Music 19, Summer 2003
rhythm terminology: definitions abbreviated from the Harvard Dictionary of Music

accent
Emphasis on one note or chord. In this sense, the term is equivocal, because the emphasis may be physically discernable, or it may lie solely in the way the listener perceives musical movement. Physically a note or chord may be louder than its surrounds (dynamic accent), or it may be higher (tonic accent), or of longer duration (agogic accent). On the other hand, since the listener perceives music as sound in motion, an upbeat is felt as leading somewhere, and the note or chord to which it leads is thus emphasized (accented) in the mind, even if the goal of motion should be softer, lower, or shorter than its surroundings.

In measure-music, both physical and mental accents normally fall on the downbeat, with secondary accents occurring in the middle of the measure in compound meters, e.g. on the third beat in 4/4 time.

bar line
A vertical line drawn through the staff to mark off measures.

beat
The temporal unit of a composition, as indicated by the up-and-down movements, real or imagined, of a conductor’s hand (upbeat, downbeat). In modern practice, the duration of such a beat varies from 50 beats per minute (bpm) to 140 bpm, with 80 bpm being a middle speed. In moderate tempo, the 4/4 measure includes four beats, the first and third of which are strong, the others weak, while the 3/4 measure has three beats, only the first of which is strong. In quick *tempo, there are only two beats, or even one, to the measure. In very slow tempo, the beats may be subdivided into two’s or three’s.

measure
A group of beats (units of musical time), the first of which normally bears an accent. Such groups, in numbers of two, three, four, or occasionally, five or more, recur consistently throughout a composition and are marked off from one another by *bar lines. The basic scheme of note values within a measure is called *meter or time (duple, triple, 6/8 meter, etc.) Occasional deviations from the regularity of accent, e.g. *syncopation, emphasize rather than destroy the general scheme of measures and meter.

meter
The pattern of fixed temporal units, called *beats, by which the timespan of a piece of music or a section thereof is measured. Neither meter nor *rhythm is exactly equivalent to patterns of note values. Meter is indicated by *time signatures. For instance 3/4 meter (or 3/4 time) means that the basic values are quarter notes and that every third quarter note receives an accent.

Such metric groupings are indicated by *bar lines that mark off *measures. According to whether there are two, three, or four units to the measure, one speaks of duple (2/2, 2/4, 2/8), triple (3/2, 3/4, 3/8), and quadruple (4/2, 4/4, 4/8) meter, 4/4 also being called “common” meter. All these are simple meters. Compound meters are simple meters multiplied by three: compound duple (6/2, 6/4, 6/8), compound triple (9/4, 9/8), and compound quadruple (12/14, 12/8, 12/16). Quintuple meter (5/4) is either 2/4 + 3/4 or 3/4 + 2/4 depending on where the secondary accent lies.

rhythm
In its primary sense, the whole feeling of movement in music, with a strong implication of both regularity and differentiation. Thus breathing (inhalation vs. exhalation), pulse (systole vs. diastole) and tides (ebbs vs. flows) all are examples of rhythm.

Rhythm and motion may be analytically distinguished, the former meaning movement in time and the latter meaning movement in space (pitch).

syncopation
Syncopation is, generally speaking, any deliberate disturbance of the normal pulse of *meter, *accent, and rhythm. The principal system of rhythm in Western music is based on the grouping of equal beats into two’s and three’s with a regularly recurrent accent on the first beat of each group. Any deviation from this scheme is perceived as a disturbance or contradiction between the underlying (normal) pulse and
the actual (abnormal) rhythm. Another type of syncopation, resulting not from a displaced accent in unchanged meter but from a sudden change of the meter itself, is common in the works of modern composers, notably Stravinsky.

**tempo**

The speed of a composition or a section thereof, ranging from very slow to very fast, as indicated by tempo marks such as largo, adagio, andante, moderato, allegro, presto, prestissimo. More accurate are metronome indications, such as quarter note = M.M. 100, i.e. the quarter note lasts 1/100 of a minute. The practical limits for the duration of the beat are [conservatively] M.M. 50 and M.M. 120. M.M. 60-80 represents a “normal” tempo that agrees with various natural paces, e.g. moderate walking or the human pulse. The question of the “right” tempo for a piece is a favorite one among musicians, listeners, and critics.

**time signature**

The time (meter) is indicated at the beginning of a piece or section of music by two numbers, one above the other; the lower indicates the chosen unit of measurement (half note, quarter note, etc.), while the upper indicates the number of such units comprised in a *measure.*