

# Musical Terms and Concepts

Explanations and musical examples can be found through the *Oxford Music Online*, accessed through the [SUNY Potsdam Library](#) page. Click on Music Reference, then *Oxford Music Online*.

## Related to melody:

**contour:** the shape of the melody as ascending, descending, arcing, inverse arc (bowl), undulating (wave-like), flat

**conjunct:** stepwise melodic motion

**disjunct:** melodic motion in intervals larger than a 2nd, often with a large number of wide skips

**range:** the distance between the lowest and highest pitches, usually referred to as narrow (> octave) or wide (< octave)

**motive:** a short pattern of 3-5 notes (melodic, rhythmic, harmonic or any combination of these) that is repetitive in a composition

**phrase:** a musical unit with a terminal point, or cadence. Lengths of phrases can vary.

## Related to rhythm:

**non-metrical, unmetrical:** free rhythm, no discernable time

**mensurations:** signs used in music from 1300-1600 to measure the ratios of rhythmic durations

**beat:** pulse

**measures or bars:** a metrical unit separated by lines in musical notation

**meter:** groups of beats in a recurring pattern with accentuation on strong beats

**simple meters:** beats subdivided into two parts (2/4, 3/4, 4/4)

**compound meters:** beats subdivided into three parts (6/8, 9/8, 12/8)

**asymmetrical meters:** meters with an uneven number of subdivisions (7/4, 5/8)

**mixed meters:** shifting between meters

## Related to harmony:

**chords:** three or more pitches sounding simultaneously

**triads:** three notes that can be arranged into superimposed thirds

**extended chords:** thirds added above the triad, usually as a 9th, 11th or 13th

**consonance:** a harmonic combination that is stable, usually in thirds

**dissonance:** a harmonic combination that is unstable, often including seconds or sevenths

**parallel motion:** two or more parts moving in the same direction and same intervals, as in parallel fifths

**contrary motion:** two or more parts moving in the opposite direction

**oblique motion:** occurs when one voice remains on a single pitch while the other ascends or descends

**canon:** (meaning rule) one melody is strictly imitated by a second part after a delay in the entrance of the second part. In order for the parts to end simultaneously, the canon may break down at the end of the composition. The canonic parts may occur at the unison or some other interval.

**round:** an exact canon, ending at different times, as in "Row, row, row your boat."

**imitation:** two or more parts that have the same or similar phrase beginning and with delays between entrances (as in a round or canon), but after the beginning of the phrase, the parts diverge into separate melodies

## Related to tonality:

**diatonic:** a seven-note scale with a regular pattern of 5 whole and 2 half steps. Diatonic intervals are found within this type of scale.

**modality:** (noun; modal = adjective) refers to music using diatonic scales with Greek names (Western) or non-Western scales. Modal scales predominate in medieval and Renaissance compositions.

**chromatic:** using pitches outside of a particular diatonic scale, or using a succession of half steps.

**major tonality:** pitches are related to a central pitch called the tonic. Major scales are used.

**minor tonality:** pitches are related to a central pitch called the tonic. Minor scales are used.

**modulation:** moving from one key area to another key

**atonality:** music that is not tonal or not based on any system of keys or modes

**bitonality:** the simultaneous use of two key areas.

**polytonality:** the simultaneous use of two or more key areas.

## Related to texture:

**monophony** (noun; monophonic = adjective, as in monophonic texture): literally “one sound” - one melodic line, without harmony or any accompaniment, which can occur when one person or many people sing a melody simultaneously. Singing in octaves is considered a monophonic texture.

**homophony** (noun; homophonic = adjective): one melodic line with a harmonic accompaniment that supports the melody.

**polyphony** (noun; polyphonic = adjective): two or more parts sung or played simultaneously.

**heterophony** (noun; heterophonic = adjective): multiple voices singing a single melodic line, but with simultaneous melodic variants between the singers. Heterophony often occurs in non-Western music and sometimes in folk music.

**homorhythms**: the same rhythms in all parts, as in the singing of a hymn.

**counterpoint** (noun; contrapuntal = adjective): like polyphony in that it has two or more compatible melodies performed simultaneously.

## Related to tempo: *(consult the Oxford Music Online)*

commonly in Italian from the 17th-18th c., and then increasingly in other vernacular languages

largo, lento, adagio, andante, moderato, allegretto, allegro, presto, prestissimo  
qualifying terms: meno (less), più (more), molto (very or much) poco a poco (little by little), assai (very)  
mosso (motion), sostenuto (sustained), non troppo (not too much)

## Related to expression:

crescendo

decrescendo/diminuendo

piano

forte

mezzo

terraced dynamics: a sudden and dramatic shift from loud to soft or soft to loud

accelerando

rubato

## Related to text and music:

**syllabic**: one syllable sung to each note

**neumatic**: a term used primarily for chant notation, two or three notes per syllable

**melismatic**: one syllable sung to several notes

**sacred:** religious music, often for the church liturgy (services)

**secular:** worldly, non-religious music, usually in the vernacular

**vernacular:** texts in the language of the people (English, French, Spanish, German, etc.)

## Related to musical forms:

Generally capital letters are used to distinguish different sections of a composition. A capital refers to an exact repetition. A lowercase letter refers to the same music but new text. A prime number after the capital refers to a variation of the music from the original section.

### Repetitive forms:

**strophic:** a vocal form consisting of several phrases. The musical form is repeated using different verses of text, as in a hymn or folksong.

**modified strophic:** simply means that the repetitions of the sections are varied slightly, but not so much that they are a significant variation or the original.

**bar form:** two sections of music, with only the first section A repeated. Many hymns use the bar form.

**binary form:** two sections of music, usually with each A and B section repeated. This is typically used in dances. When a group of dances are combined into a suite, the dances generally all stay in the same key.

### Processive or variation forms:

**continuous variations:** includes an ostinato -- a repeated bass line or set of chords (usually 4-8 measures) with continuous variations above the bass pattern. This term is also called a ground bass, a chaconne, and a passacaglia. These are common in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

**sectional variations:** a theme and variation set, where usually each section is clearly marked. Generally in a theme and variations, the theme itself is identifiable. Variation sets are commonly used in the Classical period as the slow movement of a string quartet or symphony.

**fugue:** a one-subject (also called monothematic) composition in which the subject is continually restated on different pitches and in various keys, processing the modulations, fragments or registers of the subject.

Like the other variation forms, there is usually a return to the subject in the original key.

**Return forms:** the initial section returns following a contrasting middle section.

**rounded binary:** two sections, with a return of A in the second section: |: A :| : B A :| This form is typical of late Baroque dances and of minuets/scherzos and trios of the Classical period.

**ternary:** ABA, with new material in the middle section and a return to the first A material (exactly or varied). The return to the final A section can be recopied in the music, denoted by a phrase above the music (da capo), or a sign (da capo al segno), which is common in da capo arias.

**rondo forms:** ABACA, ABACADA, etc. the initial section is contrasted with episodes in different keys and styles from the original A material. Rondos are typically used as the last movement of a Classical sonata, string quartet or symphony.

**rondeau:** a medieval song/dance, ABaAabAB

**virelai:** a medieval song/dance, AbbaA, usually in three stanzas. Thus, AbbaAbbaAbbaA

**sonata form:** two contrasting key areas in the first section (exposition) are developed in the middle section (development) and return in the final section (recapitulation) in the tonic key. The sonata form emerges from an expanded rounded binary form in the Classical period.

**Compound forms:** any two forms combined to make a new, large form.

**binary forms** can be combined (Minuet – Trio - Minuet) to produce a larger ABA structure

**sonata-rondo:** combines the contrasting rondo sections ABA-C-ABA with the sonata principles of an exposition, development and recapitulation.

**concerto-sonata form:** derived from sonata form, but with two expositions (1. orchestra, 2. orchestra and soloist) and a solo cadenza between the recapitulation and the coda.

**Additive form:**

**through-composed:** continuous contrasting sections are composed together without repetitions of previous material. Ballad songs and improvisatory instrumental pieces, like the fantasia, toccata or prelude are examples of additive compositions. Some Renaissance genres (mass, motet, madrigal) are typically through-composed.

**Related to timbre:** classifications of instruments

**chordophone:** string instruments

**aerophone:** wind produces the sound (woodwinds and brass instruments)

**membranophone:** a vibrating membrane produces the sound (drums)

**idiophone:** sound is produced from the material (wood, glass, stone, metal)

**Related to ensembles:**

**choir:** vocal ensemble

**voice ranges:** bass, tenor, alto, soprano (from lowest to highest)

**choral:** music written for a choir

**a cappella:** choral music without instrumental accompaniment, literally “at the chapel”

**polychoral:** two or more choirs in a composition, usually with an antiphonal or echo effect

**orchestra:** large instrumental ensemble with strings

**band:** large instrumental ensemble without strings

**chamber ensembles:** trio, quartet, quintet, sextet, octet

## Standard ensemble combinations:

**string trio:** three string instruments

**piano trio:** piano, violin, cello

**string quartet:** two violins, viola, cello

**piano quintet:** piano and a string quartet

**brass quintet:** 2 trumpets, french horn, trombone, tuba

**wind quintet:** flute, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, french horn

## Related to genres: compositional types or categories of works

### Examples of sacred vocal genres:

chant, plainsong, or Gregorian chant  
mass  
motet  
oratorio  
chorale cantata

### Examples of secular vocal genres:

opera  
solo cantata  
madrigal  
song  
Lied  
chanson  
cançon  
song cycle

**Examples of instrumental genres:**

dance  
fantasia  
prelude  
toccata  
fugue  
sonata  
suite  
concerto  
symphony  
tone poem/symphonic poem  
program symphony

**Nota bene:** Instruments, terms, concepts, tempi and expressions often go by different names in foreign languages. It is best to look up unfamiliar words when they are encountered.