

The Versatile Recorder: It's Not Just Medieval!

For:
Fifty-Fourth National Conference
Community Engagement
Richmond, Virginia



Richmond Public Library
October 20, 2011

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Documentation Handout

--The Versatile Recorder: It's Not Medieval Anymore —

History and Development

*Based on the discovery of a Neanderthal flute made from the femur bone of a bear cub, the use of early instrumental ancestors of the recorder is estimated to have begun between 43,000 and 82,000 years ago. This flute was found in Slovenia by Kvan Turk of the Slovenian Academy of Paleontology'. Perhaps this was similar to the Hopewell Human Bone Whistle illustrated below.



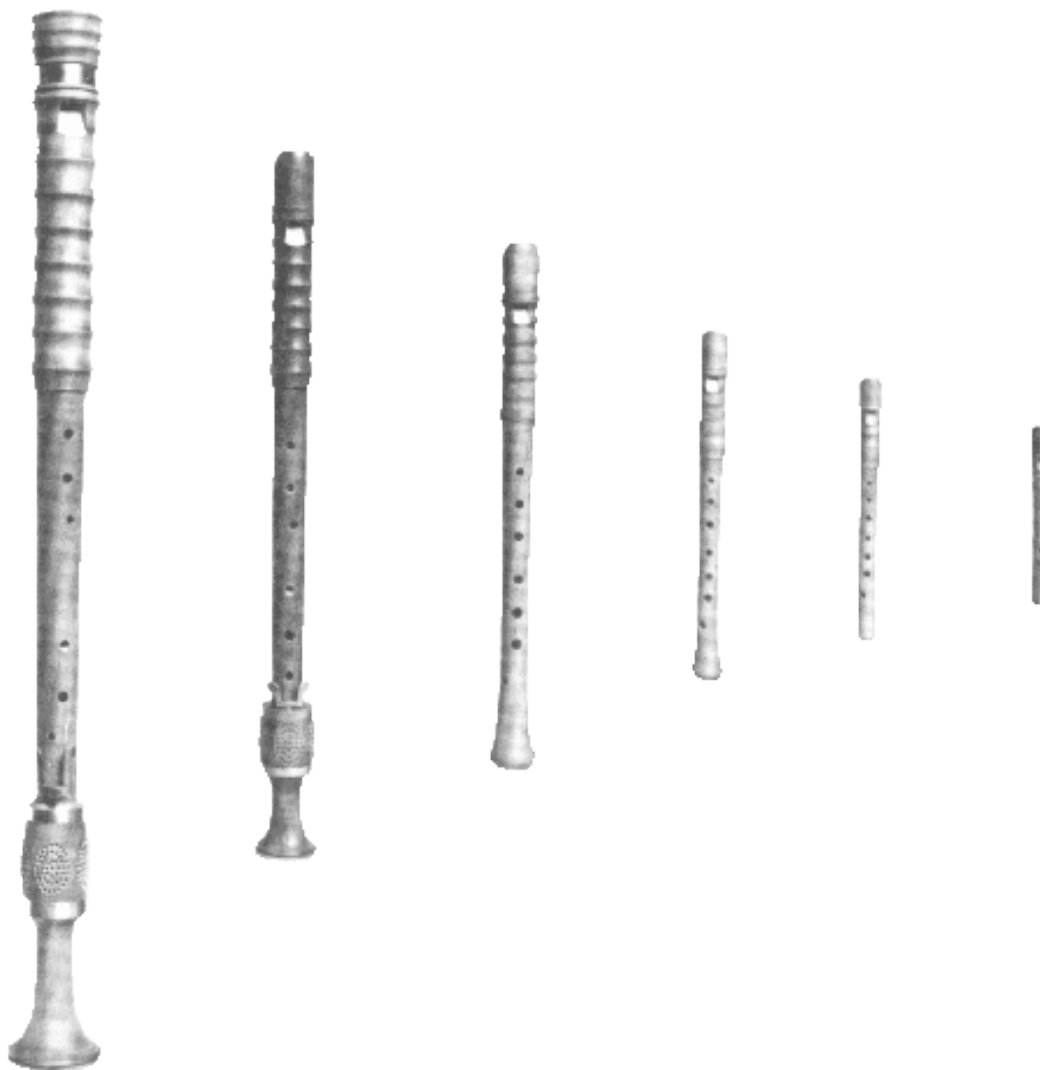
*A fourteenth-century recorder (1300), a two-piece instrument with holes for seven fingers and a thumb, was found in northern Germany in 1987.

*A recorder can be seen in a fourteenth-century fresco (The Mocking of Jesus, 1315 A.D.) located in the Church of Staro Nagoricvino, near Kumanova in Macedonia. In this fresco, a musician plays a cylindrical duct flute, the window/labium of which is clearly visible. (The term “duct {from the Latin “ductus,” meaning “windway”} refers to the space between the block and the top of the beak that allows the air to enter the recorder and be focused on the lip or labium.) At the foot of the instrument in the fresco there is an open finger hole for the little finger of the lower most hand.



The Mocking of Jesus, 1315 A.D

*Full consorts of recorders (SATB) were produced in the fifteenth through sixteenth century. They had conical bores, full rich tone, and a range of one octave and a sixth.



*Renaissance composers wrote for this instrument and many compositions included viols and recorders or combinations thereof. Composers such as Palestrina (1524-1594—Italy), and William Byrd (1543-1623—England) were featured.

*Medieval recorders probably have cylindrical bores but the taper increases over time. A van Eyck bore would be like the transitional bore. Renaissance recorders have a "choke" at 3/4 of the sounding length and then a flare that strengthens the bottom note and accentuates the second harmonic (12th above the fundamental). Their range is an octave and a sixth while later recorders play the usual range of two octaves and a note.

Bore comparisons; Renaissance Bore 20.4mm, Transitional bore 19.6mm
Baroque Bore 19.2mm

* The recorder was part of the musical life in the American colonies, and many early settlers played the instrument. The first known band identified in America was formed in 1653 and included recorders, which were considerably quieter than the other instruments, such as the two drums and fifteen oboes that also comprised the group.

* During the Classical and Romantic periods, the recorder was used very little as the emphasis was on orchestral instruments with extensive note ranges and a multitude of dynamic possibilities. Recorders were used, however, to provide marching music during the Civil War.

* Baroque through Present has produced the more comprehensive and technically demanding recorder playing. Bach, Handel, Telemann, Vivaldi and many modern composers have written for this instrument. Many of the ABS Plastic recorders are very well voiced and in tune.

Design of the Recorder

* Recorders have been made of materials including plexiglass, ivory, bone, porcelain, glass, metals, and even cement! Wood recorders are made from maple, boxwood, rosewood, ebony, and other soft and hard woods. Harder woods are more impervious to moisture and hold heat longer, allowing for stability of intonation.

* Sound is produced as the air stream hits the lip. Approximately half of the air goes out of the recorder through the lip opening, and the rest goes into the instrument, escaping through the holes and bell.

* Recorders have sometimes been called 'fipple flutes' because of the 'fipple' or block located inside wooden recorders...plastic ones are usually built in or cemented securely. A fipple is a small removable block of cedar that is placed in the head joint of the instrument. It forms the floor of the windway and connects through to the window, which allows the concentration of air on the lip to produce the recorder/s whistle-like sound.

* The recorder has a conical bore that is different from other instruments in that it is larger at the top and smaller at the bottom.

Renaissance vs Baroque Recorders

Renaissance recorders often come as a bit of a shock to people who are accustomed to the softer, more refined sound of the usual Baroque instruments. Renaissance recorders are very much consort instruments, and have a much louder, more robust sound, especially in the lower register. They also sound somehow "woodier" than Baroque instruments. The payoff for the volume and the strength in the lower notes is a smaller range: most Renaissance recorders have a range of an octave and a sixth, as opposed to a bit over two octaves for a Baroque recorder. (In practical terms this is not usually a problem, as consort music of the Renaissance period, being written for the instruments then available, is unlikely to require a larger range.)

Renaissance recorders have a large bore, much bigger than that found in Baroque recorders. Often referred to as cylindrical, it is actually very slightly tapered. Renaissance instruments feature a much plainer profile than most people are used to, with almost no decorative carving. The original instruments were made in one piece, but modern copies are usually made in two pieces for convenience, often joined by a brass or wooden ring at the base of the head joint. Interestingly, there was no hard and fast rule in Renaissance times as to which hand went "on top": some surviving instruments have two bottom holes, one for left and the other for right handed musicians. The unused hole was filled with wax to seal it off according to the musician's preference.

Baroque Recorders

These are the recorders all of us are used to: the highly turned, sophisticated "flutes" of the Baroque period. In the 17th century the recorder underwent a period of transition: the bore

became more sharply conical (tapering out from bottom to top), and makers started striving for a larger range and a more refined, flexible sound which would be suitable for playing solos. (Much of the great solo recorder repertoire dates from this period.) Recorders were also used in orchestral music at this time.

In the early 18th century, the transverse flute (traverso) started gaining in popularity. The biggest disadvantage of the recorder is the fact that it is a very soft instrument; transverse flutes were louder and had a bigger range, making them more suitable for the orchestral music then beginning to come into vogue. The recorder was gradually played less and less until it almost disappeared; by the 19th century it was played rarely, and then mostly as an historical curiosity. The art of making recorders virtually disappeared (and, as anyone who has ever tried to make one can attest, they are deceptively sophisticated instruments). The instrument did not come back into fashion until the early music revival of the late 19th and early 20th century, when Arnold Dolmetsch (England) virtually had to reinvent the wheel in reintroducing the recorder to musicians. Dolmetsch recorders are well known as to their quality.