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: xüan2
Cantonese pronunciation: suen4
Meanings: revolve, turn, whirl, swirl, circle round, manoeuvre


Seagulls/war-planes 盤旋 (pan3 xüan2 = pan-whirl = 迴旋 hui2 xüan2 = circle-whirl = make rounds) in air. 旋風式訪問 (xüan2 feng1 shi1 fang3 wen4 = whirl-wind-type-visit-ask) = whirlwind visit.

Johann Strauss’s 皇帝圓舞曲 (huang2 di4 yüan2 wu3 qu3 = emperor-ruler-round-dance-melody = Emperor/Kaiser Waltz) has lovely 旋律 (xüan2 lü4 = whirl-rule = melody). 華爾滋節奏 (hua2 er3 zii jie2 zou4 = “waltz”-transliterated-segment/bar-play = waltz rhythm) is typically 三拍 (san1 pai1 = three-beats = triple time): one 重拍 (zhong4 pai1 = heavy-bat), 二輕拍 (er4 qing1 pai1 = two-light-beats).

by Diana Yue