

Tempo & the Metronome

THE LADDER — BEATS PER MINUTE

200 and above	Prestissimo	As fast as it can be played. Rare, and usually short.
168–200	Presto	Very fast. Finales, moto perpetuo, the last movement of a sonata.
140–168	Vivace	Lively — bright and quick rather than merely fast.
120–140	Allegro	Fast and cheerful. The commonest first-movement marking there is.
108–120	Moderato	Moderate — neither hurried nor held back.
92–108	Andantino	A shade quicker than andante — though composers have argued the point.
76–92	Andante	At a walking pace. Steady, unhurried, going somewhere.
66–76	Adagio	Slow and at ease. Room for the melody to breathe.
56–66	Larghetto	Rather broad — a little quicker than largo.
48–56	Largo	Broad — wide and weighted.
40–48	Grave	Slow and solemn; serious, not merely slow.
below 40	Larghissimo	Slower than most metronomes will click.

Ranges overlap in practice and differ between editions. Treat them as a neighbourhood, not an address.

A tempo word tells you two things at once — how fast, and in what spirit. The numbers below are the ranges those words have settled into, not laws. Set the metronome, then decide whether the music agrees with it.

Reading a metronome mark

 = 120

One hundred and twenty crotchets in a minute — two every second. The note drawn is the note you count, so in 6/8 the mark is usually written on a dotted crotchet instead.

-  = 60
- One minim a second — a slow two-in-a-bar.
-  = 52
- Compound time: the dotted beat, not the quaver.
-  = 96–108
- A range. The performer chooses inside it.
-  = c. 88
- circa* — about. An editor's suggestion.
- MM*  = 84
- Mälzel's Metronome, the old way of writing it.
-  = 
- At a change of metre: the old note equals the new one.

Changing speed

- accelerando*
- Getting gradually faster. *accel.*
- stringendo*
- Pressing forward, tightening.
- rallentando*
- Gradually slowing. *rall.*
- ritardando*
- Gradually slowing. *rit.* Much the same as *rall.*
- ritenuto*
- Held back — at once, not gradually.
- allargando*
- Broadening: slower and louder together.
- rubato*
- Stolen time. Give here, take back there.
- a tempo*
- Back to the speed you had before.
- tempo primo*
- Back to the speed the piece began with.
- fermata* 
- Pause. Hold the note beyond its value.

Words that qualify

- poco*
- a little — *poco rit.*
- poco a poco*
- little by little
- molto*
- very — *allegro molto*
- assai*
- very, quite — *allegro assai*
- più / meno*
- more / less — *più mosso, meno mosso*
- non troppo*
- not too much
- sempre*
- always, throughout
- subito*
- suddenly
- ma*
- but — *allegro ma non troppo*

Speed, or character?

Most of these words were ordinary Italian before they were tempo marks. *Allegro* means cheerful. *Grave* means serious. *Vivace* means alive.

So a marking carries a mood as well as a number. An *allegro* played at the right speed but with no cheer in it is still wrong.

Some marks name only the mood: *cantabile* (singing), *maestoso* (majestic), *scherzando* (playful), *con brio* (with spirit).

Marking your own score

Write the tempo above the top stave at the start, in the same place every time, left-aligned over the first note.

Give a word and a number together. The word says what kind of fast; the number says how fast.

Mark every change — and mark the return. A *rit.* with no *a tempo* after it leaves the player guessing.

Beethoven left metronome marks that many players find impossibly fast. Even the composer's number is a suggestion.