

Musical Terms

Given the resources available on the Internet, as well as many printed materials, I am often surprised at the music vocabulary deficiencies of many young musicians. Trying to play music without understanding the words on the page is akin to playing a sport without knowing the rules...confusing and possibly downright chaotic. While very few people could claim to know every phrase they encounter while preparing a piece of music, there are certain common musical words and phrases with which every musician should be familiar. Most of these are Italian in origin (taken directly from Latin, the language which practically preceded all those in Western culture). Below are about sixty of these terms divided into various categories. College- and professional-level musicians should know all of these. Intermediate-level musicians should know approximately 75%, and beginner-level student musicians should know at least 50% of these. *Learn them, live them, love them.*



Tempo Markings

Adagio [It.] Slow tempo.
Allegretto [It.] Slightly slower than allegro.
Allegro [It.] (allo) Merry, lively; fast.
Andante [It.] Walking; moderately slow.
Largo [It.] Wide, broad; slow.
Lento [It.] Slow.
Moderato [It.] Moderate tempo.
Presto [It.] Very fast.
Rubato [It.] Steal; as in steal time; speeding up and slowing down for expressive purposes.
Vivo [It.] Lively, brisk.

Change of Tempo Markings

Accelerando [It.] (accel.) Becoming faster; faster.
Generalpause [Ger.] (G.P.) General pause, a rest for all musicians, usually unexpected.
L'istesso tempo [It.] The same tempo.
Rallentando [It.] (rall.) Slowing down.
Ritardando [It.] (ritard., rit.) Slowing down gradually.
Ritenuto [It.] (riten.) Held back; generally more sudden than in the case of a *ritardando* or *rallentando*.
Mosso [It.] Moved, agitated.
Stringendo [It.] Pressing forward.
Tempo Primo [It.] (Tempo I) Return to original tempo after some deviation from it.

Dynamic Markings

Forte [It.] (f) Loud.
Forte-piano [It.] (fp) Loud followed immediately by soft.
Mezzo [It.] (m) Half, medium, middle.
Piano [It.] (p) Soft.

Change of Dynamic Markings

Crescendo [It.] (cresc.) Growing; increasing volume.

Decrescendo [It.] (decresc.) Decreasing in volume.

Diminuendo [It.] (dim.) Decreasing in volume.

Articulation & Expression Markings

Brio [It.] Vivacious, spirited.

Cantabile [It.] (cant.) Singable, songlike.

Dolce [It.] Sweet.

Espressivo [It.] With expression.

Legato [It.] Fastened, bound, tied; played smoothly without separation.

Leggiero [It.] Light, lightly.

Marcato [It.] Marked, stressed, emphasized.

Morendo [It.] Dying or fading away.

Semplice [It.] Simple, plain.

Sforzando [It.] (sf) Forcing, forced, accented, loud.

Staccato [It.] (stacc.) Separated, detached.

Tenuto [It.] (ten.) Keep, hold, grip; sustain without detachment.

Modifiers and Others

Alla [It.] To the, at the; in the manner of.

Coda [It.] Tail; concluding section.

Con [It.] With.

Da Capo [It.] (D.C.) The head; the beginning.

Dal Segno [It.] (D.S.) From the sign.

Divisi [It.] Part, divide.

Etto [It.] Suffix meaning "less" (*allegretto* is less fast, *adagietto* is less slow).

Fine [It.] End.

Issimo [It.] Suffix meaning "very" (*pianissimo* is very soft, *legatissimo* is very smooth).

Ma [It.] But.

Ma non troppo [It.] But not too much.

Meno [It.] Less.

Molto [It.] Very.

Non [It.] Not.

Più [It.] More.

Poco [It.] Little in amount.

Poco a poco [It.] Little by Little.

Sempre [It.] Always.

Senza [It.] Without.

Simile [It.] In a similar fashion.

Soli [It.] Within an ensemble, this refers to passage to be played by a small group or section.

Solo [It.] Alone; a passage or entire piece to be played by one player only.

Subito [It.] Immediately, suddenly.

Un [It.] One, a, an.

Unison [En.] Same pitch.