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Reverting to its original title, The Harvard Dictionary of Music continues under editor Randel as a revision of his 1986 The New Harvard Dictionary of Music, so named at that time to reflect its significantly expanded scope from previous editions. The focus remains "the tradition of Western art music," with greater attention to world and popular music. Dozens of contributing scholars are listed in the front matter and denoted by initials at the end of entries.

Entries range from one or two words to multiple pages in length, defining or explicating terms for musical styles, instruments, performance marks, concepts, and works (e.g., Blues, Consonance and dissonance, Koto, Largo, Moonlight Sonata, Percussion instruments, Suzuki method). Black-and-white illustrations identify instruments, and staves and other forms of notation aid understanding of concepts (e.g., Diminution, Mambo). Many longer essays retain most of the text of the last edition, with brief updates to each section where appropriate. For example, England is enhanced by a listing of important British composers born in the twentieth century under the heading "History." Others have been substantially reworked or replaced (e.g., Electro-acoustic music). Many short entries have been completely revamped to reflect greater cultural importance or changing use or understanding of the terms. For example, Reggae now emphasizes the influence of Bob Marley. The content occasionally seems a bit behind the times, omitting terms like MIDI and MP3 (though Compact disc is a new entry) and failing to mention significant technological advances in Notation and Score that enable new approaches to both representation and reproduction of musical ideas. Brief bibliographies accompany many of the articles, and these have been updated even if there were few major changes to the entry.