Basic Tempo Markings

From fastest to slowest, the common tempo markings are:

- **Prestissimo** — extremely fast (200 and above bpm)
- **Vivacissimamente** — adverb of vivacissimo, "very quickly and lively"
- **Vivacissimo** — very fast and lively
- **Presto** — very fast (168–200 bpm)
- **Allegrissimo** — very fast
- **Vivo** — lively and fast
- **Vivace** — lively and fast (≈140 bpm)
- **Allegro** — fast and bright or "march tempo" (120–168 bpm)
- **Allegro moderato** — moderately quick (112–124 bpm)
- **Allegretto** — moderately fast (but less so than allegro)
- **Allegretto grazioso** — moderately fast and gracefully
- **Moderato** — moderately (108–120 bpm)
- **Moderato espressivo** — moderately with expression
- **Andantino** — alternatively faster or slower than andante
- **Andante** — at a walking pace (76–108 bpm)
- **Tranquillamente** — adverb of tranquillo, "tranquilly"
- **Tranquillo** — tranquilly
- **Adagietto** — rather slow (70–80 bpm)
- **Adagio** — slow and stately (literally, "at ease") (66–76 bpm)
- **Grave** — slow and solemn
- **Larghetto** — rather broadly (60–66 bpm)
- **Largo** — Very slow (40–60 bpm), like lento
- **Lento** — very slow (40–60 bpm)
- **Largamente/Largo** — "broadly", very slow (40 bpm and below)
- **Larghissimo** — very very slow (20 bpm and below)

Articulation Terms:

- **Marcato** — marching tempo "Stacotto-ish" Strong
- **Misterioso** - slightly slower than marcato
- **Tempo comodo** — at a comfortable speed
- **Tempo giusto** — at a consistent speed
- **L'istesso tempo** — at the same speed
- **Non troppo** — not too much (e.g. Allegro ma non troppo, "fast but not too much")
- **Assai** — rather, very, enough as is needed (e.g. Adagio assai)
- **Con** — with (e.g. Andante con moto, "at a walking pace with motion")
- **Molto** — much, very (e.g. Molto allegro)
- **Poco** — a little (e.g. Poco allegro)
- **Quasi** — as if (e.g. Più allegro quasi presto, "faster, as if presto")
- **tempo di...** — the speed of a ... (e.g. Tempo di valse (speed of a waltz), Tempo di marcia (speed of a march))

All of these markings are based on a few root words such as 'allegro', 'largo', 'adagio', 'vivace', 'presto' 'andante' and 'lento'. By adding the -issimo ending the word is amplified, by adding the -ino ending the word is diminished, and by adding the -etto ending the word is endeared. Many
tempos also can be translated with the same meaning, and it is up to the player to interpret the speed that best suits the period, composer, and individual work.

N.B. Metronome markings are a guide only and depending on the time signature and the piece itself, these figures may not be appropriate in every circumstance.

**Common qualifiers**

- **assai** — very, very much, as in Allegro assai (but also understood by some as "enough")
- **con brio** — with vigour or spirit
- **con fuoco** — with fire
- **con moto** — with motion
- **non troppo** — not too much, e.g. Allegro non troppo (or Allegro ma non troppo) means "Fast, but not too much."
- **non tanto** — not so much
- **molto** — much, very, as in Molto allegro (very fast and bright) or Adagio molto
- **poco** — slightly, little, as in Poco adagio
- **più** — more, as in Più allegro; used as a relative indication when the tempo changes
- **meno** — less, as in Meno presto
- **poco a poco** — little by little
- In addition to the common allegretto, composers freely apply Italian diminutive and superlative suffixes to various tempo indications: andantino, larghetto, adagietto, and larghissimo.

**Mood markings with a tempo connotation**

Some markings that primarily mark a mood (or character) also have a tempo connotation:

- **Agitato** — agitated, with implied quickness
- **Appassionato** — to play passionately
- **Dolce** — sweetly
- **Espressivo** - expressively
- **Furioso** — to play in an angry or furious manner
- **Giocoso** — merrily
- **Lacrimoso** — tearfully, sadly
- **Maestoso** — majestic or stately (which generally indicates a solemn, slow movement)
- **Morendo** — dying
- **Sostenuto** — sustained, sometimes with a slackening of tempo
- **Scherzando** — playful
- **Vivace** — lively and fast, over 140 bpm (which generally indicates a fast movement)

**Terms for change in tempo**

Composers may use expressive marks to adjust the tempo:

- **Accelerando** — speeding up (abbreviation: accel.)
- **Allargando** — growing broader; decreasing tempo, usually near the end of a piece
- **Meno mosso** — less movement or slower
- **Mosso** — movement, more lively, or quicker, much like più mosso, but not as extreme
• **Più mosso** — more movement or faster
• **Rallentando** — slowing down, especially near the end of a section (abbreviation: rall.)
• **Ritardando** — slowing down (abbreviation: rit. or more specifically, ritard.)
• **Ritenuto** — slightly slower; temporarily holding back. (Note that the abbreviation for ritardando can also be rit. Thus a more specific abbreviation is riten. Also sometimes ritenuto does not reflect a tempo change but a character change instead.)
• **Rubato** — free adjustment of tempo for expressive purposes
• **Stretto** — rushing ahead; temporarily speeding up
• **Stringendo** — pressing on faster

While the base tempo indication (such as *allegro*) appears in large type above the staff, these adjustments typically appear below the staff or (in the case of keyboard instruments) in the middle of the grand staff.

They generally designate a *gradual* change in tempo; for immediate tempo shifts, composers normally just provide the designation for the new tempo. (Note, however, that when *Più Mosso* or *Meno Mosso* appears in large type above the staff, it functions as a new tempo, and thus implies an immediate change.) Several terms control how large and how gradual this change are:

• **poco a poco** — bit by bit, gradually
• **subito** — suddenly
• **poco** — a little
• **molto** — a lot
• **assai** — quite a lot, very

After a tempo change, a composer may return to a previous tempo in two different ways:

• **a tempo** - returns to the base tempo after an adjustment (e.g. "ritardando ... *a tempo" undoes the effect of the ritardando).
• **Tempo primo or Tempo I** - denotes an immediate return to the piece's original base tempo after a section in a different tempo (e.g. "Allegro ... Lento ... *Tempo I*" indicates a return to the Allegro). This indication often functions as a structural marker in pieces in binary form.