The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about waltzes

Putonghua pronunciation:  qū3
Cantonese pronunciation:  kuk1
Meanings: melody, song

Noun 曲 (qū3) = 樂曲 (yüe4 qū3 = music-melody), 歌曲 (ge1 qū3 = song-melody = song). 曲調 (qū3 diao4 = song’s-tune) = melody, 曲詞 (qū3 ci2 = song’s-words) = lyrics.

Diva 高歌一曲 (gao1 ge1 yi1 qū3 = high-sing-one-song = performs a song sonorously). 曲高和寡 (qū3 gao1 he2 gua3 = song-high-harmony/accompaniment-few) describes fine art unappreciated. 曲終人散 (qū3 zhong1 ren2 shan4 = song-ends-people-disperse) = party/fanfare’s over, no more merriment.

小夜曲 (xia03 ye4 qū3 = little-night-tune) = serenade. 進行曲 (jin4 xing2 qū3 = advance-walk-tune) = march. 怨曲 (yūan4 qū3 = sorrow-song) = blues. 圓舞曲 (yūan2 wu3 qu3 = round-dance-melody = waltz) is in 三拍 (san1 pai3 = three-beats = triple time).

by Diana Yue