

The Elements of Music

An **element** is something essential that cannot be further broken down. In music, there are seven elements that form the basis for our discussion of a musical work. No piece of music lacks any of these seven elements, although some may be more important than others.

Element	Definition	Associated words
Melody	The relationship of pitches over time; the “tune” of a piece of music	Tune, motive, theme; smooth, jagged, jumpy; singing, cantabile;
Harmony	The relationship of pitches in space	Chords, changes; consonant, dissonant; major, minor; key
Rhythm	The interaction of events around the basic pulse; sometimes inaccurately called the “beat”	Groove; choppy, funky; syncopated; danceable; march-like; free, strict
Tempo	The speed of the basic pulse	Fast, slow, medium; lots of Italian words such as <i>Allegro</i> and <i>Andante</i> ; metronome markings given in beats per minute (bpm); rubato; changes in tempo such as <i>accelerando</i> or <i>ritardano</i> ; fermata
Timbre	The shape of the waveform in space; also known as “tone color”	“sound;” specific instruments or combinations of instruments; strings, brass, woodwind, percussion; vocal quality
Dynamics	The shape of the wave form in time	Loudness, volume; <i>crescendo</i> and <i>decrescendo/diminuendo</i> ; articulation; accent; <i>piano</i> , <i>forte</i> and other Italian terms
Form	The structure of a piece of music	Verses; choruses; bridge; introductions; coda; repetition; variation; specific forms like 12-bar blues or sonata-allegro

Notice that “lyrics” or “text” are *not* an element of music. The words associated with music can impact the other elements, but are not essential to the music itself. Vocal music is always a blend of music and language, and a great deal of music has no text at all.

Together, the way that all seven elements interact determine the **style** of a piece of music.