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

管 (radical 竹 zu2 = bamboo)
Putonghua pronunciation: guan3
Cantonese pronunciation: goon2
Meanings: tube, pipe

管 = tube/conduit: 氣管 (qi4 guan3 = air-tube), 水管 (shui2 guan3 = water-pipe), 飲管 (yin3 guan3 = drinking-straw). 油管 (you2 guan3 = oil-tube = oil pipelines) carry oil from oilfields. Spies collect intelligence through secret 管道 (guan3 dao4 = conduit-road = channels).

血管堵塞 (xue4 guan3 du3 sai1 = blood-vessel-block-jam = blocked blood vessel) causes stroke. 雙管齊下 (shuang1 guan3 qi2 xia4 = pair-tubes-together-down) means trying two ways/solutions simultaneously.

簫 (xiao1, flute), 笛 (di2, reedless pipe), 單簧管 (dan1 huang2 guan3 = single-reed-strip-pipe = clarinet), 雙簧管 (shuang1 huang2 guan3 = double-reed-strip-pipe = oboe) are 木管樂器 (mu4 guan3 yue4 qi4 = wood-tube-music-instruments = woodwinds). 管風琴 (guan3 feng1 qin2 = pipe-wind-lyre) = pipe organ.

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