

# Dynamics and Accents in Music

Page by: Catherine Schmidt-Jones

<https://cnx.org/contents/ufBZTimV@13/Dynamics-and-Accents-in-Music>

## Dynamics

Sounds, including music, can be barely audible, or loud enough to hurt your ears, or anywhere in between. When they want to talk about the loudness of a sound, scientists and engineers talk about [amplitude](#). Musicians talk about **dynamics**. The amplitude of a sound is a particular number, usually measured in decibels, but dynamics are relative; an orchestra playing fortissimo sounds much louder than a single violin playing fortissimo. The exact interpretation of each dynamic marking in a piece of music depends on:

- comparison with other dynamics in that piece
- the typical dynamic range for that instrument or ensemble
- the abilities of the performer(s)
- the traditions of the musical genre being performed
- the acoustics of the performance space

Traditionally, dynamic markings are based on Italian words, although there is nothing wrong with simply writing things like "quietly" or "louder" in the music. Forte means loud and piano means quiet. The instrument commonly called the "piano" by the way, was originally called a "pianoforte" because it could play dynamics, unlike earlier popular keyboard instruments like the harpsichord and spinet.

## Typical Dynamic Markings

<b><i>mf</i></b>	<b>mezzo forte</b>	=	<b>medium loud</b> (pronounced "MET-soh FOR-tay")
<b><i>f</i></b>	<b>forte</b>	=	<b>loud</b> ("FOR-tay")
<b><i>ff</i></b>	<b>fortissimo</b>	=	<b>very loud</b> ("for-TISS-im-oh")
<b><i>fff</i></b>	<b>fortisissimo</b>	=	<b>very, very loud</b> ("FOR-tiss-SISS-im-oh")
<b><i>ffff</i></b>	<b>and so on...</b>		

<b><i>mp</i></b>	<b>mezzo piano</b>	=	<b>medium quiet</b> ("MET-soh PYAN-oh")
<b><i>p</i></b>	<b>piano</b>	=	<b>quiet</b> ("PYAN-oh")
<b><i>pp</i></b>	<b>piannissimo</b>	=	<b>very quiet</b> ("PEE-an-ISS-im-oh")
<b><i>ppp</i></b>	<b>pianississimo</b>	=	<b>very, very quiet</b> ("PEE-an-ISS-ISS-im-oh")
<b><i>pppp</i></b>	<b>and so on...</b>		

When a composer writes a forte into a part, followed by a piano, the intent is for the music to be loud, and then suddenly quiet. If the composer wants the change from one dynamic level to another to be gradual, different markings are added. A crescendo (pronounced "cresh-EN-doe") means "gradually get louder"; a decrescendo or diminuendo means "gradually get quieter".

### Gradual Dynamic Markings

The image shows three musical staves, each with five measures of music. Each measure contains a single quarter note on a treble clef staff with a common time signature (C).  
 - The first staff starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a crescendo (*cresc.*) over two measures, reaching a forte (*f*) dynamic in the third measure. It then has a decrescendo (*decresc.*) over two measures, returning to a piano (*p*) dynamic in the fifth measure.  
 - The second staff follows the same pattern: *p*, *cresc.*, *f*, *dim.*, *p*.  
 - The third staff uses slanted lines to indicate the gradual changes: a line slanting up from *p* to *f*, and a line slanting down from *f* to *p*.

Here are three different ways to write the same thing: start softly (piano), gradually get louder (crescendo) until the music is loud (forte), then gradually get quieter (decrescendo or diminuendo) until it is quiet (piano) again.

### Accents

A composer may want a particular note to be louder than all the rest, or may want the very beginning of a note to be loudest. **Accents** are markings that are used to indicate these especially-strong-sounding notes. There are a few different types of written accents (see [Figure](#)), but, like dynamics, the proper way to perform a given accent also depends on the instrument playing it, as well as the style and period of the music. Some accents may even be played by making the note longer or shorter than the other notes, in addition to, or even instead of being, louder. (See [articulation](#) for more about accents.)

### Common Accents



*sf*  
(sforzando)      *fp*  
(fortepiano)

The exact performance of each type of accent depends on the instrument and the style and period of the music, but the sforzando and fortepiano-type accents are usually louder and longer, and more likely to be used in a long note that starts loudly and then suddenly gets much softer. Caret-type accents are more likely to be used to mark shorter notes that should be stronger than unmarked notes.