

**Absolute music.** Music that makes no intentional reference to a non-musical source, such as a literary work, visual image, historical event, etc. The term was coined in the Romantic Period to make a distinction between "pure" music and program music (music that tells a story). The distinction is often hazy, however. For example, though Beethoven's Fifth Symphony has no overt program, Beethoven himself described the opening measures as "fate knocking at the door."

**A capella.** [ah kah-peh-lah] (Italian) Literally, "in the chapel." Choral music sung without instrumental accompaniment.

**Act.** one of the main divisions of a drama, opera or ballet, usually completing a part of the action and often having a climax of its own.

**Adagio/Adagietto.** [ah-dah-jee-oh; ah dah-jee-eh-toh] (Italian) "Slowly." Indicates a slow tempo . Adagietto is also a slow tempo, but not as slow as adagio.

**Allegro/Allegretto.** [ah-lay-groh; ah-lay-greh-toh] (Italian) "Merry," "cheerful." Indicates a fast tempo . Allegretto is slightly slower than allegro and implies a lighter style.

**Andante/Andantino.** [ahn-dahn-tay; ahn-dahn-tee-noh] (Italian) From the verb andare, "to walk." Implies a moderate, "walking" tempo. Similarly, andantino (the diminutive of andante) could imply a tempo either faster or slower than andante.

**Animato.** [ah-nee-mah-toh] (Italian) "Animated" Tempo indication, generally modifying an initial tempo. For example, piu animato means "more animated than before."

**Antiphonal.** Music performed by an ensemble divided into two or more distinct groups which perform in alternation and together.

**Aria.** [ah-ree-ah] (Italian) "Air" A self-contained, melodic section of a large-scale vocal work (opera, cantata, or oratorio) sung by a soloist with instrumental or orchestral accompaniment. It is distinct from the more speech-like recitative sections. There are also arias that exist independent of any larger work, and in the Baroque period, some instrumental works were called arias, such as the theme of Bach's Goldberg Variations.

**Arioso.** [ah-ree-oh-soh] Sometimes used to identify vocal or instrumental music in a lyrical style

**Arpeggio.** [ahr-peh-jee-oh] (Italian) From "arpa" (harp) Playing the notes of a chord in succession, instead of simultaneously.

**Bar.** Synonymous with measure. A way of dividing music into small, often regularly spaced groups of beats. The division is indicated by a vertical line, called the bar-line.

**Baritone.** The most common category of the male voice; lower than a tenor, but higher than a bass. Baritones were more commonly used in during the Romantic opera era.

**Bass.** The lowest male voice. Many bass roles are associated with characters of authority or comedy.

**Bel Canto.** "beautiful singing" in Italian. A very fluid singing style that was very popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti are the best known composers in

this style. Best examples include the roles of Rosina in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and Angelina (Cenerentola) in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (Cinderella).

**Bravo.** "well done" in Italian. Audiences say this to express their appreciation for a performance. Bravo is used for male singers, Brava for female singers and if you want to go all out for the entire cast, it's Bravi.

**Cadence.** The ending of a musical phrase, and the common melodic or harmonic formulas that make the ear recognize such an ending.

**Cadenza.** [kah-dehn-zah] (Italian) "cadence" A virtuoso passage usually found near the end of a concerto movement or vocal aria. Cadenzas are often based on the themes of the piece in which they appear and are improvisatory in style. In the Classical and Romantic periods performers were expected to improvise or provide their own cadenzas, although Mozart began the practice of providing written cadenzas for some of his piano concertos.

**Canon.** (Latin) "Rule" The strictest form of counterpoint. After the initial statement of a melody in one "voice," all subsequent "voices" must imitate that melody exactly (note for note), or with only minimal adjustments. The melody must be composed so that it sounds "correct" when played "against" itself. The imitations may begin on the same pitch, or on another pitch (in which case all the notes will have to be "transposed" to maintain the integrity of the melody). Canons are usually part of larger works; perhaps the most renowned collection of canons is contained in J.S. Bach's Musical Offering. "Row, Row, your Boat" is a familiar example of a simple canon.

**Cantabile.** [kahn-tah-bee-lay] (Italian) "Singing" Music performed in a singing style. The term can be added to a tempo marking (andante cantabile, for example) or placed over a melodic line.

**Chord.** The simultaneous sounding of three or more notes.

**Chorus.** A group of singers usually divided into sections based on vocal range. The chorus was originally an ancient Greek practice of underscoring portions of the drama through music. The chorus is often used for crowd scenes and to play minor characters.

**Chromatic.** From the Greek "chromatikos" (colored). The chromatic scale divides an octave into twelve semitones (all the white and black notes on the keyboard from middle c to the c above it, for example), as opposed to the diatonic major and minor scales. Chromatic chords employ notes foreign to the diatonic scale of the prevailing key in a musical passage. The history of Western Music through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals a progression of increasing chromaticism.

**Coda.** [koh-dah] (Italian) "Tail" The last section of a piece of music.

**Composer.** The person who writes the vocal and/or orchestral music (score).

**Conductor.** The person in charge of all the musical aspects of an opera; both orchestrally and vocally.

**Consonance.** The simultaneous sounding of two or more tones which produce an effect of stability or harmoniousness. Exactly which combinations of tones are considered

consonant varies considerably among different cultures and has changed considerably during the history of Western music. Definitions of consonance may also be found in acoustical theories from Pythagoras to Helmholtz. Intervals (the distance from one note to another) considered consonant in the common practice of tonal music are unisons, octaves, perfect fifths and fourths, and both major and minor sixths.

**Costumes.** The clothing worn on stage by the performers. Costumes can be used to reflect the personality of characters, the historical time period, country of origin or social ranking.

**Counterpoint.** The art of combining two or more musical lines that is to be played or sung simultaneously. These lines may be said to be "in counterpoint" with each other. The term is in some ways synonymous with polyphony, although counterpoint is most commonly used for Baroque music; polyphony for music from the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The rules of counterpoint were codified from the music of Palestrina by J.J. Fux in his 1725 treatise, *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Steps to Parnassus).

**Crescendo.** [kreh-shen-doh] (Italian) "Growing" Indicates a gradual increase in volume. May be indicated by a symbol called a "hairpin" (<) or abbreviated as "cresc."

**Designers.** The people who create the sets, costumes, make-up, wigs and lighting for the opera performance.

**Diatonic.** Any octave divided into a seven-note scale (consisting of various combinations of whole tones and semitones). The major and minor scales, as well as the church modes, are diatonic. Diatonic harmony, which is the basis for our tonal system, consists of chords which contain only the notes of a given diatonic scale. (See chromatic.)

**Diminuendo.** [deh-meen-yoo-ehn-doh] (Italian) "Diminishing" Indicates a gradual decrease in volume. Synonymous with decrescendo. May be indicated by a symbol called a "hairpin" (>) or abbreviated as "dim."

**Dissonance.** The sounding of two or more tones which produce an effect of harshness or instability, and demand "resolution" to a consonance. Like consonance, the concept of dissonance is dependent upon both context and the way our ears have been cultured. Some intervals considered dissonant in the Medieval period were found to be consonant during the Renaissance. Also, the way a dissonance is resolved (and even the way it is orchestrated) can decrease or intensify how "harsh" it sounds. Intervals commonly considered dissonant in tonal music are the major and minor seconds and sevenths.

**Drone.** A sustained musical sound, usually a bass note or notes. Also, an instrument or part of an instrument that produces such sounds can be called a drone, such as the drones of a bagpipe.

**Duet.** Two people singing together. Example of operatic female duet is the *Viens, Mallika* (the Flower Duet) from Delibes' *Lakme* and example of operatic male duet is *Au fond du temple saint* from Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. Examples of tenor/soprano duets include *O Soave Fanciulla* from Puccini's *La Bohème* and *Mir Ist Die Ehre Widerfahren* from R. Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*.

**Dynamics.** The degrees of volume (loudness and softness) in music. Also the words, abbreviations, and symbols used to indicate degrees of volume. Piano (soft) and forte (loud) are most common.

**Finale.** The ending segment of an act or scene.

**Harmony.** Harmony is the chordal or vertical structure of a piece of music, as opposed to melody (and polyphony, or multiple melodies) which represents the horizontal structure. The succession of chords in a given piece is referred to as a chord progression.

**Homophony** (homophonic). From the Greek for "like-sounding." Music in which all voices move in the same rhythm. Or, more commonly, a musical texture in which there is a clear distinction between melody and a chordal [chord] accompaniment. (See polyphony.)

**Imitation.** The overlapping repetition of a melody by two or more "voices." A technique of polyphonic composition.

**Key.** A musical work in a "key" is melodically and harmonically orientated around a particular major or minor scale. For example, a composition in C Major will usually begin and end in that key, although excursions to other keys may occur. However, a passage in C Major may temporarily utilize notes that do not occur in that scale and still remain in C Major.

**Key signature.** The key signature is a symbol found at the beginning of a musical composition; sharps or flats are placed on the staff as needed to indicate the key of the piece.

**Largo.** [lahr-goh] (Italian) "Broad" Indicates a very slow tempo, usually slower than adagio.

**Legato.** [leh-gah-toh] (Italian) "Tied" An indication to play music in a connected, smooth fashion.

**Leitmotif.** A theme or other musical idea that represents or symbolizes a person, object, place, idea, state of mind, supernatural force or some other ingredient in a dramatic work. An idea used widely throughout German opera, though associated with Richard Wagner in most of his operas and Richard Strauss in his symphonic tone poems. See **Motive/motif** for more information.

**Librettist.** The person who writes the text (words) of the opera.

**Libretto.** [lih-breh-toh] (Italian) "Little book" The text of an opera, oratorio, or other large-scale vocal work.

**Lyrics.** Most associated with the words to a song. The opera "lyrics" are called the **Libretto** (see above).

**Measure.** Synonymous with bar.

**Meter.** The organization of beats, establishing an underlying pattern of emphases and creating a regular, measurable "pulse." A waltz for example, is in a triple meter, with an

emphasis on the first beat of the three: 1-2-3, 1-2-3. A time signature placed at the beginning of a composition or section indicates the basic unit of measurement contained within each measure. A waltz is usually notated in three-quarter (3/4) time, for example, which tells the performer that each measure will contain three quarter notes to be played as fast as the tempo indicates. The first beat of a group is generally emphasized. A beat should not be confused with a note; a beat may contain one note, many notes, or may be silent (indicated by a symbol called a rest). Beats create an underlying pulse that organizes musical sounds through time.

**Mode.** In the broadest meaning, any arrangement of musical tones into a scale. The major and minor scales can be called modes. Mode most often refers to the scales used in Western music from about 400 to 1500 which were identified by Greek names: Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian. These are sometimes called the "church modes," because of their associations with Gregorian chant. Two subsequent additions to this old modal system, Ionian and Aeolian, were identical to the major and minor scales known today. By 1600 these were the only two modes commonly used by classical composers, but the other modes continued to be heard in folk traditions. The church modes were rediscovered by composers of the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries; the modes also play an important role in jazz composition.

**Modulation.** Changing key within the course of a composition.

**Monophony** (monophonic). From the Greek for "one-sounding" Music for a single voice or part; a melody without any accompaniment. Gregorian chant is an example of monophony.

**Motive (or motif).** A recurring, recognizable rhythmic, melodic, or harmonic idea. A motive may also be a part of a larger phrase, theme, or melody. The **leitmotif** is most associated with operatic composer Richard Wagner (see **Leitmotif**). Although the recurring or recognizable melody has been used in movie music as well; best example is John Williams' Star Wars.

**Musical.** A staged story similar to opera, though most of the dialogue is spoken. John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) is considered the first musical comedy, even though it was labeled as a "ballad opera" at the time of its London premiere. America has its first taste of musical theatre when *The Beggar's Opera* was performed in 1750 but it wasn't until 1866 that the first American musical *The Black Crook* took New York by storm. Until the 1920s, musical theatre seemed more like a Broadway revue (primarily the highly successful *Ziegfeld Follies*) than a serious musical play. In 1927, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein's *Show Boat*, based on the Edna Ferber novel, changed the mold of the modern musical. When Oscar Hammerstein teamed up with Richard Rodgers, American musical theatre was changed forever. Beginning with their wildly successful *Oklahoma*, Rodgers and Hammerstein began integrating the songs, dances and story lines more fully to become the model of American musical theatre. Many of their musicals continue to be in the "revival rotation" on Broadway including *Oklahoma (1943)*, *Carousel (1945)* and *South Pacific (1949)*. Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe had success with their musicals *My Fair Lady (1956)* and *Camelot (1960)* as did Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim with *West Side Story (1957)*. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the musical changed to become more topical and sometimes controversial. These musicals included *Hair (1968)*, *Jesus Christ Superstar (1971)*, *Godspell (1971)* and *Grease (1972)*. By the mid to late 1980s, theatrical technology had changed as well so composer/lyricists took advantage to create more spectacular musicals including Schönberg & Boublil's

*Les Misérables (1987)* with its revolving set, Andrew Lloyd Webber's roller-skating *Starlight Express (1987)* and effects laden *Phantom of the Opera (1988)*. Special effects still play a big role in modern musical theatre including Disney's *Beauty and the Beast (1994)*, *Rent (1996)*, Disney's *The Lion King (1998)*, *Wicked (2004)*, *Avenue Q (2004)*, and *Xanadu (2008)*.

**Opera.** A staged musical work in which some or all of the parts are sung. In Italian, the word "opera" means "a work" which is derived as the plural of the Latin **opus**. Opera is a union of music, drama and spectacle. See separate **Opera History** and **Opera Timeline** for more specific information.

**Orchestra.** A group of musicians led by a conductor who accompany the singers.

**Orchestra Pit.** A sunken area in front of the stage where the orchestra sits.

**Ornament.** An embellishment to a pre-existing melodic line, generally consisting of a single note, or small group of notes. At various times musical history the use of ornaments has been left up to the discretion of the performer, indicated either by a system of symbolic shorthand, or written out as notes.

**Ostinato.** [oh-steh-nah-toh] (Italian) "Obstinate." A musical pattern repeated many times, one after another. The pattern may be melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic. A melodic ostinato repeated in the bass is called a ground bass.

**Overture.** An orchestral introduction played before the action begins. The overture is often used to set the mood of the opera. Many composers use the overture to introduce themes or arias within the opera. The overture can become better known than the opera itself such as Rossini's *William Tell*.

**Pants Role.** A young male character who is sung by a woman, usually a mezzo-soprano, meant to imitate the sound of a boy whose voice has not yet changed. Best examples include Cherubino in Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Octavian in R. Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier* and Hansel in Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*.

**Phrase.** A sub-section of a melodic line, generally longer than a motive, and comparable to a clause or sentence within a paragraph of written prose. Melodies and themes may be constructed out of several phrases of equal or varied length.

**Pizzicato.** [pih-tzee-kah-toh] (Italian) "Plucked" An indication to pluck (with the fingers) the string or strings of an instrument which is usually bowed.

**Polyphony** (polyphonic). From the Greek for "many-sounding." Music in which two or more "voices" are heard simultaneously; as opposed to monophonic ("one-sounding") and homophonic ("like-sounding"). See counterpoint.

**Props.** The visual elements of a scene other than the set. Furniture is called "set props" and smaller items (anything held by the performer) are called "hand props".

**Quartet.** Four people singing together. Operatic examples include *Bella figlia dell'amore* from Verdi's *Rigoletto*, and *Addio dolce svegliare* from Puccini's *La Bohème*.

**Recitative.** [reh-sih-tah-teev] From the Italian "recitativo." This is dialogue which is "sing-speak". The recitative helps get through a lot of text quickly and moves the action along.

It often precedes an aria or ensemble. It was developed by a group of Florentine intellectuals (c.1600) in an attempt to recreate the performance style of ancient Greek tragedy, and became an essential feature of operas and oratorios. In early Baroque operas, the distinction between recitative and aria was often blurred; by the late Baroque (c. 1700) the two were completely distinct in style and purpose, with recitative used to propel the plot and aria used for poetic reflection. In the Romantic period the lines between the two forms began to blur again. Baroque and Classical opera featured two types of recitative: **recitativo secco** ("dry recitative") featuring quick articulation of the text, accompanied by harpsichord; and **recitativo accompagnato** ("accompanied recitative"), more dramatic and melodic, accompanied by the full orchestra.

**Rubato.** [roo-bah-toh] (Italian) "Robbed" Also tempo rubato ("robbed time"). The practice of performing music in a flexible, instead of strict tempo. Rubato is one of the more controversial issues in musical performance, as its precise manner of execution cannot be precisely notated. However, the "appropriate" application of rubato is often considered to be a sign of the "musicality" of a performer. What sounds like "musical" rubato to one listener may sound overdone and distorted by another.

**Set.** The visual background on stage. The set shows the location of the action.

**Soprano.** The highest female voice. The soprano is commonly the lead female character including Mimi in *La Bohème*, Violetta in *La Traviata* and Cio-cio San in *Madama Butterfly*.

**Staccato.** [stah-kah-toh] (Italian) "Separated" Notes which are held for less than their written value, or "separated" from one another. There are various degrees of staccato, and it can be notated in various ways; the most common has a dot placed over or under the note. Notes written to be played staccato are often played in a pointed or spiky manner.

**Syncopation.** An alteration of the expected rhythmic emphases: for example, accenting a weak (instead of a strong) beat, or replacing strong beats with a rest (silence). Syncopations disturb the regular, predictable pattern of strong and weak beats. (See meter.)

**Tempo.** [tehm-poh] (Italian) "Time" The rate of speed at which a musical composition is performed. Tempo is indicated by a tempo marking (usually in Italian), which describes the general speed (and often the mood) of a piece or section. Allegro, andante and adagio are common tempo markings.

**Tenor.** The highest natural male voice. Often the lead male character within the opera including Radames in *Aida*, the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto* and Don José in *Carmen*.

**Theme.** A musical idea on which all or part of a work may be based. The theme is usually a melody or melodic fragment. A single theme may be used as the basis for a set of variations. Most music is made up of at least several different themes.

**Timbre.** [tam-bruh] Synonymous with tone color. The acoustical properties of a specific instrument or voice which contribute to its distinctive sound. For example, a flute has a different timbre than a clarinet.

**Tonality.** Denotes the presence of a central key in a musical composition. If the music moves to a different key (see modulation), it is expected to return to the original key (called the tonic). Tonality gives the ear a "center," providing a context in which melody and harmony have "meaning." Atonality (prevalent in some 20th century music) is music without any central key.

**Tone.** 1. Any stable sound; synonymous with pitch. 2. A quality of sound, dependent in many ways on personal taste. For example, a person may find a particular singer's tone to be beautiful; another may find that same singer's tone to be unpleasant. 3. The mood of a musical composition, similar to the use of the term in descriptions of literature.

**Trio.** Three people singing together. Operatic examples include *Du feines Täubchen, nun herein!* from Mozart's *Magic Flute* and *Marie Theres'! / Hab' mir's gelobt* from R. Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*.

**Vibrato.** [vih-brah-toh] (Italian) "vibrated." A slight fluctuation of pitch on a sustained tone. String players produce vibrato by wiggling the left hand back and forth (the right hand holds the bow); wind players and singers use breath control. Judicious use of vibrato is considered to be expressive. Excessive vibrato produces what is often described euphemistically as a wobble.

**Vivace.** [vih-vah-chay] (Italian) "full of life," "flourishing," "vivacious." More an indication of mood than of tempo. It was often used to modify a tempo indication, such as Allegro vivace ("Fast and vivacious").