

Basic glossary of musical forms

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air/ayre: (1) an English song or melody from the 16th to the 19th century; (2) a 16th-century solo song with lute accompanied.

aleatory music: music in which chance or indeterminacy are compositional elements.

anthem: a choral setting (often with solo voice parts and organ accompaniment) of an English language religious or moral text, usually for performance during Protestant services.

antiphon: a liturgical chant sung as the response to the verses of a psalm.

arabesque: a short piece of music featuring various melodic, contrapuntal, or harmonic decorations.

bagatelle: a short, light instrumental piece of music of no specified form, usually for piano.

ballade: (1) a 14th-15th-century French song form which set poetry to music; (2) an instrumental (usually piano) piece with dramatic narrative qualities.

barcarolle: song or instrumental piece in a swaying 6/8 time (i.e., suggesting the lilting motion of a Venetian gondola).

berceuse: a soft instrumental piece or lullaby, usually in a moderate 6/8 tempo; a lullaby.

canon: a contrapuntal form in two or more (voice or instrumental) parts in which the melody is introduced by one part and then repeated by the next before each previous part has finished (i.e., such that overlapping of parts occurs).

cantata: term applied to a 17th-18th-century multi-movement non-theatrical and non-liturgical vocal genre; subsequently used to describe large-scale vocal works in the same spirit, generally for soloists, chorus and orchestra; may also be for solo voice and accompaniment.

canzona: (1) 16th-17th-century instrumental genre in the manner of a French polyphonic chanson, characterized by the juxtaposition of short contrasting sections; (2) term applied to any of several types of secular vocal music.

caprice/capriccio: term describing a variety of short composition types characterized by lightness, fancy, or improvisational manner.

carol: since the 19th century, generally a song that is in four-part harmony, simple form, and having to do with the Virgin Mary or Christmas.

chaconne: a slow, stately instrumental work in duple meter employing variations.

chanson: French for song; in particular, a style of 14th- to 16th-century French song for voice or voices, often with instrumental accompaniment.

chant/plainchant: monophonic music used in Christian liturgical services sung in unison and in a free rhythm.

concertante: (1) a term used to modify another form or genre, suggesting that all parts should be regarded as equal in status (18th century) or indicating a virtuoso first violin part (19th century); (2) a work with solo parts in the nature of, but not the form of, a concerto.

concerto: (1) ensemble music for voice(s) and instrument(s) (17th century); (2) extended piece of music in which a solo instrument or instruments is contrasted with an orchestral ensemble (post-17th century).

concerto grosso: orchestral form especially popular in the 17th and 18th centuries in which the contrasting lines of a smaller and a larger group of instruments are featured.

credo: third item of the Ordinary of the [Mass](#) [3].

divertimento/divertissement: a style of light, often occasion-specific, instrumental music arranged in several movements.

etude/study: especially, a piece written for purposes of practicing or displaying technique.

fancy/fantasia/fantasia/fantasy/phantasie: an instrumental piece in which the formal and stylistic characteristics may vary from free, improvisatory types to strictly contrapuntal; form is of secondary importance.

fugue: contrapuntal form in which a subject theme ("part" or "voice") is introduced and then extended and developed through some number of successive imitations.

galliard: a lively court dance of Italian origin, usually in triple time.

gigue (jig): a quick, springy dance often used as the concluding movement to 18th century instrumental suites.

Gloria: second item of the Ordinary of the [Mass](#) [3].

impromptu: a short instrumental piece of a free, casual nature suggesting improvisation.

incidental music: music composed for atmospheric effect or to accompany the action in a predominantly spoken play; the music is not integral to the work even though it may have dramatic significance.

Lied(er): German for song(s); in particular, a style of 19th-century German song distinguished by the setting of texts from the literary tradition and by the elaboration of the instrumental accompaniment.

madrigal: (1) a 14th-century Italian style of setting secular verse for two or three unaccompanied voices; (2) a 16th/17th-century contrapuntal setting of verse (usually secular) for several equally important voice parts, usually unaccompanied.

magnificat: a setting of the Biblical hymn of the Virgin Mary (as given in St. Luke) for use in Roman Catholic and Anglican services.

march: instrumental music in duple meter with a repeated and regular rhythm usually used to accompany military movements and processions.

masque: an aristocratic 16th-17th-century English theater form integrating poetry, dance, music, and elaborate sets.

[mass](#) [3]: the principal religious service of the Catholic Church, with musical parts that either vary according to Church calendar (the Proper) or do not (the Ordinary).

mazurka: a moderately fast Polish country dance in triple meter in which the accent is shifted to the weak beats.

microtonal music: music which makes use of intervals smaller than a semitone (a half step).

minuet: a graceful French dance of moderate 3/4 tempo often appearing as a section of extended works (especially dance suites).

motet: (1) to ca. 1400, a piece with one or more voices, often with different but related sacred or secular texts, singing over a fragment of chant in longer note-values; (2) after 1400, a polyphonic setting of a short sacred text.

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nocturne: a moderately slow piece, usually for piano, of dreamy, contemplative character and song-like melody.

ode: cantata-like musical setting of the lyric poetry form so called.

opera: theatrically staged story set to instrumental and vocal music such that most or all of the acted parts are sung. a drama set to music sung by singers usually in costume, with instrumental accompaniment; the music is integral and is not incidental.

operetta: a light opera with spoken dialogue, songs, and dances.

oratorio: originally setting of an extended religious narrative (and since ca. 1800, non-religious ones as well) for vocal soloists, chorus, and orchestra, intended for concert or church performance without costumes or stage settings.

ostinato: a short melodic, rhythmic, or chordal phrase repeated continuously throughout a piece or section while other musical elements are generally changing.

partita: term initially applied as a synonym for "set of variations" (17th century), then as a synonym for "suite" (ca. 1700 to present).

passacaglia: an instrumental dance form usually in triple meter in which there are ground-bass or ostinato variations.

pavan(e): a stately court dance in duple meter, from the 16th and 17th centuries, and remaining popular in the 17th century as an instrumental form.

polka: an energetic Bohemian dance performed in the round in 2/4 time.

polonaise: a stately Polish processional dance in 3/4 time.

prelude: (1) an instrumental section or movement preceding or introducing a larger piece or group of pieces; (2) a self-contained short piece usually for piano.

psalm: a vocal work set to text from the Book of Psalms.

quadrille: a lively, rhythmic 19th-century French country couple dance that incorporates popular tunes, usually in duple meter.

requiem: a musical composition honoring the dead; specially the Roman Catholic Mass for the dead, but also other commemorative pieces of analogous intent.

rhapsody: term similar to "fantasia" applied to pieces inspired by extroverted romantic notions.

romance: (1) a song with a simple vocal line and a simple accompaniment; especially popular in late 18th-19th-century France and Italy; (2) a short instrumental piece with the lyrical character of a vocal romance.

rondo: an instrumental form in which one section intermittently recurs between subsidiary sections and which concludes the piece.

scherzo: term designating lively and usually lighthearted instrumental music; most commonly used to label the fast-tempo movement of a symphony, sonata, etc.

serenade: a light and/or intimate piece of no specific form such as might be played in an open-air evening setting.

sinfonia: term applied in a variety of contexts in different periods; e.g., as a near synonym for "instrumental canzona," "prelude," "overture," and "symphony."

sonata: an extended piece for instrumental soloist with or without instrumental accompaniment, usually in several movements.

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sonatina: a short sonata, or one of modest intent; especially popular during the Classical Period.

song cycle [4]: a group of songs performed in an order establishing a musical continuity related to some underlying (conceptual) theme.

Stabat Mater: a sequence in the Roman Catholic liturgy regarding the crucifixion, and used in several Divine offices.

suite: a set of unrelated and usually short instrumental pieces, movements or sections played as a group, and usually in a specific order.

symphonic poem/tone poem: a descriptive orchestral piece in which the music conveys a scene or relates a story.

symphony: an extended piece for full orchestra, usually serious in nature and in several movements.

tango: an Argentinian couple dance in duple meter characterized by strong syncopation and dotted rhythms.

Te Deum: (from the Latin, "We praise Thee, O God") lengthy hymn of praise to God in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other Christian liturgies.

toccata: a piece for keyboard intended to display virtuosity.

trio sonata: a 17th-18th-century sonata for two or three melody instruments and continuo accompaniment

variations: composition form in the theme is repeated several or many times with various modifications.

waltz: a popular ballroom dance in 3/4 time.

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