

Common Musical Terms

From The United States Navy Band

<http://www.navyband.navy.mil/cmt.htm>

-A-

a cappella - to be performed without instrumental accompaniment.
accelerando - gradually increase tempo.
accent - an emphasis on a tone or chord.
accidental - a sign of chromatic alteration used for single notes or measures, as opposed to those given in the key signature. The English names of accidentals are sharp, flat, double sharp, double flat, and natural.
adagietto - slightly faster than adagio.
adagissimo - very slow.
agitato - agitated.
al fine - to the end.
alla - in the manner of.
allargando - slowing down.
allegretto - a tempo between allegro and andante.
allegro - a lively tempo.
allentando - slowing down.
andante - moderate speed.
andantino - a tempo faster than andante.
assai - very

-B-

baroque - music of the period c. 1600-1750. The Baroque era began with the rise of monody, opera, oratorio, cantata, and recitative. It closed with the deaths of Bach and Handel.
brio, con - with vigor

-C-

chamber pitch - (Kammerton) - the absolute pitch of a specific note, standardized in order to obtain identical pitches on all instruments. Today's standard pitch is usually a'=440.
choir pitch - (Chorton) - a pitch standard used during the Baroque period for church organs and sacred choral music.
chromaticism - the use of tones outside of the diatonic scale, for example, in the key of C: C, D, D#, F# rather than the diatonic C, D, E, F.
classical period - generally refers to the period from 1770-1830 during which the composers Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert were active. Its complex development of style and form began around 1740 with composers in Mannheim, Germany, Vienna, Italy, and Bohemia.
coda - a concluding passage falling outside of the basic structure.
codetta - a coda of shorter length.
con - with.
concertino - a short concerto.
concerto - a piece of music, generally written for orchestra and solo instrument.
cornet pitch - (Cornett-ton) - the pitch standard practiced before 1889 which town musicians used for their brass instruments.
crescendo - increase volume gradually.

-D-

da capo - repeat from the beginning.
decrescendo - decrease volume gradually.
diatonic - refers to the natural scale consisting of five whole tones and two semitones as found within a key. For example, the C major scale of C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C is diatonic.
diminuendo - decrease volume gradually, diminishing.
dolce - sweet, soft.
dolcissimo - very soft.
dotted note - a dot beside a note adds one-half to its original value.
duet - a composition for two players.
duplet - a group of two notes played in the place of three.

-E-

eighth note - note length which equals one-half the value of a quarter note.
enharmonic - tones which are the same degree of the chromatic scale, but which are "spelled" differently, e.g. G# and Ab; and C# and Db.
epilogue - a concluding passage or section.
equal temperament - the system of temperament in which the octave is divided into 12 equal semitones.
etude - study, exercise.

-F-

finale - last movement of a work.
fine - end.
flat - lowers pitch one-half step from natural.
flutterzunge - flutter tonguing.
forte - loud.
forte-piano - written 'fp', loud followed by a soft.

-G-

glissando - a rapid scale performed with a sliding movement.
g.p. - grand pause.
grand - great.

-H-

half note - note length which equals the value of two quarter notes.
half step - the smallest distance between two notes. For example: C and C-sharp.

-I-

interval - the difference in pitch between two notes.
intonation - denotes the singing or playing in tune as either good or bad; the matching (or lack thereof) of pitches with another player or singer.

-J-

just intonation - a method of tuning and intonation in which all the intervals are derived from the natural (pure) fifth and natural (pure) third.

-K-

kammerton - see chamber pitch.
key signature - set of sharps or flats appearing at the beginning of a musical work.

-L-

larghetto - tempo slightly faster than *largo*.
largo - very slow.
legato - play with no silence between notes.
leggiero - light.
lento - slow.
l'istesso tempo - beat remains the same.

-M-

major - term used for a certain type of scale or interval.
marziale - marchlike.
measure - a group of notes set off by bar lines to either side.
meno - less.
meter - marking for type of beats and number of beats per measure in a work or section of a work. For example, 4/4.
mezzo - half.
mezzo-forte - half loud.
minor - term used for a certain type of scale or interval.
moderato - moderate speed, less than *allegro*.
modulation - the change of key within a composition.
molto - very.
mosso - moved, animated.
moto - motion.

-N-

natural - a note that is neither sharp nor flat.
non tanto - not so much.

-O-

ossia - alternative part.

-P-

piano - soft.
pianissimo - very soft.
piu - more.
poco - little.
poi - then.
presto - very fast.
prestissimo - as fast as possible.
pythagorean tuning - the tuning system based on the Pythagorean scale which derived all the tones from the interval of the pure fifth (3/2).

-Q-

quarter note - note length generally equivalent to one beat, for example, in 4/4 meter.
quartet - a work for four performers.
quasi - almost.
quintet - a work for five performers.

-R-

rallentando - slowing down.
rest - silence for a specified amount of time.
rinforzando - sudden stress on a note or chord.
ritardando - gradually decreasing tempo.
ritenuto - gradually decreasing tempo.
rubato - denotes freedom in tempo.

-S-

secco - dry.
sempre - always.
senza - without.
sforzando - with a strong accent on a note or chord, denoted *sf*.
sforzato - with a strong accent on a note or chord, denoted *sf*.
Sfp - sforzato followed by a piano.
sharp - raises pitch one-half step from natural.
simile - in a similar manner.
slentando - slowing in tempo.
solo - work for single performer.
soltanto - but only.
sordino - mute.
sostenuto - sustained.
sostenendo - sustained.
sostenente - sustained.
staccato - short.
stesso tempo - same tempo.
subito - sudden.
sul - on, at.

-T-

tacet - it is silent.
tanto - so much.
temperament - refers to a system of tuning in which the intervals deviate from the "pure," such as the acoustically correct intervals used in the Pythagorean scale and in just intonation.
tempo giusto - normal tempo.
tenuto - sustained, full value.
trill - rapid alternation of a given note with its upper neighbor.
trio - work for three performers.

-U-

unison - performance of the same melody by different performers.
un poco - a little.

-V-

via - away.
vivace - quick.
volti - turn over.