

Centonization and Adaptation

The Gregorian melodies are made up of short melodic fragments that are joined together like a patchwork quilt in a technique known as *centonization*. The more one becomes familiar with the Gregorian repertory, the more these familiar melodic fragments begin to reveal themselves. Sometimes a substantial portion of one chant (or even the entire melody) is borrowed by the Gregorian composer for use with completely different words. This leads to a technique known as adaptation, where an existing melody is modified to accommodate a new text.

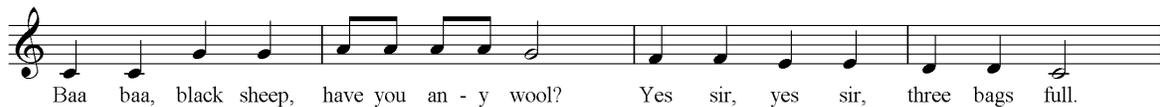
For example, consider the French melody *Ah! vous dirais-je Maman* as it is used for the nursery rhyme “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star”:



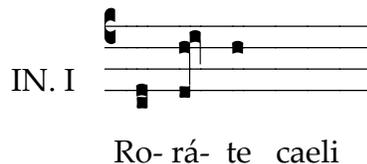
The same melody is used for teaching children to sing the letters of the alphabet, but the rhythm is adapted in order to accommodate two extra syllables:



The word rhythm of “Baa Baa, Black Sheep” requires a different adaptation:



A common melodic fragment is found at the beginning of several chants classified as Mode I. Consider the following example from the Introit for the Fourth Sunday of Advent:



The melodic formula appears here with six notes for the three syllables of “Rorate.” The first syllable is set to two notes which lead to the accented second syllable.

The following two examples illustrate how this melodic formula is adapted to

accommodate different texts without altering the position of the accented syllable. When two syllables precede the accented syllable, as in the word “Jubilate,” the initial two-note group is divided in half with one note per syllable:

OF. I

Ju-bi- lá- te Deo

Three syllables precede the accented syllable of the phrase “Ave Maria,” so an additional note is required:

I

A-ve Ma- rí- a

The introit *Gaudeamus* begins with the same melodic fragment:

au de á mus ó (m) nes in Dó mi no

It is absurd to think that during the prenotional period when chants were sung from memory the first two notes of this chant would have been treated as long when there were two syllables and short when there was only one. The above transcription shows that the first two notes are short, since two syllables are sung in the place of one.

Later in the same chant, we find another example of the patchwork technique of composition:

dí e(m) fés tum ce le brá (n) tes sub ho nó re Á ga thae mar ty ris.

The melodic fragment found at “sub honore” reappears at “et collaudant”:

et col lá (u) dant Fi li u (m) Dé i.

The image shows a single line of musical notation in a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody consists of a series of eighth and quarter notes, with some notes beamed together. Above the staff, there are several horizontal brackets indicating phrasing. Below the staff, the lyrics are written in Latin: "et col lá (u) dant Fi li u (m) Dé i.". Underneath the lyrics, there are various performance markings, including accents, slurs, and other symbols that indicate how the notes should be sung.

Only through an intimate familiarity with a large body of chant will these frequently recurring melodies be revealed to the singer. Therefore, one must be cautioned not to interpret the notation on the page too literally in every instance without consideration for its original context.

This melodic fragment is also used for “passione,” preceded by a long note on the final syllable of “cuius”:

de cui (i) ūs pas si ó ne gá (u) dēnt á (n)ge ō ſ li,

However, when this phrase appears in the Introit for the Assumption of Mary, the melody is adapted to accommodate the four syllable word “Assumptione,” and the long note on the final syllable of “cuius” is divided into two short notes:

de cui (i) us Assump ti ó ne gá (u) dēnt á (n)ge ō ſ li,

For an example of a neo-Gregorian composition that has been entirely centonized from an existing chant, see the offertory *Assumpta est Maria*.