

# Glossary of Musical Terminology

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## Music Theory for young students

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## Glossary of musical terminology

- accent** A heavy attack indicated by the symbol, >, placed above or below a note head.
- accidental** Natural, sharp, or flat symbol that alters the pitch of a note.
- antecedent** A phrase whose ending is in need of a second phrase to complete the musical thought, much like a question.
- articulation** The manner in which a note is begun and ended during performance, indicated by symbols placed above or below a note head.
- asymmetrical meter** a meter containing unequal beat units, i.e. some beats divide into two parts, some into three
- augmented** (literally, "enlarged") A major or perfect interval which has been enlarged by half step. Also applied to a triad (which gets its name from the interval.)
- bar** See measure.
- barline** The vertical line that begins and ends each measure.
- beam** The thicker line that connects the stems of consecutive 8th, 16th, etc. notes; beaming of notes should be according to the beat.
- binary** Binary is two-part form. It generally involves little contrast, and features continuity. It can be represented as A-B or A-A'.
- cadence** Cadence marks the end of a musical phrase, passage, or larger form. It provides a sense of closure or repose.
- canon** An extensive process of imitation. A following voice duplicates exactly what the leading voice has done, at a precise distance 1) above or below in pitch and 2) behind in time.
- chord** Any grouping of three or more notes sounding together.
- chromaticism** Presence of accidentals outside the key. In melody, it may be purely decorative, or may represent an aspect of functional harmony.
- circle of fifths** A chart presenting relationship of keys organized by 5ths.
- clef** The musical symbols that determine the pitch names and pitch register of the staff.
- composition** Composition is making up and writing down music in non-real-time.
- compound division** The division of the beat into three equal parts.

- compound interval** Intervals larger than an octave. Interval quality remains the same whether compound or simple, thus a minor tenth is a compound minor third.
- consequent** A phrase which provides the needed completion posed by an antecedent, much like an answer does.
- consonance** A stable musical sound. Commonly understood as an agreeable combination of musical tones.
- counterpoint** The way melodic lines relate to each other; historically, the craft of controlling dissonance and consonance.
- D.C. al fine** Abbreviation for "da capo al fine" (literally, "from the head to the end"); usually found below the last printed measure of a piece of music, directing the performer to return to the beginning and perform the music until the "fine" indication is printed in the music.
- diatonic scale** Any stepwise arrangement of the seven "natural" pitches. In particular, the major and natural minor scales.
- dictation** Dictation is a process of writing down what is heard.
- diminished** (literally, "reduced") An interval or triad with a half step removed. Commonly encountered examples include the diminished fifth, the diminished triad and the diminished seventh. A diminished interval is labeled with a lower case "d"; a diminished triad or seventh chord is indicated with the degree sign, "°".
- dissonance** An unstable musical sound. Commonly understood as a disagreeable combination of tones.
- dominant** 1) the fifth degree in a scale, relatively stable, and 2) the chord constructed on it
- double flat** The sign used to lower the pitch of a note by a whole step.
- double sharp** The sign used to raise the pitch of a note by a whole step.
- dynamics** Loudness of performance as expressed by symbols placed in the music.
- fermata** A symbol which indicates that the note or chord should be held longer than notated. How much longer it is held depends on a number of factors.
- figured bass symbol** (figured bass numerals) A set of numerals arranged vertically from low to high (reading up) which indicate the intervals present above the bass note.
- flag** The symbol on a stem that represents divisions of a beat smaller than a quarter note. One flag equals an eighth note. Two flags equals a sixteenth note.
- flat** The sign used to lower the pitch of a note by a half step.

- form** Musical form speaks of common ways of organizing large spans of music. Concepts such as contrast vs. repetition, modulation, departure and return are involved in the study of form.
- functional harmony** A system of relations between chords in tonal music.
- half step** (also half tone) The smallest musical interval. The distance between two adjacent pitches in the chromatic scale, or the difference between two adjacent keys on the piano. (i.e. The distance between a white and black key on the piano.)
- harmonic interval** The distance between two pitches when the pitches are presented simultaneously.
- harmonic minor** Version of the minor scale with raised seventh scale degree (compared to natural minor).
- harmony** Agreement, concord in Greek. Harmony is music in its vertical aspect; Harmony also means chords supporting melody.
- homophony** The most common musical texture, in which a single melody on top is supported by a chord progression.
- imitation** When one musical part repeats what another just did, often at a different pitch location (transposition).
- improvisation** Improvisation is making up the music as one produces it, usually relying on limited materials or concepts, and drawing heavily on memory.
- interval** The distance between two notes, either melodically (sounding sequentially) or harmonically (sounding together).
- interval quality** The general sound of an interval; there are several ways to classify quality, with the most common being major, minor, perfect, diminished and augmented intervals.
- inversion (triad)** A triad with the third or fifth in the lowest sounding position.
- inversion (interval)** Moving a lower note of a simple interval one octave higher, or a top note of an interval one octave lower.
- key** Organizing music around one note (the first note of a scale, also called tonic); consists of a set of hierarchical relationships.
- key signature** Sharps or flats which maintain the structure (placement of semitones) in a given scale, written immediately after a clef on every staff.
- ledger line** An extension of the staff. A line placed above or below the staff to extend its range. Ledger lines are only long enough to make single notes or notes of a chord legible; they never connect with each other.

**legato** A smooth and connected performance style.

**major second (M2)** See whole step.

**major interval** Larger: seconds, thirds, sixths and sevenths each have a larger and smaller version; the major version of each is found above tonic in a major scale.

**major scale** The whole- and half-step pattern defined by the white notes on a keyboard from C to c; the pattern when ascending is W-W-H-W-W-W-H, where W is a whole step and H is a half step; the brighter quality of this scale leads to its commonly-described quality as "happy". A scale with semitones between 3rd and 4th, 6th and 7th steps.

**major triad** The triad which contains a major third and perfect fifth above its root, commonly described as "happy".

**measure** The combination of notes and rests contained between two barlines.

**mediant** Scale degree 3 and the chord built upon it.

**melodic interval** The distance between two pitches when the pitches are presented one after another.

**melodic minor** Version of the minor scale with raised scale degrees 6 and 7 ascending motion (compared to natural minor), descends using the natural minor form (i.e., lower scale degrees 6 and 7 on the way back down).

**melody** A series of musical pitches presented sequentially in a given rhythm, a top line of a song.

**meter** The pulse in music represented by the time signature.

**minor second (m2)** See half step.

**minor interval** Smaller: seconds, thirds, sixths and sevenths each have a larger and smaller version; minor intervals are a half-step smaller than major intervals.

**minor scale** Best understood in relation to the major scale, with a commonly-described quality of "sad"; three versions of minor scales exist, with all sharing the minor third above tonic as a defining characteristic; the three forms of minor include **natural minor**, **harmonic minor**, and **melodic minor**. (See entry for each.)

**minor triad** The triad which contains a minor third and perfect fifth above its root, commonly described as "sad".

**mode** A seven-note scale made of whole and half steps. The two primary modes are major and minor, others exist as well.

- modulation** A change of key confirmed by a cadence.
- monophony** The musical texture which features a single line. A texture is monophonic no matter how many individuals take part in executing a single line.
- motive** The smallest recognizable musical idea, with characteristic rhythmic and intervallic patterns.
- natural** The sign used to cancel a sharp or flat.
- natural minor** A scale with semitones between scale degrees 2 & 3, 5 & 6; same as major scale with lowered 3, 6, 7.
- notation** The system of symbols which allows music to be written and read.
- note value** The rhythmic duration of a note.
- overtone series** A set of frequencies made by the vibration of air when the pitch is produced.
- parallel keys** Major and minor keys starting on the same tonic.
- period** A complete musical thought that takes two or so phrases to express. The two common components of a period are an antecedent phrase and consequent phrase
- phrase** A single musical statement marked by coming to a conclusion. Phrase in music is analogous to phrase in writing or speech.
- pitch** A musical sound described as high or low, expressed through letter names or solfège.
- polyphony** The musical texture marked by independence of melodic line.
- predominant** Predominant *function* refers to a group of chords, each of which might precede the dominant chord in a cadence: II, IV, and others.
- register** The location of pitch (high, medium, low).
- relative keys** Major and minor keys sharing the same key signature.
- repeat signs** Symbols which indicate that the music bounded, or surrounded, by them is to be repeated before going on.
- rest** The musical symbols that represent a period of silence.
- rhythm** The combination of notes and rests that determine the length of sound and silence in music.
- scale** A group of 5 to 12 sequentially arranged pitches.

- scale degree** The number of scalar steps above tonic (the "key" note or "home" note); scale degree is expressed with an Arabic numeral with a carat ("^") placed above it.
- sequence** Repetition of a melodic or harmonic pattern at successively higher or lower pitch levels.
- semitone** See half step.
- seventh chord** A four-note chord built in thirds from its lowest note.
- sharp** The sign used to raise the pitch of a note by a half step.
- simple division** The division of the beat into two equal parts.
- slur** A curved line that indicates notes should be played legato.
- solfège** Solfège is an ancient system of naming pitches. Longy uses "fixed-do" solfège, in which C = do, D = re, E = mi, F = fa, G = sol, A = la, and B = si or ti.
- staccato** A manner of articulation producing a separated, detached style; indicated by a single dot appearing above or below the note head.
- staff** A line consisting of five lines and four spaces in which music notation is written.
- stem** The line attached to a note head, one octave in length, perpendicular to the line of the staff.
- subdominant** Fourth degree in a scale, often preceding dominant in a cadence, and the chord constructed on it.
- submediant** Scale degree 6 and the chord built upon it.
- subtonic** Whole step below tonic, which is scale degree 7 in a natural minor scale.
- supertonic** Scale degree 2 and the chord built upon it.
- tempo** Speed of the pulse in music.
- tenuto** A manner of articulation wherein a note is to be performed in a sustained manner; indicated by the symbol, -, appearing above or below the note head.
- ternary** Ternary is three-part form, built upon statement, departure, and return. It is often denoted simply as A-B-A.
- texture** The way musical elements relate to each other, the "broad picture" of what's happening in the music. The degree of independence of lines which create the whole is an important factor. Western Classical music is known for creating and depending upon a sort of polyphony in which somewhat independent lines combine to function together to create a unified harmonic outcome.

- tie** A curved line between notes that indicates continues for the duration of all connected note values.
- time signature** The numeric symbol representing the number of beats in a measure and the organization of strong and weak beats.
- tonic** The first and the last sound in a scale, the most important note that gives the scale its name. Tonic is most stable note in a scale.
- transposition** Moving a music structure (phrase, part of a phrase) to a different pitch location
- triad** A three-note chord built in thirds from its lowest note.
- triad quality** The sound of a three-note chord resulting from the intervals created between the various notes; the four types include: major triad (major third on the bottom and minor third on top); minor triad (minor third on the bottom and major third on top); augmented triad (major third on the bottom and top); diminished triad (minor third on the bottom and top).
- whole step** (also whole tone) The distance between two notes that equals two half steps. (Two white keys with a black key in between.)