

Dictionary of Musical Terms

Absolute - Absolute music. Music which is inspired by itself rather than extramusical implications such as the stories legends of "program" music.

Accelerando, accel - Gradually faster.

Accent - > placed above a note to indicate stress or emphasis.

Accidental - A sharp, flat, or natural not included in the given key.

Accompaniment - A vocal or instrument part that supports or is background for a solo part.

Adagio - Slow; slower than andante, faster than largo.

Addolorato - Sorrowfully.

Ad libitum, ad lib - A term which permits the performer to vary the tempo and/or to include or omit a vocal or instrumental part. Synonymous with a piacere.

A due - Return to unison after divisi.

Affrettando - Hurrying.

Agilmente - Lively.

Agitato - Agitated; with excitement.

Al, all', alla, alle - To; used with other words, e.g. al Fine (to the end).

Album - A full length recording. In pop music, it contains a number of songs.

Al coda - "To the coda."

Aleatory, or aleatoric music - Chance music in which the performers are free to perform their own material and/or their own manner of presentation.

Al fine - To the end.

Alla breve -  Cut time; meter in which there are two beats in each measure and a half note receives one beat.

Allargando, allarg - Slowing of tempo, usually with increasing volume; most frequently occurs toward the end of a piece.

Allegretto - Slower than allegro.

Allegro - Quick tempo; cheerful.

Al segno - Return to the sign, Dal segno.

Alteration - The raising or lowering of a note by means of an accidental.

Alto clef - The C clef falling on the third line of the staff. Most of the time is used by the viola.



Ancora - Repeat.

Andante - Moderate tempo.

Andantino - Slightly faster than andante.

A niente - To nothing, e.g. to ppp.

Animato - Animated; lively.

A piacere - Freedom in performance. Synonymous with ad libitum.

Appassionato - Impassioned.

Appoggiatura - A nonharmonic tone, usually a half or whole step above the harmonic tone, which is performed on the beat and then resolved.

Arabesque - A fanciful piano piece. Ornate passage varying or accompanying a theme.

Arpeggio - A term used to describe the pitches of a chord as they are sung or played one after the other, rather than simultaneously.

Arrache - Strong pizzicato.

Arrangement - An adaption of a composition.

Articulation - The degree to which notes are separated or connected, such as staccato or **legato**.

A tempo- Return to the previous tempo.

Atonality - Lacking a tonal center.

Augmentation - Compositional technique in which a melodic line is repeated in longer note values. The opposite of diminution.

Augmented - The term for a major or perfect interval which has been enlarged by one half-step, e.g. c-g \sharp , (an augmented fifth,) or c-d \sharp , (an augmented second). Also used for a triad with an augmented fifth, e.g. the augmented tonic triad in C major, C+, c-e-g \sharp .

Baby grand - A small grand piano.

Balance - The harmonious adjustment of volume and timbre between instruments or voices; it can be between players or vocalists or electronically while recording or mixing.

Ballade - In the medieval period a form of troubere music and poetry. In later time, German poetry set as a through-composed song.

Band - An instrumental ensemble, usually made up of wind and percussion instruments and no string instruments.

Bar line - The vertical line placed on the staff to divide the music into measures.

Baroque - The period 1600-1750.

Bass clef - The other name for the F clef.

Basso continuo, Continuo, Thorough-bass - The Baroque practice in which the bass part is played by a viola da gamba(cello) or bassoon while a keyboard instrument performed the bass line and the indicated chords.

Baton - Conductor's stick.

Battuto - Beat, bar, or measure. A due or a tre battuta, the musical rhythm in groups of two or three respectively.

Ben - Well. Used with other words, e.g. ben marcato, well accented, emphasized.

Binary form - The term for describing a composition of two sections. AB, each of which may be repeated.

Bis - Repeated twice. Encore!

Bitonality - The occurrence of two different tonalities at the same time.

Bourree - A French dance from the 17th century in brisk duple time starting with a pickup.

Brass family - Wind instruments made out of metal with either a cup- or funnel-shaped mouthpiece, such as trumpet, cornet, bugle, Flugelhorn, trombone, tuba, baritone horn, euphonium, saxhorn, and French horn.

Broken chord - Notes of a chord played in succession rather than simultaneously. **Arpeggio**.

Cadence - A chordal or melodic progression which occurs at the close of a phrase, section, or composition, giving a feeling of repose; a temporary or permanent ending. The most frequently used cadences are perfect, plagal, and deceptive.

Cadenza - a solo passage, often virtuosic, usually near the end of a piece, either written by the composer or improvised by the performer.

Caesura - A sudden silencing of the sound; a pause or break, indicated by the following symbol:
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Calmo, calmato - Calm.

Cambia - A direction found in scores to change tuning or instruments.

Camminando - Following easily and gently.

Canon - The strictest form of imitation, in which two or more parts have the same melody but start at different points.

Canonic - A term used to describe a polyphonic style of music in which all the parts have the same melody but which start at different times.

Cantabile - In singing style.

Cantata - Baroque sacred or secular choral composition containing solos, duets, and choruses, with orchestral or keyboard accompaniment.

Carol - The term was derived from a medieval French word, *carole*, a circle dance. In England it was first associated with pagan songs celebrating the winter solstice. It then developed into a song of praise and celebration, usually for Christmas.

C clef - A clef **C** usually centered on the first line (soprano clef), third line (alto clef), fourth line (tenor clef), or third space (vocal tenor clef) of the staff. Wherever it is centered, that line or space becomes middle C.

Chance music - Aleatoric music.

Chorale - Hymn-like song, characterized by blocked chords.

Chord - A combination of three or more tones sounded simultaneously.

Chromatic - Ascending or descending by half steps.

Chromatic scale - A scale composed of 12 half steps.

Circle of fifths - The succession of keys or chords proceeding by fifths.

Classical - Music conforming to certain form and structure. Usually music composed during the period 1770-1825.

Clef - A symbol placed at the beginning of the staff to indicate the pitch of the notes on the **staff**.

The most commonly used clefs in choral music are the G, or treble, clef  and the F or bass clef . On the keyboard, all the notes above middle C are said to be in the G clef; all the notes below middle C in the F clef.

Coda - Closing section of a composition. An added ending.

Col, coll', colla - With or "with the."

Common time - 4/4 meter.

Complete cadence - I-IV-V-I progression.

Composer - A person who creates (composes) music.

Con - With.

Con brio - With spirit; vigorously.

Con calore - With warmth.

Concert - A public performance of music.

Concert grand piano - The largest of the grand pianos, usually about nine feet long.

Concertino - A short concerto. The group of soloists in a concerto grosso.

Concert master - First chair violinist in an orchestra.

Concerto - A piece for a soloist and orchestra.

Concert pitch - The international tuning pitch -- currently A 440 or 442. The pitch for non-transposing (C) instruments.

Conducting - The directing of a group of musicians.

Conductor - The person who directs a group of musicians.

Con intensita - With intensity.

Conjunct - Pitches on successive degrees of the scale; opposite of disjunct.

Con moto - With motion.

Consonance - Intervallic relationships which produce sounds of repose. Frequently associated with octave, third and sixth intervals; however, fourths and fifths may be sounds of consonance, as in both early and 20th-century music.

Consort - A 17th-century term for instrumental chamber ensembles and for the compositions written for these ensembles.

Con spirito - With spirit.

Contra - The octave below normal.

Corda, corde - String.

Countermelody - A vocal part which contrasts with the principal melody.

Counterpoint - The technique of combining single melodic lines or parts of equal importance.

Crescendo -  Gradually louder.

Cue - Indication by the conductor or a spoke word or gesture for a performer to make an entry. Small notes that indicate another performer's part. Music occurrence in a film.

Cut time - 2/2 meter.

Da capo, D. C. - Return to the beginning.

Dal - "From the," "by the."

Dal segno, D. S. - Repeat from the sign . Frequently followed by al Fine.

Damper pedal - On pianos, the pedal that lifts the dampers from the strings.

Deceptive cadence - Chordal progression dominant (V) to a chord other than the expected tonic.

Decrescendo -  Gradually softer. Synonymous with diminuendo.

Degree - One of the eight consecutive tones in a major or minor scale.

Delicato - Delicately.

Di - Of, with.

Diminished - The term for an interval which has been decreased from the major by two half steps and from the perfect by one half step, e.g. c-a^b, diminished sixth, or c-g⁷, a diminished fifth. Also used for a triad which has a minor third and a diminished fifth, e.g. c^b, c-e^b, g^b.

Diminuendo, dim - Gradually softer. Synonymous with decrescendo.

Diminution - The shortening of note values; the opposite of augmentation.

Dirge - A piece that is performed at a funeral or memorial service.

Disjunct - The term used to describe intervals larger than a second; the opposite of conjunct.

Dissonance - Sounds of unrest, e.g. intervals of seconds and sevenths; the opposite of consonance.

Divisi, div - An indication of divided musical parts.

Do - The first degree of the major scale.

Dolce - Sweetly.

Dolcissimo - Very sweetly.

Doloroso - Sadly; mournfully.

Dominant - The fifth degree of the major or minor scale. Also, the term for the triad built on the fifth degree, labelled V in harmonic analysis.

Double bar - Two vertical lines placed on the staff to indicate the end of a section or a composition. Also, used with two dots to enclose repeated sections.

Double flat -  A symbol for lowering pitch one step.

Double sharp -  A symbol for raising pitch one step.

Double tonguing - On flute and brass instruments, the technique of rapidly articulating notes by using the front and the back of the tongue in alternation (t-k-t-k-t-k).

Down beat - The first beat; given by the conductor with a downward stroke.

Down bow - In the violin family, drawing the bow downward from its frog. The symbol is: .

Du - "From the," "of the."

Duet - A piece for two performers.

Duplet -  A group of two notes performed in the time of three of the same kind.

Dynamics - Varying degrees of loud and soft.

E - Italian word meaning "and."

Eighth - Octave.

Eighth note/rest - A note/rest half the length of a quarter note and an eighth of the length of a whole note. 

Encore - To repeat a piece or play an additional piece at the end of a performance.

Enharmonic - A term used to describe notes of the same pitch which have different names, e.g. c \sharp and d \flat , f \sharp and g \flat .

Espressivo - Expressively.

Esuberante - Exuberant.

Fa - In solmization, the fourth degree of the major scale.

Fanfare - A prelude or opening, a flourish, usually played by brass instruments.

Fasola - A system of solmization used in 17th- and 18th-century England and America. Fa, so, and la were given to both c-d-e and f-g-a, with mi used for the seventh degree.

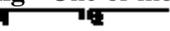
Fermata - Hold; pause .

Festivo, festoso - Festive; merry.

Fifth - The fifth degree of the diatonic scale. Also, the interval formed by a given tone and the fifth tone above or below it, e.g. c up to g, c down to f. Intervals of the fifth may be perfect (corresponding to major), diminished, or augmented.

Finale - The last movement of a symphony or sonata, or the last selection of an opera.

Fine - The end.

First ending - One or more measures which occur at the end of the stanza or stanzas. It is usually indicated: 

Fixed do - The system of solmization in which c is always do.

Flat - \flat A symbol which lowers the pitch of a note one half step.

Form - The design or structure of a musical composition.

Forte -  Loud.

Fortissimo -  Very loud.

Full score - An instrumental score in which all the parts for the instruments appear on their own staves in standard instrumental family order.

Fourth - The fourth degree of the diatonic scale. Also, the interval formed by a given tone and the fourth tone above or below it, e.g. c up to f; c down to g. Intervals of the fourth may be perfect, diminished, or augmented.

Fz - Forzando or forzato. Synonymous with sforzando (sf or sfz).

Gig - A job for a musician.

Giocoso - Playful.

Giubilante - Exultant, jubilant.

Glissando - Gliss. The rapid scale achieved by sliding the nail of the thumb or third finger over the white keys of the piano. Glissando is commonly used in playing the harp. For bowed instruments glissando indicates a flowing, unaccented playing of a passage.

Grandioso - Grandiose, majestic.

Grand pause - A rest for the entire ensemble.

Grand piano - A piano with a winglike shape and a horizontal frame, strings, and soundboard.

Grand staff, Great staff - The G and F clef staves together make the grand (great) staff.

Grave - Slow, solemn.

Grazia - Grace. Con grazia, with grace.

Grazioso - Graceful.

Grosso, grosse - Great, large.

Half step - The interval from one pitch to the immediately adjacent pitch, ascending or descending, e.g. c-c \sharp ; e-e \flat ; b-c. The smallest interval on the keyboard.

Harmony - The sounding of two or more tones simultaneously; the vertical aspect of music.

Hemiola - The term applied to time values in the ration of 3:2, e.g. three half notes in place of two dotted half notes.

Homophony, Homophonic - Musical texture which is characterized by chordal support of a melodic line.

Impressionism - A musical movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Inspired by the French impressionist painters, the movement had its impetus in the music of Debussy and Ravel.

Instrument - Any device that produces a musical sound.

Instrumentation - The art of composing, orchestrating, or arranging for an instrumental ensemble.

Interval - The difference in pitch between two tones.

Inversion - As applied to music the term may be used in both melody and harmony. Melodic inversion: an exchange of ascending and descending movement, e.g. c up to f in descending becomes c down to g. Harmonic inversion: the position of the chord is changed from root position (root on the lowest pitch) to first inversion, with the third, or second inversion, with the fifth in the lowest voice. An example: root position c-e-g; first inversion e-g-c; second inversion g-c-e.

Ironico - Ironic.

Key signature - The sharps or flats placed at the beginning of the staff to denote the scale upon which the music is based.

La - In solmization, the sixth degree of the major scale. Also, the first degree of the relative minor scale, e.g. a is the sixth degree, or la, in the C major scale and the first degree of the a-minor scale.

Lacrimoso - Tearful, mournful.

Lamento - Mournful, sad.

Langsam - Slow.

Largamente - Broadly.

Larghetto - Slower than largo.

Largo - Very slow.

Leading tone - The seventh degree of the major scale, so called because of its strong tendency to resolve upward to the tonic.

Ledger lines - Short lines placed above and below the staff for pitches beyond the range of the staff.

Legato - Smooth, connected.

Leggiero - Light; graceful.

Lento - Slow; slightly faster than largo, slower than adagio.

Liberamento - Freely.

Linear - Melodic; horizontal lines.

Ma - But. Used with other words, e.g. lento ma non troppo, slow but not too slowly.

Maestoso - Majestically.

Major - The designation for certain intervals and scales. A key based on a major scale is called a major key. The pattern for the major scale is:

whole	whole	half	whole	whole	whole	half
step	step	step	step	step	step	step

Major chord - A triad composed of a root, major third, and perfect fifth.

Mancando - Fading away

Marcato - Emphasized, heavily accented.

Measure - A group of beats containing a primary accent and one or more secondary accents, indicated by the placement of bar lines on the staff. The space between two bar lines.

Medesimo - The same.

Mediant - The third degree of the major or minor scale. The triad built on this degree is labeled iii in the major scale, III in the natural minor scale, and III⁺ in the harmonic minor scale.

Medieval - The period prior to the Renaissance, c. 500-1450, marking the music of the early Christian church.

Melody - In general, a succession of musical tones. It represents the linear or horizontal aspect of music.

Meno - Less.

Meno mosso - Less motion.

Meter - The structure of notes in a regular pattern of accented and unaccented beats within a measure, indicated at the beginning of a composition by a meter signature.

Meter signature - The numbers placed at the beginning of a composition to indicate the meter of the music, e.g. $\frac{4}{4}$. The upper number indicates the beats in a measure; the lower number tells what kind of a note will receive one beat.

Metronome - Invented by Maelzel in 1816, the instrument is used to indicate the exact tempo of a composition. An indication such as M.M. 60 indicates that the pendulum, with a weight at the bottom, makes 60 beats per minute. A slider is moved up and down the pendulum to decrease and increase the tempo. M.M. \downarrow = 80 means that the time value of a quarter note is the equivalent of one pendulum beat when the slider is set at 80.

Mezzo - Half, Medium

Mezzo forte -  Medium loud.

Mezzo piano - Medium soft.

Mi - In **solmization**, the third degree of the major scale.

Middle Ages - European historical period between roughly A.D. 500 and 1450.

Middle C - The note C in the middle of the Grand staff, and near the middle of the piano.

Minor - The designation for certain intervals and scales. A key based on a minor scale is called a minor key. The three types of minor scales include natural, harmonic, and melodic, which is used infrequently in choral music. The patterns for natural and harmonic scales are:

natural:	whole	half	whole	whole	half	whole	whole
	step	step	step	step	step	step	step

harmonic:	whole	half	whole	whole	whole	1-1/2	half
	step	step	step	step	step	steps	step

melodic:

(ascending):	whole	half	whole	whole	whole	whole	half
	step	step	step	step	step	step	step

(descending):	whole	whole	half	whole	whole	half	whole
	step	step	step	step	step	step	step

Misterioso - Mysteriously.

Mit - With.

Mode - Any scalewise arrangement of pitches; more generally, the term refers to the patterns upon which medieval music was structured, the patterns which preceded the development of major and minor scales and tonality.

Moderato - Moderate speed.

Modern - Music written in the 20th century or contemporary music.

Modulation - The process of changing from one key to another within a composition.

Molto - Very. Used with other terms, e.g. molto allegro.

Mordent - "Biting." An ornament consisting of an alteration (once or twice) of the written note by playing the one immediately below it (lower mordent), or above it (upper, or inverted, mordent) and then playing the note again.

Morendo - Gradually decreasing in volume; dying away.

Mosso - Rapid. Meno mosso, less rapid. Piu mosso, more rapid.

Motive - A short melodic or rhythmic pattern.

Moto - Motion. Con moto, with motion.

Movable Do - The system of solmization in which do changes to accommodate the key, e.g. in the key of C major, do is c; in E^b major do is e^b. In the key of a minor do is c (relative major); in the key of c minor do is e^b (relative major).

Music - The organization of sounds with some degree of rhythm, melody, and harmony.

Music theory - The study of how music is put together.

Nach - After (as "in the manner of"); behind.

Nachtmusik - "Night music." A serenade.

Natural -  A musical symbol which cancels a previous sharp or flat.

Neumatic - One style of chant in which two to four pitches occur on one syllable; in contrast to melismatic and syllabic.

Non - No; not.

Nonharmonic tones - A designation for tones outside the harmonic structure of the chord. Two frequently used examples are the passing tone and the appoggiatura.

Non troppo - Not too much. Used with other terms, e.g. non troppo allegro, not too fast.

Notation - A term for a system of expressing musical sounds through the use of written characters, called notes.

Note - The symbol which, when placed on a staff with a particular clef sign, indicates pitch.

Nuance - Subtle variations in tempo, phrasing, dynamics, etc., to enhance a musical performance.

Octave - The eighth tone above a given pitch, with twice as many vibrations per second, or below a given pitch, with half as many vibrations.

Octet - A piece for eight instruments or voices.

Open fifth - A triad without a third.

Open strings - Strings are not stopped, fingered, or fretted.

Opus, Op - The term, meaning work, is used by composers to show the chronological order of their works, e.g. Op. 1, Op. 2.

Orchestra - A large group of musicians made up of string, brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments.

Orchestration - The art of writing, arranging, or scoring for the orchestra.

Ornamentation - Note or notes added to the original melodic line for embellishment and added interest.

Ornaments - Melodic embellishments, either written or improvised.

Ossia - "Or." Indicating an alternative passage or version.

Ostinato - A repeated melodic or rhythmic pattern, frequently appearing in the bass line.

Ottava - Octave.

Ottava alta - (8va) An octave higher.

Ottave bassa - (8va or 8vb) An octave lower.

Overtones - The almost inaudible higher tones which occur with the fundamental tone. They are the result of the vibration of small sections of a string (instrument) or a column of air. Other general terms for overtones are partials and harmonics.

Overture - The introductory music for an opera, oratorio or ballet. A concert overture is an independent work.

Pacato - Calm, quiet.

Passing tones - Unaccented notes which move conjunctly between two chords to which they do not belong harmonically.

Pausa - A rest.

Pensieroso - Contemplative, thoughtful.

Percussion family - Instruments made of sonorous material that produce sounds of definite or indefinite pitch when shaken or struck, including drums, rattles, bells, gongs, and xylophones.

Perfect - A term used to label fourth, fifth, and octave intervals. It corresponds to the major, as given to seconds, thirds, sixths, and sevenths.

Perfect cadence - The chordal progression of dominant to tonic, in a major key V-I, in minor V-i.

Perfect interval - Interval of an octave, fifth, or fourth without alteration.

Perfect pitch - The ability to hear and identify a note without any other musical support.

Pesante - Heavy.

Petite - Little.

Peu a peu - Little by little.

Phrase - A relatively short portion of a melodic line which expresses a musical idea, comparable to a line or sentence in poetry.

Pianissimo - **pp** Very soft.

Pianississimo - **ppp** Very, very soft; the softest common dynamic marking.

Piano - **p** Soft. Pianoforte.

Pianoforte - "Soft-loud." A keyboard instrument, the full name for the piano, on which sound is produced by hammers striking strings when keys are pressed. It has 88 keys.

Picardy third - The term for the raising of the third, making a major triad, in the final chord of a composition which is in a minor key. The practice originated in c. 1500 and extended through the Baroque period.

Pitch - The highness or lowness of a tone, as determined by the number of vibrations in the sound.

Piu - More. Used with other terms, e.g. piu mosso, more motion.

Pizzicato - "Pinched." On string instruments, plucking the string.

Plagal cadence - Sometimes called the "amen" cadence. The chordal progression of subdominant to tonic, in a major key IV-I, in minor iv-i.

Poco - Little. Used with other terms, e.g. poco accel., also, poco a poco, little by little.

Poco ced., Cedere - A little slower.

Poco piu mosso - A little more motion.

Poi - Then or afterwards, e.g. poi No. 3, then No. 3.

Postlude - "Play after." The final piece in a multi-movement work. Organ piece played at the end of a church service.

Prelude - "Play before." An introductory movement or piece.

Premiere - First performance.

Prestissimo - Very, very fast. The fastest tempo.

Presto - Very quick.

Primo - First.

Principal - Instrumental section leader.

Prologue - An introductory piece that presents the background for an opera.

Quarter note/rest - A note/rest one half the length of a half note and one quarter the length of a whole note. 

Quartet - A piece for four instruments or voices. Four performers.

Quasi - Almost. Used with other terms, e.g. quasi madrigal, almost or as if a madrigal.

Quintet - A piece for five instruments or voices. Five performers.

Rallentando, rall - Gradually slower. Synonymous with ritardando.

Range - The gamut of pitches, from low to high, which a singer may perform.

Rapide - Rapidly.

Re - In solmization, the second degree of the major scale.

Recital - A performance by one or more performers.

Refrain - A short section of repeated material which occurs at the end of each stanza.

Relative major and minor scales - Major and minor scales which have the same key signature.

Renaissance - The period c. 1450-1600.

Repeat - The repetition of a section or a composition as indicated by particular signs.

Repeat of a section: 

Repeat from the beginning: 

Also D.C., repeat from the beginning and D.S., repeat from the sign.

Resonance - Reinforcement and intensification of sound by vibrations.

Rest - A symbol used to denote silence.

Rhapsody - A free style instrumental piece characterized by dramatic changes in mood.

Rhythm - The term which denotes the organization of sound in time; the temporal quality of sound.

Rinforzando - A reinforced accent.

Risoluto - Resolute.

Ritardando, rit - Gradually slower. Synonymous with rallentando.

Ritenuto - Immediate reduction in tempo.

Ritmico - Rhythmically.

Roll - On percussion instruments, a sticking technique consisting of a rapid succession of notes:


Romanticism - The period c. 1825-1900.

Root - The note upon which a triad or chord is built.

Root position - The arrangement of a chord in which the root is in the lowest voice.

Round - Like the canon, a song in which two or more parts having the same melody, starting at different points. The parts may be repeated as desired.

Rubato - The term used to denote flexibility of tempo to assist in achieving expressiveness.

Rudiments - On drums, the basic sticking patterns.

Ruhig - Quiet.

Run - A rapid scale passage.

Rustico - Pastoral, rustic, rural.

Sanft - Soft, gentle.

Sans - Without.

Scale - A succession of tones. The scale generally used in Western music is the diatonic scale, consisting of whole and half steps in a specific order.

Scherzo - "Joke." A piece in a lively tempo. A movement of a symphony, sonata, or quartet in quick triple time, replacing the minuet.

Schnell - Fast.

Score - The written depiction of all the parts of a musical ensemble with the parts stacked vertically and rhythmically aligned.

Secco - "Dry." Unornamented.

Second - The second degree of the diatonic scale. Also, the interval formed by a given tone and the next tone above or below it, e.g. c up to d, or c down to b. Intervals of the second may be major, diminished, or augmented.

Section - A division of a musical composition.

Segno - "Sign." 

Sehr - Very.

Sehr leise beginnend - Very soft in the beginning.

Semitone - A half step. The smallest interval on the keyboard.

Sempre - Always. Used with other terms, e.g. sempre staccato.

Semplice - Simple.

Senza - Without. Used with other terms, e.g. senza crescendo.

Septet - A piece for seven instruments or voices. Seven performers.

Sequence - The repetition of a melodic pattern on a higher or lower pitch level.

Serenade - A love song or piece, usually performed below someone's window in the evening.

Sereno - Serene, peaceful.

Seventh - The seventh degree of the diatonic scale. Also, the interval formed by a given tone and the seventh tone above or below it, e.g. c up to b, or c down to d. Intervals of the seventh may be major, minor, diminished, or augmented.

Seventh chord - When a seventh (above the root) is added to a triad (root, third, fifth), the result is a seventh chord, e.g. the dominant triad in the key of C major, g-b-d, with the added seventh becomes g-b-d-f and is labelled V⁷.

Sforzando, Sfz, Sf - Sudden strong accent on a note or chord.

Sharp - \sharp A symbol which raises the pitch of a note one-half step.

Sheet music - An individually printed song, most often for voice, piano, guitar, or a combination of the three. Any printed music.

Shifting meter - The changing of meter within a composition. Synonymous with changing meter.

Simile - An indication to continue in the same manner.

Sin' - Until.

Sinistra - Left hand.

Sino - Until.

Six-four chord - The second inversion of a triad, made by placing the fifth of the chord in the lowest voice, e.g. C_4^6 is g-c-e.

Sixteenth note/rest - A note/rest half the length of an eighth note and a sixteenth the length of a whole note. 

Sixth - The sixth degree of the diatonic scale. Also, the interval formed by a given tone and the sixth tone above or below it, e.g. c up to a, or c down to e. Intervals of the sixth may be major, minor, diminished, or augmented.

Sixth chord - The first inversion of a triad, made by placing the third of the chord in the lowest voice, e.g. C_6 is e-g-c.

Skip - Melodic movement of more than one whole step.

Slur - A curved line placed above or below two or more notes of different pitch to indicate that they are to be performed in legato style.

Smorzando - Fading away.

Soave - Sweet, mild.

Sognando - Dreamily.

Sol - In solmization, the fifth degree of the major scale.

Solmization - The term for the use of syllables for the degrees of the major scale: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la ti, do. The minor scale (natural) is la, ti, do, re, mi, fa, sol, la.

Solo - To perform alone or as the predominant part.

Sonata - An instrumental piece, often in several movements.

Sonatina - A short sonata.

Sostenuto - Sustaining of tone or slackening of tempo.

Spiccato - On string instruments, a bowing technique wherein the bow is bounced on the string at moderate speed.

Staccato - Detached sounds, indicated by a dot over or under a note. The opposite of legato.

Staff - The most frequently used staff has five horizontal lines, with four spaces, upon which the notes and other musical symbols are placed.

Stanza - A selection of a song, two or more lines long, characterized by a common meter, rhyme, and number of lines.

Stesso - Same.

String instrument family - Instruments with strings that produce sound when plucked, bowed, or struck.

Strophic - A term used to describe a song in which all the stanzas of the text are sung to the same music. The opposite of through-composed.

Subdominant - The fourth degree of the major or minor scale. Also, the name of the triad built on the fourth degree of the scale, indicated by IV in a major key and by iv in a minor key.

Subito - Suddenly.

Submediant - The sixth degree of a major or minor scale. Also, the name of the triad built on the sixth degree of the scale, indicated by VI in a major key and by vi in a minor key.

Sul - On the.

Supertonic - The second degree of the major or minor scale. Also, the name of the triad built on the second degree of the scale, indicated by II in a major scale and ii^o in a minor scale.

Sur - On, over.

Suspension - The use of a nonharmonic tone to delay the resolution of a chord, frequently as it occurs in a cadence.

Svelto - Quick, light.

Symphony - A piece for large orchestra, usually in four movements, in which the first movement often is in sonata form. A large orchestra.

Syncopation - Accent on an unexpected beat.

Tanto - Much, so much.

Tempo - The rate of speed in a musical work.

Tempo primo - Return to the original tempo.

Teneramente - Tenderly.

Tenor clef - The C clef falling on the fourth line of the staff.

Tenuto, ten - Hold or sustain a note longer than the indicated value, usually not as long a duration as the fermata.

Ternary form - Three-part form in which the middle section is different from the other sections. Indicated by ABA.

Terraced dynamics - The Baroque style of using sudden changes in dynamic levels, as opposed to gradual increase and decrease in volume.

Tertian harmony - A term used to describe music based on chords arranged in intervals of thirds.

Tessitura - The general pitch range of a vocal part.

Texture - The term used to describe the way in which melodic lines are combined, either with or without accompaniment. Types include monophonic, homophonic, and polyphonic, or contrapuntal.

Theme - The musical subject of a piece (usually a melody), as in sonata form or a fugue. An extramusical concept behind a piece.

Theme and variations - A statement of musical subject followed by restatements in different guises.

Theory - The study of how music is put together.

Third - The third degree of the diatonic scale. Also, the interval formed by a given tone and the third tone above or below it, e.g. c up to e, or c down to a. Intervals of the third may be major, minor, diminished, or augmented.

Through-composed - A term used to describe a song in which the music for each stanza is different. The opposite of strophic.

Ti - In solmization, the seventh degree of the major scale. Also called the leading tone.

Tie - A curved line over or below two or more notes of the same pitch. The first pitch is sung or played and held for the duration of the notes affected by the tie.

Time signature - Synonymous with meter signature.

Tonality - The term used to describe the organization of the melodic and harmonic elements to give a feeling of a key center or a tonic pitch.

Tone - A note; the basis of music.

Tone clusters - The simultaneous sounding of two or more adjacent tones.

Tonguing - On wind instruments, articulation with the tongue.

Tonic - The first note of a key. Also, the name of the chord built on the first degree of the scale, indicated by I in a major key or i in a minor key.

Tono - Tone, key, pitch.

Tosto - Quick.

Tranquillo - Tranquilly; quietly; calm.

Transposition - The process of changing the key of a composition.

Tre - Three. Used with other terms, e.g. a tre voci, in three parts.

Treble clef - The G clef  falling on the second line of the staff.

Triad - A chord of three tones arranged in thirds, e.g. the C-major triad c-e-g, root-third-fifth.

Trill, tr - A musical ornament performed by the rapid alternation of a given note with a major or minor second above.

Triple meter - Meter based on three beats, or a multiple of three, in a measure.

Triplet -  A group of three notes performed in the time of two of the same kind.

Troppo - Too much. Used with other terms, e.g. allegro non troppo, not too fast.

Turn -  A musical ornament characterized by the rapid performance of a given note, the major or minor second above and below, and a return to the given note.

 is performed as

Tutti - All. A direction for the entire ensemble to sing or play simultaneously.

Twelve-tone technique - A system of composition which uses the twelve tones of the chromatic scale in an arbitrary arrangement called a tone row or series. The row may be used in its original form, its inversion, in retrograde, and in the inversion of the retrograde. The system was devised by Arnold Schoenberg in the early 20th century.

Una corda - Soft pedal.

Unison - Singing or playing the same notes by all singers or players, either at exactly the same pitch or in a different octave.

Un peu - A little. Used with other words, e.g. un peu piano.

Un poco - A little.

Upbeat - One or more notes occurring before the first bar line, as necessitated by the text for the purpose of desirable accent. The unaccented beat of a measure.

Variation - The manipulation of a theme by the use of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic changes.

Vibrato - Repeated fluctuation of pitch.

Virtuoso - A brilliant, skillful performer.

Vivace - Lively, brisk, quick, and bright.

Vivo - Lively, bright.

Volti subito - Turn [the page] quickly.

Whole note/rest - A note/rest equal to two half notes and four quarter notes. 

Wind instrument family - Instruments in which sound is produced by the vibration of air, including brass and woodwind instruments.

Woodwind family - Instruments, originally made of wood, in which sound is produced by the vibration of air, including recorders, flutes, clarinets, saxophones, oboes, and bassoons.