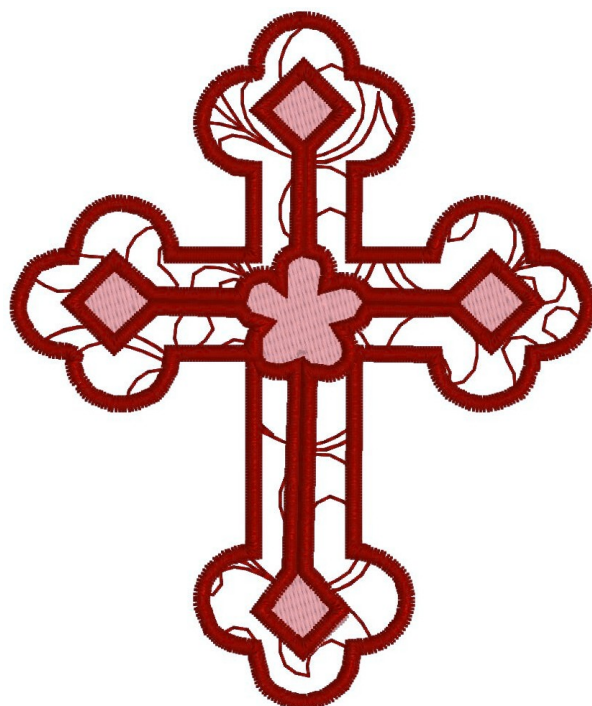


Digital Pointed Notation Guide



Inherited from Father Michael Fortunato

Further developed by V. Mastoridis

July 2026

Digital Pointed Notation Guide

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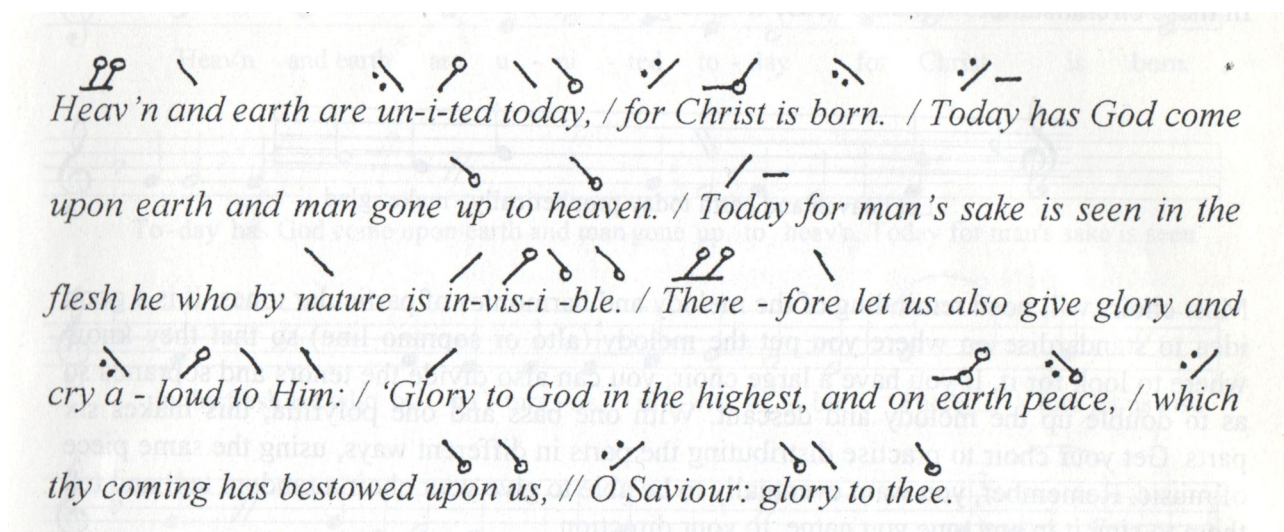
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Fr. Michael's Original Pointed Notation

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

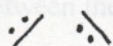
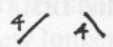
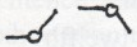
When compiling music for our Vespers services, I quickly realized how challenging it was to correct mistakes when working with pen on printed paper. My solution was to use readily available **computer keyboard symbols**, keeping the music digital and making corrections easy.

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.

To start, let's get a quick overview of Fr Michael's foundational system:

	(on a first word) Start on the note above / below the root e.g. T 1, T4 stikhera
	(on a first word) Start two notes above / below the root
	Go up one note
	Go up two notes
	Go down one note
	Go down two notes
	Go up / down three notes
	Go up / down four notes
	Two upward shifts on one syllable. Downward shifts should hang from a line above: 
	Melisma, i.e. sing more than one note on one syllable (these can be extended in various ways)
	pause on this note
	go up / down and pause
	pause, then go up / down
	reminds the choir of an important word during a chanting note
	indicates an unusual chord
	start new phrase)
	)
	start ending phrase)
	in the text

Fr Michael's Pointed Notation outline

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.' 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:



(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:



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:



(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

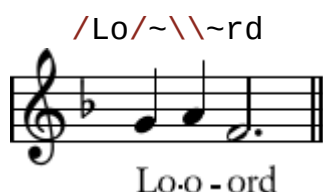
Text commas can indicate brief rests, but too many stops can break the melody's flow. Another way to indicate shorter, natural breaks is to underline only the last letter of the word; for example: in 'O / Sa/viour', the underlined 'a' letter indicates that we pause on the syllable 'Sa-' for a slightly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

*(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 Obikhod ison notation, scale degrees are read according to register convention:

- Scale degrees 1, 2, 3 are sung in normal register
- Scale degrees 4, 5, 6, 7 are sung in lower register

Occasionally, scale degrees 2 and 3 are also sung in the lower octave. To distinguish the registers, dots are added after the scale degrees numbers, so 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. means that these are sang an octave lower.

The whole span of the bass notes is thus octave and half:

(2.	3.)	4.	5.	6.	7.	1	2	3	4
Re.	Mi.	Fa.	Sol.	La.	Ti.	Do	Re	Mi	Fa

The **ison numbers** are formatted as **dark red superscript**, and added in front of a word/syllable. If a note has a melisma, i.e. one syllable is sang over two or more notes, a forward slash (/) or a backslash (\) are added just before the number of the second/third note. This is to help visualise the upward (/) or downward (\) movement of the bass voice.

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

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

¹**When the** - Do

^{5.}sto — low Sol; long note (underlined)

/¹~ne — upward melisma back to Do; long note

had been sealed — ‘sealed’ is long

^{6.}**by** ^{5.}**the** ^{4.}**Jews...** — low La, low sol, low Fa

Here’s an example with the tone degree 2 sang in the normal, then lower register:

^{5.}**He**/¹~ar ^{2.}**me,** ^{2.}**O** ^{5.}**Lord.** — ^{2.}**me** is in the normal register; ^{2.}**O** is octave lower.

To make the numbered notation easier to learn, **numbered noteheads** for the **bass part** are written in all standard notation scores, helping singers understand how the bass numbers relate to the actual notes in the tonal hierarchy.

“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

Tone Pattern Schema and Melodic Patterns Numbering

When notating traditional Obikhod music (the tones etc.), at the top of each pointed notation, I add a ‘**Tone Pattern Schema**’ using standard notation; this is both an indication and a reminder of the melody and ison movement.

As mentioned above, **melodic patterns** based on the **Major Natural Scale** form the backbone of the Obikhod Tradition. These patterns are short melodic phrases that are structured differently for each tone.

To understand and internalize each tone’s structure and the layout of the melodic phrases, I use Arabic Numerals throughout, visible in grey colour in all the notations:

- In the standard notation, the phrase numbers appear in the lyrics
- In the Tone Pattern snippets, they appear between the two staves
- In the Pointed and Ison notations, each row starts with a different, clearly marked phrase number
- As Arabic numbers may collide with the numbered bass notation, Roman Numerals are used instead to mark the melodic phrase patterns

I use **numbers with hyphens** (e.g. 1- & 2- or I- & II- for ison) to indicate non-repetitive phrases; **numbers with dots** (e.g. 2. & 3. or II. & III.) to indicate looped musical patterns; and the **plus sign** (+) to indicate the cadenza, or final phrase. For example, in a “1- 2. 3. +” pattern, phrase 1- is only

used as an opener; phrases 2. and 3. are looped; we end with the cadenza either after phrase 2. or 3..

When there are more **complex patterns**, such as in the Troparion Tone 3, I lay out the full structure. For example: "1.2. |: 1.3.2. 1.4.2. :| +"; this means that the tone opens with phrases 1-2, then 1-3-2 and 1-4-2 are looped; the cadenza can follow any of the four phrases. In short texts, such as Lord I Have Cried, we don't even arrive at the 4th phrase.

Sometimes a phrase has an extension, like a **variation**; this is indicated with the **plus sign** next to its number: **1+** means that it's a variation of phrase 1.

- In some cases, such as in Tone 1t, this adds colour: phrases 1. and 1+ are used interchangeably in longer texts.
- But sometimes, such as in Stichera Tone 6 ("1. 2. 2+ 3. +"), phrases 1, 2, and 3 are looped until the cadenza arrives. However, when phrase 2 falls before the cadenza, we must use the variation 2+ instead.

Tone 1t has two phrases and the melody always ends with the 2nd phrase; this is why, in the tone pattern indication, the 2nd phrase is indicated as **2/+**.

Last but not least: notating **long, single-note phrases**:

- In *Standard Notation* these lyrics are displayed under a **whole note**, following the Deanery UK tradition.
- In the *Tone Patterns* notation (the schematic tone movement indication of the melody/ison on top of each traditional pointed notation), the whole note indicates the place where a **longer text** is supposed to be placed.

Final takeaway

In liturgical practice, we're often given a troparion, kontakion, or stichera with a tone designation (e.g., "Tone 2") but without notation—just the text.

By understanding the melodic pattern structure of that tone (we now know that kontakion uses the troparion melody), we can attempt to map the text to the melodic phrases: where to place the opening text (1-), which portions loop with phrases 2. and 3., and where the final phrase (cadenza) concludes the melody.

With time, practice, and persistence (and falls and hitting many walls:-), we develop the skill to do this intuitively.

Appendix

What follows is a complete example of the Troparion in Tone 1 using both systems:

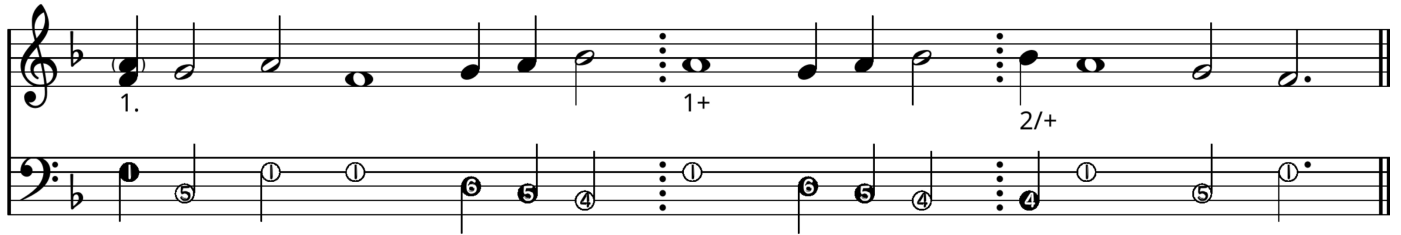
- The first example is in standard notation (with numbered bass note heads)
- The 2nd example is a text with pointed notation; it consists of three parts:
 - The Tone Pattern
 - The pointed melody (text with signs or pointers)
 - The ison – or numbered bass notation

Resurrection Troparion Tone 1t

The image displays a musical score for the Resurrection Troparion in Tone 1t, presented in four systems. Each system consists of a treble staff with standard musical notation and a bass staff with numbered notation (1-6). The lyrics are written below the staves, with numbered bass notes corresponding to the text. The first system includes a repeat sign. The second system also includes a repeat sign. The third system includes a repeat sign. The fourth system includes a repeat sign. The lyrics are: 1. When the stone had been sealed by the Jews 2. and when the soldiers were guarding Thy pure Bo-dy, O Sa - viour, Thou didst rise on the third day 2. and give life to the world. Therefore, the Powers of Heaven cried to Thee, O Giver of life: 2. Glory to Thy Resurre-ction, O Christ! Glo - ry to Thy Kingdom! 2. Glory to Thy Providence, O only Lo - ver of man - kind.

Resurrection Troparion

Tone 1t



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 (numbered bass*)

- I. ¹When the ⁵sto¹~ne had been sealed ⁶by ⁵the ⁴Jews
- II. ⁴And when ⁶the ¹soldiers were guarding Thy pure ⁵Bo¹dy,
- I. ¹O ⁵Sa¹viour, Thou didst rise ⁶on ⁵the ⁴third day
- II. ⁴And 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.

By the prayers of Sts Eteldrude of Ely and Sophrony of Essex
Inherited from Fr. Michael Fortunato
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-

LOG

July 2026

- Adding dots to indicate lower octave in numbered bass notation (5., 6. etc)
- The ‘Final Takeway’
- Much clearer explanation of the Tone Pattern Schema and Melodic Patterns Numbering
- The ↓ symbol added to indicate an octave lower for the 2 and 3 scale degrees when needed
- The upward slash and backslash added to ison numbered notation to indicate upward or downward melisma movement
- Ison numbered notation explanation clarified, especially that scale degrees 4, 5, 6, 7 are sung in lower register

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