Musical Terminology and Symbols

The Musical Terminology and Symbols represented here are the basic terms and symbols that every musician needs to know to perform any genre of Western Music.

Terms shown in **BOLD** and **CAPITALIZED** type are important. Strong, literate musicians know these terms. They also know how to perform a musical composition when these terms and symbols are written in the music. Be a strong and literate musician.

ACCIDENTAL
A sign placed before a note to alter its previously understood pitch by one or two semitones.

1.   **SHARP**: Raises the pitch of a note by one half step.

2.   **FLAT**: Lowers the pitch of a note by half step.

3.   **NATURAL**: Cancels a previous accidental, or modifies the pitch of a sharp or flat as defined by the prevailing key signature (such as F-sharp in the key of G major, for example).

4.   **DOUBLE SHARP**: Raises the pitch of a note by two chromatic semitones or whole step. Usually used when the note to be modified is already sharped by the key signature

5.   **DOUBLE FLAT**: Lowers the pitch of a note by two chromatic semitones or whole step. Usually used when the note to be modified is already flatted by the key signature.

ARTICULATIONS
The separation of successive notes from one another, singly or in groups, by a performer, and the manner in which this is done is more broadly applied to phrasing in general.

1.   **TENUTO**: This symbol has several meanings: It may indicate that a note be played for its full value, or slightly longer; it may indicate a slight dynamic emphasis; or it may indicate a separate attack on a note.

2.   **STACCATO**: performed in a detached, separated manner between notes.

3.   **ACCENT**: The note is played louder or with a harder attack than surrounding unaccented notes. May appear on notes of any duration.

4.   **MARCATO**: The note is played somewhat louder or more forcefully than a note with a regular accent mark (open horizontal wedge).

Articulations: (Cont.)

5. **FERMATA**: An indefinitely-sustained note, chord, or rest. Usually appears over all parts at the same metrical location in a piece, to show a halt in tempo. It can be placed above or below the note.

6. **TIE**: Indicates that the two (or more) notes joined together are to be played as one note with the time values added together. To be a tie, the notes must be identical; that is, they must be on the same line or the same space; otherwise, it is a slur (see below).

7. **SLUR**: Indicates that two or more notes are to be played in one physical stroke, one uninterrupted breath, or (on instruments with neither breath nor bow) connected into a phrase as if played in a single breath. In certain contexts, a slur may only indicate that the notes are to be played legato; in this case, re-articulation is permitted. Slurs and ties are similar in appearance. A tie is distinguishable because it always joins exactly two immediately adjacent notes of the same pitch, whereas a slur may join any number of notes of varying pitches.

8. **CAESURA**: Indicates a brief, silent pause, during which time is not counted. In ensemble playing, time resumes when the conductor or leader indicates.

9. **BREATH MARK**: In a score, this symbol tells the performer or singer to take a breath (or make a slight pause for non-wind instruments). This pause usually does not affect the overall tempo.

DYNAMICS
The aspect of musical expression resulting from variation in the volume of sound.
It is the loudness and softness of the music being performed.

1. **PPP** **PIANISSISSIMO**: Extremely soft. Very infrequently does one see softer dynamics than this, which are specified with additional *p*s.

2. **PP** **PIANISSIMO**: Very soft. Usually the softest indication in a piece of music, though softer dynamics are often specified with additional *p*s.

3. **P** **PIANO**: Soft. Usually the most often used indication.

4. **mp** **MEZZO PIANO**: Literally, half as soft as piano or medium soft.

5. **mf** **MEZZO FORTE**: Similarly, half as loud as forte or medium loud. If no dynamic appears, mezzo-forte is assumed to be the prevailing dynamic level.

6. **f** **FORTE**: Loud. Used as often as piano to indicate contrast.

7. $f\!f$ **FORTISSIMO**: Very loud. Usually the loudest indication in a piece, though louder dynamics are often specified with additional *f*s (such as fortississimo – seen below).

8. $f\!f\!f$ **FORTISSISSIMO**: Extremely loud. Very infrequently does one see louder dynamics than this, which are specified with additional *f*s.

9. < **CRESCENDO**: A gradual increase in volume. Can be extended under many notes to indicate that the volume steadily increases during the passage.

10. > **DIMINUENDO**: Also **DECRESCENDO**. A gradual decrease in volume. Can be extended in the same manner as crescendo.

11. *sfz* **SFORZANDO**: Literally "forced", denotes an abrupt, fierce accent on a single sound or chord. When written out in full, it applies to the sequence of sounds or chords under or over which it is placed.

In your performance, think of the dynamics from **FORTISSIMO** to **PIANISSIMO** not as one level of loudness or softness, but that each dynamic has ten levels. A **CRESCENDO** from **MEZZO FORTE** to **FORTE** may start at the Third Level of **MEZZO FORTE** and grow up to the start of **FORTE** and beyond.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	1 et c.

mf ⟵‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑⟶ *f*
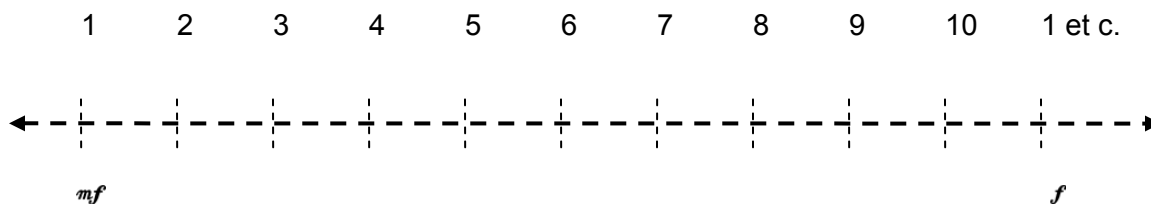
REPETITIONS AND CODAS

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1. *D.S.* **DAL SEGNO**: (lit. "From the sign") This symbol tells the performer to repeat playing of the music starting at the nearest **segno**. When this is followed by **al fine** (lit. "to the end"), which means to repeat to the word **fine** and stop, or **al coda** (lit. "to the coda (sign)"), which means repeat to the **coda** sign and then jump forward.

2. 𝄋 **SEGNO**: Mark used with dal segno.

3. *D.C.* **DA CAPO**: (lit. "From top") This sign tells the performer to repeat playing of the music from its beginning. This is followed by **al fine** or **al coda** just as with **dal segno**.

4. 𝄌 **CODA**: Indicates a forward jump in the music to its ending passage, marked with the same sign. Only used after playing through a **D.S. al coda** (Dal segno al coda) or **D.C. al coda** (Da capo al coda).

Repetitions and Codas: (Cont.)

5.   **REPEAT**: Enclose a passage that is to be played more than once. If there is no left repeat sign, the right repeat sign sends the performer back to the start of the piece or the nearest double bar.

6.   **SIMILE MARKS**: Denote that preceding groups of beats or measures are to be repeated. In the examples here, the first usually means to repeat the previous measure, and the second usually means to repeat the previous two measures.

7.   **VOLTA BRACKETS** (1st and 2nd endings, or 1st- and 2nd-time bars):   A repeated passage is to be played with different endings on different playings; it is possible to have more than two endings (1st, 2nd, 3rd ...).

TEMPO

TEMPO is the speed at which the **beats** happen in a composition. The tempo can remain steady from the first beat to the last beat of a piece of music or it can speed up or slow down within a section, a phrase, or a measure of music. Performers need to watch the conductor for any changes in the tempo.

Tempo is the Italian word for "time."

Below are terms that refer to the tempo and **METRONOME** settings for each term. **BPM** is short for **BEATS PER MINUTE**. This number is what one would set the metronome. Please note that these numbers are generalities and should never be considered as strict ranges. Time Signatures, music genres, instrumentations, and a host of other considerations may make a tempo of Grave a little faster or slower than as listed below. These words generally appear above the staff at the start of the piece or at the beginning of a change of tempo.

1. **GRAVE** — slow and solemn (20–40 BPM)
2. **LARGO** — broadly (40–60 BPM)
3. **ADAGIO** — slow and stately (literally, "at ease") (66–76 BPM)
4. **ANDANTE** — at a walking pace (76–108 BPM)
5. **ANDANTINO** – slightly faster than andante (although in some cases it can be taken to mean slightly slower than andante)
6. **MODERATO** — moderately (108–120 BPM)
7. **ALLEGRETTO** — moderately fast (but less so than allegro)
8. **ALLEGRO MODERATO** — moderately quick (112–124 BPM)
9. **ALLEGRO** — fast, quickly and bright (120–168 BPM)
10. **VIVACE** — lively and fast (≈140 BPM) (quicker than allegro)
11. **PRESTO** — very fast (168–200 BPM)
12. **PRESTISSIMO** — extremely fast (more than 200BPM)

Another method of indicating tempo is the use of **MM =** ♩ 60. This means that the ♩ beat is to be

taken at speed of **MAELZEL'S METRONOME** set at 60 beats per minute. Any note value can be representative of the beat.

Tempo: (Cont.)

A **METRONOME** is an apparatus for establishing musical tempo. Its distinct main purposes are to establish an appropriate tempo for the piece and to establish a consistency of tempo through a work or exercise.

Johann Nepomuk Maelzel (15 August 1772 – 21 July 1838) was a German maker of chronometers, ear trumpets (early hearing aids), and other mechanical musical instruments. For a time, he was a friend of Ludwig van Beethoven. Beethoven's metronome is still in existence and it still keeps great time.   The modern, wooden metronomes of today still resemble the last models Maelzel made.

METER: The organization of notes in a composition or passage, with respect to time, in such a way that a regular pulse made up of **BEATS** can be perceived and the duration of each note can be measured in terms of these beats. The beats are grouped regularly into larger units called **BARS** or **MEASURES**. Meter is identified at the beginning of a composition, or at any point where it changes, by a **TIME SIGNATURE**.

There are two types of meter or time: **SIMPLE METER** or **TIME** and **COMPOUND METER** or **TIME**. In **SIMPLE METER/TIME**, the beat can be divided into two equal parts. In **COMPOUND METER/TIME**,   the   beat   can   be   divided   into   three   equal   parts.

EXAMPLES OF SIMPLE METERS/SIMPLE TIME SIGNATURES

EXAMPLES OF COMPOUND METERS/COMPOUND TIME SIGNATURES

In the above examples of **COMPOUND METERS**, those **METERS** which have a top number divisible by three may be counted or conducted as if it were in the resulting number. For instance, any meter in *SIX* could be counted or conducted as if it were in *TWO* with the subdivision of the beat into three equal parts or **TRIPLETS** of the **NOTE VALUE** represented by the bottom number.

TIME SIGNATURES
Represented by a fraction.

The top number tells the performer how many **BEATS** in each measure. This number can be any number from 1 to infinity. However, time signatures, for us, will rarely have a top number larger than 7.

The bottom number can only be the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512, et c. These numbers represent the **NOTE VALUES** of a whole note, half note, quarter note, eighth note, sixteenth note, thirty-second note, sixty-fourth note, one hundred twenty-eighth note, two hundred fifty-sixth note, five hundred twelfth note, et c. However, time signatures, for us, will only have a bottom numbers 2, 4, 8, 16, and possibly 32.

Examples of Time Signatures:

The above chart represents the same note relationships in five different time signatures. At the same tempo the five lines would sound exactly the same.

The **BEAT** is the main pulse of any piece of music. Time signatures indicate what note value is the beat and how many beats are in each measure of the section of music. A new time signature found in the course of the piece replaces the previous section's time signature.

Any note value can equal one beat. The beat is usually only divided in one of two ways: **DUPLE** (in twos) or **TRIPLE** (in threes).

Simple Time:

Here the beat can be subdivided into two equal parts, which can then be divided in half again, and again, and again, and again; or the beat can be subdivided into three equal parts.

TWO EQUAL PARTS

If we think of the beat as the face of a clock, then the beat would look like this.
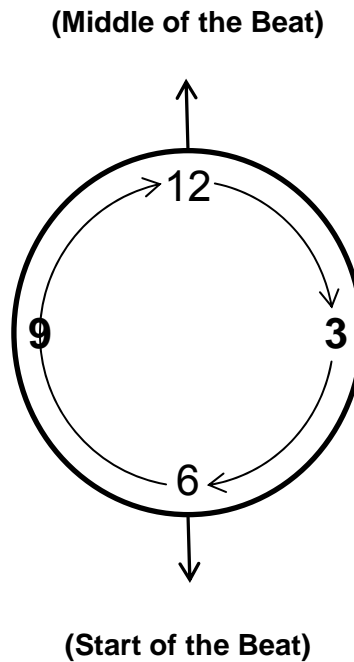
(Middle of the Beat)

(Start of the Beat)

The **BEAT** is some note value. The **Beat** could be a **whole note**, **half note**, **quarter note**, **eighth note**, **sixteenth note**, or any other note value. The start of the beat is 6. The first beat of the measure is the **DOWNBEAT**. The middle of the beat is 12. This is also referred to as the **UPBEAT**. The **UPBEAT** is the impulse in a measured rhythm that preceded and anticipates the downbeat. If the beat equals a quarter note, then the quarter note is from 6 to 6. The eighth note is from 6 to 12, 12 to 6, or 3 to 9. Note: 9 to 3 would represent the last fourth of one beat and the first fourth of the next beat. **OFFBEAT** is any impulse in a measured rhythmic pattern except the first. The term is usually applied to the rhythms that emphasize the weak beats of the bar.

The above diagram represents in one beat the following rhythm:

6-12	12-3	3-6	6-6		6-6		6-6
Beat One			Beat Two		Beat Three		Beat Four

THREE EQUAL PARTS

Here the beat is subdivided into thirds or **TRIPLETS**.

A **TRIPLET** is a group of three notes to be performed in the time of two of the same kind.

If we think of the beat as a face of clock, then the beat would look like this:
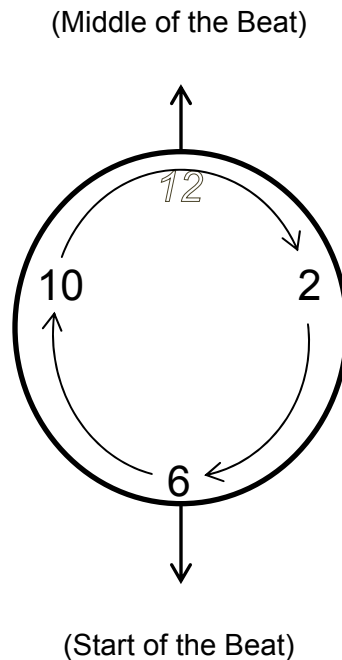
(Middle of the Beat)

(Start of the Beat)

The Beat is some note value. The Beat could be a whole note, half note, quarter note, eighth note, sixteenth note, or any other note value. The start of the beat is 6. The first beat of the measure is the **DOWNBEAT**. ***The middle of the beat is 12 and is shown here only as a reference point***. This is also referred to as the **UPBEAT**. The **UPBEAT** is the impulse in a measured rhythm that preceded and anticipates the downbeat. If the beat equals a quarter note, then the quarter note is from 6 to 6. **In Triple Time, 12 is not an indication of a subdivision of the beat.** In Duple Time, this scheme represents triplets. A triplet is three notes in the space of two notes of the same note value. For example, three eighth notes in the space of two eighth notes.

The above diagram represents in one beat the following rhythm:

| 6-10 | 10-2 | 2-6 | 6-6 | 6-6 | 6-6 |
| Beat One | | | Beat Two | Beat Three | Beat Four |

GORDONIAN SYLLABLES

Edwin Gordon, Ph. D. created a series of syllables that make the above beats and subdivision of the beats easy to understand and perform, regardless of the instrument or voice.

The Syllables

Simple Time (Subdivided into Halves)

DO = Start of the beat, or 6. A note that is indicated by **DO** is on the **BEAT**.

DE (day) = Middle of the beat or 12. A note that is indicated by **DE** is on the **UPBEAT**.

DA (dah) = Quarter of the beat or 9 or 3. A note that is indicated by **DA** is half way between the start of the **BEAT** and the **UPBEAT**.
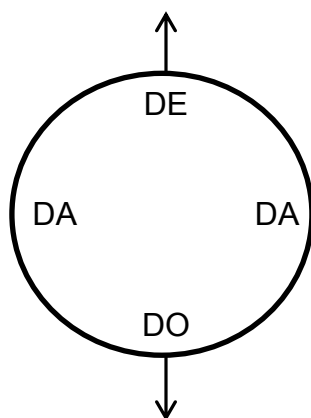
Examples of these Syllables in use:

Simple Time (Subdivided into Thirds or TRiPLETS):

DO = Start of the beat, or 6. A note that is indicated by **DO** is on the **BEAT**..

DA (da) = The Second Third of the beat or 10

DI (dee) = The Third Third of the beat or 2
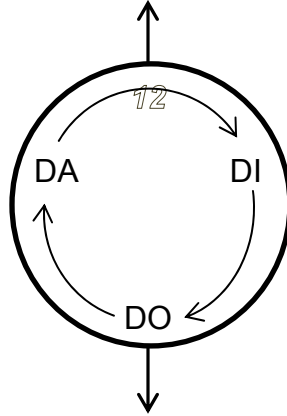
Examples of these syllables in use:

A piece of music can be entirely in Duple Time or Triple Time. Duple Time Signatures generally have a lower number of 2, 4, 16, or 32. Triple Time Signatures almost always have a bottom number of 8. Time Signatures with a top number that can be divided by 3 are almost always Triple Time.

A piece of music can have small doses of both times, Duple and Triple, within the piece of music. These small doses may happen for a beat, a measure, a phrase, a section, or a movement.

The big thing to keep in mind is that if the beat is divided into two, four, or eight, then the beat is a duple beat. If the beat is divided into three, then it is a triple beat. The mixing of the two types makes music interesting to the listener and performer.

Examples of all the above syllables in use:

Remember the Time Signature Example on page 6?   Here it is again with Gordonian Syllables:

NOTE VALUES

NOTES   RESTS

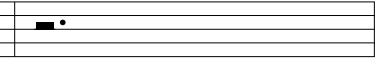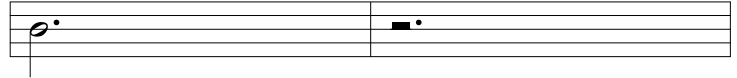BREVE or Double Whole Note
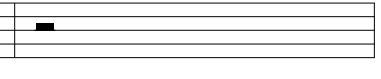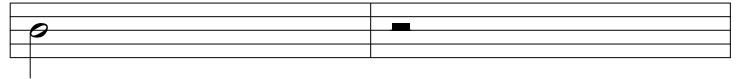BREVE REST or Double Whole Rest
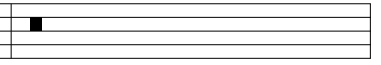
Dotted Whole Note
Dotted Whole Rest
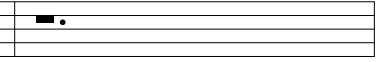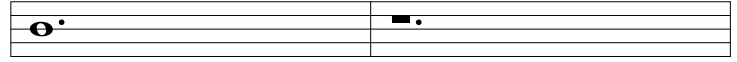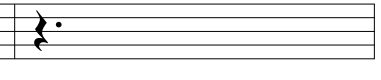
SEMIBREVE or Whole Note
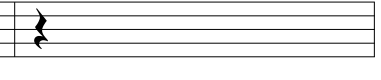SEMI BREVE or Whole Rest
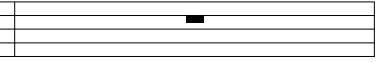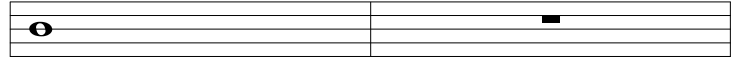
Dotted Half Note
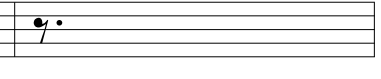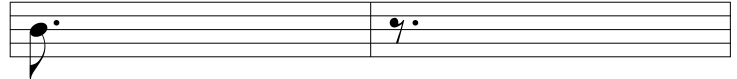Dotted Half Rest

MINIM or Half Note
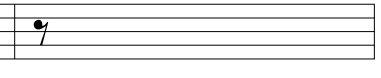MINIM REST or Half Rest

Dotted Quarter Note
Dotted Quarter Rest

CROCHET or Quarter Note
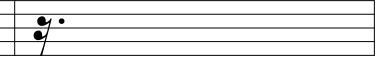CROCHET REST or Quarter Rest
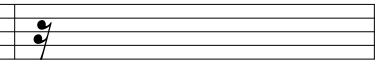
Dotted Eighth Note
Dotted Eighth Rest

QUAVER or Eighth Note
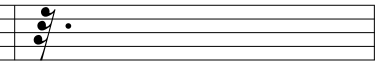QUAVER REST or Eighth Rest

Dotted Sixteenth Note
Dotted Sixteenth Rest

SEMIQUAVER or Sixteenth Note
SEMIQUAVER REST or Sixteenth Rest

Dotted Thirty-second Note
Dotted Thirty-second Rest

DEMISEMIQUAVER or
Thirty-second Note
DEMISEMIQUAVER REST or
Thirty-second Rest