



## No 5: Tempo

One of my goals in this music series is to help you understand and identify individual music elements as you listen so you can distinguish balanced, beneficial music from what is not.

Before we look at the element of tempo, let's quickly revise the elements studied so far in this series to better understand how their combinations can produce a mighty, powerful medium which can influence and manipulate listeners. Music is a complex combination of basic building blocks with very powerful positive and negative effects.

We have seen how music contains many opposites — rhythm is long and short sounds and silences; beat is even like ticks on a clock, the opposite to rhythm; melody is high and low notes following each other; harmony is notes sounding at the same time, opposite of melody; dynamics is loud and soft sounds. There is infinite variety in how the elements can be combined. When

we add tempo, we add another huge range of possibilities and variations.

### Definition

So then, what is tempo? An easy definition of tempo is 'how fast or slow the music is.' Tempo comes from the Latin *tempus* meaning 'time'. The Macquarie dictionary defines it as 'relative rapidity or rate of movement'. Basically tempo is about movement, speed and time. Time is fascinating. Sometimes it seems to go faster and other times slower. Our perception of time depends on how many activities we fit into a given time. In a busy day, time seems to fly. A slower day means there are fewer activities and we relax more. It is a matter of how many activities we have.

Tempo can be measured. A car's speedometer measures kilometres travelled per hour — the higher the number, the faster the car moves. In music, tempo is measured by counting the number of beats per minute — the higher the number, the faster the music. A metronome was invented to count the number of beats per minute so composers and performers know exactly how fast a piece should be played. Many pieces have a metronome marking at the start. e.g. MM ♩ 60 (MM stands for 'Maelzel's Metronome') means the speed is 60 beats per minute. Obviously MM ♩ 40 is a slower tempo than MM ♩ 200.

Italian words are commonly used in music to describe various tempos. *Moderato* is at a moderate speed, not too fast and not too slow. *Andante* means a rather slow, flowing

pace. *Adagio* and *largo* are even slower. *Allegro* describes happy, cheerful, rather fast music. *Presto* is faster still, and *Prestissimo* means as fast as possible!

Tempo is often confused with rhythm and beat because they are all directly related to time but in different ways. Rhythm is about activities and rests — long and short notes (many active bumping molecules)

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and silences (rests). Beats are even just like seconds ticking on a clock. But tempo is about *how many* beats (activities) are in a given time.

### The foundation of time

We have heard a very brief explanation of tempo. Now let's apply this further to assist our discernment of music. Remember that music moves through a timeline. The foundation of time provides a beginning, middle and end to a piece of music.

Who created time? God created time but gave us free will to decide how many activities we cram into a day — what sort of a tempo our day will have. We cannot be busy all the time because we need times of stillness and rest to recover, like our night time sleeping and weekly Sabbath rest. In Psalm 46:10 God tells us to 'Be still and

know that I am God'. The world is full of diversions which will keep us occupied and distracted from what should be the centre and main focus of our lives — God. Tempo teaches us that God gives us time for busyness and stillness. For good health we need to balance busyness and stillness in our lives.

### Tempo and the body

Tempo in music has a direct effect on us physical, mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Music with about sixty beats per minute is beneficial being similar to our heartbeat. Some like to study listening to music and music of this tempo can be beneficial to learning. Personally I prefer silence without any distractions at all.

In contrast, fast music with many beats per minute energises the body. In appropriate situations this can be beneficial to motivate and stimulate people. However, excessively fast music heard over long periods overstimulates and causes adverse effects. This is especially so when tempo is combined with excessive dynamics, beat and rhythm, leading to stress, anxiety and tension. We saw in earlier articles the effects of abused elements on the heart, brain, ears and hormones, sex organs, minds, feelings and energy levels. Short bursts of fast loud music (e.g. mobile phone ring tones) can pressure us to answer the phone immediately. The element of tempo adds a whole new dimension to popular music. Faster tempos combined with excessive dynamics, rhythm and beat may become a lethal cocktail.

Very fast music may be flashy and egotistical to showcase the brilliance of the performer. This is common in the humanistic, worldly music scene. Some rock musicians have even made pacts with the original master musician in heaven, the devil, so they can become highly successful in the world's eyes. Their music is amazingly fast, extremely difficult to play, loud, frenzied and manic. The New Penguin Dictionary states that the brilliant playing of the nineteenth century charismatic violinist, Nicolo Paganini, 'suggests supernatural, even demonic powers.'

## God should be our main focus and director of the tempo of our lives

Students of classical music can also abuse tempo by rushing through technique and pieces just to finish their practice. In the long run they merely practise bad habits which need to be corrected later on. It may be fun for students to play fast but it is also very good to play slowly.

At the opposite extreme, slow, soft music can aid relaxation and help sleep habits. However, excessively slow music may become boring and dull the brain. Some New Age music styles use this slowness to manipulate the mind by inducing an alpha state rather than a beta state. Slow tempo combined with excessive harmony can lead to a false sense of peace and security.

## Tempo in worship

Quiet Christian worship music in a moderate tempo creates a reverent atmosphere as people enter church and their hearts are prepared to be stilled and calmed so minds can focus on God. But how often do we hear this today? Many times, as soon as people get out of their car, the first thing they hear is the thump of a bass drum kit with its fast, loud beat. Adrenalin starts flowing and they rush in to meet their friends with chit chat and laughter. They may even grab a cup of coffee as they go through the door to keep them alert and awake. The atmosphere in such churches is more like a social club. People seem totally unaware that their senses are totally distracted. Ears are bombarded by fast, loud music. Eyes spy friends and noses smell the coffee. Taste buds savour the flavour. The frontal lobe in the forehead which God designed for spiritual awareness and discernment, is clouded over with so much information and distractions that it is difficult for the person to concentrate on the whole reason for being there. It is hardly respectful to our Creator who designed this holy day to be an intimate one between each individual and Him to strengthen their relationship. I won't rave on any more! Let's turn to some history about time.

## The history of tempo

Throughout history tempo has had different meanings, depending on man's concept of time. In the Baroque and early Classical periods (1600–1750), musicians usually kept strict tempos. Many compositions

were simply titled *Largo*, *Adagio*, *Andante*, *Allegro* or *Presto*. Life was at a relatively slower pace than in later periods. After the Industrial Revolution in the Classical and Romantic Periods (1700s–1800s), life in general moved at a quicker pace. Trains were faster than horses. The telegraph and Morse code made communication faster. Bicycles were faster than walking. Many moved to the cities for work and people must have felt city life was busier than ever before. They wanted to visit the country to slow down. Beethoven (1770–1827) loved to retreat to the country, to hear the sounds of nature and describe them in some of his works.

*Rubato* was a new musical term used to describe Romantic music which did not keep to a strict tempo. This meant freedom in tempo (*rubato* literally means 'robbing' some time from longer notes and adding it to shorter notes). Playing with *rubato* allowed the player to go faster or slower as his emotions dictated. This was reflective of romantic philosophies of freedom from classical restrictions.

What would people of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries think if they could experience our era? How would they describe the tempo of our lives today? Beyond *prestissimo*! *Presto* in the early 1800s may have meant the speed of a galloping horse but in the twentieth century it could be the speed of a jet. Today speed is almost instantaneous. Computer technology sends information to the other side of the world in an instant of time.

But — whatever tempo our lives are, and whatever age and stage we are at, whether we are busy or quiet — *whatever* we do should still be done with all our heart for the Lord. Regardless of the century and times we live in, God should still be our main focus and director of the tempo of our lives. Colossians 3:23 says, 'And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord and not unto men.'

In summary, tempo is based on time and is how fast or slow the music is. This music element teaches us that God gives us time for busyness and stillness. He wants us to be still and know who He is (Psalm 46:10). He wants us to do everything with all our heart for Him (Colossians 3:23).

If we make the effort to find the time and slow down from the world's hustle and bustle, to spend time with Him and pray to Him, then He will find the time to answer our prayers.

As the hymn says:

Take time to be holy, speak oft with the Lord;  
Abide in Him always and feed on His Word...  
Take time to be holy, the world rushes on,  
spend much time in secret with Jesus alone.

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