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WHAT'S WRONG WITH ENGLISH?

The Use Of Foreign Terms In Music

To The Editor

Sir,—Is there any reason why directions in music should be given only in a foreign language—"allegro," "fortissimo," and so on? What is wrong with simple English words that everyone can pronounce and understand? I don't believe the slightest harm would be done to the artistic standard of the broadcast programmes if someone went through and systematically translated all the foreign expressions that sound so meaningless even when they are correctly pronounced. English would do me.

—LET HER GO (Wellington).

We passed this letter to "Mar-syas," whose reply follows:

ENGLISH would do me too if I thought the solution were so simple. *Allegro ma non troppo, maestoso, brioso ed ardentemente, adagio assai poco sostenuto, lento assai cantante e tranquillo, piu mosso*—what can all this mean to the average listener? "Let Her Go" proposes good plain English in its stead.

Now I agree that in most cases intelligent translation would help many listeners to gain access to the music that is described by these syllables. But let's just take a look at what would happen if we got someone to "go through and systematically translate all the foreign expressions."

Obviously words such as *sonata* and *cantata* have got to remain. We aren't in the habit of using our past participles as nouns, so we wouldn't like it very much if 2YA announced "Artur Schnabel playing Beethoven's *Sounded*, almost a *Fantasy*, in C sharp minor, Opus 27, No. 2, known as the *Moonlight Sounded*." And "soundings" wouldn't be a very helpful compromise either.

But say we translate all the other words—the ones that aren't part of the language, chiefly indications of time or expression. Let's overlook for the moment the inevitably cosmopolitan nature of large orchestras, and decide to compel the Italian flautist, the Viennese violinist, the French bassoonist, and the Jewish 'cellist to learn the meanings of English equivalents for all the terms they have used for years (admittedly this difficulty wouldn't arise in New Zealand). We will lay it down that if "allegro" in Italian means "merry" in English, then "merry" will do whenever the word appears above the staff. Result, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, opening movement, the famous notes of "Fate": *Allegro con brio* = "Merry, with vigour."

Feasible? No sir, the word *allegro* cannot be translated for all purposes, because its meaning is not a matter of words. In fact it is hardly a thing of spoken language at all—it is merely a symbol by which a certain purely musical idea is communicated to a performer, who doesn't think of merriness at all when he sees it on his score, but associates with it a certain feeling of movement, rhythm, and to some extent of measurable speed—but never with a mood, or anything so specific as merriness; nor even with Milton's *L'Allegro*, for how could we "come and trip it" in the first movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony?

However, let us assume that these objections are insufficient, and "Let Her Go" still wants all his Italian words translated, including, of course, *Largo* and *Andante Cantabile*. It will have to be done literally, or we would be abusing the composer's intentions. So a couple of typical announcements might sound like this:

"The time is 8.12 p.m. Now you will hear the Boston Promenade Orchestra playing Handel's *Broad*..."

Or, "You have just heard the Leslie Howard String Orchestra in the *Goin' Singable* from Tchaikovsky's String Quartet in D Major..."

When High Means Low

So it's hard to be consistent about this translating. But I still agree that there's a case for it here and there. I agree for instance that the Italian word for "high" seems an unduly euphemistic designation for what some-

one has called "a woman who sings low songs." But then altos were males once, poor wretches, and naturally they were thought of as high in relation to the basses and tenors, and the name stuck. Now that altos are actually the female voices of lower range, there's a case for a new word. I've heard this particular section of a small choir consistently refer to itself at rehearsals as "the seconds," but if I were conducting a choir that might include a few draper's assistants, I'd hesitate to adopt that term myself. It would be too much like a home truth to those altos who are really only sopranos unable to sing high notes.

"Let Her Go" is not the first to decide against Italian. Beethoven did it once, and his Sonata in E Minor, Opus 90, has German expression indications. But he soon went back.

And our professional musicians are familiar with Percy Grainger's "louden lots," "to the fore," "accompanyingly,"

(Continued on next page)

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