accidentals

The signs used in musical notation to indicate chromatic alterations or to cancel them. The alterations valid for the entire composition are contained in the *key signature, while the term “accidentals” refers specifically to those alterations introduced for single notes. The sharp raises the pitch one semitone, the flat lowers it one semitone; the double sharp and double flat raise and lower two semitones respectively; the natural cancels any of the other signs. In modern practice a sign affects the note immediately following and is valid for all the notes of the same pitch (but not in different octaves) within the same measure.

chromaticism

In the widest sense, the use of pitches not present in the diatonic scale but resulting from the subdivision of a diatonic whole tone into two semintonal intervals, e.g. of f-g into f-f-sharp and f-sharp-g. The application of this principle to all five whole tones of the diatonic scale produces the chromatic scale, with twelve tones to the octave.

church modes

The church modes are a medieval system of eight scales, each consisting of the tones of the C-major scale (white keys) but starting and closing on d, e, f, or g and limited to the range of about an octave. In the 16th century the eight-mode system of Gregorian chant was enlarged to include the two scales on a and the two scales on c (essentially our minor and major), thus bringing the number up to twelve.

clef

A sign written at the beginning of the staff in order to indicate the pitch of the notes. There are three such signs which respectively represent the tones g, c, and f, hence the names G-clef, C-clef, and F-clef. The G-clef, also called treble clef, is used on the second line of the staff. The F-clef, also called bass clef, is used on the fourth line. The C-clef is used in two positions, on the third line (alto clef) or on the fourth line (tenor clef).

consonance, dissonance

Terms used to describe the agreeable effect produced by certain intervals (consonant intervals, e.g. octave, third) compared to the disagreeable effect produced by others (dissonant intervals, e.g. second, seventh) or similar effects produced by chords. [a modern definition might avoid the value judgement]

Consonance and dissonance are the very foundation of tonal music, in which the former represents the element of normalcy and repose, the latter the no less important element of disturbance and tension.

diatonic

The natural scale, consisting of five whole tones and two semitones, as it is produced on the white keys of the keyboard. There is, of course, a corresponding scale in each key. Music is called “diatonic” if it is confined to the notes of this scale, to the exclusion of chromatic tones. “Diatonicism” means music whose tonality is predominantly diatonic, i.e. nonchromatic, such as the works of Haydn and Mozart.

enharmonic

In modern theory, tones that are actually one and the same degree of the chromatic scale but are named and written differently, e.g. g-sharp and a-flat, c-sharp and d-flat, etc. Enharmonic intervals are intervals consisting of the same tones but “spelled” differently. A well-known example of “enharmonic equivalents” is the diminished seventh chord, which can be written in four or more different ways.

harmony

The chordal (or vertical) structure of a musical composition, in contrast to counterpoint, i.e. the melodic (or horizontal) structure.

interval

The distance in pitch between two tones. The name of each interval indicates the number of tones in the diatonic scale it includes. The intervals larger than an octave are called compound intervals.
Although, e.g. a third always includes three tones, there are various kinds of third, according to whether the tones are whole tones or semitones, i.e. according to the number of chromatic steps contained in the interval.

**key**

The “main” key of a composition, i.e., the main note or “tonal center” to which all its notes are related and finally, by extension, the meaning of the entire tonal material itself in relation to its center. Thus, “key” is practically synonymous with *tonality*. There is, however, a distinct difference between key and scale, since numerous notes extraneous to the scale can be used in the key, e.g. as chromatic variants or in connection with modulations.

Corresponding to the 12 tones of the chromatic scale, there are 12 keys, one on C, one on C-sharp, etc. (this number is increased to 14 or 15 by the notational distinction between *enharmonic keys*, such as C-sharp and D-flat, or G-sharp and A-flat). With any given key there is a choice of modality, i.e., of certain alterations of the tones that form the scale. Thus, in C there is the choice between major (mode), minor (mode), and others derived from the *church mode*. Of these, only the first two are usually considered and are actually distinguished as different keys, thus leading to a total number of 24 keys, one major and one minor on each tone of the chromatic scale.

**key signature**

The sharps or flats appearing at the beginning of each staff to indicate the *key of a composition*. A given signature indicates one of two keys, a major key or its relative minor key.

**melody**

In the broadest sense, a succession of musical tones, as opposed to *harmony*, i.e. musical tones sounded simultaneously. Melody and harmony represent the horizontal and vertical elements of musical texture. By its very nature melody cannot be separated from rhythm. Each musical sound has two fundamental qualities, pitch and duration, and both of these enter into the successions of pitch-plus-duration values known as melodies.

**pitch**

The location of a musical sound in the tonal scale, proceeding from low to high. The exact determination of pitch is by frequency (number of vibrations per second) of the sound.

**staff**

A series of horizontal lines, today always five in number, on and between which musical notes are written, thereby indicating (in connection with a *clef*) their pitch. The positions of the notes on the staff give a satisfactory image of the pitches, although they fail to indicate the difference between whole tones and semitones, as well as the modifications of pitch produced by accidentals (e.g. C-double-sharp is actually higher in pitch but lower on the staff than D-flat).

**tonality**

Loyalty to a tonic, in the broadest sense of the word. One of the most striking phenomena of music is the fact that, throughout its evolution – in non-Western cultures, in Gregorian chant, and in harmonized music – practically every single piece gives preference to one tone (the tonic), making this the tonal center to which all other tones are related.

Although nearly all music in this sense of the word is tonal, the means of achieving tonality have greatly varied throughout history. About 1700 came general acceptance of a system of tonal functions based on the establishment of three main chords – the tonic, the dominant, and the subdominant *triads* – as the carriers of harmonic as well as melodic movements. Broadened by the ample use of chromatic alterations and modulation into other keys, this system prevailed throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

**triad**

A chord of three notes consisting of a root and the third and fifth above it. There are four kinds of triad: major (major plus minor third); minor (minor plus major third); diminished (minor plus minor third); and augmented (major plus major third). The first two are consonant and the last two dissonant chord. Each triad (e.g., c-e-g) has two inversions, the sixth chord (e-g-c) and the six-four chord (g-c-e).