

# Words Into Music

If you're new to music making, you may have noticed this hobby, like any other, has its own vocabulary. If some of the words seem foreign, that's because they are—Italian, to be exact, which over the years has become the lingua franca of music.

Don't be daunted. Many of the words are simply shorthand for musical concepts that will soon be quite familiar. To help you know your arpeggio from your vibrato, clip and save this glossary of common musical terms: dynamic and performance instructions that you might see written on sheet music.

*The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Randell, is a great resource for those who want a concise music reference.

**accidentals:** Marks that indicate when a pitch is sharpened, flattened, or a previous accidental is cancelled (a "natural"). The symbols are # (sharp), ♭ (flat), or ♮ (natural).

**adagio:** Play at a slow tempo.

**allegro:** Play fast, lively.

**arco:** Indicates that string instruments should be played with their bows. This instruction usually follows a pizzicato section.

**bar line:** A line drawn through one or more staves to mark off a measure.

**cadenza:** A short, ornamental solo, usually near the end of a movement in a concerto.

**clef:** A symbol that assigns notes to the lines and spaces on the musical staff; the most common clefs are the bass (or F) clef ♭ and treble (or G) clef ♯.

**common time:** A time signature of  $\frac{4}{4}$ . Its alternative symbol is e.

**crescendo:** Gradual increase in volume. Its symbol is ——

**cut time:** Also known as alla breve, meaning twice as fast. Cut time has a feeling of two beats per bar. Its symbol is ♩.

**decrescendo:** Gradual decrease in volume. Its symbol is ——

**divisi:** Divided—a section of instruments divides into two or more sections playing different parts.

**dotted note:** Increases the value of the note by one half. For example, a dot next to a half note adds a quarter note to its value ( $\text{J} = \text{J} + \text{J}$ ).

**double bar:** Two lines that indicate the end of a score or section of it.

**dynamic markings:** Symbols and terms that indicate degrees of loudness.

**espressivo:** Play expressively.

**fermata:** A pause or hold. Usually it is placed over a note or rest and means hold longer than its usual value. In an ensemble, the conductor will usually indicate when to cut off a fermata note. Its symbol is ⌂.

**fine:** The end of a score or section in a score.

**forte:** Play loudly. Abbreviated as f.

**glissando:** Play with a continuous or sliding movement from one pitch to the next. Its symbol is a diagonal or jagged line connecting two notes.

**grace note:** A note of very short duration played before another, longer note. It's written in small type, for example JJ.

**grazioso:** Play gracefully.

**largo:** Play very slow and broad.

**legato:** Play smoothly, with no separation between notes. For wind players, legato means to play with a soft tongue. See slur.

**lento:** Play slowly, but not as slow as largo.

**maestoso:** Play majestically.

**marcato:** Play with emphasis or with heavy accents.

**mezzo:** Medium or moderate, usually abbreviated and prefixing another dynamic marking. For example, *mp* means moderately soft; *mf* means moderately loud.

**moderato:** Play with a moderate tempo.

**ornaments:** Musical embellishments such as trills or grace notes.

**piano:** Play softly. Abbreviated as *p*.

**pickup notes:** Notes that precede the first full measure of a score.

**pizzicato:** An instruction for string players to sound notes by plucking the strings instead of bowing, usually followed by the instruction *arco*, or return to bowing.

**presto:** Play fast.

**repeat sign:** If seen at the end of a score, a repeat sign means to play the entire piece again from the beginning. Within a piece, repeat the music between the signs ||: and :||.

**ritardando:** Gradually slow down.

**slur:** A curved line over or under two or more notes indicating they are to be played legato connected.

**staccato:** A dot beneath a note that means play it short and separated.

**tempo marking:** A number written over a score that indicates at what metronome speed to play: J=120.

**tenuto:** Hold or sustain a note for full value. Indicated by a short line drawn over or under the note.

**time signature:** Two numbers at the beginning of a measure that indicate how many beats are in the measure and what note equals one beat. For example,  $\frac{3}{4}$  means three beats to a measure and that a quarter note (♩) is one beat.

**tremolo:** See vibrato.

**trill:** A musical ornament that consists of rapid alternations between two notes that are next to each other in the music's key. Its symbol is ♭ or ≪.

**tutti:** Everyone in a section plays. This instruction usually appears after a solo.

**unison:** All instruments in the section play together at the same pitch.

**vibrato:** Or tremolo. An instruction that calls for a rapid reiteration of a single note. Its symbol is ≡ written over the tail of a note.