



## **MUSIC AND COMPOSITION GLOSSARY**

### **CATEGORIES**

**Composition:** note, pitch, scale, melody, harmony, chord, score, orchestration, instrumentation, overture, aria, recitative, finale, beat, pulse, octave

**Writing:** couplet, rhyming couplet, haiku, story, plot, narrative, libretto, dialogue, character, protagonist, antagonist, setting, detail

**Organizing words and music:** stanza, phrase, chorus, refrain, form, key, ostinato, obbligato

**Organizing time:** meter, rhythm, tempo, measure, time signature, largo, andante, allegro, accelerando, ritardando, rubato, fermata

**Notation:** staff, treble clef, bass clef, whole note/rest, half note/rest, quarter note/rest, eighth note/rest, sixteenth note/rest, triplet, rest, fine, key signature

**Sounds:** timbre, tone color

**Dynamics:** legato, staccato, pianissimo, piano, forte, fortissimo, crescendo, diminuendo, decrescendo

**Singing:** melisma, cadenza, improvisation, ornamentation, range, tessitura, solfège

**Vocal ranges:** soprano, mezzo-soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, bass

**Voicings:** solo, duo, duet, trio, quartet, quintet, sextet, septet, octet, ensemble, chorus, tutti, unison

## **DEFINITIONS**

**accelerando:** gradually becoming faster

**allegro:** quick tempo, cheerful

**andante:** moderate tempo

**antagonist:** the chief opponent of the protagonist in a drama

**aria:** lyric song for solo voice with orchestral accompaniment, generally expressing intense emotion

**baritone:** a male singer with a middle tessitura

**bass:** a male singer with a low tessitura

**bass clef:** a symbol placed at the beginning of the lower staff to indicate the pitch of the notes on the staff, also called F clef

**beat:** the unit of musical rhythm, also called the pulse

**cadenza:** a solo passage, usually near the end of a piece, either written by the composer or improvised by the performer

**character:** a person represented in a theatrical work

**chord:** a combination of three or more tones sounded simultaneously

**chorus:** a group of singers; or the refrain of a song

**conductor:** the person who directs a group of musicians

**contralto:** a female singer with a low tessitura

**couplet:** a unit of verse consisting of two successive lines, usually rhyming and having the same meter and often forming a complete thought

**crescendo:** gradually becoming louder

**decrescendo:** gradually becoming softer

**dialogue:** spoken portions of a musical piece



**diminuendo:** gradually becoming softer

**director:** the person who directs (stages) an opera or theatre piece

**duet:** a piece for two performers

**duo:** two performers

**dynamics:** varying degrees of loud and soft

**eighth note/rest** ( /  ): half the length of a quarter note/rest and an eighth the length of a whole note/rest

**encore:** to repeat a piece or play an additional piece at the end of a performance

**ensemble:** a group of musicians; the performance of either all instruments of an orchestra or voices in a chorus

**fermata:** a hold or pause; to hold a tone or rest beyond the written value at the discretion of the performer

**finale:** the last selection of an opera



**fine:** the end

**form:** the design or structure of a musical composition (e.g. ABA, AABA, ABACA)

**forte:** loud

**fortissimo:** very loud

**haiku:** a poem written in the form of 17 syllables divided into 3 lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables

**half note/rest** (  /  ): twice the length of a quarter note/rest and half of the length of a whole note/rest

**harmony:** the sounding of two or more tones simultaneously

**improvisation:** creation of a musical composition while it is being performed, or embellishment of a written piece

**instrumentation:** the art of writing music for instruments (orchestration); or the actual scoring of a particular composition

**key:** system of notes or tones based on and named after the key note; or the levers on a musical instrument which when depressed produce a particular pitch, such as piano keys

**key signature:** the flats and sharps at the beginning of each staff line indicating the key of music the piece is to be played

**largo:** very slow

**legato:** smooth, connected (the opposite of staccato)

**libretto:** the text or book of an opera

**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

**melisma:** the singing of a single syllable of text while moving between several different notes in succession

**melody:** a series of musical notes that form a distinct unit, are recognizable as a phrase, and usually have a distinctive rhythm

**meter:** the structure of notes in a regular pattern of accented and unaccented beats within a measure

**mezzo-soprano:** a female singer with a middle tessitura

**note:** a symbol which, when placed on a staff with a particular clef sign, indicates pitch

**obbligato:** an extended solo, often accompanying the vocal part of an aria

**octave:** an interval of an eighth, as for example from the note C to C or D to D

**octet:** a group of eight performers, or a piece for eight performers

**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

**ostinato:** a motif or phrase which is persistently repeated in the same musical voice

**overture:** the introductory music for an opera

**phrase:** a relatively short portion of a melodic line which expresses a musical idea, comparable to a line or sentence in poetry

**pianissimo:** very soft



**piano:** soft

**pitch:** the highness or lowness of a tone

**plot:** the story or action of a theatrical work

**protagonist:** the main character in a play around whom most of the action is based

**pulse:** see beat

**quarter note/rest** (  /  ): half the length of a half note/rest and one quarter the length of a whole note/rest

**quartet:** a group of four performers, or a piece for four performers

**quintet:** a group of five performers, or a piece for five performers

**range:** the gamut of pitches, from low to high, which a singer may perform

**recitative:** solo vocal declamation that follows the inflections of the text with the rhythms of ordinary speech

**refrain:** a short section of repeated material which occurs at the end of each stanza, also known as the chorus

**rest:** a symbol used to denote silence

**rhythm:** the term which denotes the organization of sound in time; the temporal quality of sound

**ritardando:** gradually becoming slower

**rubato:** the term used to denote flexibility of tempo to assist in achieving expressiveness



**scale:** successive notes of a key or mode either ascending or descending

**score:** written depiction of all the parts of a musical ensemble

**septet:** a group of seven performers, or a piece for seven performers

**setting:** the physical location of a theatrical work

**sextet:** a group of six performers, or a piece for six performers

**sixteenth note/rest** (  /  ): half the length of an eighth note/rest and a sixteenth the length of a whole note/rest

**solfège:** technique for the teaching of sight-singing in which each note of the score is sung to a special syllable

**solo:** a single performer, or a piece for one performer (or a featured performer)

**soprano:** a female singer with the highest tessitura

**staccato:** detached sounds (the opposite of legato)

**stanza:** a selection of a song, two or more lines long, characterized by a common meter, rhyme, and number of lines

**tempo:** the rate of speed in a musical work

**tenor:** a male singer with a high tessitura

**tessitura:** the general pitch range of a vocal part

**timbre:** the quality of a musical note or sound or tone that distinguishes different types of sound production in voices or musical instruments, also known as tone color

**time signature:** the numbers placed at the beginning of a composition to indicate the meter of the music. The upper number indicates the beats in a measure; the lower number tells what kind of a note will receive one beat.

**tone color:** see timbre

**treble clef:** a symbol placed at the beginning of the upper staff to indicate the pitch of the notes on the staff, also called G clef

**trio:** a group of three performers, or a piece for three performers

**triple:** a group of three notes performed in the time of two of the same kind



**tune:** a succession of musical tones; a melody

**tutti:** a direction for the entire ensemble to sing or play simultaneously

**unison:** singing or playing the same notes by all singers or players simultaneously, either at exactly the same pitch or in a different octave

**virtuoso:** a brilliant, skillful performer

**waltz:** a piece written in triple (3/4) time, where the accent falls on the first beat of each measure

**whole note/rest** (  /  ): equal to two half notes/rests and four quarter notes/rests