# MUSICAL CRYPTOGRAMS

A musical cryptogram is a sequence of musical notes that spell out a hidden message when represented by their letter names.

The most famous example is the **BACH motif**, which the German Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach used to spell out his name and employed as a musical element in a number of his compositions.

English   B-flat   A   C   B

**German**   B   A   C   H
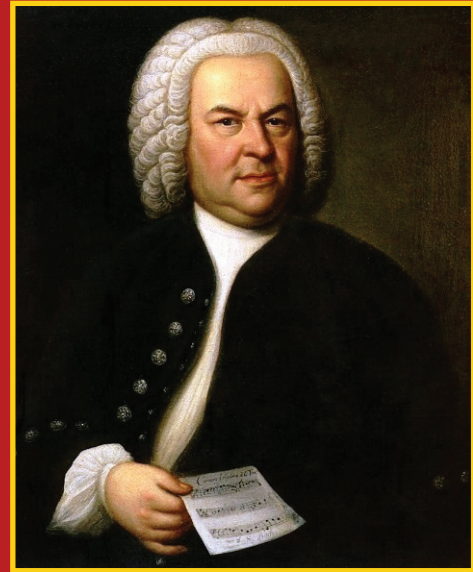
Johann Sebastian Bach

To the English speaking musically literate, this makes no sense since the note names read:

B-flat - A - C - B-natural

But, Bach was using German nomenclature.

GERMAN NOTE NAMES

The German nomenclature seems confusing because the note B-flat is indicated as "B" and the note B is labeled "H," but it is easier to understand with some historical context. During the Middle Ages, certain pieces would require the note "B" to be lowered to "B-flat" in order to avoid a sinister sounding dissonance known as the tritone, the so-called "Diabolus in Musica" (the devil in music). Before our current system of indicating whether the "B" was "natural" (♮) or "flat" (♭), different styles of writing the "b" were used with a rounded version corresponding to "flat" and a harder-edged Gothic version meaning "natural." This Gothic "b" was likely visually confused for an "h" over time and thus "B natural" became "H," leaving the other variant "B-flat" to become simply "B." It is also important to note that, the German notation for "E-flat" is "Es" which sounds like the letter "S" so this is also used in musical cryptograms.

b became ♭ flat
♮ looked like h and became ♮ natual
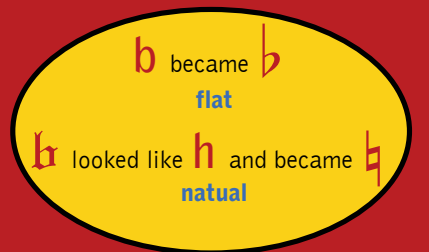
While the German note names are most often used in musical cryptograms, composers sometimes combine it with other systems like **SOLFÈGE**, which is a type of solmization (a system of attributing distinct syllables to individual notes in a musical scale). It is used to teach musicians to hear the music they see on the page inside their head and reinforce knowledge and understanding of music theory. There are two different solfège methodologies: **1) FIXED DO**, where "DO" is always the note "C" whether such pitch is the home key or not and **2) MOVABLE DO**, where "DO" is assigned contextually to the first note of the key of a piece of music. For consistency, cryptograms use the **FIXED DO** method.

Most Common Notes Used In Musical Cryptograms

B-flat and E-flat are commonly used in the German system

	English	German	Solfège
	A B C D E F G A B C D E F G A	A H C D E F G A H C D E F G A	La Ti Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do Re Mi Fa Sol La

and continuing up the scale

E-flat B-flat
Es B often used as an S   Me Te

SHOSTAKOVICH & MUSICAL CRYPTOGRAMS

Dmitri Shostakovich devised his own musical cryptogram to represent himself by using initials from the German transliteration of his name:

Dmitri **Sch**ostakowitsch

English   D   E-flat   C   B

German   D   S   C   H

The result is the DSCH motif and it is found in a number of his pieces

The 10th Symphony also contains the so-called Elmira theme, based on a musical cryptogram using a combination of German notation and solfège representing Shostakovich's student Elmira Nazirova, with whom he fell in love.

E   L(a)   Mi   R(e)   A

English   E   A   E   D   A

German   E   A   E   D   A

Solfège   Mi   La   Mi   Re   La

Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Op. 93
Cello Concerto No. 1 in E flat major, Op. 107
String Quartet No. 8 in C minor, Op. 110
Symphony No. 15 in A major, Op. 141
Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, Op. 77

D S C H

Infographic by Kurt Mortensen created for Pacific Symphony's performances of Shostakovich's 10th Symphony January 30 – February 2, 2014.

ORANGE COUNTY'S Pacific Symphony
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