

Time 4 Change



by Geoff Thomas

“The world hates change, yet it is the only thing that has brought progress.”¹

Who amongst us can honestly say, “I like change”? Many people like the idea of change - as long as it doesn't affect them. But, is change always for the better?

“Certain things, they should stay the way they are. You ought to be able to stick them in one of those big glass cases and just leave them alone.”²

Since first coming to Malta in April 2004, I have shared and witnessed many changes, and certainly some are for the better, whilst others ... well, you work it out! Hotels are being re-vamped, many changing hands or changing over to all-inclusive packages; there are more roads with better surfaces (and the speed cameras to go with them!); a bigger choice of flights to and from Malta at more competitive prices; we now have the euro, and who can go a day without mentioning Arriva?!

“To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.”³

Then, of course, there have been many changes in the Imperial Band Club: changes to the structure and fabric of the building, changes in staff and committee, an ever-improving rehearsal room, a fabulous bandstand, and new, young, band members. The club needs to make changes in order to make itself future proof. This is merely a positive comment on the changes it has already made, and continues to make, and a compliment to the committee, staff and members on the way the club is moving forward, something it needs to do to survive.

“We are the music-makers, and we are the dreamers of dreams.”⁴

So why and how does the band continue to flourish and attract regular players for marches and concerts? How many other band clubs – and not just in Malta – have the attendance figures we do for band practice? There are many reasons, but one

of the key reasons for me is the ability of the band and its conductor to change the repertoire to suit the occasion and the audience.

“As with anything creative, change is inevitable.”⁵

So where am I going with all this?

“Why do you go away? So that you can come back. So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colours. And the people there see you differently, too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as never leaving.”⁶

The repertoire changes in band have happened for a few reasons: the number of visitors, and exchanges with people, from other countries is certainly one, and the willingness and enthusiasm of the band to respond to the needs of its audience is definitely another. But, and this is my main point, the band (like musicians the world over) is handicapped in the way that we all, or nearly all, were taught music theory. If I had a euro for every person I've met who can completely and accurately define a time signature and its purpose, I'd be very poor indeed. Since this publication will be read by many people who are musicians, or have friends or family members who are, I'll explain what I mean. I'll try not to get too technical, but apologies if I lose some of you along the way.

“Intelligence is the ability to adapt to change.”⁷

Pieces of music can be broken down into two types: those with time signatures, and those without. (If you haven't seen a piece without a time signature, try looking at early plainsong, graphic scores, many piano pieces by Erik Satie and Olivier Messiaen, or a huge amount of the 'modern' music written after World War II.) Time signatures themselves can be broken down into three main types: Simple, Compound and Other (Complex, Mixed, Additive, Irrational). When we learn music theory, we are usually only taught simple and compound, and yet complex time signatures have been around for

over two hundred years in printed music, and some say over two thousand years in Greek friezes. Our present band repertoire contains examples of all of these types, except irrational, so no wonder we have problems.

What is a time signature?



A time signature usually has two numbers, one written above the other. (There are common exceptions including the two above; these are shorthand for four and two beats in a bar, and are frequently found in hymns and marches). The upper number tells you **how many** beats in a bar; the lower number tells you **the value** of those beats. It follows, therefore, that the top number can be any number, although in practice it is usually between 2 and 12. On the other hand, the bottom number can only be one which is equivalent to a note length (this is even true for irrational time signatures for you clever ones), as shown in the chart below. (Chart 1)

So it follows that 3/2 means three half-notes (or minims) in a bar; 4/4 means four quarter-notes (or crotchets) in a bar; 5/8 means five eighth-notes (or quavers) in a bar, and so on. This rule always applies, and – once learnt – should be easy. Unfortunately, many people still teach that a crotchet is equal to one beat, so unless 4 is the bottom number,

pupils become confused and playing in other time signatures is difficult. For example, in 6/8 a crotchet (or quarter note) will never be one beat.

What makes it even trickier is how the notes are grouped within the bar. This is where the terms simple, compound, complex etc. come in.

- If the top number is 2, 3, or 4, or 8, 16 etc, we have simple time; the notes in the music will be grouped in twos, fours etc.
- If the top number is divisible by 3 (for example, 6, 9, or 12) then the music is in compound time and the notes in the music will be grouped in threes.
- If the number is not divisible by 2 or 3, then we have complex time. The time signature might be 5/4 (as in *Mars* from Holst's *Planets Suite*), or 7/4 (as in Stravinsky's *Firebird Suite*). In each case, the number will be broken down into groups of 2 or 3 or 4; in the piece *Mars* already mentioned, the conductor will beat 3 plus 2 (Chart 2).

Or, as in Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, the conductor might beat 2 plus 3 (Chart 3).

- Quite frequently, to make matters more interesting (or complicated!), the time signature might look like one type and actually be another. For example, Dave Brubeck's *Blue Rondo à la Turk* is written in 9/8 but starts out with patterns of three bars of (2+2+2+3)/8 followed by one of a standard 9/8. (Apologies that I can't reproduce it here, but it's still under copyright!) The conductor

1	Semibreve / Whole Note		8	Quaver / 8 th Note	
2	Minim / Half Note		16	Semiquaver / 16 th Note	
4	Crotchet / Quarter Note		32	Demisemiquaver / 32 nd Note	

Chart 1

Gustav Holst
from *The Planets (Mars)*

Allegro

Beat: 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

Chart 2

Tchaikovsky
from *Symphony No. 6* (II)

Beat: 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 2

Chart 3

therefore conducts in **four** for three bars and **three** for one, yet the bar lengths remain the same.

This brings us to the programme for September 2nd 2013, and the problems we have with counting in our rehearsals. Four pieces in particular raise interesting time signature issues for the performer. Firstly, the well-known overture to *Orpheus in the Underworld* by Offenbach. The delightful slow melody in this overture is written in 6/8; however, it changes tempo, or speed. Thus the conductor may wish to conduct it with two beats in the bar (remember – groups of three), or with six, or even a mixture of the two. Players must write carefully in their parts to ensure they know where it changes.

Secondly, we have *Music* by John Miles in a great arrangement by the British composer, Philip Sparke. Quite early on in the piece, a lot of the band members are requested to clap a rhythm in 7/4 time; in this case it is actually (2+2+3)/4 and the transition to the next section in 4/4 (2+2) is cleverly written so as to be quite straightforward for the players.

Film music is notorious for its constantly changing time signatures; after all, the music is accurately timed to fit scenes and key moments. As listeners, we rarely notice the changes; try listening to the main theme from *ET*, or the music as the *Titanic* puts to sea. The next example is a selection of music from the first *Chronicles of Narnia* film, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and this is typical of film music: there are many changes of time signature and of tempo. Again it is important to write down what the conductor is beating so that

the changes of tempo, the rhythms and the accents all happen in unison.

Finally, I was thinking back to my piece *Gwalia* of two years ago, and to the Karl Jenkins piece *In Caelum Fero* from last year. The main problems in rehearsal were the changing time signatures in one, and the rhythms in the other. So this year, I wrote *Merħba*. This piece is written in 10/8 and 9/8 but the conductor beats in four throughout. Both of the time signatures are complex and can be subdivided: 3+3+2+2 for the 10, and 3+2+2+2 for the 9. In order to help the band we came up with the idea of using words with the same number of syllables; being a band, we found *pastizzi, pastizzi, birra, birra* worked really well! (Try it – it works!) Apart from being fun to play, and – I hope – to listen to, *Merħba* is the beginning of another change. In the Imperial Band at least, musicians are beginning to understand that a dotted minim can be three beats, two beats, one and a half beats, or a single beat, and (I hope!) we are starting to change the way we look at time signatures and note values forever.

*Change isn't always for the worst; the shell that forms around a piece of sand looks to some people like an irritation, and to others, like a pearl.”*⁸

Referenzi

- ¹ Charles Kettering
- ² J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*
- ³ Winston Churchill
- ⁴ Arthur O'Shaughnessy
- ⁵ Enya
- ⁶ Terry Pratchett, *A Hat Full of Sky*
- ⁷ Stephen Hawking
- ⁸ Jodi Picoult, *My Sister's Keeper*

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