

Musical Terms & Symbols

35 Italian words and signs you'll meet in real sheet music - tempo, dynamics, articulation and score directions - scoped to early theory, roughly up to Grade 3.

Every one shows its symbol (where it has one) and a plain-English translation.



Antonio Vivaldi

The most famous Italian composer of them all - these are his native words.

Tempo - how fast

Term	Symbol	Meaning
Grave	-	very slow and solemn
Largo	-	broad and slow
Adagio	-	slow and stately
Andante	-	at a walking pace
Moderato	-	at a moderate pace
Allegretto	-	moderately fast, a little less than Allegro
Allegro	-	fast and bright
Vivace	-	lively and quick
Presto	-	very fast
Prestissimo	-	as fast as possible

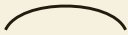
Tempo changes

Term	Symbol	Meaning
Accelerando (accel.)	accel.	gradually getting faster
Ritardando (rit.)	rit.	gradually getting slower
Rallentando (rall.)	rall.	gradually slowing down (very close to ritardando)
A tempo	-	return to the original speed
Rubato	-	with flexible, expressive timing

Dynamics - how loud

Term	Symbol	Meaning
Pianissimo (pp)	pp	very soft
Piano (p)	p	soft
Mezzo piano (mp)	mp	moderately soft
Mezzo forte (mf)	mf	moderately loud
Forte (f)	f	loud
Fortissimo (ff)	ff	very loud
Crescendo (cresc.)		gradually getting louder
Diminuendo (dim.)		gradually getting softer (also called decrescendo)

Articulation & expression

Term	Symbol	Meaning
Staccato	•	short and detached
Legato		smooth and connected
Tenuto	—	held for its full length
Accent		played with extra emphasis
Fermata		hold the note or rest longer than usual (a "pause")
Dolce	-	sweetly, gently
Cantabile	-	in a singing style
Maestoso	-	majestically

Directions in the score

Term	Symbol	Meaning
Da Capo (D.C.)	D.C.	go back to the beginning
Dal Segno (D.S.)	D.S.	go back to the sign
Fine	-	the end
Coda	-	a closing section

General music vocabulary

Everyday words you'll hear discussed in lessons and around this site.

Term	Meaning
Beat	The steady pulse of music - the part you tap your foot to.
Tempo	How fast or slow the music goes.
Rhythm	The pattern of long and short sounds.
Melody	The main tune: single notes, one after another, that you can sing.
Harmony	Notes sounded together to support and colour a melody.
Chord	Three or more notes played at the same time.
Scale	A ladder of notes in order, like do-re-mi.
Key	The family of notes a piece is built from, named after its home note.
Tonic	The "home" note or chord a piece keeps returning to and rests on.
Major	A bright, happy-sounding scale or chord.
Minor	A darker, more serious-sounding scale or chord.
Pitch	How high or low a note is.

Term	Meaning
Octave	The gap between one note and the next note with the same name, higher or lower.
Dynamics	How loud or soft the music is (from pianissimo, very soft, to fortissimo, very loud).
Motif	A short musical idea - just a few notes - that a composer repeats and develops.
Phrase	A short musical "sentence," often heard as a question or an answer.
Bar	A small group of beats, marked off by lines in the written music (also called a measure).
Time signature	The two numbers at the start that tell you how many beats are in each bar.
Rest	A silence - a beat with no note played.
Polyphony	Several independent melodies sounding at once.
Counterpoint	The art of weaving two or more melodies together so each stands on its own.
Movement	One complete section of a larger work, like one part of a symphony.
Concerto	A piece for a solo instrument (or a few) playing with an orchestra.
Symphony	A large work for full orchestra, usually in several movements.

Keep this pack beside your manuscript paper - spotting these words and signs in real sheet music is one of the fastest ways to build your musical vocabulary.