

MUSIC THEORY GLOSSARY

Accelerando

Is a term used for gradually accelerating or getting faster as you play a piece of music.

Allegro

Is a term used to describe a tempo that is at a “lively” speed.

Andante

Is a term used to describe a tempo that is at a “slow and easy” speed.

Alternate Picking

Involves the pick hand – The first note is picked down, the second note up, the third note down, the fourth note up, and so on... (also called “down – up – down – up” picking). One of the most important fundamentals that need to be learned and practiced (alternating picking helps improve speed).

Arpeggio

A chord that is played one note at a time (instead of strumming the chord, the notes are played as single notes). The Arpeggio is frequently used in advanced lead playing (rock, metal, jazz, etc).

Arrangement

The arrangement refers to a song and how the instruments are structured and organized (according to the arranger). Example: Any song could be played by an orchestra, but it would need to be “arranged” for the different types of instruments, etc.

Bar

A sub division of time in music (one measure of a piece of music).

Bar Line

A line (vertical) which divides measures (bars) of music (shows the beginning and end of each measure).

Beat

The “Beat” can be described formally as a subdivision of musical time that is felt as the pulse within a piece of music (a basic unit of length in musical time).

BPM (beats per minute - bpm)

On a metronome it refers to the "clicking speed."

Chords

A combination of two or more notes sounded simultaneously (played at the same time). There are regular and barre chords (major, minor, diminished, augmented, minor 7th, minor 9th, to name a few).

Chord Progression

A group of chords played in sequence (in a defined order).

Ex: G /// C /// G /// D /// C /// G /// (is a chord progression in the Key of G)

Chorus

The part of a song that the verse and bridge usually builds to, and is the main melody that is repeated over and over (the “hook” of the song).

Chromatics

Sharps, Flats, Rests, etc. Usually refers to the 12-notes that make up a scale using all the semitones of the octave (notes 1 – 12).

Chromatic Scale

Refers to the 12 notes that make up a scale using all the semitones of the octave (notes 1 – 12). Chromatic scales are easy to play – all you have to do is start on a note, and play every fret until you get to the note’s octave (all half steps).

Example: F, F#, G, G#, A, A#, B, C, C#, D, D#, E, F (you actually play 13 notes if you count the last “F” note, but there are only 12 different notes in the Chromatic Scale).

Clef

The symbol at the very beginning of a piece of music (first symbol that appears on the staff). The “Treble” clef (or “G” clef) is generally used to notate notes which are higher in pitch, and the “Bass” clef is used to notate the lower notes.

Double Bar Line

Two vertical lines (double bars) that indicate the “end” of the section (or piece of music).

Down Stroke / Down Pick

Refers to the pick hand strumming or picking from top to bottom (downward).

Dotted Half Notes

When a dot is placed after a half note (or any note) it increases the notes value by one half. A dotted half note is equal to three beats (half note equals two beats – dot equals one beat).

Duration

One of the characteristics of a tone. The “length” of a tone.

Dynamics

One of the characteristics of a tone. The “force” (loudness or softness) of a tone.

Eighth Note

A beat that receives half of a beat (two eighth notes = one quarter note = one beat).

Eighth Rest

The eighth note rest symbol will indicate silence for one half of a beat.

Flat

Lowers a note or chord one half-step in pitch (lowering one fret equals a half-step).

Four / Four Time

Also called “Common Time” – Four / Four time is a time signature that indicates that there are four beats per measure, and that each quarter note will receive one beat.

Fret

A strip of metal (vertical metal bars) that are placed on the neck (fretboard). The term usually refers to the space between two of the metal bars (or the nut and the first metal bar for the 1st fret) on the fret board that indicates locations of notes.

Half Note

The Half note is two beats long (twice that of a quarter note).

Half Rest

The half note rest symbol will indicate silence for two beats.

Half Step

Is equal to one fret on the guitar or bass guitar (notes right next to each other).

Harmonize

Can refer to vocals, guitar leads, etc – Harmonizing is when two or more notes are sung or played together (in unison).

Harmony

Two or more notes sounded together (in unison).

Harmonic Tones

Are secondary notes that can be produced by lightly touching the string above the 5th, 7th, or 12th fret (directly over the fret wire). Although harmonic tones can be produced at the 5th, 7th, and 12th frets – there are other ways to produce harmonic tones also. Harmonic tones are also used for tuning the guitar (works well because there is no bending of the strings).

Hexatonic Scale

A scale that consists of six notes per octave.

Interval

Best described as the distance between two notes.

Key

The key of a song or piece of music tells a musician what scales, chords, or notes that can be used. The easiest way to find what key a song is in is by looking at the key signature (which is found right after the clef sign on a piece of music).

Key Signature

The key signature indicates if there are any sharps or flats in the piece of music (which will identify the key). There are twelve different key signatures, and each key signature will have a major key and a minor key.

Ledger Lines

When notes are placed above or below the musical staff – these “extra” lines are called ledger lines.

Legato

The Legato technique usually requires playing notes (mostly using hammer-ons and pull-offs) that are close to each other and are on the same string. Basically the opposite of the Staccato technique.

Major Chord

A major chord consists of the 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes of a major scale.

Moderato

Is a term used to describe a tempo at a “medium or moderate” speed.

Modulation

Refers to changing “keys” within a piece of music.

Melody

Usually the most recognizable part of the song (and can be described as a succession of musical notes played one after another).

Natural

When the Natural symbol is placed next to a note it means to “cancel” any sharps or flats previously used within that bar of music (restores a note to its original position).

Noise

Best described as sounds caused by “irregular” vibrations (firecracker, door slamming, etc).

Note

Notes can have three parts – the Head, Stem, and Flag. When a note is placed on the staff, the note takes on the name of the line or space they are placed on. Once placed on the staff the note will then indicate the duration and the pitched sound of the note.

Octave

Two notes with the same name, but at a different location on the fretboard. One example of an octave would be using the notes C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C (C scale); these notes form an octave from one C note to the next C note. One example of an octave in “E” would be to play the top “E” string open, then play each “E” note until you reach the 12th fret (E).

Open String

Refers to a string that is played without fretting a note.

Open String Chord

Chords that contain open strings.

Open Tunings

There are many different “Open Tunings” used by guitarists, and can be described as the result of changing the tuning of one or more strings from the standard E-A-D-G-B-E tuning.

Outro

The last few measures of a song, usually made up of four or eight bars of the chorus.

Pentatonic Scale

A scale that consists of five notes per octave – a very popular rock scale.

Picking

Striking or Plucking to produce sounds on the guitar (using picks, fingers, etc).

Pitch

Any sound (frequency) generated by vibrating a string (the high or low of a sound). On some analog tuners the center position pitch (frequency) is 440Hz (usually shown as A = 440).

Quarter Note

The Quarter note (beat) is one beat long (in four / four time, there would be 4 quarter notes and each would receive one beat).

Quarter Rest

The quarter note rest symbol will indicate silence for one beat.

Relative Key

A relative minor key (scale) is built upon the sixth note of a major key (scale). Every major key will have a relative minor key.

Relative Pitch

Best described as the “comparison” of one pitch to another pitch (example would be tuning a string so that it matches the pitch of another string).

Repeat Sign

The repeat sign is shown by placing two dots before a double line at the beginning and end of a section of music (this will indicate that this section of music is to be repeated).

Rest

A symbol that is placed on the musical staff that indicates a silence (depending on the rest symbol shown). See eighth rest, half rest, quarter rest, and whole rest.

Rhythm

The rhythm drives the music, and controls the movement (timing).

Ritardando

Describes the act of gradually delaying or slowing down the tempo of a piece of music.

Root (Root Note)

The “root” is the first note of a scale and can indicate the “key.” Chords can be named for their root note, but the root note does not necessarily have to be played.

Scale

Basically a scale is a series of notes in an ascending or descending order. There are many different Modes of scales – such as the Major, Ionian, Dorian, Lydian (and more...). The main scale used in rock music is the “minor pentatonic” scale (a 5-note scale).

Sharp

Raises a note or chord one half-step in pitch (raising a note one fret equals a half-step).

Slur

Often used with the Legato technique – means to smoothly glide over a series of notes, without a break.

Sound

Can be described as any “sound” made by a noise or a tone.

Staccato

A technique using only alternating picking.

Staff

Consists of five lines and four spaces, notes are placed on the lines and spaces to represent notes.

Standard Tuning

The standard tuning for a guitar is E-A-D-G-B-E (low string to high string).

Stem

A vertical line that appears above or below a note.

Strumming

Strumming can be achieved by using a pick, or using fingers. The act of striking (brushing across) two or more strings simultaneously using up or down strokes (or a combination of up and down strokes).

Sustain

Is the length of time (the duration) that a guitar or bass string vibrates. The longer a note can be heard, the longer the sustain.

Syncopate

To purposely play a rhythm off-beat (also stressing or accenting a weak beat).

Tablature (TAB)

An easier way of reading and writing music. Most guitar music books these days are written in TAB – all guitarists and bass players should be familiar with reading tablature. One difference between Reading music and Tablature is that with Reading music you are actually reading notes, and with Tablature you are reading numbers that indicate frets (notes) on the guitar or bass.

Tempo

Best described as the “speed” (or rate of speed) of a piece of music.

Three / Four Time

Three / Four time is a time signature that indicates that there are three beats per measure, and that each quarter note will receive one beat.

Tie

Is a curved line that joins (connects) two notes of the same pitch – these notes are played as “one” using the time value of both notes.

Timbre

A term used to define the “quality” of a tone.

Time Signature

The fraction looking symbol (or sign) at the beginning of a piece of music (right after the clef sign) that indicates how many beats in per measure (top number), and how long each beat will last (bottom number). See Four/Four, Three/Four Time.

Tone

The combination of pitch, duration, dynamics, and sound character (quality) produced by any instrument or equipment used by the instrument. Tone can be defined as a sound produced by “regular” vibrations.

Transcribe (Transcription)

Refers to the breakdown (dissection) of a piece of recorded music, and writing it down (usually note for note).

Transpose (Transposing)

Is best described as changing the “key” of a piece of music (to a different key).

Tremolo

A technique that uses a very rapid down-up movement of the pick. Also a term used for whammy bar, tremolo arm, and vibrato.

Triad

Basically a “three note” chord.

Triplets

In Music Theory triplets can be described as 3 notes played in the time of two notes.

Two / Four Time

Two / Four time is a time signature that indicates that there are two beats per measure, and that each quarter note will receive one beat.

Up Stroke / Up Pick

Refers to the pick hand strumming or picking from bottom to top (upward).

Verse

The part of a song (or piece of music) that comes after the intro and leads up to the chorus (the part of the song that tells the story).

Voicing

The arrangement of notes of a chord. Also the arrangement (or placement) of a melody or bass line within a harmonic progression.

Whole Note

The Whole note is four beats long (twice that of a half note). Also described as one beat that lasts for a whole measure (bar) with a time signature of Four/Four.

Whole Rest

The Whole note rest symbol will indicate silence for four beats.

Whole Step

A whole step is equal to two frets on the guitar or bass guitar. For example: An “F” note is one whole step away from a “G” note.