

# Dynamics

People typically speak at many different volumes—a soft whisper, a conversational tone, or a shrill yell. Music is the same way; we rarely play music at the same volume at all times. Even within a single sentence, the volume of the voice fluctuates slightly. **Dynamics** is the word musicians use to describe volume, or how loud or soft music should be played.

## History of Dynamics

Dynamic markings are prominent in music today. In fact, it is rare to see a piece of music without some sort of dynamic marking indicated. However, it was not always so. Until the late 1700s, dynamics were rarely written in the music, though musicians would still insert their own.

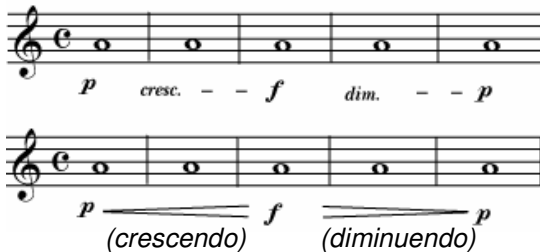
The Renaissance composer **Giovanni Gabrieli** was one of the first to use dynamics in his music.

While Mozart used six terms (*below right*) to indicate dynamics, some composers, like Brahms, use a range of Italian terms to indicate what dynamic they want.

As instruments developed and became capable of playing a larger **dynamic range** (the distance between how soft and how loud one can play), composers began inserting more and more words to describe the relative levels of volume they wanted their pieces to be played at.

Because musicians traditionally use Italian words and phrases, dynamic markings are written as abbreviations of those Italian terms. The list below contains the most common dynamic markings as well as their full name and translation:

Furthermore, dynamics are not only “terraced”. Sometimes music moves gradually or suddenly between dynamic levels. We call the gradual changes between dynamics either **crescendo** (“gradually louder”) and **diminuendo** (“gradually softer”, also called **decrescendo**). Sometimes they are written below the music (usually abbreviated *cresc.* or *dim.*) or, more commonly, they are written using the symbols below:



*pp*—*pianissimo*: very soft  
*p*—*piano*: soft  
*mp*—*mezzo piano*: medium soft  
*mf*—*mezzo forte*: medium loud\* (pronounced “FOR-tay”)  
*f*—*forte*: loud  
*ff*—*fortissimo*: very loud

\**forte* translates literally to “strong”

Notice that the *crescendo* marking opens up and the *diminuendo* marking closes down. Though these two lines of music look different, they mean the exact same thing.

For an example of a very gradual *crescendo*, listen to [Ravel’s Bolero, played by the Copenhagen Philharmonic](#).

There are many more terms to describe dynamics, but one of the most important is *subito*: “suddenly”. This word is often combined with other terms to create immediate dynamic contrast, like *sfz* (*subito forzando*, or “**sforzando**”, meaning “strong sudden force”). Listen to [Haydn’s Symphony No. 94 in G, ‘Surprise’ - Andante](#) for an example of *sforzando*.

