Musical terms & signs

The words and symbols a piano score uses to tell you **how loud**, **how fast** and **how to play** each note. Most of the words are Italian. The colors match the term-matching exercises (Exercises 08–11, 74 and 75).

HOW LOUD — DYNAMICS

softest to loudest: Handout 63

pp **pianissimo** pp Very soft	***p*** **piano** p Play softly	***mp*** **mezzo piano** mp Medium soft
mf **mezzo forte** mf Medium loud	***f*** **forte** f Play loudly	***ff*** **fortissimo** ff Very loud
sfz **sforzando** sfz A sudden, strong accent on one note	 **crescendo** cresc. Gradually grow louder	 **decrescendo** decresc. Gradually grow softer; diminuendo (dim.) is its twin

HOW FAST — TEMPO

slowest to fastest, beats per minute from Handout 55

Grave	Extremely slow and solemn	—
Largo	Very slow and broad	40–60
Adagio	Slow and unhurried	60–76
Andante	Walking pace	76–108
Moderato	A medium, moderate speed	108–120
Allegro	Fast and lively	120–168
Vivace	Lively and quick	—
Presto	Very fast	168–208

Tempo words sit above the staff at the start of a piece. Grave and Vivace have no fixed range: Grave is slower than Largo, Vivace sits between Allegro and Presto.

CHANGING THE TEMPO

Handouts 55 and 64

rit. **ritardando** rit. Gradually slowing down	***accel.*** **accelerando** accel. Gradually speeding up	***a tempo*** **a tempo** Return to the original speed	***rubato*** **rubato** Flexible time — bending the beat expressively	 **metronome mark** 92 quarter-note beats per minute	***tempo*** **tempo** The speed of the music

HOW IT'S PLAYED — TOUCH

Handouts 43 and 62, Exercise 15

 **staccato** dots Short and detached	 **legato, slur** Smooth and connected; the curve is a slur	 **tenuto** dash Hold the note for its full value	 **accent** > Strike one note with extra emphasis	 **marcato** ^ Marked: a stronger, sharper accent	 **fermata** Hold the note longer than written

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Musical terms & signs, continued

Pedal marks, ornaments and character words, then the **road map**: the signs that tell you where to go next.

HOW IT'S PLAYED — PEDAL, ORNAMENTS, CHARACTER

Handouts 52, 54 and 58



grace note
A tiny crushed note with no beat of its own



pedal Ped. … ✱
Press the damper pedal at Ped., lift at the star



pedal bracket
Line = pedal down; each notch = lift and press again

una corda

una corda
Use the soft (left) pedal



trill tr
Alternate fast with the note above



short trill (upper mordent)
One quick bite: note, note above, note



mordent (lower mordent)
The same bite, but to the note below



turn
A loop: above, note, below, note

dolce

dolce
Sweetly and gently

espressivo

espressivo espress.
With expression and feeling

cantabile

cantabile
In a singing style

HOW IT'S BUILT — THE ROAD MAP

Handouts 48, 67 and 70



tie
Joins two notes of the same pitch into one longer note



repeat signs
Play the music between the dots twice



1st & 2nd endings
Ending 1 the first time; after the repeat, skip to ending 2



double barline
The end of a section



final barline
The end of the piece



segno
A bookmark: D.S. jumps back to it



coda
The ending section; To Coda leaps here



ottava 8va or 8
Play one octave higher than written



ottava bassa 8vb or 8
Play one octave lower than written

loco

loco
"In place": back to normal after 8va

D.C. al Fine

da capo al fine
Back to the very top; stop at Fine

D.C. al Coda

da capo al coda
Back to the top; at To Coda, leap to the coda

D.S. al Fine

dal segno al fine
Back to the segno; stop at Fine

D.S. al Coda

dal segno al coda
Back to the segno; at To Coda, leap to the coda

Fine

fine
"The end": stop here after a D.C. or D.S.

To Coda

to coda
Jump ahead to the coda sign

Trace the route first: before playing a piece with D.C. or D.S., follow it with your finger and say the bar numbers out loud (Handout 70; practice: Exercise 60). Match the signs: Exercise 75.

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