

Hitting the right notes

In her article for the journal of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting, Nicola Bottrell explores the fascinating history of musical language.



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Pick up an English music book for beginners and the first thing you will notice is the plethora of Italian terms. For many children in the UK, Italian is the first foreign language they encounter, long before their first school language lessons. Italians must be bemused by the music-lovers they meet who can reel off a string of bizarre phrases such as *allegro ma non troppo* (fast but not too much), *un poco maestoso* (slightly majestic) and *con spirito* (with spirit), and yet would have no idea how to buy a return ticket to Naples.

In fact, when it comes to 'holiday' Italian, you had better leave your musical phrase book at home. The differences between the musical meaning and the literal sense could lead to some awkward situations, especially in the case of *rubato* indicating a more flexible tempo, but, literally translated, means 'stolen'.

Italy sets the stage

Italy's dominance as the language of music began during the Renaissance. At the time Italy was the cultural centre of Europe, excelling in literature, painting, sculpture and, of course, music. But what really established Italy as the driving force in Western music was the emergence of opera.

Composed by the Italian Peri, the first opera *Daphne* appeared in 1597. Around the same period, composers in Italy also began to give written indications to musicians about the speed and style of performance, rather than just the notes themselves. As the taste for opera grew and spread, composers from across Europe flocked to Italy to learn the art, including German-born Handel (1685–1759) who went on to pen some three dozen operas in Italian.

Change of tune

Italy's hegemony as the home of opera was not to last. The French court was a great patron of the arts

and, in 1653, Lully was appointed as composer to Louis XIV. Italian-born, but fully naturalised, Lully was the founder of French opera and created a new style of opera to suit the French tongue. Despite French opera's growth, it took the German language longer to shake off its Italian rival. Although many had tried, it was not until Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, first performed in 1791, that German-language opera was taken seriously for the first time. Not that everyone in society was pleased about this; the linguistic barrier meant that Italian-language opera was the preserve of the upper classes, and *The Magic Flute* controversially made this high-brow entertainment accessible to the German-speaking lower classes in Vienna and beyond.

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Although the lyric became more likely to appear in the native language, the guidance given to conductors and players in terms of musical tempo, dynamics and expression markings was still, as a rule, in Italian. The rise, particularly in the 19th century, of 'programme music', which seeks to tell a story or evoke an image, meant that composers looked for more imaginative ways to express their ideas than set Italian terms. From Schumann (1810–1856), it became increasingly common for composers to use their native language in this way. In his First Symphony (1888), Mahler inserts lengthy German markings such as 'Very simple and homely like a folk tune' into his score.

Multilingual musicians

Today, it is common to see musical directions in Italian, English,

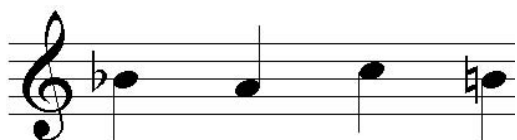
German, French and even Russian. Of course, while using the native language may give more freedom of expression, there is much room for misinterpretation when an unusual term crops up unexpectedly. It certainly wouldn't be for the first time that an unsuspecting player has been fooled by the German *drängend*. It may look like 'dragging', but its correct meaning – 'pushing on' – is quite the opposite.

There are also plenty of stumbling blocks for non-English speakers. In the 20th century, the rather eccentric Grainger, remembered for his *Country Gardens*, famously shunned all Italian expressions. He preferred instead to invent his own colloquial English versions such as *louden lots*, *slowing off* and the imaginative *clingingly*, which have no doubt puzzled generations of non-native speakers.

As easy as ABC

While musicians wrangle with directions in four or more languages, another quirk of the system means that even the familiar musical alphabet cannot be taken for granted when switching language. Here the maxim definitely holds: not everything is as it seems. JS Bach, for example, is well-known for his musical self-reference in the note sequence B flat, A, C and B natural. At first glance this may not mean much, until you realise this spells out the name BACH in the German note system.

Although German uses the letters A–H and English A–G, both notations have the same origins. In the 6th century, the Roman philosopher Boethius is known to have applied the first fifteen letters of the alphabet to describe the range of notes used at the time. This was later reduced to the letters A–G, and in fact the Greek G, or gamma, is the basis for the current French word for scale *gamme*. But the note B had two versions in the old system of Church Modes (of



Whose tune is it anyway?
Spot the name spelled out in this motif.

which Gregorian chant is an example). The note B therefore needed two signs and these remain with us today in modified form as the natural \natural and flat \flat symbols. While German also uses these symbols, the name H is applied instead of B, and B in German means B $^\flat$ in English.

A deer, a female deer

Different again is the system used in France, Italy and Russia. Immortalised by Julie Andrews in *The Sound of Music*, Do-Re-Mi, or 'tonic sol-fa', is an alternative notation based on a system developed in the 11th century. Its inventor, the monk Guido d'Arezzo, originally took six syllables from a Latin hymn where each phrase began on a different note in the scale. So, from the line *Mira gestorum Famuli tuorum* come the notes Mi and Fa. While the von Trapps were waxing lyrical about drops of golden sun, singing practice for d'Arezzo's choirboys took the more pious focus of the birth of John

the Baptist. Used primarily in Germanic countries for sight singing, this system is now the preferred convention for all note names in the Romance languages. Thus César Franck's *Symphony in D minor* was originally described in French as his *Symphonie en ré mineur*.

'use of other languages has created pitfalls for the unwary musician'

Differences between languages are not just confined to the way the pitch of the note is described, but also extend to their length. The note breve is called a breve in British English and is based on an old Latin name of the early Middle Ages. As you may guess from its similarity to the word *brief*, this note was originally considered to be short. Changes in musical notation now mean that it is in fact the longest note, and even then it is rarely used today.

German names are purely reflective of the length of the note in relation to the semibreve, or *ganze Note* (whole note), with a crotchet crotchet being called a *Viertel* (quarter). Likewise American English has abandoned Latin-based terminology for the whole note, half note, quarter note and so on. French has an interesting take on note values; opting for literal descriptions of the note's appearance. Thus a crotchet becomes a *noire* (black) and a quaver quaver , confusingly, a *croche* (hook).

Five centuries on from Italian's initial dominance, the language used in Western music today is a truly multilingual affair. Italian-based terms still play an important role but the use of other languages has grown; allowing increased freedom of expression, and creating a number of pitfalls for the unwary musician (and translator). Only one thing can be guaranteed: the only true universal language is the music itself.

All in the name



French horn

Commonly referred to as French, this instrument's English name is a complete misnomer. In French, as in many languages, the instrument is just the native word for 'horn'. At one time there were actually two versions of the horn in common use – the narrower-bore French type and the wider-bore German type. The French version was dominant in France and England (hence the historical French reference) but has since been replaced by its German cousin. So the horns you see in a modern orchestra are actually 'German'. The correct name is still hotly contested but, as the International Horn Society contends, it should just be called a 'horn'.

Cor anglais

This member of the oboe family is unusual in that it is still referred to by its French name in the UK. By contrast, US musicians use its translation 'English horn'. Neither a horn nor English, the instrument remains something of a mystery both in terms of its development and its name. Various theories about its name include the corruption of the French *anglé* (referring to a previous angled shape), its similarity to the horn-like look of an earlier instrument, or, rather appealingly, the mistranslation of the Middle High German word *engellisch* (angelic).