= school of singers).
semiology – The application of *paleography, literally “reading the signs.” The modern interpretational approach begun by *Cardine.
Solesmes Abbey – The Benedictine Abbey founded in France in 1833 by Abbot Gueranger; home of *Pothier, *Mocquereau, *Gajard, and *Cardine. See also *old Solesmes school.
Solesmes Editions – The editions of the chant that include the *rhythmic signs. See also Vatican edition.
syllabic – Chant in which most of the syllables have just one pitch over them; not *melismatic.
tenor – see reciting tone.
termination – The melodic formula at the end of a *psalm tone. A *mode or *ur-mode may have several terminations; these are sometimes indicated by *e u o u a e. Also called the final cadence.
ur-mode – According to recent research, the original scale patterns, of which there were three, C, D, and E, which cantors used in improvising. These later developed into the 8 modes. Unlike the 8 modes, the ur-modes have the same pitch for the *reciting tone and the *final. These three ur-modes appear in the *Graduale Simplex and succeeding books.
Vatican Editions – The chant editions from Rome, lacking the *Solesmes *rhythmic signs.