

Tempo is the rate of speed at which the beat in a music composition is performed. Earlier in this chapter, we referred to fast and slow performances of note values. The traditional language of choice for words such as fast and slow is Italian; however, one might encounter descriptions of tempo in other languages as well, most notably, German and French.

Words signifying tempo are usually placed above the staff. Below is a list of some of the Italian words used to indicate the relative speed of the music, progressing from slower to faster tempos:

<i>largo</i>	very slow	<i>moderato</i>	moderate (faster than <i>andante</i>)
<i>grave</i>	slow, serious	<i>allegretto</i>	moderately fast
<i>lento</i>	slow	<i>allegro</i>	fast
<i>larghetto</i>	slow (not as slow as <i>largo</i>)	<i>vivace</i>	fast
<i>adagio</i>	slow	<i>presto</i>	very fast
<i>adagietto</i>	slow (faster than <i>adagio</i>)	<i>prestissimo</i>	as fast as possible
<i>andante</i>	moderately slow		

The tempo signs shown above are general and imprecise. Any two musicians will probably have a slightly different feeling for what is very slow, slow, moderately slow, moderate, moderately fast, fast, very fast, and so on. Since the early nineteenth century, composers have been using a device called a **metronome** to provide more precise tempo indications. The metronome produces a steady and repeated click that helps the musician to know exactly how fast or slow to play a composition. Usually, a metronome marking appears at the beginning of a composition in one of two ways: M.M. ♩ = 60 or ♩ = 60.

The M.M. abbreviation stands for Maelzel's metronome, after Johann Maelzel (1772–1838), the first person to mass produce and popularize the device. The note value preceding the equal sign designates the value of the beat, or pulse. The number of clicks the metronome generates ranges from 40 to about 208 beats per minute. In the present instance, the number 60 indicates 60 clicks per minute. Although a quarter note was given here, any note value may be used as part of the metronome marking.

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