Italian musical terms A–Z

A

a cappella — A vocal performance with no instrumental accompaniment. (literally: in chapel style)

a piacere — At pleasure.

a tempo — return to normal tempo from a deviation (e.g. ritenuto, rallentando, accelerando, etc.) (literally: to time)

abbandonatamente — With abandonment; so as to make the time subordinate to the expression. (literally: with abandonment)

accelerando **accel.** — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played at an increasing speed. (literally: accelerating)

acciaccatura — A short grace note (theoretically taking no time at all), occurring on the beat occupied by the main note to which it is prefixed, one scale-step higher or lower than that main note. (Sometimes equivalent, therefore, to a short appoggiatura, but in Baroque music interpreted differently and more strictly.) Written as a note lighter in appearance, typically a quaver (eighth note), with an oblique stroke through the stem. (literally: crunching)

accompagnato — A tempo mark directing that a recitative is to be accompanied by the orchestra. (literally: accompanied)

adagietto — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played slightly faster than adagio. (literally: a bit at ease)

adagio — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played rather slowly, leisurely and gracefully. (literally: ad agio, at ease)

adagissimo — Very slowly.

affettuoso — With feeling; in a loving, tender way. (literally: affectionate, with affect)

affrettando — In a rushing or hurrying manner; as if pressing onwards. (literally: hasty, hurried)

agitato — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played in a restless agitated style. (literally: agitated)

al fine — to the end (Fine)

alla breve — A time signature for which the half note is the beat and there are two beats per measure.

alla marcia — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played in the style of a march, usually with a 2/4 or 4/4 beat with an accent on the downbeat (literally: as a march)

allargando — Decreasing in tempo; getting slower. (literally: broadening)

allegretto — To be played rather fast and lively. (literally: a little bit joyful)

allegrissimo — A direction in musical notation indicating that the piece should be played very fast and lively.

allegro — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played in a quick, lively tempo, faster than allegretto but slower than presto. (literally: joyful; lively and fast)

altissimo — The highest register of a woodwind instrument, or a specific note in this register (literally: very high)

alto — A musical part or section higher than tenor and lower than soprano, formerly the part that performed a countermelody above the tenor or main melody. (literally: high)

amoroso — tender; loving (literally: loving)

andamento — A fugue subject of above-average length

andante — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played in a moderately slow tempo; faster than adagio but slower than moderato. (literally: walking)

andantino — Of a tempo that is slightly faster than andante but slower than moderato. (literally: a little bit walking)

animato — A passage to be played in a lively, animated manner. (literally: animated)

appassionato — (to be played) passionately

appoggiatura — A type of musical ornament, falling on the beat, which often creates a suspension and subtracts for itself half the time value of the principal note which follows. (literally: leaning, supporting)

arco — A note in string instrument musical notation indicating that the bow is to be used in the usual way, usually following a passage that is played pizzicato. (literally: bow)

aria — A musical piece written typically for a solo voice with orchestral accompaniment in an opera or cantata. (literally: air)

arietta — a short aria. (literally: little air)

arioso — A musical style, in opera and oratorio, that is more melodic than recitative, but less so than aria. (literally: airy)

arpeggio — The notes of a chord played individually instead of simultaneously, usually moving from lowest to highest. (literally: harp-like)

assai — A tempo direction equivalent to "very". (literally: very; aplenty)

attacca — Without any break between the current movement and the next movement of the work. (literally: attach, begin)

attacco — A short musical phrase treated as a point of imitation, for example as the subject of a fugue.

B

basso — A bass singer, especially in opera. (literally: low)

basso continuo — The continuous realization of harmony throughout a musical piece, usually by a harpsichord and/or cello, typical of the Baroque period. Abbreviation: bc. (literally: continuous bass)

basso profondo — A singer with a bass voice of the lowest range. (literally: deep low)

batteria — drums, percussion

battuta — beat

bel canto — An elegant style of singing characterized by beautiful tone and an effortless technique. (literally: beautiful singing)

bravura — A highly technical or difficult piece, usually written for effect. (literally: skill)

C

cadenza — A part of a piece of music, such as a concerto, that is very decorative and is played by a single musician. (literally: falling)

cambiata — A pattern in a homophonic or polyphonic (and usually contrapuntal) setting of a melody where a note is skipped from (typically by an interval of a third) in one direction (either going up or down in pitch) followed by the note skipped to, and then by motion in the opposite direction, and where either the note skipped from is distinguished as a dissonance or the note skipped to is distinguished as a non-harmonic or non-chordal tone.

cantabile — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played in a lyrical manner (literally: singable, songlike)

cantata — A vocal composition accompanied by instruments and generally containing more than one movement, typical of 17th and 18th century Italian music. (literally: sung)

cantilena — A vocal melody or instrumental passage in a smooth, lyrical style.

canto — The treble or leading melody.

capriccio — A piece of music, usually fairly free in form and of a lively character. (literally: caprice)

capriccioso — capriciously

castrato — A male soprano or alto voice produced by castration of the treble singer before puberty, intended to conserve his voice; the singer. (literally: castrated)

coda — The end of a piece (literally: tail)

codetta — A brief coda, or a brief segment between the themes of a fugue.

col legno — A musical notation indicating that the strings of an instrument are to be struck with the wooden part of the bow. (literally: with the wood)

coloratura — Florid or fancy passages in vocal music. (literally: colouration)

come prima — As before, typically referring to an earlier tempo

comodo — Comfortably, that is, at moderate speed. (literally: comfortable)

con amore — played gently, with tenderness (literally: with love)

con brio — With spirit, with vigor; vivaciously (used as a musical direction). (literally: with brightness)

con fuoco — Passionate, lively, enthusiastic (literally: with fire)

con moto — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played "with motion" (literally: with motion)

con sordino — With the mute. (literally: with sourdine (mute))

concertante — A concert for two or more solo instrumentalists, with orchestral accompaniment.

concertino — A short concerto. (literally: little concert)

concerto — A piece of music for one or more solo instruments and orchestra. (literally: concert)

concerto grosso — a musical form, common in the Baroque period, in which contrasting sections are played by full orchestra and by a small group of soloists. (literally: big concert)

contralto — The lowest female voice or voice part, falling between tenor and mezzo-soprano. The terms contralto and alto refer to the same musical pitch range, but among singers, the term contralto is reserved for female singers; the equivalent male form is counter-tenor. Originally the contratenor altus was a high countermelody sung against the tenor or main melody. (literally: against high)

cornetto — A trumpet-like wind instrument used in European music of the medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque periods. (literally: little horn)

cornetto muto — mute cornett

crescendo **cresc.** — An instruction to play gradually more loudly, denoted by a long, narrow angle with its apex on the left (<), by musicians called a hairpin. (literally: growing)

D

da capo **D.C.** — Abbreviated as D.C., informs the performer to go back to the beginning (capo) (finishing where the part is marked fine). (literally: from the beginning (to the "fine"))

dal segno **D.S.** — Abbreviated as D.S., informs the performer to repeat a specific section marked by a sign (segno). (literally: from the sign)

decrescendo **decresc.** — An instruction to play gradually more softly. (literally: shrinking)

diminuendo **dim.** — A dynamic mark directing that a passage is to be played gradually more softly (literally: dwindling)

divertimento — composition that has several short movements, a style that composers started to use in the 18th century.

divisi **div.** — divided (within one instrumental part, simultaneous notes between two or more players) (literally: divided)

dolce — Sweet, soft (literally: sweet)

dolcissimo — Very soft.

dolente — Sorrowfully, as if the player were mourning.

doloroso — plaintively; pathetically

E

espressivo **espress.** — To be played in an expressive manner. (literally: expressive)

F

fagotto — The bassoon. (literally: bundle)

falsetto — A person who sings in falsetto. (literally: little false)

fantasia — A form of instrumental composition with a free structure and improvisational characteristics; specifically, one combining a number of well-known musical pieces. (literally: fantasy)

fermata — The holding of a note or rest for longer than its usual duration.

fine — The end of a musical composition.

fioritura — A musical embellishment or ornamentation. (literally: flowery)

forte **f** — Loudly, as a dynamic in a piece of music. (literally: strong)

fortepiano **fp** — loud, then immediately soft

fortissimo **ff** — Indicating that the piece is to be played very loudly. (literally: very strong)

frottola — The predominant type of Italian popular secular song of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, and the most important and widespread predecessor to the madrigal.

fuga — A fugue.

furioso — Rapidly and with passion. (literally: furious)

G

giocoso — Merry; playful. (literally: jocose, jestful)

giusto — strict, exact.

glissando — Either a continuous sliding from one pitch to another ("true" glissando), or an incidental scale played while moving from one melodic note to another ("effective" glissando). (literally: gliding, glossing)

grandioso — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played in a grand and noble style (literally: grand)

grave — Slow and solemn tempo (slower than largo) (literally: grave, solemn)

grazioso — graceful, flowing (literally: gracious, graceful)

grupetto — A group of notes played together that are added to the melody, also known as the "turn" or grace notes.

gustoso — in a tasteful, agreeable manner

I

intermezzo — A short piece of music or act in the interval of the main spectacle; a theatrical interlude. (literally: interval)

L

l'istesso tempo — Indicates that the following movement should be played at the same tempo as the last, often employed when switching from simple to compound metres or vice versa, to clarify that the tempo stays the same in reference to the beats felt, not the time signature. (literally: the same time)

lacrimoso — Sadly, unhappily, grievingly. (literally: lachrymose)

lamentoso — In a mournful, grieving manner. (literally: lamenting)

larghetto — Slower than adagio but not as slow as largo; nearly andantino. (literally: broad-ish)

largo — A very slow tempo. (literally: broad)

legato — Smoothly, in a connected manner. (literally: tied)

leggero — Lightly, delicately, or gently.

leggiero — lightly

lentando — archaic form of rallentando. (literally: slowing)

lento — Slow (45–60 bpm). (literally: slow)

lo stesso — The same; applied to the manner of articulation, tempo, etc.

loco — A direction in written or printed music to be returning to the proper pitch after having played an octave higher or lower.

M

ma non troppo — But not too much. (literally: but not too much)

maestoso — majestically (literally: majestic)

mancando — Dying away

marcatissimo — Extremely marcato.

marcato — A note played forcefully (literally: marked)

martellato — Strongly accented, or hammered out; used of notes played on bowed string instruments, handbells, or the piano. (literally: hammered)

meno — Comes before other terms, such as meno mosso ("less moved/agitated") (literally: less)

messa di voce — In singing, a controlled swell (i.e. crescendo then diminuendo, on a long held note, especially in Baroque music and in the bel canto period) (literally: placing the voice)

mesto — sad, mournful

mezzo forte **mf** — Louder than mezzo piano, but softer than forte. (literally: half-strong)

mezzo piano **mp** — moderately soft (literally: half-gentle)

moderato — A tempo mark directing that a passage is to be played at a moderate tempo. (literally: moderate)

morendo — Fading away in volume or tempo. (literally: dying)

mosso — Agitated (literally: moved, agitated)

motivo — A motif.

N

niente — totally silent, as a musical direction (abbreviated to n. or ∅ in sheet music)

nonetto — A nonet.

notturno — A nocturne.

O

obbligato — An obbligato section; a prominent countermelody, often written to be played or sung above the principal theme (in a higher pitch range).

opera — A theatrical work, combining drama, music, song and sometimes dance. (literally: work)

opera buffa — A form of Italian comic opera popular in the 18th century. (literally: humorous opera)

operetta — A lighter version of opera with a frivolous story and spoken dialogue. (literally: little opera)

oratorio — A musical composition, often based on a religious theme; similar to opera but with no costume, scenery or acting. (literally: oratory)

ossia — In a musical score, an alternative version of a passage, usually just a few measures long. The alternative may be an easier version of a particularly difficult passage, or a more difficult version of a passage. (literally: from o ("or") + sia ("that it be"))

ostinato — A piece of melody, a chord progression, or a bass figure that is repeated over and over as a musical accompaniment. (literally: stubborn, obstinate)

ottava — One octave higher; as a marking, typically abbreviated 8va.

P

parlando — A piece of music to be sung or played in the style of a recitative.

passacaglia — A form of historical Spanish or Italian dance characterised by a serious nature, triple meter, and use of a ground bass.

pausa — rest

pesante — heavy, ponderous (literally: heavy)

pianissimo **pp** — Indicating that the piece is to be played very softly. (literally: very gentle)

piano **p** — Softly, as a dynamic in a piece of music. (literally: gentle)

piffero — A form of oboe.

pizzicato — To be played by plucking the strings instead of using the bow. (literally: pinched, plucked)

poco a poco — little by little; gradually (literally: little by little)

pomposo — Ceremonious and dignified.

ponticello — bridge (of a violin etc.)

portamento — A smooth, gliding transition from one note to another; used especially with stringed instruments, and sometimes on brass. (literally: carrying)

portato — In an unconnected manner, as opposed to legato, but not as short as staccato. (literally: carried)

precipitato — precipitately

prestissimo — Extremely fast, the fastest possible tempo. (literally: very prompt, very quick)

presto — Very fast or quickly; a directive for the musician(s) to play in a very quick tempo. (literally: prompt, quick; ready for action)

prima donna — The principal female singer or the leading lady. (literally: first lady)

R

rallentando **rall.** — slackening; becoming slower (used as a musical direction). (literally: slowing down)

recitativo — A recitative.

ripieno — The part of a concerto grosso in which the ensemble plays together; contrasted with the concertino. (literally: refilling or stuffing)

risoluto — (To be played) boldly, resolutely (literally: resolute)

ritardando **rit.** — Gradually decelerating the tempo of a piece of music, especially at the end of the piece. (literally: retarding)

ritenuto — (of a passage in a musical score) immediately slower, held back at a slower rate of pace.

ritmo — Rhythm (e.g. ritmo di # battute meaning a rhythm of # measures)

ritornello — A recurring tutti passage in Baroque music for orchestra or chorus. (literally: little return)

rubato — A tempo in which strict timing is relaxed, the music being played near, but not on, the beat.

S

saltando — Played with a rapid, bouncing stroke of the bow on a stringed instrument.

salterio — psaltery

scherzando — In a playful or sportive manner. (literally: joking, jestful)

scherzo — A piece of music or a movement from a larger piece such as a symphony; especially, a piece of music played in a playful manner.

sciolto — Light, free and easy; without strictness or legato.

scordatura — cross-tuning (literally: discord)

scorrendo — Gliding or passing smoothly between tones.

scorrevole — Gliding from one note to the next.

segue — To make a smooth transition from one theme to another. (literally: it follows)

semplice — (To be played) simply, without embellishments.

sempre — always, still; maintaining the same style

senza sordino — Without the mute. Specifically for the piano: with the sustain pedal. (literally: without sourdine (mute))

serenata — A type of baroque cantata performed outdoors, in the evening, with mixed vocal and instrumental forces (literally: serenade)

serpentone — serpent (an obsolete wind instrument in the brass family, whose shape is suggestive of a snake)

sforzando **sfz** — A mark that indicates that a note is to be played with a strong initial attack. (literally: strained)

slargando — Becoming broader or slower (that is, becoming more largo or more lento)

smorzando — Fading away.

solo — A piece or performance to be played by a single musician (literally: alone)

sonata — A musical composition for one or a few instruments, one of which is frequently a piano, in three or four movements that vary in key and tempo. (literally: sounded)

sonatina — A musical composition resembling a sonata but shorter or simpler.

soprano — The musical part higher in pitch than alto, typically encompassing the range of the treble clef. (literally: upper)

sostenuto — played in a sustained manner beyond the note's normal value

sotto voce — A direction in a score that a passage in a piece should be played softly, or sung in a low voice, when applied to vocal music. (literally: under the voice)

spiccato — Detached; separated; with every note performed in a distinct and pointed manner. (literally: separated, distinct; standing out)

spinto — A soprano or tenor voice of a weight between lyric and dramatic, capable of handling large musical climaxes in opera at moderate intervals. (literally: pushed)

spiritoso — In a lively or spirited manner

staccato — An articulation marking directing that a note or passage of notes are to be played in an abruptly disconnected manner, with each note sounding for a very short duration, and a short break lasting until the sounding of the next note; as opposed to legato. Staccato is indicated by a dot directly above or below the notehead. (literally: detached)

stecca — false note, crack, voice crack (on a high note)

stretto — The presence of two close or overlapping statements of the subject of a fugue, especially towards the end. (literally: tightened, strict)

stringendo — A passage in music to be played gradually faster; a section of music with in which the tempo slowly increases.

subito — Suddenly, abruptly. (literally: suddenly, quickly)

T

tenorino — A high tenor.

tenuto **ten.** — A tempo mark directing that a note or passage is to be held for the full time (literally: sustained)

terzina — A triplet.

tessitura — The most acceptable and comfortable vocal range for a singer or musical instrument; the range in which a given type of voice presents its best-sounding timbre. (literally: texture)

tranquillo — Calm, peaceful (literally: tranquil, calm)

tremolo — A rapid repetition of the same note, or an alternation between two or more notes. It can also be intended to mean a rapid and repetitive variation in pitch for the duration of a note. It is notated by a strong diagonal bar across the note stem, or a detached bar for a set of notes (or stemless notes). (literally: trembling)

trillo — A trill or shake.

tutti — All together. Indicates that the remainder of a group should join in playing after a solo or other passage with a reduced number of voices. (literally: all)

V

veloce — (To be played) with great rapidity.

vibrato — The musical effect or technique where the pitch or frequency of a note or sound is quickly and repeatedly raised and lowered over a small distance for the duration of that note or sound. (literally: vibrating)

villotta — A form of popular song from Friuli

viola d'amore — A 7- or 6-stringed musical instrument similar to the treble viol, used chiefly in the Baroque period. (literally: love viola)

viola da braccio — A stringed instrument held in the arm, such as a violin or viola (literally: arm viola)

viola da gamba — synonym of viol. (literally: leg viola)

vivace — At a brisk, lively tempo. (literally: vivacious)

Z

zeloso — Zealous, energetic, enthusiastic; typically an annotation to direct the style of play.

zufolo — A little flute or flageolet, especially that which is used to teach birds.

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