

Who Came Up with the Word O-R-G-A-N?

Meaning of the word *organ*

The English word is derived from the Latin *organum*; this in turn originates in the Greek οργανόν. Οργανόν in the Greek, however, had the connotation of *any instrument or tool by means of which something was made*.



Take the English word *tools*. In the illustration on the left you see a picture of *tools*. All the items in the picture are tools, yet each tool is called by a more specific name and each tool must be operated by the user in a different manner than the other tools. But, they're still tools!



So, why this connation? Glad you asked!

It is commonly accepted that during the Hellenistic period, a tool (or machine) was invented for the purpose of proving a scientific theory, but not so much for the purpose of making music. To the best of our available knowledge, Ctesibius of Alexandria (a.k.a. Ktesbios), who was something of a physicist and inventor, who simply needed to make a tool, or a machine, that could prove that water pressure could produce a constant supply of wind. So, he took multiple pipes (probably from a Pan flute), put them on an airtight box, and used water pressure in a cistern beneath the box to produce continuous air pressure through pipes (as long as someone was pumping air into his machine.) Lo, and behold, the machine (*hydraulis organum*) could and did make sounds with the tuned pipes. It became a very popular tool (or machine) for use in parades and other public entertainment venues and found its way through the Mediterranean and Roman Empire until the downfall of the Roman Empire. Most of these machines/tools (organs) disappeared during the invasion of the Vikings. Google *hydraulis organ* for more.

Exactly when and why the word *organ* came to take on the more specific connotation with the musical instrument we know today as the organ, continues to be a topic of debate among scholars. There is general agreement that the word had begun evolving to mean [pipe] organ somewhere in the 700-900s with the recovery of the West from Viking invasions, but no conclusive explanation is available at this time. We do have evidence that by the 1100s and mid 1200s the word *organ* was commonly used in contracts and other documents to mean [pipe] *organ*.

The word *organ* in other languages:

German	orgel
French	orgue
Italian	organo
Spanish	organo
Portuguese	órgão
Dutch	orgaan
Czechoslovakian	orgán
Russian	орган

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