

Italian Terms & Dynamics

Composers have written their instructions in Italian for four hundred years, so the same handful of words works in any language. These are the ones you will meet first.

How loud · dynamics



crescendo *diminuendo*

<i>ppp</i>	pianississimo — as quietly as possible
<i>pp</i>	pianissimo — very quiet
<i>p</i>	piano — quiet
<i>mp</i>	mezzo-piano — moderately quiet
<i>mf</i>	mezzo-forte — moderately loud
<i>f</i>	forte — loud
<i>ff</i>	fortissimo — very loud
<i>fff</i>	fortississimo — as loudly as possible

How fast · tempo

Beats per minute is a guide, not a rule — the character of the word matters more than the number.

Grave — very slow and solemn	20–40
Largo — broad and stately	40–60
Adagio — slow, at ease	66–76
Andante — at a walking pace	76–108
Moderato — a moderate speed	108–120
Allegro — fast and cheerful	120–168
Vivace — lively	168–176
Presto — very fast	168–200
Prestissimo — as fast as possible	200+

Words that change other words

Most Italian markings are built, not memorised. Learn these and you can read a term you have never seen before — *poco a poco crescendo* is simply “little by little, growing louder”.

molto	very	più	more	sempre	always
poco	a little	meno	less	subito	suddenly
poco a poco	little by little	mezzo	half	-issimo	the most — <i>fortissimo</i>
assai	very much	non troppo	not too much	-etto	the little one — <i>allegretto</i>

Changing along the way

crescendo · cresc.	growing gradually louder
diminuendo · dim.	growing gradually quieter
accelerando · accel.	gradually getting faster
rallentando · rall.	gradually slowing down
a tempo	back to the original speed
rubato	with give and take in the pulse

How to play it

legato	smoothly joined, no gaps
staccato	short and detached
dolce	sweetly
cantabile	in a singing style
con brio	with spirit
sforzando · sfz	with sudden force