

Common Terms

In addition to the following common terms, you should commit to memory all terms found in your etudes, ensemble pieces and jury selections!

A

a2 – indicates that the entire section is to play, used to cancel a previous *solo* or *divisi*
accelerando – gradually increase the tempo; accelerate
a cappella – in the manner of chapel music, without instrumental accompaniment
adagio – slow
adagietto – rather slow
adagissimo – very slow
ad libitum (commonly *ad lib*) – the speed and manner are left to the performer
affrettando – hurrying, pressing onwards
agitato – agitated
al coda – play to the *coda*
al fine – play to the *fine*
alla breve – cut time
alla marcia – like a march
allargando – broadening, gradually slower
allegro – lively, or fast
allegretto – fast, but slightly slower than *allegro*
andante – moderate walking tempo
andantino – slightly faster than *andante*
animato – animatedly
a piacere – at your own pace
appassionato – passionately
arpeggio – literally, *like a harp*. Used to indicate that the consecutive notes of a certain chord are to be played quickly one after another, instead of at the same moment. In piano music this is sometimes a solution used to play a wide-ranged chord which, technically speaking, cannot be played simultaneously with one hand.
assai – very
a tempo – return to the original (previous) tempo
attacca – (at the end of a movement) is a direction to begin the next movement immediately, without a gap or pause

B

bewegt – moved, agitated (German)
brillante – brilliantly
brio – vigor
brioso or *con brio* – vigorously or with vigor

C

cantabile – “singingly” or in a singing or vocal style

cesura or *caesura* – often called “railroad tracks,” indicates complete break in sound
coda – “tail,” or added section of music found at the end of a piece
common time – the time signature 4/4
con – with
con moto – with motion
con sordino – with mute
crescendo – gradually louder
cut time – synonymous to the meter 2/2: two half-note beats per measure, also called *alla breve*

D

da capo (*DC*) – return to “the head” (beginning)
dal segno (*DS*) – return to “the sign”
deciso – decidedly
diminuendo (or *dim*) – gradually decreasing volume. It is the opposite of *crescendo*
divisi – (or *div*) literally divided, indicating that a part with two or more simultaneous notes should be played with one player for each note
dolce – sweetly
dolente – sorrowfully
doloroso – sadly, sorrowfully

E

espressivo – expressively
-etto – suffix meaning “little” or “not as much as”

F

fermata – a hold, sustain the note at the discretion of the conductor or (in solo works) or performer
fine – end
forte (*f*) – loud
fortepiano (*fp*) – loud, then immediately soft
fortissimo (*ff*) – very loud
fortississimo (*fff*) – very, very loud
fuoco – fire

G

giocoso – gayly or humorously
giusto – strict, exact, proper
glissando – continuous sliding from one pitch to another, usually by a chromatic run
grazioso – gracefully

H

I

impetuoso – impetuously (rashly, impulsively, recklessly)

incalzando – increasing speed

-issimo – suffix meaning “very” or “more”

J

K

kraft – strength (German)

L

lacrimoso – sadly

lamentoso – mournfully

langsam – slow (German)

largetto – slowly, but not as slow as *largo*

largo – slowly

lebhaft – lively, gay (German)

legato – smoothly, in a connected manner

leggiero – lightly or delicately

lent – slowly (French)

lento – slow

loco – play as written (generally used to cancel an *allegro* direction)

M

ma – but

ma non troppo – but not too much

maestoso – stately or majestically

marcia – a march

martellato – hammered out

marzial – martially

mässig – moderate (German)

meno – less

mezzo – medium

mezzo forte (mf) – medium loud

mezzo piano (mp) – medium soft

mit – with (German)

moderato – moderate, often combined with other terms, for example, *Allegro moderato*

molto – much, very

morendo – dying away in volume or tempo

mosso – motion, used in conjunction with *piú* or *meno* for more movingly or less movingly (respectively)

moto – motion

mezza voce – with subdued or moderated volume, literally *half voice*

munter – lively (German)

N

non – not

non tanto – not too much, can refer to volume, articulation, tempo, etc

O

octave sign (*8va* or *8ba*) – an indication to play the passage one octave higher or lower (resp.) than written

ossia – “or,” denotes an alternate (often easier) way of performing a passage often notated with a footnote, additional small notes, or an additional staff

P

pesante – heavily, ponderously

piano (*p*) – soft

pianissimo (*pp*) – very soft

pianississimo (*ppp*) – very, very soft

piú – more

poco – little

poco a poco – little by little

poi – then

portamento – a slide between two notes. Similar to a *glissando*, except no distinct pitches (i.e., chromatic run) can be heard

presto – very quickly

prestissimo – very, very quickly

prima volta – first time

primo – first

Q

quasi – as if, almost

R

rallentando or *rall* – gradually slower

rinforzando or *rf* – to stress by strength

ritardando or *rit* – gradually slower

robusto – boldy, robustly

rubato – flexibility of tempo within a musical phrase for expressive effect

ruhig – calm, quiet, tranquil (German)

S

scherzando – playfully

scherzo – a joke

scherzando – in a playful style
schneller – faster (German)
sehr – very (German)
sempre – always
senza – without
senza sordino – without mute
sforzando (or *sfz*) – a sudden, strong accent
simile (or *sim*) – similarly - i.e., continue applying the preceding directive, whatever it was, to the following passage
smorzando (or *smorz*) – smother the notes; dying away
soave – smoothly
solo – typically one player or used to denote an important line that should be prominent
solì – significant passage to be played by all also may be used to cancel a *solo* directive
sordino (or *sord*) – mute
sostenuto – in a sustained manner
sotto voce – soft tones, literally “under the voice,” proceed in a more understated or more subtle fashion
spiritoso – spiritedly
staccato – separated, detached (not necessarily *short*)
subito (or *sub*) – suddenly
suivez – go on, continue (French)

T

tacet – do not play indicated section or passage
tenuto (or *ten*) – sustained full value, often with added emphasis
tranquillo – peacefully, tranquil, calm
tremolo (or *trem*) – a rapid repetition of the same note, or an alternation between two or more notes usually more than a whole-step apart
trill (or *tr*) – rapid alternation between two note a half- or whole-step apart

U

un poco – a little
unisono – (or *unis*) in unison, several players are to play the same part, often used when returning from *divisi*

V

vivace – lively, quickly
vivo – lively
V.S. (*volti subito*) – turn page quickly, found often in orchestral or pit parts

W

wie vorher – as before (German)
wie zuerst – as at first or as the beginning (German)

X

Y

Z