

Tempo markings

Musical **tempo** refers to the pacing of a piece and is an essential element of music-making. Historically, tempi were not marked with specific BPM (beats per measure) indications. This practice has become common only since the 19th century, when the metronome was invented.

Before the metronome, tempo indications were notated in words (mostly in Italian) that also conveyed moods. In some eras and genres, musical convention has been so strong that no tempo indication would be necessary.

Nevertheless, the most commonly used Italian words are as follows:

TEMPO MARKINGS

Presto - fast
Allegro - cheerful and quickly
Moderato - moderately
Andante - walking
Adagio - slowly
Lento - very slow

QUALIFIERS

assai - very
non troppo - not too much
molto - very, as in *Molto Allegro* or *Adagio Molto*
poco - slightly, as in *Poco Adagio*
più - more
meno - less

MOOD INDICATORS

maestoso - majestic
sostenuto - sustained
dolce - sweetly
morendo - dying (away)

Metronome manufacturers often assign BPM values to these and other terms, but these values are by no means correct for every piece. The tempo and number of beats per minute in a piece will depend on the actual rhythms in the music itself, as well as the performer and the style of the music. If a musical passage does not make sense, the tempo might be too slow. On the other hand, if the fastest notes of a work are impossible to play well, the tempo is probably too fast.

While there is no simple solution to finding appropriate tempi, it is crucial that musicians understand all the indications in the music they are learning. Students are encouraged to listen to recordings and live performances as well as remember that music-making is an art and not a precise science.