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Pocket Guide to Language of Music

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PREFACE

Language of Music is compiled in an A to Z form to help you interpret the most commonly found musical terms in scores, academic musical analysis and general discussion. It is also designed to enable you to enjoy and appreciate the style, form, texture, mood and technical expertise central to a composition or performance. You will find that many expressive musical terms are in Italian since the custom of inserting indications of speed and force began in Italy in the 17th century, and as Italian music was widely popular, so the Italian terms were cultivated. In the 18th century Couperin and Telemann introduced French and German terms and, since Schumann in the 19th century, the practice of inserting terms in the composer's native language has become common. You will find, therefore, terms from many different languages in this pocket guide.

Easy to use and easy to understand, *Language of Music* presents each headword in bold type, e.g. **allegro**; other commonly used phrases related to the headword are in *italics*. Italics are also used for titles of works. Within the entries there may be other terms in bold type which indicates that you can look up more information under that particular word. There are no abbreviations apart from those commonly found in musical scores, e.g. **vc** or **vla** which are listed alphabetically, and there are examples in the book of notated examples of ornaments, key and time signatures and other common musical symbols.

Language of Music is written to assist professional, amateur, performing and passive musicians alike in their quest to understand and appreciate music to the full. Many pleasurable hours have been spent compiling this dictionary, and I hope you will gain as a result more insight into this fascinating subject.

Wendy Munro

List of Abbreviations

Am.	American
Brit.	British
Eng.	English
Fr.	French
Gael.	Gaelic
Ger.	German
Gk.	Greek
Hung.	Hungarian
It.	Italian
Lat.	Latin
Pol.	Polish
Port.	Portuguese
Sp.	Spanish

A

A

Note of the scale commonly used for tuning the orchestra. Also an analytical term for the first section of a piece.

a, à (It., Fr.)

At, by, for, with, in, to, e.g. *a tempo* (It., 'in time').

ab (Ger.)

Off, away.

abbandono (It.)

A free, impassioned style.

abbassare (It.)

To lower, tune down.

abbellimenti (It.)

Ornaments.

abdämpfen (Ger.)

To mute.

abend (Ger.)

Evening.

abendlied (Ger.)

Evening song.

aber (Ger.)

But.

abgesang

abgesang (Ger., 'aftersong')

The concluding section of a stanza of a Minnesinger or Meistersinger song.

abnehmend (Ger.)

See **diminuendo**.

absolute music

Music composed simply as music, with no references to emotions, stories, paintings or any other non-musical subject.

absolute pitch

Perfect pitch. The ability to recognise or recall any note.

abstossen (Ger.)

To play **staccato**.

abstract music

Same as **absolute music**.

a cappella (It.)

In the church style. This term is used of unaccompanied church choral music.

accarezzevole (It.)

Caressing.

accelerando (It.)

Getting gradually quicker.

accent

Stress or pressure in the rhythm of music or a particular beat.

accento (It.)

Accent.

acciaccatura (It.)

A crushed dissonant note of the shortest possible duration played before or after the main note or chord and immediately released.



accidental

A sharp, double sharp, flat, double flat or natural prefixed to a note. An accidental refers only to the bar in which it occurs.

accompaniment

Subordinate part(s) added to principal instrument(s) music.

achtel (Ger.)

Quaver.

acoustics

(1) The science of sound. (2) The sound properties of a building, etc.

act tune

A piece played between the scenes of an English 17th-century theatrical work. The modern term is **entr'acte**.

acute

An ornament in 17th-century English music.

acute mixture

An organ stop giving **overtones** tuned slightly sharp.

adagietto (It.)

Slightly faster than **adagio**.

adagio (It.)

Slow and broad. Also used to describe a slow movement.

adagissimo (It.)

Very slow.

added sixth

The major sixth added to a major or minor **triad**. In C major, A is added above the triad of C E G. Used greatly in jazz.

à deux cordes (Fr.), a due corde (It.)

On two strings.

ad lib

(1) Freedom as to rhythm, tempo. (2) Improvisation. (3) Inclusion or omission of a passage.

a due

a due (It.)

In two parts.

aeolian mode

A mode which, on the piano, uses the white notes from A to A.

affettuoso (It.)

With feeling.

affrettando (It.)

Becoming faster and more agitated.

agitato (It.)

Restless and wild.

agogic

Used of deviations from the strict tempo and rhythm necessary for the subtle performance of a musical phrase.

agréments (Fr.)

See ornaments.

air

A simple tune for voice or instrument.

alberti bass

A keyboard moving figuration for the left hand using simple arpeggio treatment of a series of chords. This was much used by 18th- and early 19th-century composers.

alborada (Sp.)

Morning song.

aleatoric music

Music containing chance or random elements. A trend since 1945 with composers like John Cage and Karlheinz Stockhausen.

al fine (It.)

To the end.

alla (It.)

To the, at the, in the manner of.

alla breve (It.)

Take the **minim** as the main unit, *not* the **crotchet**, e.g. 2/2 instead of 4/4.

allargando (It.)

Getting broader.

alla turca (It.)

In the Turkish style.

alla zingarese (It.)

In the style of gypsy music.

alla zoppa (It.)

Syncopated.

allegretto (It.)

Slower than **allegro**.

allegro (It.)

Lively and rather fast.

allemande (Fr.)

(1) A moderately slow dance movement often opening the baroque suite in 4/4 time. (2) A brisk dance in triple time current in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. A prototype of the waltz.

alt

The phrase *in alt* in the vocal sense applies to notes from G above the treble staff to F above that. The notes in the octave above are *in altissimo*.

alto

(1) The highest male voice employing falsetto. (2) A low female voice (contralto). (3) French for viola. (4) The prefix to an instrument indicating one size larger, e.g. alto saxophone. (5) The alto clef from which the viola plays and where middle C is on the third line.



alto clef

amore

amore (It.)

Love. *Con amore*, lovingly.

amoroso (It.)

Lovingly.

ancora (It.)

Still, yet.

andante (It.)

At a moderate speed.

andantino (It.)

Slightly faster than **andante**.

anglaise (Fr.)

Short for *danse anglaise*. An English dance in quick duple time introduced into the suite in the 17th century.

anglican chant

A type of harmonised melody used for psalm singing in the Church of England.

animato (It.)

Lively.

answer

A responding musical phrase particularly in a **fugue**. A *real answer* occurs when the answer exactly reproduces the **subject** (entry or theme) a fifth above or a fourth below. A *tonal answer* is the subject reproduced, but this time slightly modified so as to keep within a certain key.

anthem

(1) A short solemn vocal composition used in Church of England services. (2) A short patriotic vocal composition.

anticipation

The sounding of a note or notes before the chord to which it or they belong.

arpeggio

antiphon (Gk.)

The plainsong setting of sacred words sung as responses in Roman Catholic or Greek orthodox services. The term *antiphonal* derives from the practice of alternating performances between sets of singers stationed apart.

a piacere (It.)

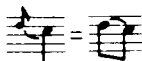
At pleasure.

appassionato (It.)

Impassioned.

appoggiatura (It.)

A musical ornament (chiefly 18th century) of an auxiliary note falling or rising to a harmonised note. It can be written or unwritten.



a punta d'arco (It.)

With the point of the bow.

arabesque (Fr. and Eng.), arabeske (Ger.)

A short piece with decorative qualities.

arco (It.)

Play with the bow.

aria (It.)

Air or song for one or more voices now used exclusively of solo song in opera and oratorio. A *da capo aria* is one in which the first section is finally repeated after a contrasting section.

arietta (It.)

A little or light aria.

arioso (It.)

Similar to an *aria*, i.e. not *recitative*.

arpeggio (It.)

A chord performed with the notes separated.

arrangement

arrangement

A harmonised setting for voices or instruments of an existing melody.

ars antiqua (Lat.)

Western European medieval music based on plainsong (see **plainchant**) and **organum**.

ars nova (Lat., 'the new art')

Breaking away from **ars antiqua** and introducing duple time and much independence of part-writing.

assai (It.)

Very. *Allegro assai*, very quick.

atonal

Not in any key.

attacca (It.)

Go on to the next section without a repeat.

augmentation

The lengthening (usually doubling) of the time-values of notes in a melody, e.g. in fugues.

augmented interval

The increased version of another interval, e.g. an *augmented first* is C to C sharp.

augmented sixth chord

This has three forms: (1) *Italian*, A flat, C, and F sharp. (2) *French*, A flat, C, D and F sharp. (3) *German* A flat, C, E flat and F sharp.

augmented triad

A chord composed of two major thirds, e.g. C, E and G sharp.

ayre

A song for one or several voices in 17th-century England.

B

B

Note of the scale. Also an analytical term for the second section of a piece.

badinage or badinerie (Fr., 'playfulness')

This term was used as a title-movement in quick 2/4 time in the 18th-century suite, e.g. Bach's *Suite in B minor* for flute and strings.

bagatelle (Fr., 'trifle')

Usually a short and light piano piece. Beethoven wrote 26, e.g. *Für Elise*.

ballabile (It.)

In a dancing style.

ballad

A traditional solo song telling a story with music repeated for each verse. In the 19th century the term came to mean a rather sentimental drawing-room song. However, it may also be applied to a self-contained narrative song, e.g. Schubert's *Erkönig* or to operatic arias, e.g. *Senta's Song* from *The Flying Dutchman* by Wagner. It describes a sentimental song in jazz.

ballade

Chopin's term for a long, dramatic piano piece suggesting narrative. *The Four Ballades* by Chopin are inspired by the poems of Mickiewicz. Grieg, Liszt and others later used the title.

ballet

Dancing of Italian origin established at the French court in the 16th century and used by Lully in operas. Nowadays it is generally conceived as using orchestral music (sometimes

ballett, balletto

specially composed) and stage decoration. In Britain it generally describes any piece of serious and lengthy stage dancing. **Opera-ballet** gave almost equal importance to opera and ballet in 17th- and 18th-century France, but it may also describe some modern ballets with singing, e.g. Prokoviev's *Cinderella*.

ballett (Eng.), balletto (It.)

A vocal composition similar to the **madrigal** and popular in England and Italy around 1600. Characteristics are a dance-like nature and the singing of *fa la la* as a refrain. Also called *fa-la*.

ballo (It.)

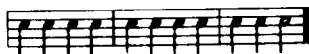
A dance. *Tempo di ballo*, in dance time.

band

An instrumental ensemble, e.g. brass band or jazz band. Originally, the term was applied to any large-scale instrumental group.

bar

The metrical division of music marked by vertical bar-lines drawn across a **staff** or staves, between which are certain numbers of beats. Hence, 2, 3 or, as in the example below, 4 beats to the bar. The American name for bar is 'measure'. A double bar (two vertical lines close together) indicates the end of a piece, or section.



bar.

Abbreviation of **baritone**.

barber-shop songs

Sentimental songs sung by amateur male quartets in close harmony.

barcarolle (Fr. from It.)

A song or instrumental associated with the Venetian gondoliers in 6/8 or 12/8 swaying time, e.g. the barcarolle in *The Tales of Hoffman* by Offenbach.

ben, bene

baritone

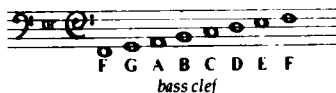
Male voice between bass and tenor with a range of two octaves from G (on bottom line bass clef) to G (above middle C). The term is also a prefix for instruments indicating the range below the tenor type, e.g. baritone saxophone.

baroque (Port., *barroco* 'rough pearl')

The musical period approximately between 1600 and 1750 encompassing composers such as Monteverdi, Frescobaldi and Gabrieli (early baroque) and Bach and Handel (late baroque).

bass

(1) Lowest male voice with a range from E below bass clef to E above middle C. (2) Lowest note or part in a chord, composition, etc. (3) Prefixed to an instrument, the term indicates the largest or second largest member, e.g. bass clarinet. (4) Abbreviation for double bass. (5) Bass clef.



bass-baritone

Male baritone voice with a strong upper register.

basse chiffrée (Fr.)

See figured bass.

basso (It., 'bass')

Basso cantante describes a lyrical singing voice; *basso continuo* is the same as *continuo* and *basso ostinato* is the same as *ground bass*.

battuta (It., 'beat')

A *battuta*, in strict time; *senza battuta*, with no regular pulse; *ritmo di tre battute*, accent falls at the beginning of every three beats.

bel canto (It.)

Fine, sustained singing in the Italian manner with emphasis on beauty of tone and agility.

ben, bene (It.)

Well, very.