





## MUSIC & 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