The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about pipe organs

Putonghua pronunciation: zhen4
Cantonese pronunciation: jan3
Meanings: shake, vibrate, shock, stun

震 (radical 風 yù3, rain) is associated with 打雷 (da3 lei2 = striking~thunder = thunderbolts), 地震 (di4 zhen4 = earth- quakes). Aerial bombings 震破 (zhen4 po4 = shake~break = crashing) windows aim at 震懾 (zhen4 she4 = stun-awe/ intimidate = frightening) city's inhabitants.


Organ’s fortissimo sound 震耳欲聾 (zhen4 er3 yù4 long2 = shake~ears~would~deaf = is deafening). Passion music 大合唱 (da4 he2 chang4 = big~together~sing = grand~chorus) 震撼人心 (zhen4 han4 ren2 xin1 = stun~shake~people's~hearts = stirs/ stuns audience).

by Diana Yue