

Stories of Words: Music



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Learning About Words

Music is a big part of most people's lives. You hear your favorite song. Before you know it, you are tapping or dancing along to it. Many people know how to make music, too. Maybe you sing or know how to play an instrument.

There are many different kinds of music. Each kind of music has its own style. You can recognize the style when you hear the tune or lyrics of the music. The tune is the pattern of musical tones, or notes, that you hear. The lyrics are the words that go along with those notes.

Music has its own set of words. There are words, which are used in other areas of life, but have very specific meanings in music. These are words such as *notes*, *staff*, and *scale*. For other words in music, the words are quite unusual, words such as *aria*.



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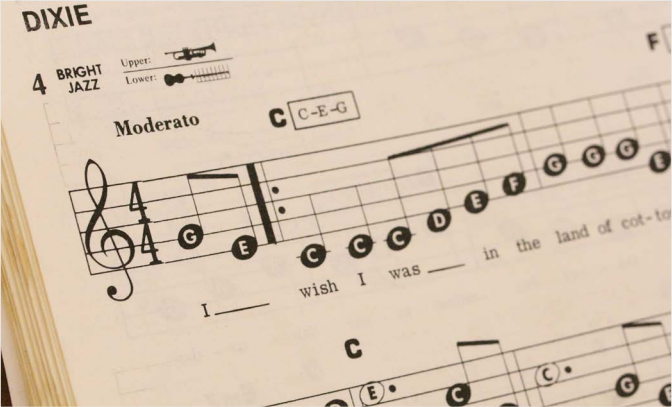
Tunes

Some people can play an instrument or sing a song just by hearing the tune. Most people, however, need to *read the music*. They need to see what the composer has written down about it.

What do people read when they read music? Reading music is different than reading words. But you'll find that many of the words that are used to describe the reading of music are ones that you already know.

The chart below shows some of common words used in reading music. It also shows the ways in which these words are used in other situations. The words may be the same but the meanings are quite different.

<i>Music Term</i>	<i>What It Means in Music</i>	<i>What It Means in Other Situations</i>
score	A book of written music	Points in a game or competition
staff	A set of lines and spaces in written music	Pole that helps support people as they walk; A person at a workplace
note	A symbol for the length of time and pitch of a sound	A short written message
scale	A pattern of notes in any system of music in ascending or descending order of pitch	Verb: To climb up Noun: Protective layer on a fish
pitch	How high or low a note is	Throwing of a ball in sports



Score, Pitch, and Scale

The written form of a musical piece is called a *score*. A score in music refers to sets of lines. Each set of lines is called a *staff*, which consists of 5 lines and 4 spaces.

Music symbols are placed on the staff. The symbols are placed on the staff for different purposes. One symbol that appears on a staff is a musical note. Musical notes are placed by *pitch*, or how high or low a note is. The higher the note, the higher up on the staff it is written.

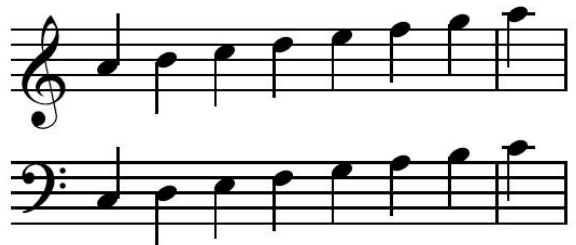
Musical notes are named after the first eight letters of the alphabet. If you play the notes one after other, then you have played a *scale*. The scale can go up or down in pitch.

Clefs

A *clef* is another symbol that appears on a score. The clef appears on the left-hand side of a line of the staff.

A *treble clef* is used for higher notes. It is put on the top set of lines in a piece of music. A fancy letter G is the symbol for the treble clef.

You will find a *bass clef* at the start of the bottom five lines of a staff. The bass clef makes up the lowest notes. The symbol looks like a backward C, followed by two dots, one on top of the other.



Time Notes

The symbols for notes also tell how slowly or quickly the music should be. There can be different *beats*, or speeds, for a song.

There are different symbols for the many possible notes in a song. A common note that is held for one beat is called a *quarter note*. It looks like a black oval with a long stem pointing either up or down.

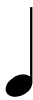
A *half note* also has an oval and a stem, but its oval is white in the middle. A half note lasts for twice as long as a quarter note.

A *whole note* can be thought of as two half notes or four quarter notes. Its symbol has a white oval but no stem. If you were to play a whole note, then you would play the key or sing the one note but hold it for four beats.

What about when you hear pauses or breaks in a song? How does the singer or player know when to take them? They read the rest symbols. Rests have the same amount as beats as a note. A half rest looks like a top hat. A whole rest looks like a top hat but upside down. A quarter rest looks like a long, bent line.



Whole Note



Half Note



Quarter Note



Whole Rest



Half Rest



Quarter Rest

2

Lyrics



A song is a piece of music. A human voice and other musical instruments perform songs. Our modern word *song* comes from the old German word *sangwaz*, which means “to sing.”

When you sing along to songs, the words you are singing are called *lyrics*. The word *lyric* is from the Middle French word *lyrique*, which means “a short poem about feelings.”

The word *lyric* also comes from Latin and Greek words about the lyre. A lyre is a stringed instrument.

It looks like a small U-shaped harp. It was used largely in ancient Greece, but can still be found mainly in East Africa.

Before many people knew how to read or write, people would gather together and tell each other news and stories. This is how many fairy tales, such as “Little Red Riding Hood” and “Cinderella,” were originally told.

During this story telling time, it was usual for music to be played, often on a lyre. The storyteller would often sing. This made the stories easier to remember and pass along. Although the stories were usually made up on the spot and changed with every retelling, these were the original song lyrics.

Traditional Music

Traditional music often involves music that has been passed orally, or by word of mouth, from one generation to another. Today, one place where you hear traditional songs is at camps or around campfires.

One type of traditional song is a ballad. Ballads have been present in many cultures across the world. Ballads typically are slow and tell a story in short verses or groups of words that usually rhyme.

Broadside ballads developed with the invention of the printing press. Songs printed on cheap paper could be made and sold in huge numbers. These songs came to be called broadside ballads because the cheap sheets of paper were called *broadsides*.

Broadside ballads varied in topic. There were broadsides of love songs and broadsides about legends, histories, and current events. Many traditional ballads were eventually printed as broadside ballads. Our national song is the “Star-Spangled Banner” by Francis Scott Key. It gained fame as a broadside ballad.



Opera

An opera is a story told through songs. The word *opera* comes from Italian and means “work.” This definition refers to the two meanings of the word. It takes a lot of work to create and perform an opera. Plus, the finished opera is known as the work.

An *aria*, Italian for “air,” is a type of song in an opera. They are typically long and performed as a solo. An aria is usually performed as a solo, which is the Italian word for “only.” That means that an aria is typically sung by only one person.

Beginning around the 16th century, opera songs became a popular form of high entertainment. Many people continue to enjoy listening to opera. They admire the extraordinary level of training it takes to perform one.

Popular Music

Today’s “popular” songs sound different than opera songs. The lyrics of popular songs have words that almost everyone can relate to. They also tend to have a beat that people can remember easily. People

can dance and sing to a “pop” song even when they’ve only heard the song a few times. *Pop* is short for *popular*.

Sometimes the catchiest part of a pop song is its chorus. The chorus is recognizable because it is the part that repeats throughout the song. A *chorus* can also refer to a large and organized group of singers that performs songs together. The word *chorus* was originally Latin for “the persons singing and dancing.”



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The Human Singing Voice

Vocal music is probably the oldest form of music, since it does not require any instrument besides the human voice. All cultures have some form of vocal music.

Some scholars even think that people sang before they used their voices to talk. The earliest sounds that humans made may have been like the sounds they heard in nature, such as the song of a bird.

In the early years, singing closely connected to the daily lives of people. People sang while they worked. People sang prayers to speak to their gods. They sang in order to remember their history.

Although much has changed since its origins, singing is still a key part of society. It is a way to communicate important ideas and feelings to each other. It is a way to celebrate important life events, such as a birthday.



Voice Type	Meaning
<i>sopra</i>	above
<i>alto</i>	high
<i>countra</i>	counter to
<i>tenor</i>	to hold (the tenor “holds” the melody)
<i>bass</i>	low

Voice Types

If you walked into a crowded room with lots of people talking, you would hear different kinds of voices. Some of those voices may be high and others may be low. This is because the human voice has a wide range of tones.

In music, when we talk about the range of people’s voices, we use specific words, such as: *soprano*, *bass*, *alto*, and *tenor*. Each of these voice types has certain qualities. Soprano, which comes from the Italian word “higher,” is the highest vocal range. Alto, or counter-alto, is the second highest. Next is tenor, which is Latin for “to hold.” The tenor holds his or her note, and the other vocal types base their notes around it. Finally, there is the bass, which comes from the Latin word for “low.”



Singing Groups

A vocal group is a group of singers who sing and harmonize together. Some vocal groups perform with musicians playing instruments in the background. Other groups play some of their own instruments. It is common, when this happens, for the group to be called a *band*.

Another word for a group of singers is *choir*. Many people think of church when they hear the word, and many choirs often perform at places of worship. A choir, however, can also sing non-religious songs at concert halls and other places. Some vocal groups perform without any instruments. Every sound made in the song is made by voices. This type of singing is known as *acapella*. The word comes from the Italian phrase *alla capella*, which meant “in the manner of the chapel.” This was a reference to earlier forms of singing at church without any instruments.

One person sings a solo. But a *duet* is a piece of music specifically meant for two or more people to sing. It comes from the Italian word *duetto*, meaning “two.” It wasn’t until the 1820’s that the word first began appearing in English, but duets were performed long before this.

A *trio* is similar to a duet except it uses three voices. The voices in a trio are meant to create a more complex melody. It is common during a trio for all three voices to sing at once.

A *glee* is a type of song that was traditionally sung by a trio in acapella. Today, there are Glee Clubs, or groups of singing societies, that write and perform short musical pieces for a variety of tones.



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Instruments

An object that can produce sound can be used to make music. For example, spoons tapped against glasses filled with different amounts of water can be used to play a tune.

The term “musical instruments” refers typically to particular objects. The word *instrument* is used in fields other than music, such as medicine, building construction, weather prediction, and aviation. But the first use of the word *instrument* was to describe objects that are used to make music.

Usually, musical instruments are placed into one of four groups according to how sounds are made. The names of the groups of instruments are: *strings*, *brass*, *woodwind*, and *percussion*. The first three names are descriptions of the instruments, or at least a feature of the original instruments in the group.

All four groups of instruments are not used for all kinds of music. But one place where the four main groups may appear is in an orchestra. The word *orchestra* originally referred to a physical area in a theater. But today orchestra refers to the group of musicians who play the four kinds of instruments in concerts.



String Instruments

The sounds of string instruments come from some kind of motion on strings. For instruments such as guitars, the strings are plucked, usually with fingers. A bow is moved over the strings of most of the string instruments.

The four string instruments that are usually in an orchestra are the violin, viola, cello, and double bass. All of these instruments were first made in Italy hundreds of years ago. Their names came from the Latin word *vitula*, which means “stringed instrument.” The word *violin* means “little viola” and *cello* originally was the *violoncello*, which means a “big viola.”

The double bass is the biggest instrument of the string family. Like the use of the word *bass* for singers, it describes the deep and low sounds that come from this instrument.



Brass Instruments

The instruments in the brass group are not all made from brass but, at one time, most were. Brass instruments depend on the airflow and lip tension of the musician. The musician also controls valves that direct air in and out of the instrument, which creates different pitches.

A popular brass instrument is the trumpet. The word *trumpet* comes from an Old French word (*trompe*) that describes an elephant’s trunk. Elephants’ trunks, of course, were never used as an instrument, but people thought that the musical instrument looked like an elephant’s trunk.

Most brass instruments can also be called “horns.” This term refers to the origin of this group. Ancient people first used animal horns to make music.

One of the instruments in the brass group is now called the horn, although for many years it was called a French horn. Both French and German inventors had created the valves that gave this horn its unique sound. No one knows why the name *French* was associated with the horn and not *German*. But since 1971, this instrument is simply called a horn.



Woodwinds

Woodwinds are a type of musical instrument that get their sound when a musician blows air into or across the mouthpiece. Many years ago, these instruments were made of wood. The combination of wood and the “wind” created by the musician led to the term *woodwind*. Today, many are made of other materials such as metal, brass, or plastic.



There are many instruments in this group, including the flute, the saxophone, and the clarinet. The instruments look similar in that most are tube-like. They have keys that cover the holes when played to make different notes.



Percussion

The name for the last group of instruments is percussion. The word *percussion* comes from the word to strike hard or to beat in Latin. The actions of striking or shaking are the ways in which the sounds of percussion instruments are produced. The surfaces, shapes, and sizes of drums differ but, for most of the drums in the orchestra, the sound comes from a musician using sticks to hit the surface of the drum.

A tambourine is an instrument in the percussion family. The name *tambourine* comes from a French word that means “long, narrow drum.” Musicians can use their hands to hit the tambourine. But unlike most other drums, the tambourine has metal jingles along its edge. These metal jingles mean that tambourines can also be shaken to get a unique sound.

Keyboard Instruments

Some instruments do not fit well into these four groups. The most prominent instrument of this type is the piano. The piano is usually placed into a unique group called keyboard instruments.

Keyboards are also a common part of computers, but the word *keyboard* was first used to describe the board of levers or keys of pianos. When the musician strikes a key on the keyboard, it causes a hammer to strike a string inside the piano. The striking is like a percussion instrument but the sounds of the piano come from the vibration of the strings, which is like a string instrument.

The original name of the piano was pianoforte, from two Italian words: *piano* (soft) and *forte* (strong). It got this name because, unlike previous keyboard instruments, the volume of sound could be controlled on the piano.

Today, computers can be used to control the volume of sound on digital instruments. These instruments are similar to pianos in that they have a keyboard of similar size. However, the levers or keys no longer hit a hammer that strikes a string. Rather, a player presses a key that triggers electronic sensors to make sound.



5

Types of Music

There are many different types of stories told in books. Some are fantasies of how people live in the future. Others tell stories of people who lived a long time ago. Still others are mysteries where the author unfolds the details of a crime or an unexplained event.

Just like there are many kinds of stories, there are many different kinds, or styles, of music. A style means that the features of music are the same. Most of the names that describe the styles of music are fairly common words. People began to refer to the music style with words that were already in the English language.



Folk Music

A very old style of music is called folk music. At first, folk music referred to songs that people had played in their communities or families for hundreds of years. Often, neither the tunes nor the words for the songs had been written down.

The tunes and words of most folk music have now been recorded, both on paper and also on recordings. Further, just because something is called “folk music” doesn’t mean that the tune or lyrics are old. Even today, there are songwriters who write songs that are in the style of folk songs.



Classical Music

Classical music refers to symphonies and other forms of music that began in Europe several hundreds of years ago. Composers continue to create music that falls into this category. Most classical music concerts, however, feature music that was composed hundreds of years ago.



Rock Music

Classical and folk music may have their roots many generations ago. However, new styles of music continue to be invented. For example, in 1951, a radio announcer referred to a new form of music as “rock and roll.” Sailors had long used the phrase *rocking and rolling* to describe the motion of ships at sea.

The kind of dancing that accompanied the new kind of music was energetic. In 1951, a disc jockey named Alan Freed referred to this new style of music as “rock and roll.” Today, the name has become simply “rock.”

Hip-Hop Music

Some forms of music have been invented very recently. When your grandparents were young, no one had heard of hip-hop music. They had probably heard the word *hip*, which meant that someone or something was current or up-to-date. The word *hop* got added when a rapper teased his friend about the marching he would need to do in the army. The term was applied to the music that a Jamaican, Clive Campbell, had been playing in shows. There are hip hop singing groups all around the world.



Our Changing Language

Music is all around us. You can hear birds singing to music devices blaring and marching bands drumming. But listen closely: Like language itself, music changes frequently. By the time you're a grandparent, there may be many new styles of music. Keep listening to the names. The names of music styles are often words that have been around but have come to have a new meaning. Language is a tool we use to describe our world. As we need new words to describe new things, we create them.



Glossary

bow in music, a stick strung with hair used to pull across the strings of a string instrument

classical something of recognized value

composer a person who writes songs

culture the way a group of people lives, acts, and thinks

harmonize to play or sing different sounds that go well together

melody the vocal quality of a song

popular someone or something that most people like

stanza a group of lines with a repeating rhyme in a poem or song

style a way of doing or making something

Think About It

- What is your favorite kind of instrument? Draw a picture of it or describe it, then tell why it's your favorite.
- Compare two kinds of music you read about in this book. How are they alike? How are they different?
- Work with a group to create a new song. Create dance movements to go with your song. Perform your song your class. Explain why it should become popular.

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