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 choirs

Putonghua pronunciation: pu3
Cantonese pronunciation: po2
Meanings: chart, compose, table, range, score, notation

譜 (radical 言 yan2, words) means record/notation. 食譜 (shi2 pu3 = eat-record) = recipe. 族譜 (zu2 pu3 = clan-chart) = family-tree records. Rainbows show 光譜 (guang1 pu3 = light-chart/range = color spectrum).

Chinese musicians 譜曲 (pu3 qü3 = compose-songs/operas) using 工尺譜 (gong1 che3 pu3 = gongche notation). Western 樂譜 (yüe4 pu3 = music-scores), 歌譜 (ge1 pu3 = song-scores), 鋼琴譜 (gang1 qin2 pu3 = piano-scores) use 五線譜 (wu3 xian4 pu3 = five-lines-notation = stave-notations) showing 譜號 (pu3 hao4 = notation-signal = clefs, e.g. treble-clef, bass-clef), 音符 (yin1 fu2 = musical-note-symbol = musical notes), 休止符 (xiu1 zhi3 fu2 = rest-stop-symbol = rests).

Disapproving/angry parent/critic yells: “離譜!” (li2 pu3 = abandon-score = “Impossible/Outrageous!”)