

Music Terms

ABSOLUTE MUSIC Music without extra-musical associations; as opposed to **PROGRAM MUSIC**.

A CAPELLA Choral music for voices alone, without instruments.

ACCELERANDO Getting faster.

ACCENT: The stressing of a note.

ACCIDENTALS In musical notation, signs indicating that a note is to be played sharp, flat, or natural.

ACOUSTICS The science of sound; also, the technology of making concert halls disseminate sound well.

ADAGIO Slow tempo.

AIR, AYRE: A simple song.

ALEATORY MUSIC: Same as chance music.

ALLEGRO, ALLEGRETTO: Fast; moderately fast

ALLEMANDE: A baroque dance in moderately slow duple meter.

ALTERNATIM SETTING: The practice of alternating newly composed stanzas with stanzas of Gregorian chant.

ALTO, CONTRALTO: The low female voice.

ANDANTE A fairly slow tempo, but not too slow.

ANDANTINO: A little faster than andante.

ANIMATO: Animated.

ANTHEM: A relatively short choral composition for the Anglican or Protestant Churches.

ANTIPHONY, ANTIPHONAL: A musical style in which two or more choirs and /or instrumental groups alternate with one another.

ARIA: A vocal number for solo singer and orchestra, generally in an opera, cantata, or oratorio.

ARIOSO: A singing style between recitative and aria.

ARPEGGIO: A chord with the notes played one after another in rapid succession, instead of simultaneously.

ART SONG: A song consciously intended as a work of art; as opposed to a folksong or popular song.

A TEMPO: At the original tempo.

ATONALITY: The absence of any feeling of **TONALITY**.

AUGMENTATION: The process of increasing the time values of all the notes in a theme at one of its later appearances, thus slowing it down. The most common form of augmentation doubles the time value of all the notes.

AVANT GARDE: In the most advanced style.

BAGATELLE: “Trifle,” a name for a “miniature” piano piece, used by Beethoven and others.

BALLAD: A song or song poem that tells a story, in several stanzas.

BALLADE: A name for a “miniature” piece of a dramatic nature.

BALLAD OPERA: Not really an opera, but a spoken play incorporating many popular and/or folk songs.

BALLETT: A type of Renaissance dance song, also called fa-la.

BAR: same as **MEASURE**.

BARLINE: Same as **MEASURE LINE**.

BARITONE: A type of adult male voice similar to the bass, but a little higher.

BASS: (1) The low adult male voice; (2) The lowest vocal or instrumental line in a piece of music.

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BASSO CONTINUO: See CONTINUO.

BASSO OSTINATOR: An OSTINATO in the bass.

BEAT: The regular pulse underlying most music; the lowest unit of METER.

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BEAT: The regular pulse underlying most music; the lowest unit of METER.

BEBOP: A modern jazz style of the 1940’s associated with Charlie “Bird” Parker.

BEL CANTO: A style of singing that brings out the sensuous beauty of the voice.

BEL CANTO OPERA: Term for early romantic opera.

BINARY FORM: A musical form having two different sections; AB form.

BLUE NOTE: A note deliberately sung or played lightly off pitch, as in the BLUES.

BLUES: A type of black folk music, used in jazz, rhythm-&-blues, and other forms of American popular music.

BREAK: in jazz, a brief solo improvisation between song phrases.

BOURREE: A baroque dance in fat duple meter.

BRIDGE: (1) In sonata form, the section of music which comes between the first theme and the second group, and which makes the modulation; also called “transition”; (2) a separable component of the violin, cello, etc., which holds the strings up from the main body of the instrument.

CADENCE: The notes or chords ending a section of music with a feeling of conclusiveness.

CADENCE THEME: In sonata form, the final conclusive theme in the exposition; also called “closing theme.”

CADENZA: An improvised passage for the soloist in a concerto, or sometimes in other works.

CANON Strict imitative polyphony, with the identical melody appearing in each voice, but at staggered intervals.

CANTATA: A composition in several movements for solo voice(s), instruments, and perhaps, also chorus.

CANTUS FIRMUS: A melody used as a basis for certain polyphonic pieces.

CANZONA: An instrumental genre of the Renaissance.

CHACONNE: Similar to PASSACAGLIA.

CHAMBER MUSIC: Music played by small groups such as a string quartet.

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CHANCE MUSIC: A type of contemporary music in which certain elements, such as the order of the notes or their pitches, are not specified by the composer but are left to chance.

CHANSON: French for song; a genre of French secular vocal music.

CHANT: A way of reciting words to music, generally in **MONOPHONY** and generally for liturgical purposes, as in **GREGORIAN CHANT**.

CHOIR: (1) a troupe of singers singing together, with more than one person singing each voice part; (2) a section of the orchestra comprising instruments of a certain type, such as the **STRING**, **WOODWIND**, or **BRASS CHOIR**.

CHORALE: German for hymn; also used for a four-part **HARMONIZATION** of a German hymn, such as Bach composed in his Passions.

CHORALE PRELUDE: An organ composition based on a **CHORALE** tune.

CHORD: A grouping of pitches played and heard simultaneously.

CHORUS: (1) same as **CHOIR**, (2) the main section of a modern popular song, as opposed to the **VERSE**.

CHROMATICISM: A musical style employing all or many of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale much of the time:

CHROMATIC SCALE: The set of twelve pitches represented by all the white and black notes on the piano, within one octave.

CHURCH CANTATA: A **CANTATA** with religious words, often tied in directly to a particular church service, such as the Easter or Christmas service.

CLEF: In musical notation, a sign at the beginning of the **STAFF** indicating the pitches of the lines and spaces.

CLOSING THEME: Same as **CADENCE THEME**.

CODA: The concluding section of a piece or a movement, after the main elements of the form have been presented.

COLORATURA: An ornate style of singing, with many notes for each syllable of the text.

COMPOUND METER: A meter in which the main beats are subdivided into three, e.g., 6/8 (ONE two three FOUR five six).

CON BRIO: Brilliantly, with spirit.

CONCERTINO: The solo group in a baroque **CONCERTO GROSSO**.

CONCERTO, SOLO CONCERTO: A large composition for orchestra and solo instrument or small solo group.

CONCERTO GROSSO: The main baroque type of concerto, for a group of solo instruments and a small orchestra.

CONCERT OVERTURE: An early nineteenth-century term for a piece resembling an opera overture – but without any following opera.

CON MOTO: Moving, with motion.

CONSONANCE: Intervals or chords that sound relatively stable and free of tension: as opposed to dissonance.

CONTINUO (BASSO CONTINUO): (1) A set of chords continuously underlying the melody in a piece of baroque music; (2) the instrument (s) playing the continuo, usually cello.

CONTRALTO, ALTO: The low female voice.

COUNTERPOINT, CONTRAPUNTAL: (1) Polyphony; strictly speaking, the technique of writing polyphonic music; (2) the term “a counterpoint” is used for a melodic line that forms polyphony when played along with other lines; (3) “in counterpoint”

means “forming polyphony.” **counterpoint**

[ˈkaʊntəˌpɔɪnt]

n

1. (Music, other) the technique involving the simultaneous sounding of two or more parts or melodies
2. (Music, other) a melody or part combined with another melody or part See also [descant](#) [1]
3. (Music, other) the musical texture resulting from the simultaneous sounding of two or more melodies or parts

(Music, other)

strict counterpoint the application of the rules of counterpoint as an academic exercise

5. a contrasting or interacting element, theme, or item; foil

6. (Literature / Poetry) *Prosody* the use of a stress or stresses at variance with the regular metrical stress

vb
(*tr*) to set in contrast Related adjective [contrapuntal](#)
[from Old French *contrepoint*, from *contre-* COUNTER- + *point* dot, note in musical notation, that is, an accompaniment set against the notes of a melody]

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COUNTERSUBJECT: in a fugue, a subsidiary melodic line that appears regularly in counterpoint with the **SUBJECT**.

INVERSION: Reading or playing a melody or a twelve-tone series upside down.

ISORHYTHM: In fourteenth-century music, the technique of repeating the identical rhythm for each section of a composition, while the pitches are altered.

JAZZ: The most important type of twentieth-century popular music.

JONGLEUR: A medieval secular musician.

K. NUMBERS: The numbers assigned to works by Mozart in the Koechel Catalogue instead of opus numbers to catalogue Mozart’s works.

KEY: (1) a tonality, named after the main note in the tonality; (2) a lever pressed down with the finger to produce the sound on the piano, organ, etc.

KEY SIGNATURE: Sharps or flats placed at the beginning of the staves to indicate the key, or tonality.

LARGO, LARGHETTO: Very slow; somewhat less slow than *largo*.

LEDGER LINES: Short lines above or below the staff to accommodate pitches that go higher or lower.

LEGATO: Playing in a smooth, connected manner.

LEITMOTIVE: “leading motive” in Wagner’s operas.

LENTO: Very slow.

LIBRETTO: The complete book of words for an opera, oratorio, cantata, etc.

LIED: German for song often used as a term for art song.

LINE: Used as a term to mean a melody, or melodic line.

MADRIGAL: The main secular vocal form of the Renaissance.

MAGNIFICAT: The canticle often set to music for church. Mary, mother of Jesus.

MAJOR MODE: One of the modes of the diatonic scale, characterized by the interval between the first and third notes containing four semitones, as opposed to minor mode.

MANUAL: A keyboard of an organ or harpsichord, usually one of two or more on a single instrument.

MASS: The main Roman Catholic service, or the music written for it.

MAZURKA: a Polish dance in lively triple meter.

MEASURE (BAR): In music, the unit of meter, above the level of the individual beats.

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MEASURE LINE (BARLINE): In musical notation, a vertical line through the staff to mark the measure.

MELISMA: A group of notes, either few in number or very extensive, sung to a single syllable.

MELODY: The aspect of music having to do with the succession of pitches, also applied (“a melody”) to any particular succession of pitches.

METER: A background of stressed and unstressed beats in a simple, regular, repeating pattern.

MEZZO: Medium.

MEZZO-SOPRANO: A type of female voice between contralto and soprano.

MINIATURE: A term for a short, evocative composition for piano or for piano and voice, composed in the Romantic period.

MINOR MODE: One of the modes of the diatonic scale, characterized by the interval between the first and third notes containing three semitones, as opposed to major.

MINSTREL SHOW: A type of variety show popular in 19th century America performed in blackface.

MINUET: A popular 17th century dance in moderate triple meter; also a movement in a sonata symphony that is based on the dance.

MODAL HARMONY: The characteristically indefinite harmonic style of the 16th century music.

MODE, MODALITY: In music since the Renaissance, one of the two types of tonality major mode or minor mode; also, in earlier times, one of several species of the diatonic scale.

MODERATO: Moderate tempo.

MODULATION: Changing tonality within a piece.

MONOPHONY: A musical texture involving a single melodic line and nothing else, as in Gregorian chant.

MOTET: A sacred vocal composition.

MOTIVE, MOTIF: A short fragment of melody or rhythm in constructing a long section of music.

MOVEMENT: A self-contained section of a larger piece.

MUSIC-DRAMA: Wagner’s name for his distinctive type of opera.

MUSICOLOGY: The scholarly study of music history and literature.

MUTE: A device put on or in an instrument to muffle the tone.

NATIONALISM: A 19th century movement promoting music built on national folksongs and dances, or associated with national subjects.

NATURAL: In musical notation, a sign indicating that a sharp or flat previously attached to a note s to be removed.

NEOCLASSICISM: A 20th century movement involving a return to the style and form of older music, particularly 18th century music.

NOCTURNE: Title for romantic miniature compositions for piano, etc.

NONIMITATIVE POLYPHONY, COUNTERPOINT: A polyphonic musical texture in which the melodic lines are essentially different from one another.

NON TROPPO: Not too much.

NOTE: (1) a Sound of a certain definite pitch and duration; (2) the written sign for such a sound in musical notation; (3) a key pressed with the finger on a piano or organ.

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OCTAVE: A pair of duplicating notes eight notes apart on the diatonic scale.

OPERA: A play set to music

OPERA BUFFA: Italian comic opera.

OPERA SERIA: A term for the serious, heroic opera of the baroque period.

OPERETTA: A 19TH century type of light (often comic) opera; employs spoken dialogue in between musical numbers.

OPUS: Opus numbers provide a means of cataloguing a composer's compositions.

ORATORIAO: Long semi-dramatic piece on a religious subject for soloists, chorus and orchestra.

ORCHESTRATION: The technique of writing for various instruments to produce an effective total orchestral sound.

ORGANUM: The earliest genre of medieval polyphonic music.

OSTINATO: A motive, phrase, or theme repeated over again at the same pitch.

OVERTONE: In acoustics, a secondary vibration in a sound-producing body. This contributes to the tone color.

OVERTURE: An orchestral piece at the start of an opera, oratorio.

PARAPHRASE: The modification and decoration of plainchant melodies in early Renaissance music.

PART: Used as a term for a section of a piece, one of the voices in contrapuntal music, the written music for a single player in an orchestra.

PASSACAGLIA: A set of variations of a short theme in the bass.

PASSION: A long, oratorio-like composition telling the story of Jesus's last days, according to one of the New Testament Gospels.

PAVANE: A slow 16th century court dance.

PEDAL BOARD: The keyboard of an organ that is played with the feet.

PEDAL POINT: In contrapuntal writing, a bass note held for a long time.

PHRASE: A section of a melody or a tune.

PIANO, PIANNISIMO: Soft, very soft.

PIANO, TRIO: An instrumental group consisting of violin, cello, and piano.

PITCH: The quality of "highness" or "lowness" of a sound.

PIU: More.

PIZZICATO: Playing a string instrument that is normally bowed by plucking the strings with the finger.

PLAINSONG: Liturgical chant, such as Gregorian chant.

POCO: Somewhat.

POINT OF IMITATION: A short passage of imitative polyphony based on a single theme, or on two used together.

POLONAISE: A polish dance.

POLYPHONY, POLYPHONIC: Musical texture in which two or more melodic lines are played or sung simultaneously.

PRELUDE: An introductory piece, leading to another.

PREMIERE: The first performance ever of a piece of music.

Music Terms

PRESTO, PRESTISSIMO: Very fast, very fast indeed.

PROGRAM MUSIC: A piece of instrumental music associated with a story or other extra-musical idea

QUARTER TONE: Half of a semitone.

QUARTET: A piece for four singers or players; often used to mean string quartet.

QUINTET: A piece for five singers or players.

RAGTIME: A genre of American popular music around 1900, usually for piano, which led to jazz.

RANGE: Used in music to mean pitch range—the total span from the lowest to highest pitches in a piece.

RECAPITULATION: The third section of a sonata-form movement.

RECITING FORMULA: In Gregorian chant, a simple set of notes to which many different texts can be chanted.

RECITATIVE: A half-singing, half-reciting style of presenting words in opera.

REED: In certain wind instruments (oboe, clarinet) a small vibrating element made of cane or metal.

REQUIEM MASS: The special Mass, in Catholicism, celebrated when someone dies.

RESOLVE: To proceed from dissonant harmony to consonance.

RESPONSORIAL CHANT: a type of Gregorian chant in which soloists sing in alternation with the choir.

REST: a momentary silence in music.

RETRANSITION: In sonata form, the passage leading from the end of the development section into the beginning of the recapitulation.

RETROGRADE: Reading or playing a melody or twelve-tone series backward and upside down.

RHYTHM: The aspect of music having to do with the duration of the notes in time.

RHYTHM-&-BLUES: A genre of black American Popular music of the 1950's.

RHYTHMIC SERIES: A fixed pattern of different note lengths held to throughout a piece.

RHYTHM SECTION: The section of a jazz band concerned mainly with bringing out the meter, or the beat.

RICEERCAR: In instrumental genre of the Renaissance.

RITARDANDO: Slowing down the tempo.

RITENUTO: Held back in tempo.

RONDEAU: Baroque form based on the regular return of a main theme.

RONDO: A musical form consisting of one main theme or tune alternating with other themes or sections.

ROUND: A simple type of sung canon with all voices entering on the same note after an interval.

RUBATO: The free treatment of meter in performance.

SARABANDE: A baroque dance in slow triple meter, featuring an accent on the second beat.

SCALE: A selection of ordered pitches which provides the pitch material for music.

SCHERZO: A form developed by Beethoven from the minuet to use for movements in larger

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compositions, later sometimes used alone, as by Chopin.

SCORE: The full musical notation for a piece involving several or many performers.

SECOND GROUP: In sonata form, the group of themes following the bridge.

SEMITONE: Same as half tone.

SEQUENCE: In a melody, a series of fragments identical except for their placement at successively higher or lower pitch levels.

SFORZATO: An especially strong accent, the mark indicating this in musical notation.

SHARP: A sign indicating that the note which it precedes is to be played a semitone higher.

SIMPLE METER: A meter in which the main beats are subdivided into two.

SINGSPIEL: German for singing play, a German comic opera with spoken dialogue.

SLUR: In musical notation, a curved line over a certain number of notes, indicating that they are to be played smoothly or legato.

SONATA: A chamber music piece in several movements, typically for three main instruments plus continuo in the baroque period.

SONG CYCLE: A group of songs connected by a general idea or story and sometimes also by musical unifying devices.

SONORITY: A general term for sound quality.

SOPRANO: The high female (or boy's) voice.

STACCATO: Played in a detached manner.

STAFF: The group of 5 horizontal lines on which music is written.

STANZA: In songs or ballads, one of several similar poetic units which are usually sung to the same tune.

STRETTO: In a fugue, overlapping entrances of the fugue subject in several voices simultaneously.

STRUCTURE: A term used to mean form.

STYLE: The combination of qualities that make a period of art, a composer, or an individual work of art distinctive.

SUBDOMINANT: The fourth note of diatonic scale, or the chord built on this note.

SUBITO: Suddenly.

SUBJECT: The term for the principal theme of a fugue.

SUITE: A piece consisting of a series of dances.

SWING: A type of big-band jazz of the late 1930's and 1940's.

SYMPHONIC POEM: A piece of orchestral program music on one long movement.

SYMPHONY: A large orchestral piece in several movements.

SYNCOPATION: The accenting of certain beats of the meter that is ordinarily unaccented.

SYNTHESIZER: An electronic apparatus that generates sounds for electronic music, also called generator.

TEMPO: The speed of music, the rate at which the accented and unaccented beats of the meter follow one another.

TENOR: The high adult male voice.

TERNARY FORM: A three-part musical form in which the last section repeats the first form: ABA form.

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TERRACED DYNAMICS: Two or more fixed, steady dynamic levels alternating during a piece of music.

TEXTURE: The blend of the various sounds and melodic lines occurring simultaneously in a piece of music.

THEMATIC TRANSFORMATION: A variation-like procedure applied to short themes in the various sections of romantic symphonic poems.

THEME: The basic subject matter of a piece of music. A theme can be a phrase, a short motive, a full tune, etc.

THEME AND VARIATIONS: A form consisting of a tune (the theme) and a number of variations on it.

THOROUGH BASS: Same as basso continuo or continuo.

THROUGH-COMPOSED SONG: A song with new music for each stanza of the poem.

TIE: In musical notation, a curved line joining two notes of the same pitch into a continuous sound.

TIMBRE: Another term for tone color.

TIME SIGNATURE: The numbers on the staves at the beginning of a piece which indicate the meter.

TOCCATA: A piece in free form designed partly to show off the instrument and the technique of the player.

TONALITY, TONAL: The feeling of centrality of one note to a passage of music.

TONE: A sound of a certain definite pitch and duration.

TONE COLOR: The sonorous quality of a particular instrument, voice, etc.

TONE POEM: Same as a symphonic poem.

TRANSITION: A passage whose function is to connect one section of a piece with another.

TRANSPOSE: To move a whole piece or a section of a piece, from one pitch level to another.

TRIAD: The common chord of three notes, none of them adjacent in terms of the diatonic scale.

TRILL: Two adjacent notes played very rapidly in alternation.

TRIPLE METER: Meter consisting of accented beat alternating with two unaccented beats.

TRITONE: The interval consisting of six half steps.

TUNE: A simple, easily sing-able melody that is coherent and complete

UPBEAT: A weak or unaccented beat leading to a downbeat.

VAMP: An accompaniment figure, usually improvised in popular music, preceding the first appearance of the theme.

VARIATION: A section of music which follows another section closely in certain respects while varying other aspects of it.

VERISMO: A realistic and sensational type of late Romantic Italian opera.

VERSE: (1) another term for stanza; (2) the shorter, subsidiary section of a modern popular song.

VIVACE, VIVO: Lively.

VOICE: (1) Throat sound, (2) a contrapuntal line—whether sung or played—a polyphonic piece such as a fugue.

WALTZ: A nineteenth century dance in triple meter.