

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
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Letters to the Editor

PITCH NOTATION: HELMHOLTZ v AAS

From Dr Edgar Hunt, Chesham Bois, Buckinghamshire

Sir, Warmest congratulations on your first issue. I have much enjoyed reading it, and you seem to have provided something for everyone.

I see that you and Jackson Amers invite opinions on pitch notation. I should vote strongly in favour of Helmholtz as it is well established—particularly in respect of keyboard instruments and is capable of extension theoretically in both directions. The third option of using superior figures as the pitches ascend is sensible but the growing number of capital Cs as one descends is clumsy.

To me the AAS [American Acoustical Society] system is a non-starter, assuming that no one wants to describe a pitch below 32ft C. My piano goes down to A a third below that. How do I describe that note? A0 or A-1?

Yours sincerely,
EDGAR HUNT

From Mr Carl Sloane, Toronto, Canada

Sir, I have one or two thoughts on pitch notation ("Tail Ends", last issue). If the Helmholtz system is being used, C for example may refer to a specific pitch or to the note C in general and it may not always be clear from the context which is intended. The American notation C2 admits no ambiguity. The second point involves the order of primes and accidentals: c'# seems logically preferable to c' but it is not unusual to see the latter. Hopefully you address this in your Guidelines for Contributors.

Sincerely,
C SLOANE

Dr Hunt (the founding editor of this journal) makes a sound point about the AAS notation of the lowest piano notes. I can confirm that the usual notation for these low piano pitches is A0 which respects the standard practice of starting numbering systems not at 1 but at 0.

Mr Sloane has lighted on a small oversight, as he will doubtless have noticed when he received his Guidelines for Contributors: I have unfortunately not indicated the preferred order for accidentals and primes in the Helmholtz system. I agree with him, however, that c'# is the better option and it will be used where necessary from now on.—Ed.

TERMINOLOGY DEBATE CONTINUES

From Mr Ray Hands, Leominster, Herefordshire

Sir, May I heartily endorse the complaint from Mr John Harley [Letter, Vol. 5 no. 1]? I am increasingly irritated by the way 'fortepiano' is being coerced into meaning 'early keyed dulcimer' and 'pianoforte' is being restricted to the modern instrument. Neither is justified. Historically, in this country (and in English generally), 'fortepiano' was hardly ever used. The instrument evolved, but its name hardly changed.

I do not base my case merely on the nameboards of every early piano that I have myself seen, nor on my (limited) collection of early editions. I have looked carefully through Humphries and Smith's *Dictionary of Music Publishing in the British Isles* (2nd edn., Oxford 1970). They give the full titles of many individual publications; even allowing for duplication because of shared publication there must be well over a hundred references to the instrument in question.

By far the commonest name is 'Piano Forte'. Variants 'Piano forte' and 'piano forte' are not uncommon; sometimes there is a hyphen between the words. The single word 'Pianoforte' is rather unusual. Carmichael of Edinburgh in 1768 uses 'Piano & Forte'; Fortier & Scola, London 1739, use 'Gravicembalo—but translate it as 'Harpsichord'! Only Cartier, London 1775 and Jackson & Smith, London c. 1790, use 'Forte Piano'; no one makes that form one word.

I can see nothing against 'Harpsichord & Piano Forte' as a title. It copies the most frequent antiquarian usage and (since the separated words are never applied to the modern instrument) avoids confusion. It certainly does not denigrate the early instrument. But, whatever you call your magazine, please edit out such absurdities as 'Fortepianos in the collection are limited to square pianos', which Kah-Ming Ng absent-mindedly states on p. 35 of your relaunch number.

Incidentally, players of the Piano Forte were known as 'pianists' from an early stage; I have not come across 'fortist' at all. Only recently have I heard 'fortepianists' and I can't avoid the feeling that they should be confined to the dining rooms of a certain chain of hotels. . . .

Yours sincerely,
RAY HANDS

We welcome our readers' comments on this or any other matter. Please address your letters to the Editor, Harpsichord & Fortepiano, 20 Chisholm Road, Richmond, Surrey (UK) TW10 6JH, or fax on (0181) 940 9661. Please note that letters may be edited for publication.