

Basic Music Reading part 3: musical expression

In Parts 1 and 2 you learned **what** to sing; how to read the notes and how to find them on a keyboard. This part is about expression; **how** to sing. The key terms are **dynamics** and **articulation**.

- **Dynamics** is pretty much loudness.
- **Articulation** is how you get louder and softer and how you add emphasis to a note.

The director's gestures:

The director is all about musical expression. His/her job is to get the chorus to express the music in a meaningful way. Just listen to a good chorus, and you'll hear them constantly getting louder and softer. The musical score usually includes dynamics and articulation instructions ... BUT no matter what is written in the score, **whatever the director wants is how you sing it**.

Assuming the director has two arms and is holding a white stick in the right hand:

- Right hand gives you the beat.
- Left hand shows you how loud to sing (dynamics).
- Either hand can be used to cue the singers, to do cutoffs, and other special messages.
- Both hands waving wildly, jumping up and down, and throwing the music in the air means it's time for a coffee break. Actually, you'll see a lot of that. Don't let it worry you.

Loudness

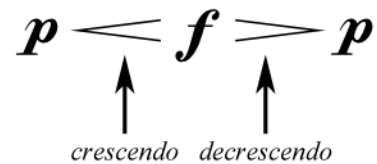
is the easiest part of reading music. Just Google "musical dynamics". The loudness is usually shown above or below the score. Here are the basic marks:

Dynamics						
	Softest -----> Loudest					
Symbol:	<i>pp</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>mp</i>	<i>mf</i>	<i>f</i>	<i>ff</i>
Italian:	Pianissimo	Piano	Mezzo Piano	Mezzo Forte	Forte	Fortissimo
English:	Very Soft	Soft	Medium Soft	Medium Loud	Loud	Very Loud

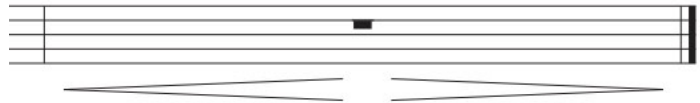
Unless told otherwise, the default loudness is "mf" (mezzo forte) which means "just sing normally". Anything with a "p" in it means quieter than normal. Anything with an "f" means louder than normal.

Changing loudness:

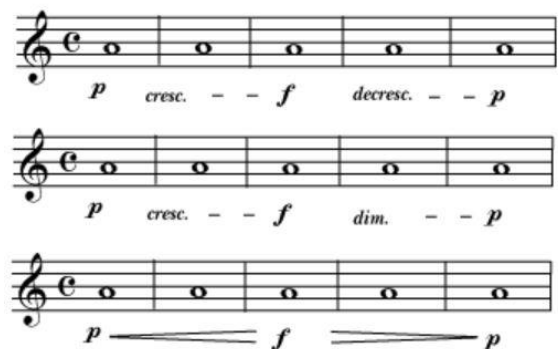
Most of the time you won't be just jumping from one loudness to another. Instead, you would want to fade up or down. This is shown with **crescendo** and **decrescendo** marks. They're really pretty obvious; you sing quiet at the pointy end and loud at the open end.



And logically enough, many musical phrases start quiet, then get loud, then go back to quiet. You might hear this spoken of as a "hairpin" phrase, or maybe a "football" phrase.



Sometimes, just to make life difficult, you will see "cresc", "deces", or "dim". They are just words for the hairpins. "Get louder" is "cresc" (crescendo). "Get quieter" is "deces" (decrescendo) or "dim" (diminuendo).



Here's an example of dynamic instructions. All three lines say exactly the same thing just with different markings. Each line goes from quiet, to loud, then back to quiet. Hey, I never promised music notation would be consistent.

Articulation:

Articulation marks show **how you sing** a note or group of notes: See Wikipedia "List of Musical Symbols"

Staccato: a dot over the note to show you sing the note very short. Sort of a pop.



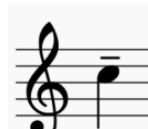
Accent:

Emphasize the note.

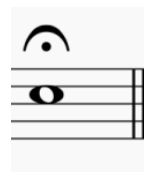


Tenuto:

Emphasize the word so the audience will understand it very clearly.



And of course the Fermata (aka the Bird's Eye): This symbol really, truly means **"hold the note until the director tells you to stop."** I'm not kidding.



Ties / Slurs:

In this example, notice the arcs above and below some notes. These are called **slurs**.



A slur over a group of notes means "**sing these notes very smoothly.**" As opposed to staccato, accent, or tenuto. You just kind of slide from note to note. **No taking a breath until the slur is over.**

If the slur connects two of the same note, it is called a **tie**. Obviously, ties are usually shorter than slurs.

Most of the time, slurs connect notes you have to sing with one breath. Whenever a longer group of notes (more than you can sing in one breath) is smoothly connected, this is called "**legato**" or a "**legato phrase**".



Here's an example with three **ties** and one huge **slur**. Take a big breath for this one!

By the way, see the dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note? Why didn't they just use two quarter notes? Or one half note? The answer is probably the lyrics. There must be some word that requires you to break it up that way. Keep an eye out for this sort of musical trickery.