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

銅 (radical 金 jin1 = gold/metal)
Putonghua pronunciation: tong2
Cantonese pronunciation: tung4
Meanings: copper, bronze, brass, brass instrument

銅 means copper/bronze/brass. 銅錢 (tong2 qian2 = copper-money) = copper coins. 滿身銅臭 (man3 shen1 tong2 chou4 = full-body-copper/money-stench) describes nouveau-riche's nauseating airs/ways.

青銅器 (qing1 tong2 qi4 = green-bronze-vessel = ancient bronzes) show 銅鑼 (tong2 xiu4 = bronze-rust). 銅牆鐵壁 (tong2 qiang2 tie3 bi4 = bronze-wall-iron-cliff/wall) describes heavily-fortified prisons/bank-vaults.

Hunter blows 號角 (hao4 jiao3 = call-horn = horn). 喇叭 la1 ba1 = blurring-sound = trumpet), 短號 (duan3 hao4 = short-horn = cornet), 大號 (da4 hao4 = big-horn = tuba) are 銅管樂器 (tong2 guan3 yue4 qi4 = brass-tube-music-instruments = brass instruments). 銅管樂隊 (tong2 guan3 yue4 dui4 = brass-tube-music-team = brass band) plays 進行曲 (jin4 xing2 qu3 = forward-walk-song = marches).

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