

Eddie, The 25 Year Reunion

Naming Musical Instruments

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Walking out to the pool area, Kathy finds Milana hard at work with two of her friends, all sitting at the same patio table where Kathy did her homework and projects when she attended the University many years ago. Seeing her mom walk toward the skimmers, Milana yells out, “there’s no frogs! I already checked!” Kathy replies, “good. How about snakes?” Milana informs her mother, “I haven’t seen any. But, they must be doing their job because there haven’t been any frogs for a while.” Kathy replies, “good. I’m really glad to hear that.”

Walking up to the patio table, Kathy comments, asking, “you look hard at work. Anything interesting?” Milana replies, “yeah. For English class, we have to write a critical essay. And, it has to be two to three pages.” Kathy replies, “really? So, Miss Starr still assigns that paper to the freshmen?” Milana replies, “yeah. But, she’s Mrs. Boudet now.” Kathy replies, “that’s right. I knew that.”

Kathy asks, “so, what’s your paper on?” Milana replies, “it’s about how musical instruments are sometimes given really stupid names.” Roberta volunteers, telling Kathy, “mine’s on how incompetent teachers, like Mr. Sharpe, should never have been hired to begin with.” Kathy tells Roberta, “I can definitely see your point. Mr. Sharpe is a real piece of work.” Svetlana boasts, “mine is on how they should have two separate band classes, like in sports, where they put the really good athletes on the varsity team, and the not so good athletes on the junior varsity

team.” Kathy tells Svetlana, “that makes a lot of sense. I’m sure your grandfather can relate to that.”

Milana hands Kathy her paper, telling her, “here. Read this. Tell me if it’s any good.” Kathy replies, “sure. I’d love to.” Kathy takes a seat and reads Milana’s paper, which reads,

Stupid Names for Precision Instruments

Musical instruments are precision machines. Much thought and engineering goes into the design and manufacturing of musical instruments. Highly skilled musicians demand superior quality instruments and will not settle for shabbily built products.

Some instruments are poorly manufactured. For example, the trumpets given to grade school kids seem to be made with plumbing tubing and plastic parts. With some of these instruments, the valves squeak when they are pressed. These instruments are junk. It is a shame to even call this type of trumpet a trumpet. Instead, it should probably be called an air horn because that’s pretty much what it sounds like.

The names given to precision instruments found in marching bands are often quite stupid. It seems quite odd that, for some instruments, little or no thought goes into giving them an appropriate name. Personally, I’m leaning pretty far towards no thought. For example, we have the saxophone, euphonium, Sousaphone, mellophone, xylophone, and perhaps a few others. First of all, these instruments are not simply phones, as the suffix “phone” would suggest. The suffix “phone”, by the way, comes from the Greek word for sound. No surprise there. All instruments make sounds. But, if we’re going to keep one “phone” instrument, I’d vote for the saxophone.

Speaking of phones, a microphone is used to convert sound to electrical signals. A megaphone is a microphone / speaker combination that is used as an amplification device for someone who cannot speak loud enough. So, why isn't a speaker, like the ones used in the school auditorium, called a speakerphone? But, no ... that designation was somehow given to a telephone that has a speaker so everyone in the room can hear the conversation.

Using the above poorly thought out terminology for musical instruments, drums would be called a drumophone, the bassoon would be called a bassoonophone, the piano would be called a pianophone, and the guitar would probably be called a stringophone. And, why isn't the tuba called a tubaphone? Now, how much sense does that make? None! See my point?

Now we come to my instrument, the keyboard. It seems that, recently, the piano, the organ, the harpsichord (more on that later), clavichord, and any other instrument that has a keyboard associated with it has been, in its electronic form, renamed to be simply a "keyboard." Again, little or no thought went into naming this modern day instrument. At least Robert Moog had sense enough to name his invention the Moog Synthesizer instead of the Moogophone or something equally as stupid.

Now, back to the "phone" and other wind instruments. If we were to apply the logic used to name the keyboard, why not apply that same logic to valved instruments? If we were apply that so-called logic, all instruments with valves (saxophone, euphonium, Sousaphone, mellophone, tuba, clarinet, oboe, bassoon, etc.) would be appropriately called a valveophone, which makes no sense at all.

Some instruments are appropriately and nicely named. For example, the Harpsichord sounds like a harp where the strings are plucked rather than hit by a hammer, like with the piano or clavichord. And, the name Harpsichord sounds a whole lot better than an instrument named the Harpophone.

And finally, when it comes to naming instruments, percussionists take first prize. Their instruments are appropriately and nicely named. Percussionists play drums, cymbals, tambourines, bells, timpani, Bongo drums, Congas, steel pan drums, chimes, and Marimbas. The list goes on and on. But, so sad, too bad for the poor xylophone, which must feel like road kill compared with the names given to other percussion instruments.

In conclusion, we can see that some musical instruments have appropriate names associated with them. Others, perhaps, should be renamed by real musicians. And, to be sure, if I ever invent an instrument, it will not be called the Milanaphone.

After reading Milana's paper, Kathy tells Milana, "this is really good! I definitely see your point. It's also kind of funny." Milana asks, "what's so funny about my paper?" Kathy replies, "well, calling the Moog Synthesizer a Moogophone, for one." Roberta comments, "yeah. That is kind of funny." Svetlana tells Milana, "you meant for your paper to be funny. And, you know it, girl." Milana replies, "okay. So, I'm busted. Roberta adds, "all of our papers are meant to be a little funny."

Roberta asks Kathy, "so, you had Mrs. Boudet when you went to high school?" Kathy replies, "yeah. Back then, she was Miss Starr. She was one of the best-liked teachers in the school." Roberta informs Kathy, "she still is. She's really nice." Kathy tells Milana and her friends, "well, I hope you all get an A."

Kathy dives into the pool, and starts swimming laps. Roberta tells Milana, "you're mom is really cool." Milana replies, "yeah. I know."