

Alto

A designation for a range of the human voice, between soprano and tenor. Both women and men perform in the alto range.

Aria

A song movement which features a soloist singing in a steady tempo (as opposed to the unmeasured, sung-speech style of the recitativ). In addition to the standard continuo accompaniment, an aria can call for a few additional instruments and sometimes even feature a solo instrument, such as the solo violin in “Erbarne dich”.

Bass

Used to describe a musical instrument and the lowest line of music, in this case it refers to a range of the human voice below tenor.

Bass line

The lowest written line of music, usually carried out by instruments such as cellos and double basses along with a doubling keyboard instrument such as the organ or harpsichord. In some instances, Bach composes a bass line for an instrument in a higher range, such as the oboe da caccia, but keeps the voice and other instrument or instruments above that range.

Chorale

A movement which typically features a four-part hymn supported by the orchestra such that the high-pitched instruments play the same line as the sopranos, mid-range instruments play the alto line, etc.; in a Lutheran service, chorale movements allowed the congregation to join in song.

Continuo

As in Basso Continuo, or “Continuous Bass.” Refers to the group of players who play the lowest line of the music, typically a keyboard instrument such as organ or harpsichord, sometimes a plucked instrument such as theorbo (bass lute), and a sustaining instrument such as the cello; bass instruments which provide the harmonic foundation throughout the entire Passion, even in solo vocal movements (for which the rest of the orchestra does not play).

Early music movement

A term used to describe a subset of the classical music world that consists of singers, players, conductors, scholars, ensembles, record labels, and instrument builders who are concerned with the performance of music in what is known as a “historically-informed” approach, most often employing “period instruments.” These are built or modified to reproduce the state in which they existed during a particular composer’s period of activity, and the appropriate techniques for their use are employed by the musicians, as well as study of any external stimuli that may have impacted the composer.

Evangelist

In St. Matthew, the role of the narrator sung by a tenor Evensong.

Forte, mezzo forte

Italian for “Strong” and “Half as Strong,” these words indicate dynamics, or how loud or soft to play or sing. These designate relative levels, and the musician must decide to what degree to play soft, for instance, and what to play softer than.

Haydn

Franz Josef Haydn, one of the Handel and Haydn Society’s namesakes, was chosen as such because, at the time of the Society’s founding in 1815, he represented “modern” choral composition, whereas Handel represented “ancient” music. He is credited with the popularization of both the symphony and string quartet, and composed copiously in both genres. He knew Mozart closely and gave Beethoven a few lessons; he was easily the most famous musician in Europe during the last third of the 18th century.

Motet

A sacred piece of choral music with multiple vocal parts but with no instrumental accompaniment.

Oboe da caccia

"Hunting oboe," a double reed woodwind instrument invented in Leipzig in the 1720s and constructed of leather-covered wood and a large bell. While it can traverse over two octaves, Bach prized its lower range and wrote for it extensively in cantatas and the passions, and is its most prominent exponent.

Oratorio

A large-scale, programmatic, multi-movement piece of music involving a chorus and orchestra featuring soloists. A Passion, such as that of St. Matthew, is an example of an oratorio.

Passion

An oratorio which depicts the arrest, trial, and crucifixion of Christ; Bach's two surviving Passions - St. Matthew and St. John - depict the story of Christ from the perspectives of the gospels of St. Matthew and St. John, respectively.

Pitch

A letter or name used to identify a particular frequency. For instance, "A" or "La" is the name given to the frequency 440Hz, to which a modern orchestra tunes its instruments. When the Handel and Haydn Society performs the music of Bach, we typically tune "A" to 415Hz, one of the most prevalent pitch levels in Bach's time.

Recitativ

Sung speech; a movement which features a soloist singing freely in the rhythm of ordinary speech (as opposed to a strictly metered tempo) accompanied only by continuo instruments .

Score

A visual representation of the music, consisting of all the various parts arranged one atop the other in order of vocal or instrumental range and instrumental family (winds, strings, etc).

Semitone (half step)

The distance between two adjacent keys on a keyboard; the difference between an "A" tuned to 440Hz and one tuned to 415Hz.

Soprano

A designation of the highest range of the human voice, typically sung by women and also boys, as was the case when Bach performed his *St. Matthew Passion*.

Tenor

A range of the human voice above bass and below alto, typically sung by men.

Turba Chorus

A chorus representing a crowd; in the St. Matthew Passion, the turba chorus plays the collective role of the citizens whom Pilate addresses when he asks "Welchen wollet ihr, dafl ich euch losgebe? Barrabam oder Jesum, von dem gesaget wird, er sei Christus? (Which one would ye have that I release unto you? Barab-bas or Jesus, of whom it is said that he is the Christ?)."

Viola da gamba

"Viol of the leg," a fretted bowed instrument held between the legs. It has six or seven strings and, unlike members of the violin family, is tuned in fourths with one third in the middle of its range. It is built in treble (high), tenor (mid), and bass (low) sizes, though all are held between the legs, and the player holds the bow beneath the stick, as opposed to a violin or cello bow, which is held above. It was the most popular stringed instrument in the 16th and 17th centuries but by Bach's time was largely overtaken by the violin family and was considered somewhat archaic, although Bach knew virtuoso performers on it. He composed three sonatas for gamba and continuo, and called for the instrument in many of his cantatas, the sixth Brandenburg concerto, and in both passions.