Musical bumps: indexing musical terms

Helga Perry

A brief examination of some aspects of music terminology that can confuse the indexer, cataloguer or translator.

The language and literature of music is international. Its terminology is multilingual, using Italian, French (particularly in dance and classical ballet), German, and British and American-English technical terms and names. Those who learned instruments or remember their music class in school will doubtless recall having to learn the meaning of many Italian terms found on their sheet music—and what about all those funny signs and squiggles? First we had to find out what they were called, then look up the names in a music dictionary. British people have a poor reputation when it comes to learning foreign languages, and it’s no wonder we got confused. Luckily our school music-manuscript books came to the rescue, with handy printed guides to the basic musical vocabulary—I still consider the best quick reference tool is the cover of one of the 99p exercise books in any music shop (and most good stationers or bookshops). I learned my German and French terms that way.

The British and the Americans have different basic terminology. The Americans follow the German nomenclature (translated), while the British use a mixture of Anglicized Latin and French.

However, note that American ‘classical’ musicians use the American terminology, whereas pop and rock session musicians tend to use the British names for anything other than the names of the note shapes. American jazz music may do either.

This brings us to ‘false relations’—actually a feature of renaissance and early baroque composition: according to the rules, a note might have to be sharpened if it formed part of a particular sequence, flattened if it was going somewhere else; both may occur in the same part in the same bar—but for our purposes false relations are words in different languages that appear similar but have different meanings, or words borrowed from one language into another, retaining the spelling but with quite a change in meaning. There are many examples: in English vs French (le smoking = dinner jacket); Britain vs US (pants = shorts); Britain vs Australia (sellotape = durex). In music we have the British crotchet, but the French croche = British quaver. The French word CROCHET means the hook on the tail of a quaver—as that of an English crochet hook!

The best example of a borrowed word that has gone both ways is the name for a conductor’s stick. In Great Britain this is known as a baton, in France as a baguette. To the British a baguette is a loaf of French bread—which the French call a baton. Baguette just means stick: hence, baguette de tambour (side-drum stick), baguette d’archet (bow-stick)—and, of course, the English baguette—French stick of the edible variety.

The names of musical instruments can also be confusing, especially for cataloguers, compilers of bibliographies, etc., who need to record details of instrumentation. For instance, the Italian tromba is a trumpet—not a trombone. Names of percussion instruments are confusing for the percussionist too, especially some Latin-American instruments. The guiro is also called resi-resi, and Indian bells are known in classical music as antique cymbals: make cross-references where necessary! Then there are composers’ instructions on orchestral or band parts: loose cymbal and suspended cymbal are the same thing. Hanging cymbal is a term you might also meet.

Another problem instrument is the organ. As these were generally custom-built there can be quite a variation in design, names of stops, etc. There are national and regional characteristics and idiosyncrasies in European organ-building. The entry in the New Oxford companion to music is as good a guide to the organ as any, and there are some excellent labelled diagrams in the Duden picture books.

Brass instruments used in brass and military, wind, or concert bands can be confusing, as can the instrumentation, which varies from country to country. An example: the euphonium (French petite-basse) is the same as a tenor tuba. The tenor horns are members of the saxhorn family (Adolphe Sax’s other inventions). These come in different sizes: the soprano saxhorn in B-flat is not the same as the soprano cornet in E-flat, but equates with the B-flat flügelhorn—these come in different sizes too! The alto horn (E-flat) is called the tenor horn in Britain, Australia and France (but the Swiss generally use this word to mean euphonium).

German tenorhorns are the oval-shaped instruments with squashed bells seen in marching bands at beer festivals. The Germans used to make a distinction between the trompete (rotary-valve trumpet, also used for cornet) and the jazz-trompete (the usual piston-valve instrument with which we are all familiar—and quite different in shape and tone from the cornet). The pictures in all the Dudens are of German-pattern instruments with rotary valves, so the terminology follows the German usage, regardless of the language of the particular Duden.

Recorders can also confuse: sometimes we find soprannino, descant, treble, tenor, bass, and elsewhere parts may be designated soprannino, soprano, alto, tenor, bass. And on the subject of whistles and pipes: the American slang for ocarina is sweet potato; and the Germans have three different words for swanee whistle (lotosflote, stempelflote, ziehpfeife).

Stringed instruments can occasionally confuse: the viola is called in French alto and in German bratsche (from the Italian viola di braccia). German viola and French viole usually refer to instruments of the viol family, which predate the violin family.

Names always pose problems—especially when they are translated or transliterated from non-Western alphabets. There are several British Standards on transliteration, to use as appropriate. Tschaikowsky, Tchaikovsky, Chaikovski, or Ciaikovski are all possible spellings you may meet and include in your filing order! Then we have Hungarian names—Westerners tend to be inconsistent here: we talk of Zoltán Kodály in Western form, but Kéler Béla stays in his Hungarian form (Béla Bartók is a special case—he emigrated to the USA and is treated accordingly—like the example of Werner Von Braun in ACR2). Yet Kodály wrote a piece called Háry Jánós—Hungarian style again! Take care to enter under the correct element of the name.

Titles of compositions, etc., can exist in many forms. Some composers produced more than one version of a work, perhaps with a different name or in a different language. Translations of titles often confuse—who would think that Haydn's 'La vera constanza' and 'List und Liebe' were the same work? Here are more examples of alternative titles: Leoš Janáček's opera 'The cunning little vixen' is also known in English as 'Sharp-Ears', and 'Jeji Pastorkyna' is the alternative title of 'Jenufa'. Many of the Savoy Operas of W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan have alternative titles: 'The slave of duty' (Pirates of Penzance) and 'The statutory duel' (Grand Duke). Then there are popular nicknames for compositions: Fingal's Cave/The Hebrides; the 'Jupiter' symphony; etc. Be sure to use cross-references or even double entries as appropriate.

Numbers—there are opus numbers, catalogue numbers, alternative numbering of symphonies, as with Dvořák (where the symphonies were renumbered to take into account some earlier compositions) or Haydn (whose works are numbered by publishers in sets).

Jazz is worth a whole session to itself; indexing works on jazz always seems to be complicated. Jazz enthusiasts love to know the minutest details about recording sessions, who did what, when, where, why, and how, and they expect the fullest information on record catalogue numbers and labels.

And now to books. The standard annotated bibliography of music bibliographies and reference works is:


This book will tell you where to find almost everything. It includes details of dictionaries, encyclopaedias, chronologies, catalogues of musical instrument collections, discographies, and directories.

A few books which I find particularly useful are:

- Grove's concise dictionary of music. London: Routledge, 1986. (isbn 0710099533. £25.00.)

A useful guide to all kinds of names—musical, literary, geographical, historical (though with a few idiosyncratic translations). There are indexes in English, French, German, Russian, Spanish and Italian. Reviewed in The Indexer Oct. 1987 15 (4), 251.


Good value for money.


A standard British reference work.


A super picture book, giving pictures of and the German names for just about everything under the sun—including the sun itself! The sections on music notation and musical instruments are excellent. A book that every user of the German language ought to have.
There are Duden picture books in other languages too, including:

**Oxford-Duden pictorial French-English dictionary.**

in hardback:

and limp:
German (and English; isbn 019869153X. £8.95).
Spanish (1988; isbn 0198691556. £8.95).

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**The Highlighting/Underlining Syndrome**

This disorder must be well known to many indexers, but it does not seem to have been previously described.

**Definition** A disorder in which the author of a book highlights (in transparent ink) or underlines a number of words on each page of the proofs and demands that the indexer include all of them in the index.

**Incidence** In this indexer's experience the condition occurs about once in forty indexes.

**Aetiology** Sufferers from this disorder have been professors or leading specialists in their particular subjects—people in authority, accustomed to giving orders to subordinates and expecting them to be obeyed. They are also distinguished by a total ignorance of indexing. All have been males. There is probably a relationship with the obsessive-compulsive neurosis.

**Clinical description** The author has attacked his text with fanatical and totally displaced zeal, marking, in one way or the other, any word that took his fancy. In one case known to me, most words of more than two syllables seem to have been highlighted. In another, a gynaecologist had on one page underlined eighteen nouns, four adjectives and two verbs. This indexer has recently seen an even more severe case in which the author of a textbook of chromatography had highlighted dozens of words on every page, several of which had more than seventy words marked; because one bit of a piece of apparatus was made of steel and another of quartz, he wanted both 'quartz' and 'steel' in the index.

The subject of this disorder appears to be completely without insight into his condition.

Care has to be taken that the condition does not infect the publisher. Most publishers are aware of the disorder, but one was so overwhelmed by the author's insistence that she wanted the indexer to carry out the author's instructions, and since his refusal has not asked him to do another index.

**Laboratory findings** None available. A psychological profile of the author might be helpful.

**Prognosis** Hopeless for the author.

**Treatment** Treatment has to be directed at the publisher. There are two methods.

In the first, the indexer returns the proofs to the publisher with the advice that as the author thinks he knows about indexing he should complete the index.

In the second, the indexer informs the publisher that he/she would be happy to compile an index in the way demanded by the author, but the publisher must appreciate that the index will be a very, very long one, that it will take (say) four weeks to do, that it will be a very bad index, and that the indexer's fee would be (say) £1,000.00. If, however, the publisher agrees that the indexer shall compile the index in his/her usual way, then the index will be of reasonable length, it will take (say) a week to do, it will be a good index, and the indexer's fee will be his usual modest one.

Both methods of treatment are successful. As it used to say on a box of pills: Cure Guaranteed.

Dr John Gibson

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**Wifely indexers**

Another gem to add to the collection of uxorious thanks for index compilation listed in our previous issue (page 192) is found in the acknowledgements to the very funny spoof history by W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and all that* (Methuen, 1930):

Their thanks are also due to their wife, for not preparing the index wrong. There is no index.