

21M.011 Section 1a: Basic Musical Terms

Scale

An organized set of pitches/notes with an ascending and descending order. There are usually specific intervals (distances) between pitches that are assigned a specific pattern.

The most common Western scales are major and minor (defined by specific patterns of intervals called whole and half steps), but the Medieval modes also contain scales defined by patterns of whole and half steps.

Mode

The musical conventions or rules that describe common practices of using a scale in a piece of music, either for composition or improvisation (not just the set of pitches or scale but the way in which it is used).

Each mode has a “home note” or the pitch that gives a sense of home or resolution or arrival.

Multiple modes can encompass the same scale (set of pitches) but are different because of their different home notes.

Melody

A succession of pitches and rhythms organized as an aesthetic whole. Typically, melody is placed prominently in a piece of music and is intended to be memorable in some way.

Phrase

Melodies divided into smaller sections (phrases). With a text, these phrases usually correspond to poetic lines.

Phrases give a sense of progression in a melody (beginning, middle, end) and tend to end with a cadence (musical closing,) a pattern that gives a sense of ending.

Theme

A melody that has an important/prominent role in a piece and may help to dictate the form.

Also has specific harmony associated with the melody. Themes may change throughout a piece but usually come back in some way.

Motive

A small melodic fragment, used to create longer phrases or themes. Typically, motives recur in a piece of music multiple times but might be slightly different. They are much shorter than themes. Think the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

Harmony

Pitches organized into simultaneous sound (chords). Chords can be combined into linear progressions with relationships to each other. Certain harmonic progressions denote cadences.

Timbre

Tone color or the characteristic sound of a voice or instrument that allows listener to distinguish it from other instruments/voices. Usually described using other sensory adjectives (harsh, smooth, rich, full, thin, bright, etc.).

Texture

The number of independent musical parts in a piece and their relationship to each other. May also refer to the density of the sound (thin vs. dense).

Monophony

A type of texture with a single melodic line with no accompaniment. The melody may be sung/played by multiple people as long as they are all in alignment on the same pitches and rhythms.

Dynamics

The volume of the music or the degree of loud or softness.

Rhythm

The durations of sound and patterns of those durations in a piece.
Or the alternation of sound and silence.

Meter

The organization of rhythm in time, grouping the pulse or beats into recurring patterns
Meter is not the rhythms you actually hear but how you feel them in relation to the underlying pulse.

Tempo

The speed of the music or the rate of the meter/pulse (not the speed of the rhythms that you hear).

Form

The structural organization of a piece by dividing into sections based on repetition or contrast of rhythms, melody, harmony, etc.

Usually we use capital letters to describe different sections (ABC etc.).

Genre

The type of piece. This is very different from genre in pop music, so be sure to think carefully about this.

Use the three F's: form, function, and forces. Genre is determined by the form of the piece, the function that it serves and the forces (who is performing). For example, the genre of a symphony is determined by the forms it uses (such as sonata form), the function (concert music), and the forces (an orchestra).

Song

The term song is often used liberally in pop music to refer to everything, sometimes even if there isn't any actual singing happening (i.e. instrumental tracks). In classical music, we use this term more precisely. To call something a song means that there must be someone singing. If it is a purely instrumental piece, such as a symphony or sonata or string quartet, etc., it is not considered a song and should not be referred to as such. In addition, if there is a piece which has singing but there are multiple singers such as a choir or perhaps the piece is part of a dramatic production such as an opera, that would also not be considered a song. Generally, song refers to a piece that is sung by one person alone and which is not part of a larger work such as an opera.

For our purposes, if we are discussing music which does not qualify according to this definition, you can generically refer to it as a "piece" or, preferably, you should simply call it by its genre (as in, this motet or this chant, this sonata or this symphony, etc.).