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Glossary



From Notation to Performance: Understanding Musical Scores

Glossary

Alberti bass

This accompaniment figuration, a prominent feature of the keyboard music of Domenico Alberti (c.1710–1746), consists of broken chords where the notes follow the pattern lowest–highest–middle–highest.

articulation

The extent to which performers detach individual notes from each other. This is signified by such markings as slurs above or below notes for legato or dots above or below notes for staccato.

bar

A bar is a single metrical unit, usually divided into two, three or four beats, with a stress on the first beat.

beats

The rhythmic organisation of much music depends on the perception of regularly recurring stresses, called beats. Some beats have a stronger stress than others.

canon

A contrapuntal composition where an extended melody in one part is imitated note-for-note by one or more parts that enter subsequently.

chord

The simultaneous sounding of notes of different pitch (two-note chords are more commonly referred to as intervals).

chordal

Where melody and harmony proceed more or less in the same rhythm as, for example, in many hymns, the texture can be described as chordal. See also 'homophonic'.

countermelody

An often subsidiary melody that is combined contrapuntally with a principal one.

counterpoint (adj. contrapuntal)

A term originally conceived to apply to music that has several simultaneous lines combined according to a system of rules.

doubling

A texture in which several parts have the same melody in different registers.

dynamic level

The dynamic level of a piece of music refers to its volume, its relative loudness or softness.

harmony

The chordal structure of a piece of music including both individual chords and progressions of chords.

homophony (adj. homophonic)

The term 'homophony' is applied to music where all parts move together at the same pace, i.e. music that is primarily chordal. It is also used to describe music in which there is a clear differentiation between melody and accompaniment.

imitation

A texture where different parts in polyphonic music enter with the same melody in turn.

key

Western music based on the major and minor scales is regarded as being 'in a key'. Thus a piece based on the C major scale is in the key of C major.

lead sheet

A manuscript or printed version of a piece of jazz or popular music consisting of the melody, lyrics (if any) and chord symbols for the accompanying harmonies.

lieder

Art song with piano accompaniment, usually sung in German.

melodic contour

The overall linear design of a melody, produced by its rises and falls.

melodies

Melodies consist of a succession of different pitches.

melody and accompaniment

See homophony.

metre

The grouping of strong and weak beats into regularly recurring patterns creates metre, which, in Western music, is indicated by a time signature.

motif

A short recurring musical idea that has a distinctive rhythmic and melodic shape. Sometimes a motif can be purely rhythmic; sometimes it is predominantly harmonic in nature, as in a series of chords. Also spelled as 'motive'.

phrases

The constituent parts of a melody, longer than a motif but shorter than a period. Phrase lengths vary, although the standard is four bars long.

phrase structure

A melody can be divided into phrases to reveal its phrase structure.

pitch

A note's pitch refers to its highness or lowness, and is measured in terms of number of vibrations per second, its frequency.

pizzicato

A technique for stringed instruments that are normally played with a bow, to pluck the strings with the fingers instead.

polyphony (adj. polyphonic)

The term 'polyphony' is applied to music that is (1) in several parts, and (2) where the simultaneous individual parts move independently to some degree.

pulse

The rhythmic organisation of much music depends upon the perception of regularly recurring stresses, called beats, and these provide music with a pulse.

range

The interval between the highest and lowest notes in a melody is its range. Similarly, the interval between the highest and lowest notes of an instrument or singing voice is its range.

register

A part of the range of an instrument or singing voice.

rehearsal mark

A letter or number placed at a recognisable point in a score as a reference point for rehearsal for the convenience of conductors and players.

rhythm

Rhythm refers to music's temporal structure, and is the product of (1) how long notes last and (2) how much notes are stressed. Rhythm therefore includes such elements as pulse, beat, metre and tempo.

rhythmic patterns

Short sequences of note values that become distinctive through being repeated.

round

A round, often unaccompanied, comprises a single-line melody that is imitated in turn by several voices that enter at equal time-intervals, for example, as in 'Three Blind Mice'. Each vocal part, having arrived at the end of the melody, returns immediately to the beginning.

staff (pl. staves)

The set of lines on which notes are written. A five-line staff is usual in Western musical notation.

system

A collection of two or more staves played simultaneously.

tablature

A type of music notation that uses numbers, letters or other signs, often placed on horizontal parallel lines that represent an instrument's strings. Most commonly, tablatures have been used for music for plucked string instruments such as the lute, and are currently used for music for guitar and ukulele.

tempo

Tempo depends on the speed of the pulse or beat. A quick tempo will have a fast pulse; a slow tempo will have a slow pulse.

texture

Musical texture can be viewed from several perspectives. For instance, (1) a texture can be described as 'thin' if it is in only two parts, whereas a six-part texture is 'thick'; (2) even the same chord placed in an either higher or lower register will sound respectively thinner or thicker; (3) a different scoring of the same chord will also produce a different texture; (4) a contrapuntal texture, where the parts are melodically independent yet harmonically coherent, contrasts with a chordal or homophonic texture consisting of a melody supported by accompanying chords. In practice, musical textures often result from a combination of these factors.

timbre

The distinctive sound quality that differentiates one instrument from another, for instance, a flute from an oboe, or one soprano voice from another.

time signature

The sign at the beginning of a piece that indicates the metre, the lower number indicates the unit of measurement (crotchet, quaver) and the upper number indicate the number of units in a bar.

treble

(1) a term applied to a child's high voice, most frequently that of a boy; (2) also applied to higher-sounding instruments, such as the treble recorder, or the clef used when notating higher-sounding parts, the treble clef.

variations

A musical form in which a musical theme is followed by a series of modified restatements or variations, but each variation always retains some features in common with the theme.