

# Prepositions in music

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## A guide for non-native speakers

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### IN:

Use “in” when discussing musical concepts that contain things. “In” is the most common preposition in writings about music.

“In the works of Bach...”

A composer’s oeuvre contains multiple works.

“In her first sonata...”

A piece contains measures.

“In the first section of the piece...” “In the B section...” “In the middle of the exposition...”

Sections contain measures.

“In the first statement of the theme...”

A statement of a theme contains notes.

“In measure 67...”

Measures contain notes.

“In beat 3 of measure 12...”

Beats contain notes (but use “On the downbeat...”).

“In the upper register...”

Registers contain multiple notes.

“In C major...”

A key contains multiple notes/harmonies.

“In the first chord...” “In the dominant-seventh chord...”

A chord contains multiple notes.

“In 1967...” “In France...” “In the ocean...”

A few other standard usages.

### ON:

Use “on” when discussing musical concepts that imply a particular point in time or space.

“On the downbeat of measure 12...”

The downbeat is a particular point in time (but see “in” for other beats).

“On the high G...”

A particular note is a point in pitch-space (but see “at” and “to”).

### BY:

Use “by” when discussing musical concepts that imply an achieved condition at a particular point in time.

“By measure 32, the theme has disappeared...”

“By the end of the exposition, the dominant has become the focal harmony...”

### UNTIL:

Use “until” when discussing musical concepts that imply motion (literal or metaphorical) toward a final condition.

“The statement continues up by step until the soprano reaches the high G...”

(Goal condition underlined)

“The tempo accelerates until the new eighth note is as fast as the former sixteenth note.”

(Goal condition underlined)

### TO:

Use “to” when discussing musical concepts that imply motion (literal or metaphorical) toward a final destination (a point).

“The melodic line ascends to the high G.”

(Goal point underlined; cf. “until”)

“The tempo accelerates to 60 beats per minute.”

(Goal point underlined)

“The retransition leads to the recapitulation.”

(Goal underlined; short for “the start of the recapitulation”)

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**FOR:**

Use “for” when discussing how long something takes. “For” often occurs with the word “continues,” though not always.

“The pattern continues for another twenty measures...”

“The vocalist rests for two beats, then...”

**AT:**

“At” is sometimes used to imply an achieved goal or the start of a section, but “to” or “in” or “by” are usually better choices.

“At measure 26, the piano sounds a C6.”

BETTER: “In measure 26, the piano sounds a C6.”

**DURING:**

Use “during” when discussing musical concepts that continue over a specified timespan.

“During the A section, the violinist plays continuously.”

“During the first ten measures, the pitch E is never heard.”

**CHAINS OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES:**

When using more than one prepositional phrase in a row, the first preposition should be chosen as usual, but the second and following prepositions typically become “of.” This is known as the genitive usage in many languages and is closely related to the possessive use of “of.” Sometimes you may hear a native speaker vary this pattern, but generally reverting to “of” after the first prepositional phrase is the most natural sounding construction in English. The difference is very subtle, and most native speakers will still understand you either way, but there are times when not following this guideline can be distracting.

“In the second beat of the third measure of the B section...” NOT “In the second beat in the third measure in the B section...”

“On the downbeat of the first measure of the violin part...” NOT “On the downbeat in the first measure in the violin part...”

“During the first ten measures of the second movement...” NOT “During the first ten measures in the second movement...”

**BONUS: USING DEFINITE ARTICLES IN WRITINGS ABOUT MUSIC**

Definite article required (partial list):

The music (UNLESS you are discussing music in general, as an art form)

The first measure

The high G, The G<sub>5</sub>, etc.

The score

The pitches

The violin part, The violin, The trumpet, The flute, etc.

NO article (partial list):

Measure 67, Measure 2, etc.

Violins (plural does not need article)

Timbre

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