

The Musical Instruments of Italy

A Music Appreciation and Craft-Making Activity



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Note: This curriculum is designed as a primer with information that can be adapted to create age-appropriate lessons.



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ITALY'S MUSICAL HERITAGE

Italy has a rich and diverse musical history that spans centuries. From the time of Ancient Rome to the Italian Renaissance and beyond, Italy has been a hub of musical innovation and creativity. Italy is the birthplace of dozens of legendary composers such as [Antonio Vivaldi](#), [Giuseppe Verdi](#), [Giacomo Puccini](#), [Gaetano Donizetti](#), and [Gioachino Rossini](#). Additionally, the origins of the [Gregorian chant](#), the [troubadour song](#), and the [madrigal](#) can all be traced back to Italy.



[Antonio Vivaldi \(1678–1741\)](#)



[Giuseppe Verdi \(1813–1901\)](#)



[Giacomo Puccini \(1858–1924\)](#)

Italy is also where modern **musical notation** was invented. Around the year 1025, Benedictine monk **Guido d'Arezzo** developed a comprehensive musical notation system. Frustrated by the difficulties of memorization being the primary mode for learning music, d'Arezzo devised a system for writing the *sounds* of songs. He began outlining principles of staff notation: a “musical ladder” with five lines and four spaces, with each line and space representing a different musical note. This revolutionized music, making it possible for anyone to learn a melody if they knew how to read musical notation. D'Arezzo also helped develop the **solfège system**, best known as “do re mi fa so la ti do.”



[Musical notation](#)



Guido d'Arezzo (ca. 900-1033)

Various forms of music also originated in Italy. The **Italian Renaissance**, which spanned from the fourteenth century to the seventeenth century, was a period of immense political, artistic, and cultural change. New musical styles, including **opera**, emerged. This era also witnessed groundbreaking advancements in musical scales, harmony, and notation, which would dramatically influence the development of many modern European classical music forms, such as the **symphony**, **concerto**, and **sonata**. Such developments helped cement Italian as the dominant language of music, which continues today. While “ballet” is a French word, ballet’s origins can be traced back to Renaissance Italy during the fifteenth century. The word **ballet** is derived from the Italian *balletto*—a diminutive of the word *ballo*, which means dance.

Many important composers of the Renaissance and **Baroque** eras were Italian. They would further promote Italian as the “language” of music. Following the development of musical notation, composers sought a way to communicate not only *which* notes to play but also *how* to play the notes. Should the musician play fast or slow? Loud or soft? If you’ve ever wondered why musicians say “allegro” (and not “quickly” or “cheerfully”), it is because Italian composers—in addition to being the first to adopt musical notation—subsequently adopted annotations to indicate **tempo** (the speed at which a composition is to be played and/or the mood and expression of the music. *Allegro*, for instance, refers to a musical piece that’s both fast and joyful. Italian composers were also the first to adopt annotations to express **dynamics**, or the degrees of volume (loudness and softness) in music. Predictably, the words and abbreviations of words were Italian. *Piano* means “soft” and *forte* “loud.” This system was standardized and accepted in Italy, and soon the rest of Europe would adopt it, which enabled musicians, regardless of the language they spoke, to understand the details and be able to play the composition.



Map of Italy

In Renaissance Italy, families of great wealth and power controlled city-states such as Florence, Venice, and Milan. While the Medici family are arguably the most famous, many other families, such as the Visconti of Milan and the Gonzaga of Mantova, spent large amounts of money to demonstrate their wealth and as a form of public relations. As well as having extravagant parties, they commissioned paintings and sculptures to fill their homes; they supported the work of scientists and hired architects; and they sought musicians for entertainment and to compose monumental works. Artists flocked to the cities to find employment, and hopefully, a generous benefactor.

The Musical Instruments of Italy

Wealthy families, in addition to collecting art, also typically had collections of musical instruments, which were symbols of prestige because of their cost. It's no coincidence that during this era, Italy created some of the most esteemed musical instruments in the world, including the violin, viola, cello, double bass, and piano. While we have adopted words such as “piano” and “cello” into the English language, these words, in fact, come from Italian.

Violin, viola, cello, and double bass

Perhaps the most esteemed of the musical instruments of Italy are of the violin family, which includes the viola, cello and double bass.

Violin

While the exact inventor is unknown, the violin was perfected in northern Italy during the sixteenth century and has grown to become one of the most popular instruments in modern classical music. Between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century, the most famous **luthiers** (stringed instrument makers) were from Lombardy, a region in northern Italy.

The city of Brescia in Lombardy is considered to be the birthplace of the violin, while the city of Cremona, 25 miles to the south, became the center of violin making in the seventeenth century. The Amati family, who were active from 1550 onward, were some of the most prominent luthiers of Cremona. Andrea Amati is often credited with creating the first true violin around 1564. Antonio Stradivari—a legendary craftsman of violins, cellos, guitars, violas, and harps—is perhaps the most famous of all. His instruments carry the latinized form of his surname, Stradivarius. During his 71-year career, he made over 1,100 instruments with the help of his sons. To date, the highest price paid for a Stradivarius violin at auction is \$16 million, while his violas, which he made fewer of and are therefore rarer, can sell for almost twice that figure.



[What does a violin sound like?](#)



Viola

The viola is extremely similar to the violin and it may even appear to be the same instrument to the untrained eye. Violas are longer than violins and have a lower pitch, filling the middle voice range in a string section. The instrument's origins can be traced back to sixteenth-century Italy, evolving alongside the violin and offering a richer, mellower sound than its higher-pitched cousin.

[What does a viola sound like?](#)

Cello

The cello, a large string instrument known for its deep, rich tones, rose to prominence in northern Italy around the mid-sixteenth century, and is the tenor of the string family. It was originally known as the violoncello, and gets its name from the Italian word meaning “little big viola.” While the exact origins are debated, instrument makers including Andrea Amati are credited with refining the cello’s design during this period. Amati, along with other Cremonese luthiers, laid the foundation for the city’s esteemed violin-making tradition, which continues to influence instrument makers today.



What does a cello sound like?



Double Bass

The Double Bass, the largest and lowest-pitched instrument in the string family, goes by a number of names such as the upright bass, bass viol, bass fiddle, contrabass, stand up bass, or simply, “the bass.” The double bass is the sole survivor of the viola da gamba family—a group of bowed instruments with distinct physical characteristics like frets and sloping shoulders. The double bass is quite large: from scroll to endpin, it measures over six feet! The double bass is a vital part of the orchestral soundscape with its deep, rumbling tones.

What does a double bass sound like?

Piano

The piano is an acoustic stringed instrument that is actually part of the violin family. This Italian invention is considered to be the most versatile of all musical instruments and remains widely used in virtually all forms of music. The word piano is a shortened form of *pianoforte*, which is a combination of two Italian words: *piano*, which means soft, and *forte*, meaning loud. A piano is played using a keyboard and produces sound when wooden hammers strike the strings inside the piano’s body.



What does a piano sound like?

Bartolomeo Cristofori of Padua is credited with the invention of the piano. Cristofori worked for Ferdinando de’ Medici, the Grand Prince of Tuscany, as the manager of his instrument collection. Cristofori was an expert harpsichord maker and had great knowledge of stringed keyboard instruments. It is not known exactly when Cristofori first built a piano, but an inventory of the Medici family shows the existence of a piano in 1700. The three Cristofori pianos that survive today date from the 1720s. Cristofori’s early



Bartolomeo Cristofori
(1655-1731)

instruments were quieter than the modern piano, but they were much louder than the clavichord. Cristofori's instrument remained relatively unknown until an Italian writer wrote an article about it in 1711, and today it's hard to imagine a world without pianos.

Most modern pianos have a row of 88 black and white keys. These different notes range from very deep bass to the highest treble. There are two main types of piano: the grand piano and the upright piano. The grand piano has a richer sound and is often preferred by musicians, but it is considerably larger and more expensive than an upright piano.

Harpsichord

The piano was founded on earlier technological innovations in keyboard instruments, such as the [pipe organ](#), the [clavichord](#), and the [harpsichord](#). The earliest mention of a harpsichord was in 1397, in Padua—a city in northern Italy. The oldest surviving harpsichord dates to sixteenth-century Italy.



[What does a harpsichord sound like?](#)

Mandolin



The **mandolin** is another string instrument that is particularly beloved in Italy. It began as an offspring of the **lute**—a type of plucked string instrument. By the sixteenth century, the mandolin had evolved into a class of its own, with versions produced in various parts of Italy. Eventually, the styles from Lombardy and Naples emerged as the most popular.

[What does a mandolin sound like?](#)

Piccolo

In Italian, *piccolo* (pronounced “pi-kuh-low”) means “small.” A **piccolo** is approximately half the size of a full-size flute and it has the highest pitch of any instrument from the **woodwind** family. The piccolo was often used in the military as the instrument's penetrating sound was audible above battles. Today, the piccolo is a standard member in orchestras, marching bands, and wind ensembles.



[What does a piccolo sound like?](#)



Ghironda

The ghironda (pronounced “gee-roan-da”) is an Italian folk instrument that’s known in English as a hurdy-gurdy. It is technically a stringed instrument that uses a bow to make sound, but it does not do so in the traditional way that a violin would. Through cranking a wheel which rubs against the ghironda’s strings, the instrument creates a sound similar to bagpipes. Like most other stringed instruments, there is a sound-board, which allows for the

vibrations of the strings to be heard.

[What does a ghironda sound like?](#)

Crotalum

Since prehistoric times, people have used a variety of items to create rhythm. In ancient Greece and Rome, an instrument known as the crotalum (pronounced “kro-ta-lum”) was popular. Crotala were often played to accompany dance performances, and were almost exclusively played by women—a fact supported by surviving ancient imagery. These women were referred to as “crotalistræe.” The crotalum, which resembles finger cymbals of clappers, evolved over time to become castanets. Forms of these rhythm instruments are still used today in Italian folk music.



[What does a crotalum sound like?](#)



Zampogna (pronounced “zam-pohn-ya”)

While bagpipes are often associated with Ireland, like many musical instruments, their origins can actually be traced to the Middle East. The reed instrument is traditionally made from a sheep’s bladder with hollowed-out pieces of wood that create the instrument’s blowpipe and chanter (the part of the instrument that consists of a number of finger-holes and resembles a flute upon which the player creates the melody). Bagpipes produce sound by forcing air over a reed. The air causes the reed to vibrate, and the reed then makes the air in the pipes vibrate, and that produces a sound. The instrument evolved as

it made its way through Europe alongside the diffusion of early civilizations. Every region from north to south in Italy, including Sicily and Sardinia, has a version of the instrument. The zampogna is the most famous of these and can be found in the regions of Marche, Abruzzo, Molise, Basilicata, Campania, and Calabria. It was in fact invading Roman legions that first introduced bagpipes, or “tibia utricularis,” to Scotland.

[What does a zampogna sound like?](#)

Quartara

The quartara (pronounced “kwar-tar-ah”) is a particularly interesting Italian folk instrument because it looks more like a ceramic pitcher than a musical instrument. The quartara is in fact a wind instrument; when you blow across the narrow neck that forms the top, it makes a sound.



What does a quartara sound like?



Organetto

A very popular instrument from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, the organetto (pronounced “or-guh-net-oh”) resembles a cross between an accordion and a pipe organ. It is also called a melodeon or a diatonic button accordion.

What does an organetto sound like?

Activities and Discussion Questions

- 1. Discussion question:** Why have some instruments remained popular while others have faded into obscurity?
- 2. Discussion question:** Why were musical instruments symbols of wealth? Has this changed?
- 3. Discussion question:** What is the difference between a symphony, concerto, and sonata? Watch [this video](#) to understand and then ask students to explain in their own words how the three differ.
- 4. Activity:** Ask students to select their favorite instrument, and then have them create a report on its origins. Include the country in which it originated; its inventor(s) or maker(s); a brief history; a famous musician who plays it; a piece of music that features the instrument; and general background on the instrument (what it is made of, how it produces sound, etc.)
- 5. Activity:** Select several (or all) the instruments from the section *The Musical Instruments of Italy* contained in this curriculum and play each link that demonstrates the instrument's sound and how it is played. Which instruments are the students' favorites? Tally votes and create a graph or pie chart.
- 6. Activity:** Make a zampogna! Using one of these links, students can learn how to make a zampogna (bagpipe).
 - a.** [Bonnie Bagpipes craft](#)
 - b.** [How to make bagpipes video](#)
 - c.** [How to make bagpipes out of a garbage bag and recorders](#)
- 7. Activity:** Use these links to make other musical instruments, such as tambourines, a harp box, drums, shakers, and rhythm sticks.
 - a.** [Musical instrument crafts](#)
 - b.** [Harp box craft](#)
 - c.** [Paper plate tambourine craft](#)
- 8. Activity:** Illuminated manuscripts are hand-written books with painted decorations that were often created using paints containing precious metals such as gold or silver. They were called "illuminated" because the gold, silver, and other paint colors made the page shimmer. Illuminated manuscripts were very popular between the years 1100 and 1600, and were often created in monasteries. At that time, most people were illiterate and it was primarily only the wealthy that could afford books. The pages of the illuminated manuscripts were often made from animal skin. Similar to musical instruments, wealthy patrons collected these

illustrative books for their personal libraries, and as a result, many artisans established workshops in Italy and France to satisfy the demand for the books. As technology—namely the printing press—developed, which allowed for the mass production of printed materials, the illuminated manuscript tradition declined.

This activity combines music, art, and history, letting kids create their own illuminated manuscript inspired by their favorite songs!

Materials:

- Construction paper
- Pencils, crayons, markers, or colored pencils
- Magazines
- Scissors (optional)
- Gold and silver origami paper, or gold and silver paint, or metallic markers, etc.
- Glue
- Ruler
- Music sheets with staff lines (printable music sheets can be found online)

Instructions:

Students select one of their favorite songs. Ideally, a portion of it describes a person, an event, or something that they will be able to depict visually. Cut out printable music sheets and paste them to the construction paper background. Below the staff lines, have them write out their chosen section of lyrics in neat handwriting. Ask the children to think about the images or feelings the lyrics evoke. What kind of story does the song tell? They can then either draw their own illustrations inspired by and around the lyrics, or cut out images from magazines, or print images they find online that match the theme of the song. To make it look like a real illuminated manuscript, students will add sparkle and shine by using gold and silver origami paper, paint, or metallic markers.

9. Activity: Making do-re-mi rainbow stairs is a fun and colorful way for students to learn the solfège system, also known as the musical scale: do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do!

Materials:

- Construction paper in seven different colors (red, orange, yellow, blue, green, purple, pink) with a white piece of construction paper serving as the background
- Scissors
- Markers
- Tape

Instructions:

First, have students watch this video to familiarize themselves with the do-re-mi scale.

[Do re mi fa so la ti do for kids](#)

Cut pieces of construction paper into strips of different lengths, representing the sounds of the musical scale.

- Do: red (the starting point, so it can be the largest scale).
- Re: orange
- Mi: yellow
- Fa: blue
- So: green
- La: purple
- Ti: pink
- Do: red (use red again)

Label the strips of paper with markers, according to their corresponding color and scale. Tape all of the strips onto the white construction paper in their correct order. Sing the “do-re-mi” musical scale together, pointing to the corresponding pieces of paper as each note is sung.

GLOSSARY

Ballet: a graceful theatrical dance form using precise steps to tell stories or express ideas

Baroque: a style of western classical music from roughly 1600 to 1750, known for its drama, complex melodies, and innovations in form

Cello: a large, rich-toned stringed instrument from the violin family, which is played upright between the knees

Clavichord: a delicate keyboard instrument with strings struck by metal blades, known for its soft and expressive sound

Concerto: a classical showpiece featuring one or more soloists in conversation with an orchestra

Crotalum: an ancient percussion instrument consisting of a pair of small, clashed cymbals or wooden clappers

Double bass: also known as the upright bass; it's the largest and deepest-pitched stringed instrument in the violin family

Dynamics: the variations in loudness, adding expression and shaping the overall sound

Gregorian chant: a form of ancient, monophonic liturgical singing in Latin used in the Roman Catholic Church

Harpsichord: a keyboard instrument with strings plucked by quills or plastic plectra, producing a bright and crisp sound

Italian Renaissance: a flowering of art, literature, science, and ideas in fourteenth to sixteenth century Italy, marking a transition from medieval to modern thought

Lute: a stringed instrument with a round body, long neck, and frets, played by plucking the strings with fingers or a pick

Luthier: a skilled craftsman who builds and repairs string instruments like violins, guitars, and cellos

Madrigal: a complex, unaccompanied vocal piece from the Renaissance and Baroque eras, typically sung by a small group on secular themes

Mandolin: a small, eight-stringed instrument from the lute family with a pear-shaped body and a bright, "twangy" sound

Musical notation: a system of symbols that visually represent music, including pitch, duration, and other performance instructions

Opera: one of the oldest art forms in the world; a form of theater—a type of musical "play"—in which most of the words are sung

Piano: a large keyboard instrument with strings that are struck by hammers to produce sound

Piccolo: a half-sized flute, known for its high-pitched, bright tone and piercing sound

Pipe organ: a keyboard instrument that uses pressurized air to create sound through ranks of pipes

Solfège system: a system that uses syllables (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do) to sing and identify musical pitches within a scale

Sonata: a lengthy instrumental piece, typically in multiple movements with contrasting moods and keys

Symphony: a lengthy orchestral work in multiple movements, known for its complex and beautiful arrangement of sound

Tempo: the speed of a piece of music, often indicated by words like "allegro" (fast) or "adagio" (slow)

Troubadour song: a medieval poem set to music, often focusing on themes of courtly love and chivalry

Viola: a slightly larger cousin of the violin with a deeper, mellower sound, filling the middle voice range in a string section

Violin: a four-stringed wooden instrument played with a bow, known for its beautiful tone and melody-playing ability

Woodwind: a family of wind instruments played by blowing air into a mouthpiece or hole, often with keys or holes for changing pitch

Zampogna: an Italian bagpipe with a distinctive, reedy sound

California Education Content Standards

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 8

Content Area: Arts

Category: Music

Essential Question(s): How do musicians generate creative ideas?

Process Component(s): Imagine

Performance Standard(s): With guidance, explore and experience music concepts (such as beat and melodic contour).

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 8

Content Area: Arts

Category: Music

Essential Question(s): How do musicians make creative decisions?

Process Component(s): Plan and Make

Performance Standard(s): With guidance, demonstrate and choose favorite musical ideas.

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 8

Content Area: Arts

Category: Music

Essential Question(s): How do performers select repertoire?

Process Component(s): Select

Performance Standard(s): With guidance, demonstrate and state personal interest in varied musical selections.

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 8

Content Area: Arts

Category: Music

Essential Question(s): How does understanding the structure and context of musical works inform performance?

Process Component(s): Analyze

Performance Standard(s): With guidance, explore and demonstrate awareness of music contrasts such as high/low, loud/soft, and same/different in a variety of music selected for performance.

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 8

Content Area: Arts

Category: Music

Essential Question(s): How do individuals choose music to experience?

Process Component(s): Select

Performance Standard(s): Demonstrate and describe how selected music connects to and is influenced by specific interests, experiences, or purposes.

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 8

Content Area: Arts

Category: Music

Essential Question(s): How do we discern the musical creators' and performers' expressive intent?

Process Component(s): Interpret

Performance Standard(s): Demonstrate and describe how expressive qualities (such as dynamics, tempo, and timbre) are used in performers' personal interpretations to reflect creators' expressive intent.

Grade: 1

Content Area: History–Social Science

Category: A Child's Place in Time and Space

Overarching Standard: 1.5 Students describe the human characteristics of familiar places and the varied backgrounds of American citizens and residents in those places.

Standard(s): Compare the beliefs, customs, ceremonies, traditions, and social practices of the varied cultures, drawing from folklore.

Grade: 7

Content Area: History–Social Science

Category: World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times

Overarching Standard: 7.8 Students analyze the origins, accomplishments, and geographic diffusion of the Renaissance.

Standard(s): 1. Describe the way in which the revival of classical learning and the arts fostered a new interest in humanism (i.e., a balance between intellect and religious faith). 5. Detail advances made in literature, the arts, science, mathematics, cartography, engineering, and the understanding of human anatomy and astronomy (e.g., by Dante Alighieri, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo di Buonarroti Simoni, Johann Gutenberg, William Shakespeare).

Grade: 7

Content Area: History–Social Science

Category: World History and Geography: Medieval and Early Modern Times

Overarching Standard: 7.9 Students analyze the historical developments of the Reformation.

Standard(s): 7. Describe the Golden Age of cooperation between Jews and Muslims in medieval Spain that promoted creativity in art, literature, and science, including how that cooperation was terminated by the religious persecution of individuals and groups (e.g., the Spanish Inquisition and the expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain in 1492).

Grades: Prekindergarten–Grade 12

Content Area: World Languages

Category: Interpretive Communication

Goal: Students demonstrate understanding, interpret, and analyze what is heard, read, or viewed on a variety of topics, from authentic texts. They use technology, when appropriate, to access information.

Level: Novice

Standard: WL.CM1.N Demonstrate understanding of the general meaning and some basic information on very familiar common daily topics. Recognize memorized words, phrases, and simple sentences in authentic texts that are spoken, written, or signed.