

The Three Commandments of Music Appreciation:

1. Open your mind.

2. Open your ears.

3. Shut your mouth.

Historical Western Musical Periods

Medieval (1000-1400)
Renaissance (1400 - 1600)
Baroque (1600 - 1750)
Classical (1750 - 1820)
Romantic (1820 - 1910)
Modern (1910 - 1960)
Post-modern (1960 to present)

List of useful musical terms

Source: The Harvard Dictionary of Music

A cappella	Designation for choral music without instrumental accompaniment.
Accelerando	Becoming faster
Accent	Emphasis on one note or chord
Accidentals	The signs used in musical notation to indicate chromatic alterations or to cancel them. (i.e. sharp, flat, natural, double sharp, double flat)
Ad libitum	An indication that gives the performer liberty to: (1) vary from strict tempo; (2) include or omit the part of some voice or instrument
Aleatoric music	Music in which the composer introduces elements of chance or unpredictability with regard to either the composition or its performance
Alla breve	A tempo mark indicating quick duple time
Allargando	Slowing down
Antecedent and consequent	The terms are usually applied to melodic phrases that stand in the relationship of question and answer or statement and confirmation.
Antiphon	A term denoting various categories of Gregorian chant
Appoggiatura	A rhythmically strong dissonant note occurring in place of a harmonic note
Arabesque	A fanciful title used for pieces of more or less casual nature.
Arco	Bow (of stringed instruments)
Aria	An elaborate composition for solo voice
Arpeggio	The notes of a chord played one after another rather than in a chord
Art song	A song of serious artistic intent, as opposed to a folk song
A tempo	Indicates return to normal tempo after deviations

Attacca	Attack suddenly, such as going from one movement directly to the next without pause
Augmentation	The presentation of a subject in doubled values (opposite: diminution)
Bar line	A vertical line drawn through the staff to mark off measures
Bass	Lowest of men's voices
Bel canto	The Italian vocal technique of the late 18th century with its emphasis on beauty of sound and brilliance of performance
Berceuse	Lullaby
Binary and ternary form	Two basic musical forms consisting of two and three main sections respectively
Bitonality	The simultaneous use of two different keys in different parts of the musical fabric
Bourée	A French 17th-century dance in quick duple meter with a single upbeat
Cadence	A melodic or harmonic formula that occurs at the end of a composition, a section or a phrase, giving the feeling of a conclusion
Cadenza	A passage or section in a style of brilliant improvisation, usually inserted near the end of a composition, giving the performer a chance to exhibit his or her technical mastery
Calando	Gradually diminishing
Canon	A contrapuntal device whereby an extended melody, stated in one part, is imitated strictly and in its entirety in one or more other parts
Cantata	A composite vocal form of the baroque period, consisting usually of a number of movements which are based on a continuous narrative text that is lyrical, dramatic, or religious
Cantilena	A vocal melody of a lyrical rather than a dramatic or virtuoso nature
Cantus firmus	An existing melody that becomes the basis of a polyphonic composition through the addition of contrapuntal voices
Capriccio	A title used by various composers for short piano pieces of a humorous or capricious nature
Cassation	Instrumental form of the 18th century, designed for outdoor performance, similar to a divertimento or serenade
Cavatina	In opera and oratorio, a short solo song, simpler in style than the aria
Chaconne (and passacaglia)	Two closely related forms of baroque music, each a kind of continuous variation
Chorale	A hymn tune of the German Protestant church
Chord	The simultaneous sounding of three or more tones

Chromatic	Having to do with the movement of notes or harmonies by half step
Circle of fifths	The circular, clockwise arrangement of the twelve keys in an order of ascending fifths (C, G, D, A etc)
Clef	A sign written at the beginning of the staff in order to indicate the pitch of the notes
Coda	A concluding section or passage, added in order to confirm the impression of finality
Coloratura	A rapid passage, run, trill or similar virtuoso-like material, particularly in vocal music of the 18th and 19th century opera
Concerto	A composition for orchestra and a solo instrument
Concerto grosso	The most important type of baroque concerto, characterized by the use of a small group of solo instruments against the full ensemble
Continuo	In baroque music, the bass part that was performed by the harpsichord or organ, together with a viola da gamba or cello
Counterpoint	Music consisting of two or more different lines that sound simultaneously
Courante	A dance with jumping movements and a great variety of figures
Crescendo	Increasing volume
Cross rhythm	The simultaneous use of conflicting rhythmic patterns (i.e. 3 against 4, etc)
Da capo	Indication that the piece is to be repeated from the beginning to a designated point
Development	1. The treatment of musical materials to convey a sense of expansion or exploration; 2. The section in sonata form devoted to such treatment
Diatonic	The natural scale, consisting of five whole tones and two semitones
Diminution	Term in counterpoint, where musical values are cut in half
Divertimento	An 18th century musical composition written primarily for entertainment and hence in a rather light vein
Dominant	The fifth degree of the major or minor scale
Double stop	The execution of two or more simultaneous tones on stringed instruments
Enharmonic	Tones that are actually one and the same degree of the chromatic scale but are named and written differently (i.e. f-sharp and g-flat)
Etude	A piece designed to aid the student of an instrument in developing mechanical and technical ability
Falsetto	An artificial method of singing used by male singers to reach notes above their ordinary range
Figured bass	A bass part provided with numerals to indicate harmonies in the baroque period

Fret	A thin strip of material placed across the fingerboard of certain instruments that marks the position for stopping the strings
Fugue	A mature form of imitative counterpoint developed in the 17th century
Glissando	The execution of rapid scales by sliding movement
Gregorian chant	The liturgical chant of the Roman Catholic Church
Ground bass	A short melodic phrase that is repeated over and over again as a bass line, with varying music for upper parts.
Hemiola	In a work in triple meter, the temporary grouping of beats in two, to form three groups of two
Hocket	In medieval music, a device consisting of the rapid alternation of two or three voices with singles or short groups of notes, one part having a rest while the other sounds.
Homophony	Music in which one voice leads melodically, being supported by an accompaniment in chordal style
Idée fixe	Berlioz' name for the principal subject of his Symphonie Fantastique. An important forerunner of Wagner's leitmotiv
Incidental music	Music to be used in connection with a play
Interval	The distance in pitch between two tones
Intonation	Singing or playing in tune
Key	The main note or tonal center of a composition to which all its notes are related
Key signature	The sharps or flats appearing at the beginning of each staff to indicate the key of a composition
Legato	To be played without any perceptible interruption between the notes
Leitmotif	A term that denotes the fundamental method of composition in Wagner's later operas - representation of characters, situations and ideas by a musical motif.
Libretto	The text of an opera or oratorio
Madrigal	Name for two different types of Italian vocal music, one of the 14th c the other of the 16th c (most usual)
Measure	A group of beats, the first of which usually bears an emphasis
Melisma	An expressive vocal passage sung on one syllable
Meter	The pattern of fixed temporal units called beats, by which the timespan of a piece of music or section is measured
Microtone	An interval smaller than a semitone
Mode	Either a type of scale formation or a rhythmic formation
Modulation	Change of key within a composition

Mordent	A musical ornament consisting of the alternation of the written note with note immediately below it
Motet	The most important form of early polyphonic music during the Middle Ages and Renaissance
Musique concrète	A musical development introduced c 1948 in Paris, which replaced the traditional material of music with recorded sounds from many sources
Mute	A device for softening or muffling the tone of an instrument
Mystic chord	A chord invented by Scriabin consisting of a series of five fourths - c-f sharp-b flat-e-a-d
Nationalism	In music, a movement beginning the second half of the 19th century that is characterized by a strong emphasis on national elements and resources of music
Neoclassicism	A movement of 20th century music that is characterized by the inclusion into contemporary style of features derived from music of the 17th and 18th centuries
Orchestration	The art of employing the various instruments in accordance with their individual properties and the composer's concept of the sonorous effects of his/her work
Organum	The name for the earliest types of polyphonic music from the 9th to 13th centuries
Ornamentation	Improvised or written melodic figures that are added to the notes of the original melody
Ostinato	A clearly defined phrase that is repeated persistently throughout a composition or section
Pandiatonicism	An important technique in 20th century music that uses the diatonic scale instead of the chromatic scale as a tonal basis without conventional harmonic limitations
Perpetuum mobile	A term that denotes pieces that proceed from beginning to end in the same rapid motion
Plainsong	Another name for Gregorian chant
Polyphony	Music that combines several simultaneous voice parts of individual design
Prepared piano	A piano whose sound is artificially altered by various devices inserted across or between the strings
Program music	Music inspired by a nonmusical idea, which is usually indicated in the title
Quarter tone	An interval equal to one-half semitone, there being twenty-four quarter tones to the octave
Quodlibet	A humorous type of music in which melodies are combined in an incongruous manner
Ragtime	A style of American popular music that reach its peak c 1910-15

Recitative	A vocal style designed to imitate and emphasize the natural inflections of speech
Requiem	The Catholic mass for the dead
Retrograde	A melody read backward
Rhythm	The whole feeling of movement in music, with the implication of both regularity and differentiation
Ripieno	In 17th and 18th century orchestral music, particularly the concerto grosso, the “reinforcing section” of the orchestra
Ritardando	Gradual slackening of speed
Rondo	A form often used for the final movement of compositions in the 18th and 19th centuries, whose form is A B A C A B A, where each letter represents a different musical idea
Round	A canon in which each singer returns from the conclusion of the melody to its beginning, repeating it ad libitum
Rubato	An elastic, flexible tempo involving slight accelerandos and ritardandos that follow musical expression
Scale	The tonal material of music arranged in an order of rising pitches
Scordatura	Abnormal tuning of a stringed instrument in order to obtain unusual chords, facilitate difficult passages, or change the tone color
Score	A notation showing all the parts of an ensemble arranged in order one underneath the other
Semitone	One half of a whole tone, the smallest interval in traditional Western music
Serenade	Evening music, vocal or instrumental
Serial music	General term describing 20th-century compositions in which the traditional rules and convention governing all aspects of music are replaced by various new rules and principles
Sinfonia	In the Baroque period, an orchestral piece designed to be an introduction to an opera or an orchestral suite
Slur	A curved line placed above or below a group of notes to indicate that they are to be played legato
Sonata	A composition which consists of three or four separate movements
Sonata form	A term that designates the form of a movement of a multimovement piece, usually the first movement
Sprechstimme	A type of voice production halfway between song and speech
Staccato	A manner of performance indicated by a dot or wedge over a note calling for a reduction of its written duration
Staff	A series of five horizontal lines on and between which musical notes are written

Stretto	In a fugue, the imitation of the subject in close succession or a concluding section of a composition in a faster tempo
Strophic	Designation for a song in which all stanzas of the text are sung to the same music
Subito	Suddenly
Suite	An important form of Baroque music consisting of a number of movements, each in the character of a dance and all in the same key, also adapted by later composers
Symphonic poem	A type of 19th and 20th century orchestral music based on an extra music idea, either poetic or realistic
Symphony	A multi-movement work for orchestra, said to begin with F.J. Haydn
Syncopation	A deliberate disturbance of the normal pulse of meter, accent and rhythm
Tempo marks	Words, often in Italian, to describe the speed of a piece of music
Tenuto	Held, sustained
Through-composed	Songs in which new music is provided for each stanza
Time signature	Numbers at the beginning of a measure of music that indicate the number and grouping of notes
Toccata	A keyboard or instrumental work in free style, employing full chords and running passages
Tonality	In traditional Western music, the preference of a main note and a major or minor chord built on it
Tone cluster	A group of tones lying close together, on a piano sometimes produced by a fist
Tone color	The quality of sound of a specific instrument
Transposition	Rewriting of a piece of music in another key
Tremolo	In stringed instruments, the quick reiteration of the same tone, in other instruments the rapid unmeasured alternation of two different notes
Tessitura	The general "lie" of a vocal part in its average range
Triad	A chord of three notes consisting of a root and third and fifth above it
Trill	An ornament consisting of the rapid alternation of a note with the half or whole step above it
Trio sonata	An important type of Baroque chamber music written in three parts, two upper parts and a supporting figured-bass part
Una corda	In piano playing the direction to use the soft (left) pedal
Variations	A technique that restates a melody in a slightly different forms, forming a chain

Verismo	An Italian operatic school of the late 19th century that uses realistic subjects from everyday, embellished with violent and theatrical incidents
Vibrato	The slight fluctuation above and below a given pitch to increase the emotional quality of the tone
Whole-tone scale	A scale consisting of whole tones only, six to the octave
Zarzuela	The most important type of Spanish opera