

Tempo in Music

Music is many things, but very rarely is it completely static; it is constantly changing and morphing, creating interest for the listener. One way composers create this type of interest is by the manipulation of musical “time” in a piece, or the speed or rate at which music happens. Since we traditionally use Italian for musical terms, we call musical time “**tempo**”, the Italian word for “time”.

It might be slow, fast, or in-between, but tempo is one of the most important ingredients for making music. We wouldn't play parade music very slowly, nor would we play a funeral dirge at an upbeat tempo. So, over time, musicians have developed a system of useful terms and **tempo markings**, allowing them to quickly and efficiently recognize the given tempo of a song.

The metronome (*below*) was developed by the German inventor **Johann Maelzel** in 1816 (though it was invented two years earlier by Dietrich Winkel).



Originally, this system consisted of several Italian terms. But with the advent of the **metronome**, a mechanical device used for keeping time, musicians could calculate how many **beats per minute** were occurring in the music. Beats per minute is a measurement of just that: the amount of beats that occur in a minute, and is usually abbreviated “**b.p.m.**” So, for instance, a watch clicks once a second, 60 times a minute. Therefore, a watch clicks at 60 bpm. Eventually, each of the Italian terms would be associated with a specific bpm so the terms would be more accurate. Here are the most general of those terms, with their translation and approximate bpm:

Largo—very slowly and broad (40 - 58 bpm)
Adagio—slow (60 - 76 bpm)
Andante—walking speed (80 - 106 bpm)
Moderato—moderate pace (108 - 118 bpm)
Allegro—fast, cheerful (120 - 168 bpm)
Presto—very fast (170 - 220 b.p.m)

But that's not all. Tempo doesn't always stay the same throughout a piece. In fact, it may change frequently throughout a work to generate interest or certain feelings for the listener. When music moves from one tempo to another, either slowing down or speeding up, composers will use the Italian terms *ritardando* (meaning “slow down”) or *accelerando* (meaning “speed up”). These two terms are often abbreviated “rit.” or “accel.” in music (see below):



Notice the *rit.* marking, as well as the hyphens (“- - - -”) that draw out the tempo slowing over several measures.

Because tempo is such a basic building block of music, a piece can take on a completely different character depending on who is conducting and how they interpret tempo. Try listening to these two versions of Bach's Cello Suite No. 1, Prelude to see if you can hear the difference (besides the instruments):

[Jacob Reuven, Mandola](#)
[Mischa Maiskey, Cello](#)

