

Musical Terms

Acapella - One or more vocalists performing without an accompaniment.

Accelerando - A symbol used in musical notation indicating to gradually quicken tempo.

Accessible - Music that is easy to listen to and understand.

Adagio - A tempo having slow movement; restful at ease.

Allegro - A direction to play lively and fast.

Atonal - Music that is written and performed without regard to any specific key.

Baroque - Time in music history ranging from the middle of the 16th to the middle of the 17th centuries. Characterized by emotional, flowery music; written in strict form.

Beat - The unit of musical rhythm.

Cadence - A sequence of chords that brings an end to a phrase, either in the middle or the end of a composition.

Cadenza - Initially an improvised cadence by a soloist; later becoming an elaborate and written out passage in an aria or concerto, featuring the skills of an instrumentalist or vocalist.

Canon - A musical form where the melody or tune is imitated by individual parts at regular intervals. The individual parts may enter at different measures and pitches. The tune may also be played at different speeds, backwards, or inverted.

Cantabile - A style of singing which is characterized by the easy and flowing tone of the composition.

Cantata - Music written for chorus and orchestra. Most often religious in nature.

Capriccio - A quick, improvisational, spirited piece of music.

Carol - A song or hymn celebrating Christmas.

Castrato - Male singers who were castrated to preserve their alto and soprano vocal range.

Cavatina - A short and simple melody performed by a soloist that is part of a larger piece.

Chamber music - Written for 2 to 10 solo parts featuring one instrument to a part. Each part bears the same importance.

Chant - Singing in unison, texts in a free rhythm. Similar to the rhythm of speech.

Choir - Group of singers in a chorus.

Chorale - A hymn sung by the choir and congregation often in unison.

Chord - 3 or 4 notes played simultaneously in harmony.

Chord progression - A string of chords played in succession.

Chorus - A group singing in unison.

Chromatic scale - Includes all twelve notes of an octave.

Classical - The period of music history which dates from the mid 1700's to mid 1800's. The music was spare and emotionally reserved, especially when compared to Romantic and Baroque music.

Classicism - The period of music history which dates from the mid 1800's and lasted about sixty years. There was a strong regard for order and balance.

Clavier - The keyboard of a stringed instrument.

Clef - In sheet music, a symbol at the beginning of the staff defining the pitch of the notes found in that particular staff.

Coda - Closing section of a movement.

Concert master - The first violin in an orchestra.

Concerto - A composition written for a solo instrument. The soloist plays the melody while the orchestra plays the accompaniment.

Conductor - One who directs a group of performers. The conductor indicates the tempo, phrasing, dynamics, and style by gestures and facial expressions.

Consonance - Groups of tones that are harmonious when sounded together as in a chord.

Contralto - Lowest female singing voice.

Counterpoint - Two or three melodic lines played at the same time.

Courante - A piece of music written in triple time. Also an old French dance.

Da Capo - In sheet music, an instruction to repeat the beginning of the piece before stopping on the final chord.

Deceptive cadence - A chord progression that seems to lead to resolving itself on the final chord; but does not.

Development - Where the musical themes and melodies are developed, written in sonata form.

Dissonance - Harsh, discordant, and lack of harmony. Also a chord that sounds incomplete until it resolves itself on a harmonious chord.

Drone - Dull, monotonous tone such as a humming or buzzing sound. Also a bass note held under a melody.

Duet - A piece of music written for two vocalists or instrumentalists.

Dynamics - Pertaining to the loudness or softness of a musical composition. Also the symbols in sheet music indicating volume.

Elegy - An instrumental lament with praise for the dead.

Encore - A piece of music played at the end of a recital responding to the audience's enthusiastic reaction to the performance, shown by continuous applause.

Energico - A symbol in sheet music a direction to play energetically.

Enharmonic Interval - Two notes that differ in name only. The notes occupy the same position. For example: C sharp and D flat.

Ensemble - The performance of either all instruments of an orchestra or voices in a chorus.

Espressivo - A direction to play expressively.

Etude - A musical composition written solely to improve technique. Often performed for artistic interest.

Exposition - The first section of a movement written in sonata form, introducing the melodies and themes.

Expressionism - Atonal and violent style used as a means of evoking heightened emotions and states of mind.

Falsetto - A style of male singing where by partial use of the vocal chords, the voice is able to reach the pitch of a female.

Fermata - To hold a tone or rest held beyond the written value at the discretion of the performer.

Fifth - The interval between two notes. Three whole tones and one semitone make up the distance between the two notes.

Finale - Movement or passage that concludes the musical composition.

Flat - A symbol indicating that the note is to be diminished by one semitone.

Form - The structure of a piece of music.

Forte - A symbol indicating to play loud.

Fourth - The interval between two notes. Two whole tones and one semitone make up the distance between the two notes.

Fugue - A composition written for three to six voices. Beginning with the exposition, each voice enters at different times, creating counterpoint with one another.

Galliard - Music written for a lively French dance for two performers written in triple time.

Gavotte - A 17th century dance written in Quadruple time, always beginning on the third beat of the measure.

Glee - Vocal composition written for three or more solo parts, usually without instrumental accompaniment.

Glissando - Sliding between two notes.

Grandioso - Word to indicate that the movement or entire composition is to be played grandly.

Grave - Word to indicate the movement or entire composition is to be played very slow and serious.

Grazioso - Word to indicate the movement or entire composition is to be played gracefully.

Gregorian Chant - Singing or chanting in unison without strict rhythm.

Collected during the Reign of Pope Gregory VIII for psalms and other other parts of the church service.

Harmony - Pleasing combination of two or three tones played together in the background while a melody is being played. Harmony also refers to the study of chord progressions.

Homophony - Music written to be sung or played in unison.

Hymn - A song of praise and glorification. Most often to honor God.

Impromptu - A short piano piece, often improvisational and intimate in character.

Instrumentation - Arrangement of music for a combined number of instruments.

Interlude - Piece of instrumental music played between scenes in a play or opera.

Intermezzo - Short movement or interlude connecting the main parts of the composition.

Interpretation - The expression the performer brings when playing his instrument.

Interval - The distance in pitch between two notes.

Intonation - The manner in which tones are produced with regard to pitch.

Introduction - The opening section of a piece of music or movement.

Key - System of notes or tones based on and named after the key note.

Key signature - The flats and sharps at the beginning of each staff line indicating the key of music the piece is to be played.

Klangfarbenmelodie - The technique of altering the tone color of a single note or musical line by changing from one instrument to another in the middle of a note or line.

Leading note - The seventh note of the scale where there is a strong desire to resolve on the tonic.

Legato - Word to indicate that the movement or entire composition is to be played smoothly.

Leitmotif - A musical theme given to a particular idea or main character of an opera.

Libretto - A book of text containing the words of an opera.

Ligature - Curved line connecting notes to be sung or played as a phrase.

Madrigal - A contrapuntal song written for at least three voices, usually without accompaniment.

Maestro - Refers to any great composer, conductor, or teacher of music.

Major - One of the two modes of the tonal system. Music written in major keys have a positive affirming character.

March - A form of music written for marching in two-step time. Originally the march was used for military processions.

Measure - The unit of measure where the beats on the lines of the staff are divided up into two, three, four beats to a measure.

Medley - Often used in overtures, a composition that uses passages from other movements of the composition in its entirety.

Mezzo - The voice between soprano and alto. Also, in sheet music, a direction for the tempo to be played at medium speed.

Minor - One of the two modes of the tonal system. The minor mode can be identified by the dark, melancholic mood.

Minuet - Slow and stately dance music written in triple time.

Modes - Either of the two octave arrangements in modern music. The modes are either major or minor.

Modulation - To shift to another key.

Monotone - Repetition of a single tone.

Motif - Primary theme or subject that is developed.

Movement - A separate section of a larger composition.

Musette - A Baroque dance with a drone-bass.

Musicology - The study of forms, history, science, and methods of music.

Natural - A symbol in sheet music that returns a note to its original pitch after it has been augmented or diminished.

Neoclassical - Movement in music where the characteristics are crisp and direct.

Nocturne - A musical composition that has a romantic or dreamy character with nocturnal associations.

Nonet - A composition written for nine instruments.

Notation - First developed in the 8th century, methods of writing music.

Obbligato - An extended solo, often accompanying the vocal part of an aria.

Octave - Eight full tones above the key note where the scale begins and ends.

Octet - A composition written for eight instruments.

Opera - A drama where the words are sung instead of spoken.

Operetta - A short light musical drama.

Opus - Convenient method of numbering a composer's works where a number follows the word "opus". For example, Opus 28, No. 4.

Oratorio - An extended cantata on a sacred subject.

Orchestra - A large group of instrumentalists playing together.

Orchestration - Arranging a piece of music for an orchestra. Also, the study of music.

Ornaments - Tones used to embellish the principal melodic tone.

Ostinato - A repeated phrase.

Overture - Introduction to an opera or other large musical work.

Parody - A composition based on previous work. A common technique used in Medieval and Renaissance music.

Part - A line in a contrapuntal work performed by an individual voice or instrument.

Partial - A harmonic given off by a note when it is played.

Partita - Suite of Baroque dances.

Pastoral - A composition whose style is simple and idyllic; suggestive of rural scenes.

Pentatonic Scale - A musical scale having five notes. For example: the five black keys of a keyboard make up a pentatonic scale.

Phrase - A single line of music played or sung. A musical sentence.

Piano - An instruction in sheet music to play softly. Abbreviated by a “p”.

Pitch - The frequency of a note determining how high or low it sounds.

Pizzicato - String instruments that are picked instead of bowed.

Polyphony - Combining a number of individual but harmonizing melodies. Also known as counterpoint.

Polytonality - Combination of two or more keys being played at the same time.

Portamento - A mild glissando between two notes for an expressive effect.

Prelude - A short piece originally preceded by a more substantial work, also an orchestral introduction to opera, however not lengthy enough to be considered an overture.

Presto - A direction in sheet music indicating the tempo is to be very fast.

Progression - The movement of chords in succession.

Quadrille - A 19th century square dance written for 4 couples.

Quartet - A set of four musicians who perform a composition written for four parts.

Quintet - A set of five musicians who perform a composition written for five parts.

Recapitulation - A reprise.

Recital - A solo concert with or without accompaniment.

Recitative - A form of writing for vocals that is close to the manner of speech and is rhythmically free.

Reed - The piece of cane in wind instruments. The players cause vibrations by blowing through it in order to produce sound.

Refrain - A repeating phrase that is played at the end of each verse in the song.

Register - A portion of the range of the instrument or voice.

Relative major and minor - The major and minor keys that share the same notes in that key. For example: A minor shares the same note as C major.

Relative pitch - Ability to determine the pitch of a note as it relates to the notes that precede and follow it.

Renaissance -A period in history dating from the 14th to 16th centuries. This period signified the rebirth of music, art, and literature.

Reprise - To repeat a previous part of a composition generally after other music has been played.

Requiem - A dirge, hymn, or musical service for the repose of the dead.

Resonance - When several strings are tuned to harmonically related pitches, all strings vibrate when only one of the strings is struck.

Rhythm - The element of music pertaining to time, played as a grouping of notes into accented and unaccented beats.

Ricercar - Elaborate polyphonic composition of the Baroque and Renaissance periods.

Rigaudon - A quick 18th century dance written in double time.

Rococo - A musical style characterized as excessive, ornamental, and trivial.

Romantic - A period in history during the 18th and early 19th centuries where the focus shifted from the neoclassical style to an emotional, expressive, and imaginative style.

Rondo - A musical form where the principal theme is repeated several times. The rondo was often used for the final movements of classical sonata form works.

Root - The principal note of a triad.

Round - A canon where the melody is sung in two or more voices. After the first voice begins, the next voice starts singing after a couple of measures are played in the preceding voice. All parts repeat continuously.

Rubato - An important characteristic of the Romantic period. It is a style where the strict tempo is temporarily abandoned for a more emotional tone.

Scale - Successive notes of a key or mode either ascending or descending.

Scherzo - Pertaining to the sonata form, a fast movement in triple time.

Scordatura - The retuning of a stringed instrument in order to play notes below the ordinary range of the instrument or to produce an unusual tone color.

Septet - A set of seven musicians who perform a composition written for seven parts.

Sequence - A successive transposition and repetition of a phrase at different pitches.

Serenade - A lighthearted piece, written in several movements, usually as background music for a social function.

Sextet - A set of six musicians who perform a composition written for six parts.

Sharp - A symbol indicating the note is to be raised by one semitone.

Slide - A glissando or portamento. Also refers to the moving part of a trombone.

Slur - A curve over notes to indicate that a phrase is to be played legato.

Sonata - Music of a particular form consisting of four movements. Each of the movements differ in tempo, rhythm, and melody; but are held together by subject and style.

Sonata form - A complex piece of music. Usually the first movement of the piece serving as the exposition, a development, or recapitulation.

Sonatina - A short or brief sonata.

Song cycle - A sequence of songs, perhaps on a single theme, or with texts by one poet, or having continuous narrative.

Soprano - The highest female voice.

Staccato - Short detached notes, as opposed to legato.

Staff - Made up of five horizontal parallel lines and the spaces between them on which musical notation is written.

Stretto - Pertaining to the fugue, the overlapping of the same theme or motif by two or more voices a few beats apart.

String Quartet - A group of 4 instruments, two violins, a viola, and cello.

Suite - A loose collection of instrumental compositions.

Symphony - Three to four movement orchestral piece, generally in sonata form.

System - A combination of two or more staves on which all the notes are vertically aligned and performed simultaneously in differing registers and instruments.

Tablature - A system of notation for stringed instruments. The notes are indicated by the finger positions.

Temperament - Refers to the tuning of an instrument.

Tempo - Indicating speed.

Tessitura - The range of an instrumental or a vocal part.

Theme - A melodic or, sometimes a harmonic idea presented in a musical form.

Timbre - Tone color, quality of sound that distinguishes one voice or instrument to another. It is determined by the harmonics of sound.

Time Signature - A numeric symbol in sheet music determining the number of beats to a measure.

Tonal - Pertains to tone or tones.

Tonality - The tonal characteristics determined by the relationship of the notes to the tone.

Tone - The intonation, pitch, and modulation of a composition expressing the meaning, feeling, or attitude of the music.

Toneless - Unmusical, without tone.

Tonic - The first tone of a scale also known as a keynote.

Treble - The playing or singing the upper half of the vocal range. Also the highest voice in choral singing.

Tremolo - Quick repetition of the same note or the rapid alternation between two notes.

Triad - Three note chords consisting of a root, third, and fifth.

Trill - Rapid alternation between notes that are a half tone or whole tone apart.

Trio - A composition written for three voices and instruments performed by three persons.

Triple time - Time signature with three beats to the measure.

Triplet - Three notes played in the same amount of time as one or two beats.

Tritone - A chord comprised of three whole tones resulting in an augmented fourth or diminished fifth.

Tune - A rhythmic succession of musical tones, a melody for instruments and voices.

Tuning - The raising and lowering a pitch of an instrument to produce the correct tone of a note.

Tutee - Passage for the entire ensemble or orchestra without a soloist.

Twelve-tone music - Music composed such that each note is used the same number of times.

Unison - Two or more voices or instruments playing the same note simultaneously.

Verismo - A form of Italian opera beginning at the end of the 19th century. The setting is contemporary to the composer's own time, and the characters are modeled after every day life.

Vibrato - Creating variation pitch in a note by quickly alternating between notes.

Virtuoso - A person with notable technical skill in the performance of music.

Vivace - Direction to performer to play a composition in a brisk, lively, and spirited manner.

Voice - One of two or more parts in polyphonic music. Voice refers to instrumental parts as well as the singing voice.

Waltz - A dance written in triple time, where the accent falls on the first beat of each measure.

Whole note - A whole note is equal to 2 half notes, 4 quarter notes, 8 sixteenth notes, etc.

Whole-tone scale - A scale consisting of only whole-tone notes. Such a scale consists of only 6 notes.