For over five years at Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in Merrimack, NH I have been working on a method of pointing the text and adapting traditional plainchant in English. My intention has been to create a way of singing the psalms that is simple enough that people who are not highly trained in music can learn it quickly; and beautiful enough that they want to.

The result is a method whereby the text is pointed the same way for all the tones. Consequently, if you know how to point the text (which is easily learnt) you can sing any one of the 120 tones you might know and apply it to the text. This opens up the whole psalter very quickly to people with very basic music knowledge. The tone melodies are all based on those of the Sarum Rite of the pre-Reformation English church. I have also adapted this method to compose a musical setting of the ordinary of the Mass, *The Mass of St Thomas More*, and have a selection of tones in simple four-part harmonies as options for choirs when an elevated form is required (perhaps in a solemn Vesper or psalm meditations during Mass).

You can see scores for this music at the *Way of Beauty - Psalm Tones* [http://thewayofbeauty.org/psalm-tones-2/], along with audio recordings of some of the selections, including harmonized forms and a tutorial video that explains how to point the text and apply any tone to it. Two examples are: *Mode VIII harmonised (for the Magnificat)* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oElTV1jogS8&feature=relmfu] *Mode II* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6nXHB4YIG4]

This project is an ongoing process of improvement and modification, but we have started to publicize our work and make it publicly available. Parishes and groups beyond the limits of the college campus are starting to use them and even a community of Augustinian Friars in Florida requested that I send them the first version of about 120 psalm tones. In this article, my aim is to tell you about the process I have used to undertake this project.

*All texts are pointed according to the natural rhythm of speech*

To make sure that the texts would be natural and easy to sing, it was important that the text would always govern the rhythm of the singing. The problem that so often occurs is that composers start with a beautiful melody and then work out how force the text on to it. I find that when music is composed in this manner people don't like singing it; it always sounds forced.

With this in mind, I developed a method of pointing that relies on the natural stressed syllables of speech and then worked out a system whereby all the tones could fit to it. The pointing doesn't change from tone to tone which means: *if someone knows just one tone, they will be able to point and sing the whole psalter*. As new tones are learned, they can be applied to same text; no re-pointing is necessary. In my experience of teaching this method, somebody can be up and running, and in a position to explain it to others with less than an hour of individual instruction. It is so intuitive that I have seen 8-year-old children learn how to point a text and sing it.

Once learned, this method can be applied easily to any psalter or edition of the Liturgy of the Hours, including the four-volume version of the Office on the four-week cycle approved by the American bishops, and reduced versions that contain Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Night
Prayer. This method encourages groups to sing together, because it does not demand that people buy specially pointed, and often very expensive psalters, but can apply it to the version they already own (provided they don't mind marking the pages lightly with a pencil). One could, for example, easily apply this with their monthly subscription to Magnificat magazine; it takes just a few minutes for people to point the psalms together for Vespers with their own copy.

An Example of How the Text is Pointed

If you read any text aloud you will find that certain syllables are naturally stressed and some are not. English tends to follow a pattern of stressed and then unstressed syllables. This system works around the last two stressed syllables in each line. I have pointed the following text according to the way I naturally stress it.

1 O praise Góð in his hóliness *
praise him in the fírmament of his pówer.
2 Praise him in his nòble ácts *
praise him according to his éxcellent gréatness.
3 Praise him in the sóund of the trúmpet *
praise him upon the lúte and hárp.
4 Praise him in the cýmbals and dánces *
praise him upon the stríngs and pípe.
5 Praise him upon the wéll-tuned cýmbals *
praise him upón the loud cýmbals.
6 Let everything thát hath bréath *
praise the Lórd.

All people will not always accent the text it in precisely the same way, but the degree of variation (even between Americans and someone with an English accent like myself) is very small. The pointing tutorial video on my website also explains the method: How To Point the Text So That You Can Sing Any Psalm [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AQx8MDZzcA]

One thing to notice is that this method does not count syllables from the end of the line. The two pointed syllables can move laterally within the line according to the natural stress of the spoken word, and the final stressed syllable may or may not be the final syllable. We will discuss how tones are fitted to the text after the next section.

Adapting tones intended for use in Latin to English

Adapting the Gregorian Psalms tones to English text is very difficult because the patterns of emphasis in the two languages are different: tones that flow naturally in Latin seem unnatural and awkward when forced onto English. I felt that in order to develop tones that could consistently be applied smoothly to all lines, I would do better to treat English as though it conformed more to its Germanic roots. This leads to a form of chant that tends much more towards having one note per syllable, which is called 'syllabic' chant. If you were to characterize one major difference between Latin and English, it would be that Latin floats on the vowels while English punches on the consonants. (When singing, choirs should be aware of this and make sure that they don't punch so aggressively that they kill it!)
Those who delve deeply into what I have done will find that some tones have some simple neums of just two notes per syllable. However, even these cannot be universally applied without occasionally sounding awkward, so I had to develop a rule which allows the singers to decide whether to drop the second note depending on the flow of text at that point. The instruction on how and when to do that is in the score.

To begin adapting the melody, I analyzed the characteristics of the original tone that made it beautiful: is it melody or the rhythm, or aspects of both? In the end, I think it is the combination of the two, but I decided that I would focus first on melody and make my priority to retain the key melodic intervals. The rhythm of the tone does not emanate from the music first, but matches the rhythm of speech for each line of text. Therefore, I decided that the rhythmic pattern of the tone be dictated by the English language, which means that it will have a different rhythmic feel than its Latin root tone. Sometimes this method worked well, but other times the melodic phrasing is so closely linked to the rhythmic pattern of the original language that it does not carry over into English. In these cases it was necessary for the character of the tone to change partially. I found this particularly in the Mode VIII tones. In some cases I decided that I would have to go where the pattern of the English language was taking me and, in effect, compose new tones to fit it.

This process has to be more than a systematic process of adaptation. While what I have explained so far does sound somewhat coldly methodical, at the end of the process I always take a step back and ask myself if that particular tone “works”. When I hear it sung does this sound holy? Does it have goodness of form? Does it seem to participate in something that is universal to chant? From here, I modify the tone further based on these qualifications if needed.

Applying the Tone to the Text
Many aspects of chant are more easily caught than taught. This is easily understood when I demonstrate it, but difficult to describe in print alone. Let us take a tone such as the following from Mode V (I have omitted flex and incipit) and apply it to a couplet from the previously pointed psalm:

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Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals
Praise him upon the loud cymbals.
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As you can see, the tone has pointed notes and the aim is make these coincide with pointed syllables. The first bar is applied to the first line of each couplet of text and the second to the second. The first note in each case is the reciting note. Then it is sung so that the first pointed syllable (well) coincides with the first pointed note, which in this case is still the reciting note, do. The final stressed syllable is sung to coincide with the that of the tone too. In this case they both happen to be do. In between there is a single note re. The rule here is that the single notes that are not pointed, belong to a cluster linked to the stressed syllable w. So in this case, the re belongs to the final stressed syllable and is applied to the word 'tuned'.
5. Praise him upon the well-tuned cymbals *

Note also that the final pointed syllable - cym - is not the final syllable in the line and as a result, the final note, do, is repeated until you reach the end ie the whole word, cymbals, is sung on do.

For the second line, the same rules apply. In this case there is more than one syllable between the first and second points. The note ti which is word 'upon' finishes on is applied to all syllables following, until you get the note, or cluster of notes belonging to the final pointed syllable, so this means that the word 'the' is sung as a ti and then 'loud' shifts up to the do before singing 'cymbals' on la.

This is more difficult to explain than it is to demonstrate, and more easily learnt by hearing someone do it, than by listening to an explanation. In fact, people pick it up very quickly if they are singing along with others who know how to do it because it is so intuitive.

See what works and be prepared to discard or modify what doesn't

At TMC, I would introduce a tone and observe how easily and naturally my students took to them. As I observed their reactions I began to discern the pattern of what did and didn’t work and steadily modified my method as I learned. I considered the ease with which they picked up new material and the effect it seemed to have on them - for example, did it promote a good liturgical disposition in them? Did it seem to encourage them to pray the Office regularly or was it a hurdle that they had to overcome? I also asked myself at a very simple level how it sounded to me: what was my gut reaction to it?

Harmonised Tones

We are very lucky at Thomas More College to have a choir director who is also a brilliant composer, Paul Jernberg. He has written wonderful four-part harmonies that are very simple to learn but have great nobility. Syllabic chant seems to lend itself well to homophonic harmonization and so I think it is no accident that the Eastern and Anglican forms have robust traditions of four-part harmonization in their liturgical music. Mirroring the traditional idea of singing gospel canticles by alternating chant and polyphony, we alternate singing in unison and in harmony. We also use these harmonization for the Responsorial Psalm during the Mass, so as the congregation sings the melody of the response prompted by the cantor, a small choir sings harmonies to support the melody.

Antiphonal Singing

It is common when singing the psalms is to divide the congregation into two groups and then for each to sing couplets alternately (referred to as singing 'antiphonally'). The tradition here, which we follow, is not to pause for long between one side and another. Rather, insert an obvious pause...
between the first phrase and the second phrase within each couplet of the tone, [after the asterisk (*)]. When there is triplet in the text, there is not an equivalent pause after the dagger (†), we might draw a quick breath, but don't take any long pause until the asterisk. This creates a sense that the contemplative pause is within each couplet or triplet phrase, but not between.

_Slowly is not holy_!

I find that people often equate slowness with contemplation. I do not agree that this always needs to be the case. Contemplation is a passive state of mind, one of receptivity and listening. Therefore, in order to lead the congregation towards contemplation, the choir must sing at a pace that is natural for those listening to take in the information. Though it always _feels_ fast for singing, the way that seems to work best for comprehensibility of the text is to sing the reciting note at a talking pace. Beyond this, there is room for interpretation and we generally slow down and get quieter at the end of each line. I was once told that a general principle for singing Gregorian chant is to “feather it in and feather it out”.

*Please feel free to go the website and download and use any material for the singing of the psalms at www.thewayofbeauty.org.*

NB _Chant experts will notice in the scores on the site, the neums are not annotated according the strict format of Latin chant - this is not a deliberate break from tradition on my part. It's because I haven't mastered the software fully yet.*