

# Musical Polyglottery

## *Sancte Johannes*

*Ut queant laxis  
Resonare fibris  
Mira gestorum  
Famuli tuorum,  
Solve polluti,  
Labbii reatum,*

-Guido d'Arezzo

Although there are four national languages in Switzerland (German, French, Italian and Romansch), the greatest geographical divide is *La Sarine*, the river known locally as the 'Rösti-Curtain'. United towards the exterior, the Swiss differ greatly from each other, not only in language, dialect and culinary tastes, but also in a variety of styles and customs. The fried grated potato dish, 'Rösti', is as much an everyday *plat* of the majority living to the northeast of *La Sarine*, as it is not, to the mainstream resident in the southwest.

So it is with music. In the French and Italian parts of Switzerland, the contemporary derivation of the above Latin chant gives its first syllables to music. It is believed that Guido d'Arezzo was born in Paris around 990 and died in Avellano in 1050. A learned Benedictine monk, his influence upon our music and theory is still felt to this day. The seventh degree of the scale (*Si*) was added later when the octave replaced the hexachord (C-A).

*An octave-based system suggests the concept of 'mode as unified octave species,' while a hexachord system may place more emphasis on the concept of a mode as a coalition of tetrachords, pentachords, or 'melodic orbits.'*- Margo Schuller (*ad huc vivit*), U.S. musicologist, expert on early music and alternative tuning techniques ancient and modern.

Even now, *Ut* is still used in France although its equivalent, the more singable *Do*, has gained the monopoly almost everywhere else.

Of course, the adopting of an alphabetical system in countries Saxon and Anglo-Saxon rather complicated matters. After all, *Si* sounds the same as *C* and is not the same note. The wonderful British theoretical musical tool, *Tonic Sol-Fa*, changed *Si* into *Ti* to avoid any possible confusion. Julie Andrews was forever grateful!

So, on one side of this River *Sarine*, children sing *E, F, G, A, B, C, D, E* for the

scale of E major, and on the other, *Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Si, Do, Re, Mi*. This seems most confusing to those of us with an Anglo-Saxon musical heritage. We can easily relate to any tonic home base being referred to as 'Do.' The French, and those of French linear descent who also still use 'Ut' (the *Romandie* part of Switzerland, Belgium, Quebec etc.), cannot! For them, *Do* is C and no sliding rule of relativity can ever apply!

Naturally, there are other variations on the theme. The Germans have the 'H' for B natural (*Si*) and call *Bb* (*Si bémol*) 'B'. This and a few other German modifications have been most useful to musicians and composers who have wanted to sign their names in musical notation. BACH really knew no problems as far as his musical signature was concerned!

Having lived and worked as a musician and music educator in several continents, I have needed to adapt myself to these differences in musical language<sup>1</sup>. There are some pitfalls that can be avoided by taking an international approach, which I admit I do. The French have a very poetic way of saying things, as one would expect. A crotchet (quarter note) rest is called a 'sigh' (*soupir*). If you half both note and rest values, you have a quaver (eighth note or *croche*) equal to a 'half sigh' (*demi-soupir*). There is nothing very dramatic so far. The next step is also relatively painless giving us a semiquaver (sixteenth note or *double-croche*) equal to a 'quarter of a sigh'. However, catastrophe is about to strike! When we divide what the French refer to as a 'black' (*noire*, crotchet, or quarter note) into eight parts, the result is what they call 'triple-croche' (demisemiquaver or thirty-second note). Its corresponding rest is an 'eighth of a sigh' (*huitième-de-soupir*).

I have lost count of the students to whom I have been obliged to teach the French system, who have thought that 'triple-croche' implied an odd number of divisions. There would appear to be three *triples* (triple) *croches* in a 'double-croche'. "Sorry, everybody, there are two!" I have repeated time and again. Its rest being termed an 'eighth of a sigh', obviously implied an even division. "Madame, how on earth can they represent the same value?" Good question! I changed languages and explained in American note values. The American system calls everything just exactly what it is, and when it isn't, its rest is called what it would have been had it been there in the first place!

It was whilst working for an academic year in the United States, that I realised life *senza* Guido d'Arezzo, *con* pure numerical logic, was no longer so easy. I grew up in England and initially thought that I would have terrible problems driving on the right hand side of the road, or converting to *Fa dièse* for F sharp when I moved to pastures (or Alps) yon. Here I was again, back in a land of F sharp, yet feeling quite homesick for my European musical heritage, or at least, parts of it.

The American system does have one weak point. In Britain, our longest common note is the 'semibreve'. The French equivalent is a 'ronde', which means a

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information <http://www.dolmetsch.com/musictheory1.htm>

'round'. The Americans call this a '*whole note*'. '*Semi*', obviously meaning half, although rare and rather ancient, the British system includes the '*breve*' in its logic. In French, this is called a '*carée*', meaning a 'square', thereby underlining the disadvantages of the quill! As the American system has already played its ace with a 'whole note', it is obliged to invent a 'double whole note' to correspond to its value of eight quarter notes (crotchets, *noires*). I personally believe they could have been a trifle more poetic. How about updating to *Kingsize*, *Stained-Glass Windows XL P*, or *Scoreescape OS. X.8?*

The 'strange' British names do have certain logic if we look back to the *Ars Nova* period of the XIVth century. The longest note was then referred to as a '*maxima*'. WHY did anybody change that idea? There followed the '*longa*', the *brevis*, *semibrevis*, *minima*, *semiminia*, *fusa*, *semifusa*, *et cetera*!

I feel there is a major flaw in the logic of the German/Anglo-Saxon system. Our musical writing spans a clef grid, which is based on C: Middle C is the common denominator for both treble and bass clefs. It is a two-way mirror. If we go up three spaces into the treble clef or down three into the bass, we will find C again. Continuing either up or down to the next octave, we have C as 2 ledger lines above the treble or below the bass clefs. Yet C is the third letter of the alphabet! We don't start an alphabet with its third letter in the language of words; doing so in music is not logical! The scale of *C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C* begins the alphabet, three letters in! If we use the Guido d'Arezzo system, we kick off with the first name on the first note, the note from which we work out the clefs and their logic. That makes so much more sense, particularly in grasping the relativity of one to another, as well as one hand to another on a keyboard

It doesn't matter where I am; I have now converted to *Do, Re, Mi*, mixed with the American note values. It is my own personal blend of what appears most logical and least confusing to others. Of course, with fluency, students can chop and change systems, and should and do learn the other names of notes and notation. Starting this approach as soon as possible is as important as learning the meaning of the Italian terms for musical direction. Musicians should be polyglot in terms of *sofège* (musical theory), which is only fun when one is! Maybe the music of the future will have even more inventions of its own? There are quite some additional hieroglyphics in the contemporary musical scores of today. I have a soft spot for John Cage's fish tank idea. He drew five lines on the outside of an aquarium and one played where the fish swam. *A chaqu'un son pois(s)on!* Beautiful random logic – the fishscape! Another is Cathy Berberian's '*Stripsody*'<sup>2</sup> in which characters from strip cartoons are drawn in graphic notation on three lines – low, medium and high. It is a wonderful tool for the beginner of any age, and her recording of it, a delight.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Edition Peters No.66164

<sup>3</sup> For more information <http://www.cathyberberian.com>

Over the years, I have played in countries where I have not spoken the language very well (if at all), outside the concert hall. The wonderful thing for musicians the world over is that music is their native language. Communication has never presented a problem even as an orchestral musician in the Netherlands, and my Dutch is sketchy at best.

My greatest challenge as far as communication was concerned was in Iran. I had been invited to give a recital at the University of Shiraz. A purely medical university, they were just beginning work on Music Therapy as a subject, which interested me greatly and was the reason for my stay in the United States many years later.

I wanted to carry out an experiment and they agreed. We chose several regional players (some from the *Qashqa'i* Tribe) of various local flutes and percussion instruments whom I had not met prior to the actual recital. We could not communicate in any way other than through music. Obviously, a rehearsal would have spoiled the exercise. I felt a thrill that the musicians were hearing an *oboe d'amore* for the first time, and that they were listening to it before having heard what is, to us, the much more familiar soprano oboe.

Although Bach probably turned in his grave, I started to play one of my favourite *obligati* from the *Christmas Oratorio*. From all points of view, I was as far away as possible from the musicians with whom I wanted to communicate. My point was that without the given support of language, a musician can communicate with another through rhythm and feeling even if there are no written musical notes, words, or shared cultural criteria.

The alternations between compound duple and simple triple timings, for example, do not need to be on paper for another musician to understand what is happening. Leonard Bernstein's '*I Want to Live in America*' uses just that shift throughout. Music is a language of communication and feelings, after all!

We all enjoyed our very unorthodox moment during my recital and I have never forgotten it. In how many situations apart from a musical quartet can one group together four strangers from, say, Iceland, Japan, India and Belarus, and expect communication, coordination and understanding (without the support of a common spoken language)? It is a most humbling and very heart-warming thought! No, everybody should *NOT* speak English!

*Vive la différence!*

© Jennifer I. Paull, June 2002, Vouvry, Switzerland.