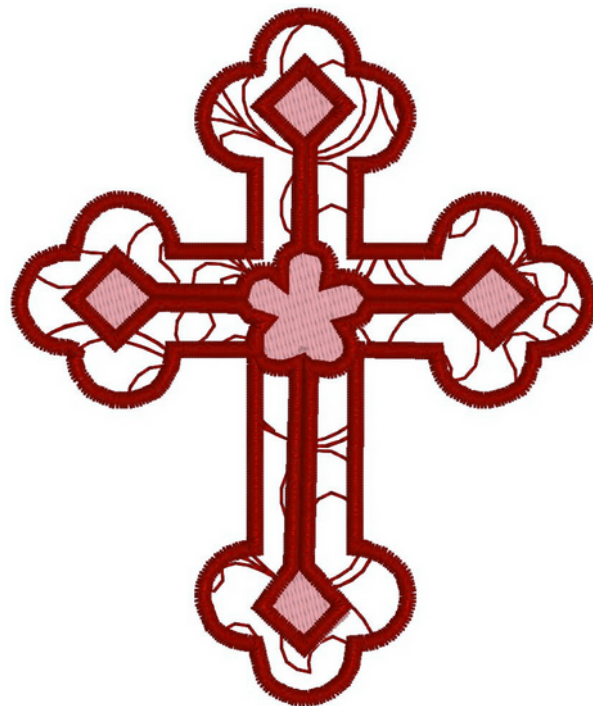


Digital Pointed Notation Guide



Inherited from Father Michael Fortunato

Further developed by V. Mastoridis

April 2026

Digital Pointed Notation Guide

Table of Contents

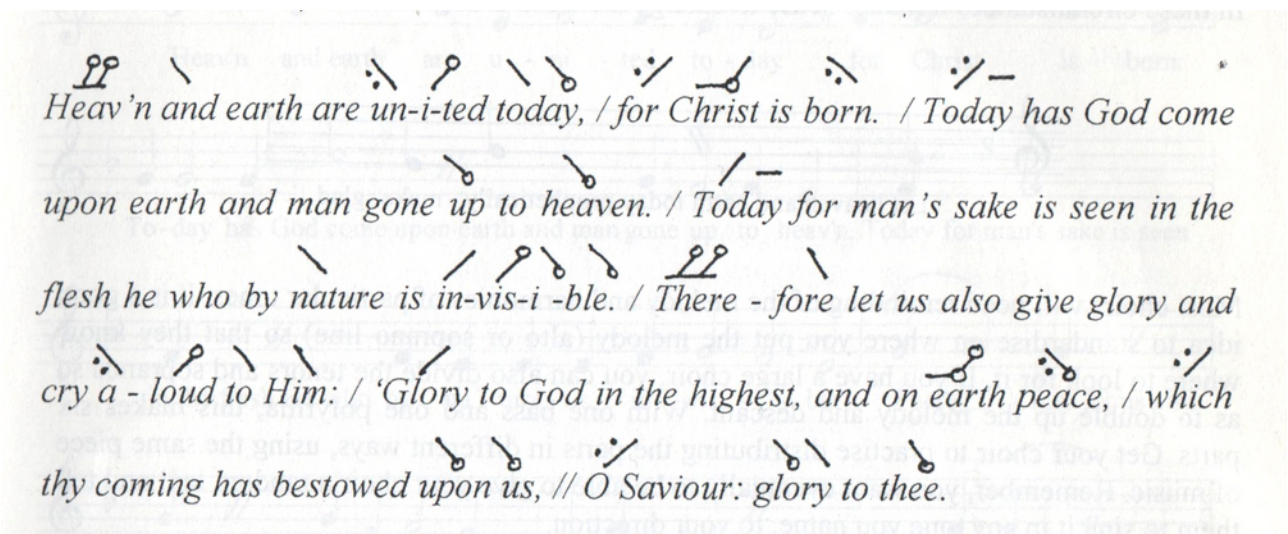
| | |
|--|----|
| Fr. Michael's Original Pointed Notation..... | 3 |
| Orthodox Christian Music Theory Basics: The Octoechos..... | 5 |
| The Notation Basics..... | 5 |
| The Digital Pointed Notation (DPN)..... | 6 |
| Minor Scales..... | 7 |
| Accidentals..... | 7 |
| Note Lengths..... | 8 |
| Melismata (Ornaments)..... | 8 |
| Ison (Bass Part)..... | 8 |
| “In the 2 nd tone!”..... | 9 |
| Resurrection Troparion Tone 1..... | 11 |

Fr. Michael's Original Pointed Notation

My own journey with this system began when I joined the Russian Orthodox Cathedral at Ennismore Gardens. There I discovered the method devised by the late Father Michael Fortunato, detailed in his book "Russian Church Music, THE EIGHT TONES" (2000), published by St Stephen's Press.

This is a system that uses a printed text with space above the words. Then, in that space, signs are added manually with a pen to indicate up and down pitch movements, as well as length. This is designed for non-music readers, as well as a shorthand for quickly notating long texts.

You can see an example of Fr Michael's original approach here:



Example of Pointed Notation as developed by Fr Michael

When compiling music for our Vespers services, I quickly realized how challenging it was to correct mistakes when working with pen on printed paper. My solution was to use readily available **computer keyboard symbols**, keeping the music digital and making corrections easy.

So, while inspired by Fr Michael's work, I made the pointed notation fully digital.

And — it worked! At our monthly Vespers prayers, there were a few who already sang in a church choir; they quickly adopted the change. The children also got used to it relatively easily, as well as adults who started joining us later.

Eventually, a parish priest from the Deanery UK who knows of my work, asked me to send them a copy as they are considering adopting it.

Orthodox Christian Music Theory Basics: The Octoechos

Before we dive into the notation itself, let's look into the musical 'language' behind it:

Orthodox Christian Liturgical Music Theory. At its heart is the **Octoechos** (which just means 'eight modes'). This is a system, inherited from the Byzantine music, that uses 8 different melodic **modes** that cycle through eight weeks, then start all over again. The cycle always resets with Tone 1 during Bright Week, right after Pascha.

For each of the liturgical 'forms' (like the **Troparia, Kontakia, Alleluias, and Stichera**), there are specific melodies built around these Octoechos tones. Now, here's a key point for Russian chant: while the Byzantine system is based on distinct *modes*, the Russian Obikhod tradition developed this into eight distinct **melodic patterns** for each liturgical form. These patterns typically feature one or two opening phrases, followed by 'looped phrases' that repeat, and then usually a clear ending or 'cadence.'

In the liturgical texts, I use numbers with hyphens (e.g. 1-, 2-) to indicate non-repetitive melodies; numbers with dots (e.g. 2., 3.) to indicate looped musical patterns; and the plus sign (+) to indicate the cadenza, or final phrase.

The **Major Natural Scale** is the backbone for most of these phrases.

The Notation Basics

Let's get down to the **Notation** itself. We'll start with the Natural Major Scale:

C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C, or **Do-Re-Mi-Fa-So-La-Ti-Do.**

In Russian-based church music, it's common practice to write in the key **F Major / D Minor** (one flat accidental, B \flat). Why F Major? Because it doesn't use ledger lines; sticking to one key also helps people quickly get familiar with the common note positions and how intervals feel within that familiar scale. So, while F Major gives us F-G-A-B \flat -C-D-E-F, we'll still use the **Do-Re-Mi** names in our examples. This keeps things clearer.

As for the singing pitch — we simply use a pitch that suits most of the singers in the church choir on the day..

The same stands for the rhythm: it's purpose is to be in service of the words and not the other way around. Note length symbols serve only as a guide to maintain balance between the melodic line and the meaning of the words.

The Digital Pointed Notation (DPN)

Now, let's look at the **Digital Pointed Notation (DPN)** system. This is where the keyboard symbols come into play.

To show a melody moving **one pitch up**, we simply use a forward slash '/' right before the syllable. To go one pitch down, it's a backslash '\' before the syllable. So, if we were to sing a simple scale from F (Do) up to the next F (Do') and back, it would look like this:

Do /Re /Mi /Fa /So /La /Ti /Do | Do \Ti \La \So \Fa |Mi \Re \Do.



This is a jump of one step (a 2nd interval; minor or major, depending on the scale degree we're in).

To show a jump of **two steps** (or 3rd interval) up or down, we use a double slash // for up, and double backslash \\ for down.



For 3 steps up, we use '///'; for 4 steps, we introduce the vertical bar '|' symbol. For jumps of 5 to 7 steps, we combine these two symbols, as shown below:

Going Higher:

/ one step (2nd interval)
// 2 steps (3rd)
/// 3 steps (4th)
|/ 4 steps (5th)
|// 5 steps (6th)
|/// 6 steps (7th)
|| 7 steps (octave)

Going Down:

\ one step (2nd interval)
\\ 2 steps (3rd)
\\\ 3 steps (4th)
|\ 4 steps (5th)
|\\ 5 steps (6th)
|\\\ 6 steps (7th)
||_ 7 steps (octave)

To make reading the DPN even easier, I introduced a **dark red colour** for the pitch (jump) symbols. Here are a few examples to clarify the above signs:

Do ///Fa /So \Fa \\Do



Do |/So \\Mi //So |\Do



Do |///La /Si |\\Do ||Do ||_Do



(We almost never come across jumps as large as in the last example, but it's good to be ready.)

Minor Scales

To indicate a melody in a minor key (usually D Minor, since it's the relative minor of F Major), we just add a '\\\' on the very **first syllable** of the first phrase. Why '\\'? Because D, the root note of the relative minor, is two steps down from F. So, if a melody starts in a minor key, it would look like this:


\\La /Ti /Do /Re \Do \Ti \La



Accidentals

If a melody uses a sharp or flat note, we simply add the **sharp (#)** or **flat (b)** sign accordingly right after the pitch symbol. For example, a Troparion in Tone 4 might look like this:

Do Do Do //Mi \Re \#Do /Re Re Re \Do



(In pointed notation, we don't usually use the natural (♮) sign to reset the pitch, as in standard notation.)

Note Lengths

The words in chant generally follow their natural rhythm, roughly in quarter or eighth notes. All melodies have a long note at the end of each phrase – we know this, so we don't need to indicate it with a symbol.

When we need to indicate longer notes within a phrase, we use an **underline**. So, our Tone 4 example is better written like this:

Do Do Do // Mi \ Re \ # Do / Re Re Re \ Do

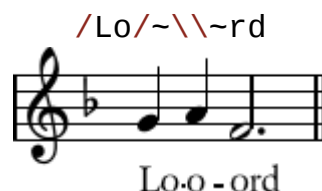
Text commas can indicate brief rests, but too many stops can break the melody's flow. Another way to indicate shorter, natural breaks is to underline only the last letter of the word; for example: in 'O / Sa/viour', the underlined 'a' letter indicates that we pause on the syllable 'Sa-' for a slightly shorter time than on the fully underlined syllable '-viour'

*(While I've never had the need to indicate faster notes within a melody, **italics** or **overline** would be possible ways to do it.)*

Melismata (Ornaments)

Melisma is when a single syllable of text gets stretched out over several notes. To indicate a melisma in pointed notation, we use the tilde '~' symbol.

For instance, word 'Lord' flowing over the notes Re-Mi-Do, we would write it like this:



Ison (Bass Part)

*(When singing in two voices, a melody and bass line, the bass is referred to as **ison**, a drone note; when singing in 4-part harmony, it's the **bass** part; I will use them interchangeably here)*

I struggled for years to find a way to write easy notation for the ison, always ending up with numbers somehow. So, in 2026 I finally decided to start implementing this numbered system. Will it work in the long run? Only God knows.

Here are the basics.

The scale degrees used in the bass part are represented with numbers:

- Do = 1 (Root)
- Re = 2 (Supertonic)
- Mi = 3 (Mediant)
- Fa = 4 (Subdominant)
- Sol = 5 (Dominant)
- La = 6 (Parallel Minor)
- Si (Ti) = 7 (Leading Note)

In most cases, the ison sings the root (1), the dominant (5) and the subdominant (4). Some melodies start or use the minor key (6).

While the supertonic (2), mediant (3) and leading note (7) are also used, the above four scale degrees form the core of the Obikhod bass melody.

The **ison numbers** are formatted as **dark red superscript**, and added in front of a word/syllable.

For example, the first line of Troparion in Tone 1 would be notated like this:

¹When the ⁵sto¹~^{ne} had been sealed ⁶by ⁵the ⁴Jews...

To make the numbered notation easier to learn, I started writing numbered noteheads for the bass part in all standard notation scores. When creating pointed notation for Stichera and Troparia, a '*melody/ison template*' is included in the appropriate tone; there, the ison part is also presented as numbered notation. This template is invaluable when we need to quickly recall a forgotten melody. I include samples at the end of this document.

When I add ison numbers to texts, I mark the phrases with Roman numerals (I, II, III) rather than Arabic numerals. This serves two purposes:

1. It avoids confusion between phrase numbers and ison numbers.
2. It allows me to use 'Find and Replace' (Ctrl+H) in LibreOffice Writer to quickly format the ison scale-degree numbers without affecting the phrase markers

“In the 2nd tone!”

Initially I was confused, and even after 25 years I am sometimes puzzled when I hear the phrase above. Which tone? For Troparia, Stichera, or Canons?

To help myself (and the chanters) make sense of this announcement, I use one-letter symbols to organize the tones by type.

- “t” (1t, 2t, etc.) for the **Troparion** tone family (including Kontakia)
- “s” (1s, 2s, etc.) for the **Stichera** (“Lord I Have Cried” and Aposticha)
- “a” (1a, 2a, etc.) for the **Alleluia** (incl. Prokeimenon)
- “i” (1i, 2i, etc.) for the **Irmos** (Irmoi) of the Canon

Last but not least: **Long, single-note phrases** in standard notation are written as **whole notes**, following the Deanery UK tradition.

Here's the full **Troparion in Tone 1t**, shown in standard notation (with numbered bass note heads); text with pointed notation for the melody; text with ison scale-degree numbers; and the melody/ison template.

Resurrection Troparion Tone 1t

style: Simplified Obikhod

text: Deanery UK

1. When the stone had been sealed by the Jews 2. and when the soldiers were guarding Thy pure Bo-dy,

1. O Sa - viour, Thou didst rise on the third day 2. and give life to the world.

1. There - fore, the Powers of Heaven cried to Thee, O Gi - ver of life:

2. Glory to Thy Resurre - ction, O Christ! 1. Glo - ry to Thy King-dom!

2. Glory to Thy Providence, O only Lo - ver of man - kind.

Resurrection Troparion Tone 1

(Melody/Ison Template)

Tone It

1. When the /sto/~ne \ \ had been sealed /by /the /Jews
2. And \when the soldiers were guarding Thy pure \Bo\dy,
1. O /Sa/viour, \ \ Thou didst rise /on /the /third day
2. And give \life \to the \world.
1. /There/fore, \ \ the Powers of Heaven cried to Thee,
O /Giver /of /life:
2. \Glory to Thy Resur \rection, O \Christ!
1. /Glo/ry \ \ to/~ /Thy /Kingdom!
- + \Glory to Thy Providence, O only \Lover of \mankind.

(Ison)

- I. ¹When the ⁵sto¹~ne had been sealed ⁶by ⁵the ⁴Jews
- II. And ¹when the soldiers were guarding Thy pure ⁵Bo¹dy,
- I. O ⁵Sa¹viour, Thou didst rise ⁶on ⁵the ⁴third day
- II. And give ¹life ⁵to the ¹world.
- I. ⁵There¹fore, the Powers of Heaven cried to Thee,
O ⁶Giver ⁵of ⁴life:
- II. ¹Glory to Thy Resur⁵rection, O ¹Christ!
- I. ⁵Glo¹ry to⁶~ ⁵Thy ⁴Kingdom!
- + ¹Glory to Thy Providence, O only ⁵Lover of ¹mankind.

Follow, reach out, or support:

- [Newsletter](#)
- Viktor.Mastoridis.co.uk/Orthodox
- YouTube.com/The-Gentle-Light
- Gentle-Light.Bandcamp.com
- BuyMeaCoffee.com/Gentle.Light

LOG

April 2026

- Modified the overall tone of the document, to make it more neutral
- Added explanation of Fr Michael's system, rather only relying on images
- Added overline as possible solution for very short note lengths
- Added Ison section
- Added explanation for the tone family letter classification (1t, 2s, etc.)
- Added explanation for whole notes in long single-note phrases
- Added full standard and pointed notations of the Troparion in Tone 1