

Music is the language of a soul.

What is Music?

Music surrounds us. It enriches our environment. In our homes and cars, in cafes and restaurants, indoors and outdoors, music pours from speakers, sound systems, mp3 players, cell phones, television sets and computers. We dance, march and jog to the sound of it. Occasionally we listen to music at a concert hall or stadium. Sometimes, we listen to it to help us fall asleep. Music is everywhere in our lives, so much so that it is impossible to imagine a world without it. Remarkably, we can make our own music by singing or playing a musical instrument.

Music excites the imagination. It reflects feelings and moods. Imitating the intonations of our voice, it can sound like sighing, sobbing or laughter. It asks questions, gives answers, and tells a story. Sometimes music imitates the sounds of our natural world. In some compositions it is easy to recognize a bird call, the roar of a bear, a murmuring brook, the buzz of a bee, or thunder from a bolt of lightning. Other times it can reproduce the sounds of man-made objects like a train, clock or chime.

What makes music different from all the spontaneous sounds we hear around us? Music organizes its sounds in a special and pleasing way that can be written down and repeated.

Before learning about how musical sounds are organized, it is important to understand how to distinguish one sound from another. All sounds have characteristics. We can use these characteristics to describe how one sound differs from another.

- Sounds can be described as being high or low. The sound of a chirping bird is said to be higher than the sound of a roaring bear. In music, this high or low quality is known as *pitch*.
- Sounds can be described as short or long. The sound of a train whistle would be considered as long; the sound of a handclap would be described as short. In the world of music, this characteristic – of sounds being long or short – is called *duration*.

- Sounds can also be described as being loud or soft. The sound of a fire truck siren would be considered loud; the sound of a whisper would be considered soft. In music this property – of loudness or softness – is called *dynamics*.

When we tap our foot to music we are feeling the *beat* of the music, the pulse that gives music its steady pace. Like the windshield wipers in a car, sometimes the beat is slow, other times it is fast. The speed of playing a musical composition is called *tempo*. Changing the tempo can dramatically change the character of the music being played. Sounds of different durations over the beat form the *rhythm* of music, making it exciting by giving it drive and direction.

When composers write music, they organize sounds by applying all these characteristics – pitch, duration, dynamics, beat, tempo and rhythm – to a series of musical sentences called musical phrases. Musical phrases carry the sense of musical composition. A series of these phrases placed into a special order builds a musical story. The completed story is referred to as a musical piece or composition.

Composers need to be able to write down their compositions so that everybody can read and play them. For this they need a musical language whose special symbols – like our alphabet and punctuation – are musical notes, rests, staves, clefs, bar lines, time and key signatures.

Playing a musical piece is like reciting a poem but instead of speaking words we use a musical instrument. In the same way that understanding the poem we're reciting helps other people understand and enjoy it, when we learn a new piece of music we should think about the story the composer wanted to tell and how we can make the best musical sense of it.

Playing a musical instrument can be very interesting for both the player and the listener. It's just as important to be a good listener as a good player of your music. If you like your own playing, chances are that other listeners will like it too.

Like other skills and activities, playing a musical instrument has rules. There are not many of them, but it takes time to learn to do them well, and that means practice! Sometimes learning a new piece is challenging, but with patience and diligence, in a while, you will be able to communicate a musical story or composition! Reaching that goal brings not only satisfaction but also a lot of fun.

Now let's get started!