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 about orchestras

弦 (radical 弓 gong1 = bow)
Putonghua pronunciation: xian2
Cantonese pronunciation: yin4
Meanings: string, stringed instrument

弦 = string on archer’s 弓 (gong1, bow) or 弦樂器 (xian2 yue4 qi4 = stringed-musical-instruments): 提琴 (ti2 qin2 = hand-held-lyre = instruments of the violin family), 吉他 (ji1 ta1 = “guitar”-transliterated). 琴弦 (qin2 xian2 = lyre-strings = strings) need 調校 (tiao2 jiao4 = adjust-correct = tuning).
胡琴 (hu2 qin2 = Hu/Western-District-lyre = huqin, Chinese violin) player strikes strings with 琴弓 (qin2 gong1 = lyre-bow = bow) to produce sounds. 琵琶 (pi2 pa2 = pipa, Chinese lute) player 挑弦 (tiao1 xian2 = plucks-strings), 撥弦 (bo2 xian2 = strums-strings).

Friends who 不咬弦 (bu4 yao3 xian2 = not-bite-strings) cannot get along. 弦外之音 (xian2 wai4 zhi1 yin1 = strings-beyond-’s-sound/notes) means what an explicit message delicately hints at.

by Diana Yue