



Photo: John Savin@designfolk.com

The collateral damage of nice

TO be clear and direct in communicating – getting across what you really feel to your fellow person – must surely be one of the rarest of human traits. In my experience, it's the norm for people to often do whatever can be done to avoid saying what might be said in the most concise and unvarnished of ways. In our use of words, in our lexicon, we've even invented a special category for words that are indistinct, words that soften the impact of a purer, more literal alternative. We have the euphemism.

Death and dying are taboo discussion subjects in much of the world. Rather than to die or to have died you'll know it's much better to have "passed away". To have passed away must be among one of our most common euphemisms. Like quietly leaving a big party, easing away from a large dinner table or fading from sight at the end of a long road, people just "pass away". So much nicer to think of death that way, isn't it? Of course, euphemisms can be crass and colourful as much as they can be gentle and soft: to kick the bucket, flatline, croak and push up daisies all fall into the category of words and phrases to use when you don't want to say the D word.

Among many other things, Winston Churchill was a master of the English language. In 1906, in responding to a question in Parliament regarding government treatment of unskilled Chinese labourers, he said: "Perhaps we have been guilty of some terminological inexactitudes." Terminological inexactitudes: a lot of syllables and letters to say the crisp and explicit monosyllabic "lie". Of course, the word lie is considered unparliamentary language and so Churchill looked to the cloying and – this time – clunky euphemism.

Sometimes called doublespeak or double-talk, the euphemism is usually about substituting words that might be blunt, or even offensive, with something milder and more indirect – vague even. Readers of George Orwell's 1984 will be familiar with his inventions of "doublethink" and "newspeak". There is danger in euphemisms because while the words may seem sweet, true and clear, meaning is camouflaged. Something bad can seem good. The intolerable can seem bearable.

When bombs are dropped on wartime targets bad guys can be "eliminated" – killed. At the same

time, there can be "collateral damage": civilians can be blown into a thousand bloody pieces. I can't recall ever having heard a newsreader say anything close to "a thousand bloody pieces" in the context of a bomb exploding. "Collateral damage" is so much less, well, bloody.

And so to piping. Collateral damage in the context of pipe bands might be an acre of litter and detritus after a Worlds contest: a sodden sea of empty

In our game, judges for the most part are people who have been through the mill, the wars of pipe band life. It's all practice and sacrificed time away from other important things and just hard graft. No matter the grade, pipe band life is not always easy-going and almost always involves some sacrifice or, at any given time, a tricky emotionally-charged people "situation" (euphemism alert) – usually both. I think knowing this makes a judge less inclined to be concise and clear and euphemism-free on score sheets. We all respect the effort, the toil and the love of the music. To say, "Ds suck" – like saying the converse, "unaligned pitch" – well, just not on.

So what to do?

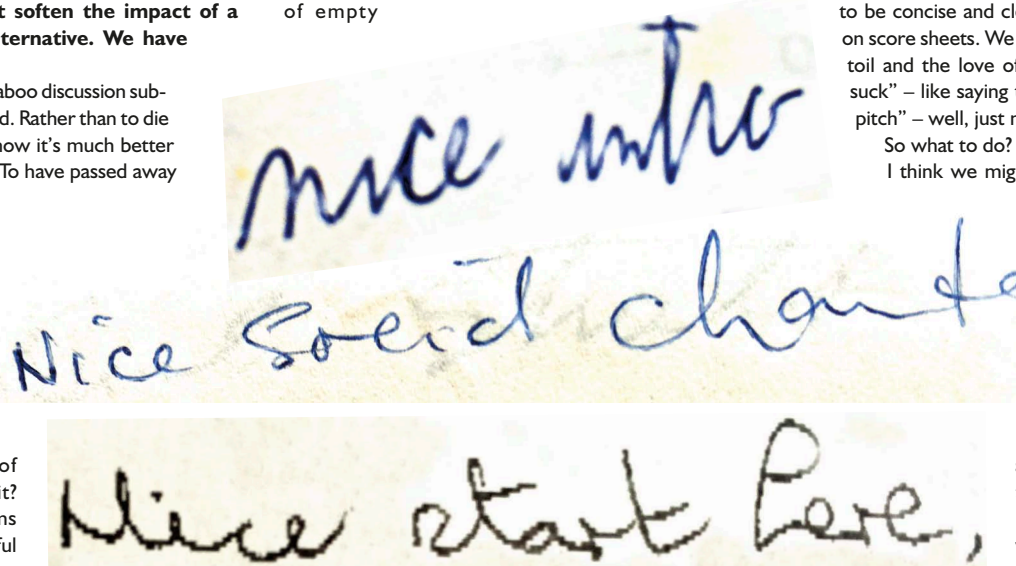
I think we might draw on a bigger vocabulary to describe what we mean. I don't think the classical music world's Italian glossary would help. If people don't know what the words mean how useful can any effort in communicating an assessment be? *Sentimental* air, *spinto* reels. Cue rolled eyes (like those who read my "unaligned pitch" comment).

What about drawing on commonplace words to describe what we hear? Consider: ambitious, bold, catchy, braw, breathtaking, effortless, enigmatic, satisfying, gallus, passionate, stylish, riotous, unpredictable, miserable, couthy, throbbing and heartfelt. What's wrong with saying, "this tune made my heart soar"? Or, "too slow and uninteresting. Left me cold"? You get the idea.

One word that has stunk out more score sheets of mine than I care to think, both band and solos, is that most genial of words – "nice". I think "nice" in this context is a euphemism for inoffensive. "Nice" is the path of least resistance. You know, your tune didn't make me want to jump out of my seat and strangle you so – "nice phrasing", "nice lift", "nice intro" – just "nice". And when it comes to music – and art in general, is there a more offensive word than inoffensive? Your art is "nice". Your music is "nice".

As much as we – er, me – need to stop with the "unaligned pitch" – we need to stop the nice. It's true that "no major errors" and the inoffensive can hit prize targets, but we can do better, I think, in simply describing what is great and not so about any performance: a description without euphemism. Tell it like it is.

Still, I thought I'd near pop my clogs when I heard your sensuous strathspeys. Now isn't that nice? ●



pint cups. We're not without our doublespeak. We certainly have euphemisms aplenty.

A short laundry list might look like this: "good fingers" might have a double meaning as in musically not-so-great, "lovely pipe" can mean sausage fingers. The solo piper coming off a contest and saying, "I got through it", means s/he played pretty good and expects a result. In pipe bands, "well away" for a clean intro means, well, a clean intro and "I'm listening". "Not in the idiom" means the judge has no idea what you're doing.

It was a late-May Saturday that it came to me. I was judging pipe bands at a contest in Canada. Clipboard in hand, pipe band playing their collective sweaty heart out and me with pen, hastily scrawling the most illegible of good-intentioned critical assessment. It was two words: "unaligned pitch". I could have said, "flat, under blown Ds" or just "Ds suck" (though probably not acceptable language by the local organisers). No. I wrote, "unaligned pitch on D". Where did that come from? I'm hoping today the band couldn't read my very poor cursive handwriting and just shrugged and said the usual, "whatever". But what a fanny. It was an epiphany. My "score sheets", as we call these things in piping, struck me as over-heavy on euphemisms.