

Musical Vocabulary for Tempo

The speed or tempo of music can be indicated in different ways. Some pieces include M.M. (“Metronome Marking”) or B.P.M. (Beats Per Minute) specifications, which relate to metronome speeds. Another way to indicate tempo is through musical vocabulary, which is usually in Italian (although it can be German, French, or any other language). This vocabulary is relative and often changes with individual interpretation. Unlike M.M. or B.P.M., which is a specific number, each term falls within a range of appropriate tempi.

Italian Tempi Indications, from slowest to fastest:

Larghissimo
Grave
Lento
Largo
Larghetto
Adagio
Adagietto
Andante moderato
Andante
Andantino
Moderato
Allegretto
Allegro
Presto
Prestissimo

A prefix or suffix may also appear on these terms. Here are some common ones:

–*issimo*: to a greater degree

–*etto*/–*ino*: to a lesser degree

Example: Presto + *issimo* = Prestissimo (faster than Presto)

These tempo indications are usually combined with an expressive or stylistic word and appear at the beginnings of pieces, movements, or large sections.

Example: *Allegro maestoso* = Fast and majestically

Changing Tempos

Music is constantly switching from one tempo to another. There are many vocabulary words used to describe these changes in tempo:

- A piacere – at your pleasure
- A tempo – return to tempo
- Accelerando (accel.) – gradually faster
- Ad libitum (ad lib.) – at your liberty
- Allargando (allarg.) – broadening
- Doppio movimento – twice as fast
- Largamente – broadly
- L'istesso – the same
- Ma non troppo – but not too much
- Rallentando (rall.) – gradually slowing down
- Ritardando (rit.) – gradually slowing down
- Ritenuto – held back
- Rubato – with more rhythmic freedom