



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

triplet: 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