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.

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.

SHOSTAKOVICH & MUSICAL CRYPTOGRAMS

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

Dmitri Schostakowitsch

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