

What are they?

Music Notation is a universal language, understood by flautists, cellists, pianists and more. In fact, apart from a few guitarists' obsession with reading nothing but tablature or tab, it's pretty much totally universal. Unlike tab, it tells you what you must achieve, not how you must achieve it, and it leaves sufficient room for the player to consider alternative fingerings, for example.

But whilst it expresses pretty concisely the pitch and relative lengths of all the notes, it gives little clue whether the music is fast and furious, or slow and gentle. It gives few indications about how to shape the music.

"Italian Terms" is a catch-all name for the narrative or descriptive mark-ups that express, in plain language, how to shape the piece. Italian is used simply because it provides a standard vocabulary that, once learned, is understood the world over.

This article defines some of the more common terms.

Accelerando or Accel.....	Becoming gradually faster
Ad lib or Ad Libitum.....	At (the performer's) pleasure
Adagio.....	Slow and leisurely
Affetuoso.....	Tenderly
Affretando.....	Hurrying, pressing onwards
Agitato.....	Agitated
Allargando.....	Broadening out, often with an increase in tone
Allegretto.....	Slightly less than Allegro ("A little allegro")
Allegro.....	Lively, reasonably fast
Amoroso.....	Loving
Andante.....	Literally Walking - at a moderate pace
Andantino.....	Usually a little faster than Andante. Can sometimes mean the opposite!
Animato.....	Animated
A piacere.....	At pleasure
Appassionato.....	Passionately
Assai.....	Very
A tempo.....	Become normal speed after a diversion
Attacca.....	Go on straight away
Ben, bene.....	Well (Ben Marcato : Well marked)
Bis.....	Twice
Brillante.....	Sparkling, brilliant
Brio.....	Vigour. (Con Brio : With Vigour)
Calando.....	Decreasing tone and speed
Cantabile or Cantando.....	In a singing style
Capo.....	The beginning (literally, the head)
Capriccio.....	A caprice - a piece in light-hearted style
Coda.....	(Literally tail) - a passage to conclude a piece or movement
Col, colla.....	With the
Come.....	As (Come Prima : As At First) (Come Sopra : As Above)
Comodo.....	Convenient (usually in the sense of "at a convenient pace")
Con.....	With (Con Moto : With Movement)
Crescendo or cresc.....	Getting louder
Da.....	From, of
Da Capo or D C.....	From the beginning
Dal Segno or D §.....	From the sign (§)
Deciso.....	Decisively, firmly
Decrescendo.....	Becoming gradually softer
Delicato.....	Delicately
Diminuendo or dim.....	Becoming gradually softer
Dolce.....	Sweetly
Dolore.....	Grief, sorrow
En dehors (Fr).....	Prominently or emphasised
Energico.....	With energy
Espressivo or Espress.....	With expression, with feeling
Estinto.....	As quiet as possible (literally extinguished)

Felice.....	Happy
Feroce.....	Fierce
Fine.....	The end. DC Al Fine - back to the start, end at Fine
Forte or <i>f</i>	Loud
Fortissimo or <i>ff</i>	Very Loud
Forzando or <i>fz</i> or <i>sfz</i>	With a strong accent (literally forced)
Fuoco.....	Fire
Furioso.....	Furiously
Giocoso.....	Gay, merry
Giusto.....	Strict, exact (Giusto tempo : In strict time)
Grandioso.....	Grandly
Grave.....	Very Slow
Grazioso.....	Gracefully
Impetuoso.....	Impetuously
Incalzando.....	Increasing speed, with an implication of increasing thickness of sound
Lacrimoso.....	Sadly (literally tearfully)
Langsam (Ger).....	Slow
Largo.....	Slow and stately, broad
Larghetto.....	Less slow than Largo
Legato.....	Smoothly
Leggerio.....	Lightly
Lento.....	Slowly
Loco.....	(Literally place or in place) - restore normal pitch after 8va
Ma.....	But (Ma non troppo : But not too much)
Maestoso.....	Majestically
Mancando.....	Dying away
Marcato.....	Marked, accented
Marcia.....	A march
Marziale.....	Martial (not to be confused with marital!)
Meno.....	Less (Meno Mosso : Less Movement)
Mesto.....	Sadly
Mezzo forte or <i>mf</i>	Moderately Loud
Mezzo piano or <i>mp</i>	Moderately Soft
Misterioso.....	Mysteriously
Moderato.....	Moderately (applied to tempo)
Molto.....	Much
Morendo.....	Dying away
Mosso.....	Movement
Moto.....	Movement
Non troppo.....	Not too much
Obbligato.....	Cannot be omitted
Op. or Opus.....	Work (a published composition)
Ossia.....	Or (denoting a choice)
Passionato.....	Passionately
Patetico.....	With feeling or pathos
Perdendosi.....	Dying away
Pesante.....	Heavily
Piacevole.....	Pleasingly
Piangevole.....	Plaintively
Pianissimo or <i>pp</i>	Very soft
Piano or <i>p</i>	Soft
Piu.....	More (Piu Mosso : More movement)
Pizzicato or <i>pizz</i>	Literally plucked (but on the guitar, deliberately damped)
Pochettino.....	Rather little
Pochissimo.....	Very little
Poco.....	A little (Poco a poco : Little by little or gradually)
Precipitato, Precipitoso.....	Impetuously
Presto.....	Very quick
Prestissimo.....	As fast as possible
Primo.....	First

Quasi.....	As if, almost
Rallentando or Rall.....	Becoming gradually slower
Rinforzando.....	Reinforcing
Risoluto.....	Boldly
Ritardando or Ritard.....	Becoming gradually slower
Ritenuto or Rit.....	Held back (Slower at once)
Ritmico.....	Rhythmically
Rubato.....	Robbed, stolen - making a note or notes longer at the expense of others
Scherzo.....	A Joke
Scherzando.....	Playfully
Sec, Secco.....	Detached (literally dry)
Segno.....	A § sign (See D §)
Semplice.....	Simple
Sempre.....	Always
Senza.....	Without
Sforzando or <i>sf</i> or <i>sfz</i>	With a sudden accent
Simile.....	In a similar manner
Slargando/Slentando.....	Gradually slower
Smorzando.....	Dying away
Soave.....	Gentle, smooth
Sopra.....	Above
Spiritoso.....	Spirited
Staccato or stacc.....	Short, detached
Strepitoso.....	Noisy, boisterous
Stringendo.....	Gradually faster
Subito or Sub.....	Suddenly
Tacet (Lat).....	It is silent
Tempo.....	The speed of the music
Tempo di gavotta.....	In the time (and style) of a gavotte
Tempo Primo or Tempo I.....	Resume the original speed
Teneramente.....	Tenderly
Tenuto or ten.....	Held
Tranquillo.....	Quietly
Troppo.....	Too much. (Ma non troppo - but not too much)
Vivace.....	Lively, Quick
Volante.....	Flying
VS (Volti Subito).....	Turn the page quickly

There is a page of humorous definitions at www.derek-hasted.co.uk/definitions/