

A Brief History of the Alto Flute

by Andrea Redcay

Musicologists trace the modern alto flute to the tenor and bass voices in Renaissance flute consorts, and to the Baroque *flûte d'amour* in A and the *quart* and *quint* bass flutes in F and G. The Baroque predecessor had a bright tone and that was preferred for orchestral use. The lower-pitched *flûte d'amour* had a darker, more intimate tone and was used for chamber music. Surviving A flutes from this period are 100 to 150 millimeters longer than the concert flute in D and have a narrow bore that produced a sweet, veiled tone in the middle and upper registers.

The Germans considered the *flûte d'amour* to be a chamber instrument that was well suited to the expressive music of Baroque trio sonatas. In the famous 1752 treatise Quantz described the ideal flute tone as "thick, round and masculine; . . . the most pleasing tone quality on the flute is that which more nearly resembles a contralto than a soprano, or which imitates the chest tones of the human voice."

Bach composed chamber music for flute between 1720-1730, and probably intended most works to be played on a *flûte d'amour*. Possible exceptions are the E-minor sonata (BWV 1034)

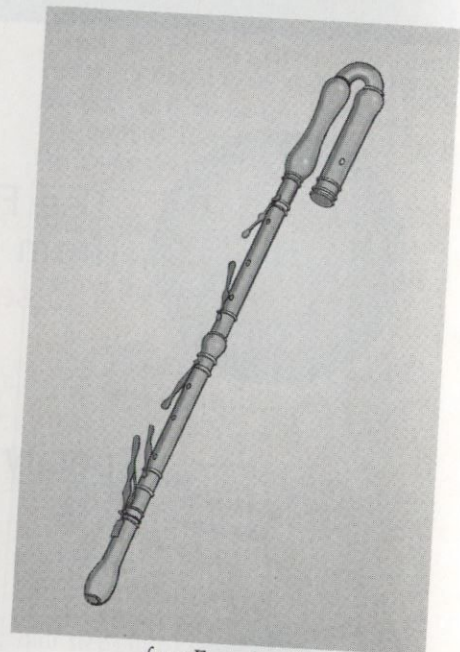
and the G-major sonata (BWV 1038). Hotteterre's *L'Art de Préluder* (1712) gives detailed suggestions on transposing, which indicates that flutists of the period were expected to transpose at sight and played flutes of different pitches.

Although the higher-pitched concert flute gained popularity by the mid-18th century, Telemann, C.P.E. Bach, and W.F. Bach continued to write for the *flûte d'amour*. There are fewer examples of scoring for bass flutes in G and D than for the *flûte d'amour*. C.P.E. Bach's *Trio Sonata in F Major* (WQ 163) specifies "bass flöte" (modern editions call for a bass recorder) and Hotteterre, Philidor, and Couperin specify the *quart* and *quint* flutes. There are excellent surviving examples of bass instruments from the period in the Dayton C. Miller Collection, but manuscripts for these are scarce.

At the end of the Baroque period flutemakers began experimenting with new designs for bass flutes pitched in G and D (an octave below the concert flute). The most remarkable of these is a J.M. Anciuti bass flute made in 1739 that has a bore and lip plate similar to concert flutes of the era, but it is twice as long with a curved headjoint from a single piece of wood. The raised finger holes are placed at acute angles that facilitate finger placement.

Between 1750 and 1830, before Theobald Boehm's revolutionary design, flutemakers experimented with bore sizes and additional keys, primarily for the popular concert flute. No manuscripts from this period use an alto- or bass-voiced flute, but surviving instruments indicate that flutists continued to play alto flutes and transposed the chamber music parts. The *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d'Alembert (1751-52) includes a drawing and description of a five-key bass transverse flute, and a comment that it had similar improvements in design. Several flutemakers, including Delusse of Paris and Wigley MacGregor of London, also made five-key instruments with curved heads.

The pitch and nomenclature of the flute family changed significantly. The soprano in E^b, the concert in C, tenor in B^b, and bass in G were the primary flutes. Until the first quarter of the 20th century when the octave bass flute in C became common, references to a bass flute still meant an alto flute in G.

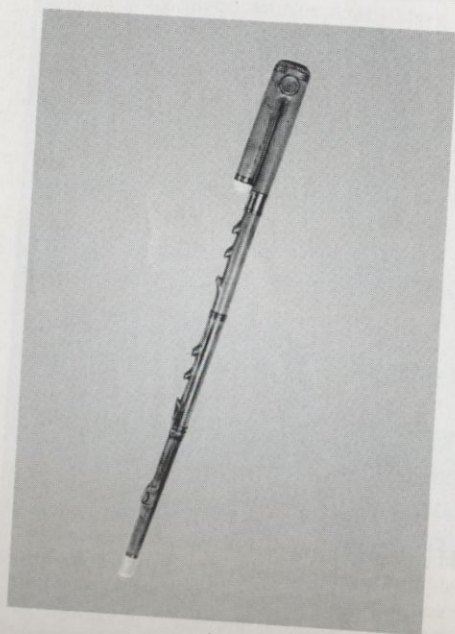


from *Encyclopédie* (1751-52)

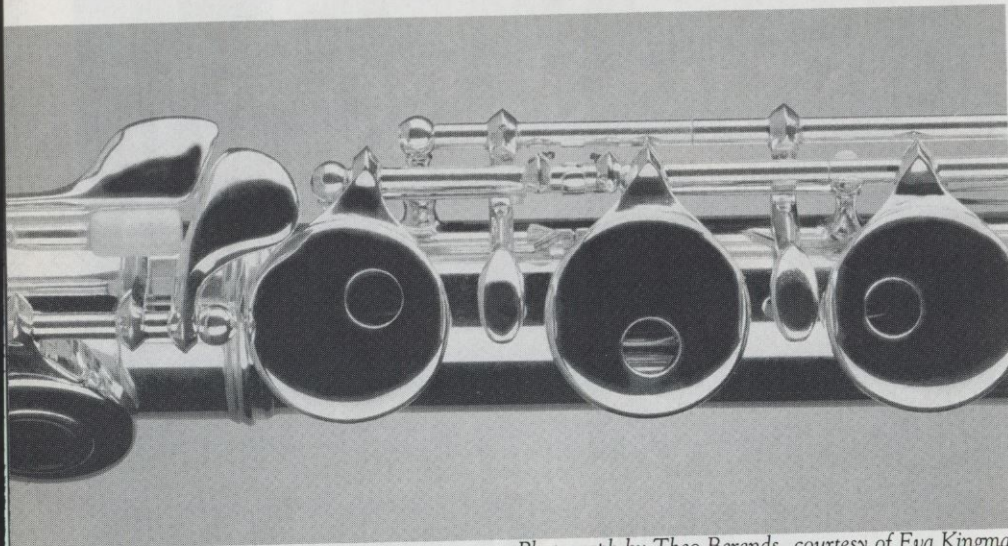
There is little documentation about the development of lower-pitched flutes from the early 19th century. In 1815 there is a record of Viennese instruments with an extended length and a range to low G, but the tone and mechanism facility was poor.

In 1855 Boehm created instruments with improved acoustical and mechanical qualities by using a rod and axle mechanism on the longer alto flute. He chose a straight head design that left quite a distance from the embouchure to the keys, but the keys were in a comfortable position and the tone holes were in the correct position for good intonation.

Though Boehm's early alto flute design had shortcomings it prevailed because other flute makers of the period did not experiment with it. He continued to improve the design and believed that throughout history there



Anciuti bass flute, 1739



Photograph by Theo Berends, courtesy of Eva Kingma

had not been any fine low flutes. In the 1860s a pupil of Boehm, Carl Wehner, brought an alto flute made by Boehm and Mendler to the United States. It had a silver-plated body with a thin cocuswood head and open G# and is now in the Dayton C. Miller Flute Collection at the Library of Congress. Alfred Badger ca. 1865 manufactured the first alto flutes in the United States. Sydney Lanier played a Badger alto flute in the Baltimore Symphony and was intrigued by the broad, noble tone quality it produced. The design of this alto flute included a range down to F# below middle C, a silver-plated brass headjoint, and adjustable key height on the footjoint for better intonation.

After Badger no alto flutes were manufactured in the United States until 1898, when George W. Haynes built an alto flute in F for organ builder Murray M. Harris in Los Angeles. By 1910 Haynes had gained the reputation as the best maker of alto flutes in the United States. Other Haynes alto flutes were used by Georges Barrère, then principal of the Damrosch Orchestra in New York City; Dayton C. Miller; and the Metropolitan Opera.

Before 1850 the alto flute repertoire was quite limited. Even with Boehm's improved scale and mechanism, the limited repertoire posed a barrier to would-be performers. Boehm's only source of solo and chamber repertoire for alto flute were the 23 lyrical pieces he arranged from works by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Weber. He completed all 23 arrangements by 1858, the year he sold his first alto flute.

Early scoring for the modern alto flute includes Rimsky-Korsakov's ballet music for *Mlada* (1870) and Weingartner's *Gefilde der Seligen* (1897). As

Romantic composers sought to create new tonal colors, the alto gained favor. The finale of Act I in Verdi's *Aida* (1871), calls for three *flûtes d'amour*; Ravel wrote *Daphnis et Chloé* between 1909 and 1912; and Stravinsky wrote *Le Sacre du Printemps* in 1911.

Gustav Holst wrote an alto flute part in *The Planets* (1916) as did Benjamin Britten in *Spring Symphony* (1947), Shostakovich in *Symphony #7* (1941), and Aaron Copland in the *Short Symphony* (1932). Hollywood composer Robert Russell Bennett wrote an alto flute part in movie scores of the 1930s. Today the alto flute is commonly used in jazz, popular, and film music.

In the early 20th century the market for alto flutes grew in Europe, but Henry Bettoney of the Cundy-Bettoney Company was the first American dealer to offer an alto flute as a stock item. He also was one of the first to publish solo music for it. Joseph La Monaca, flutist with the Philadelphia Orchestra for more than 30 years, wrote two flute quartets that include alto flute and two alto flute solos published by Bettoney ca. 1921. William S. Haynes, Verne Q. Powell, and the H. & A. Selmer companies all introduced alto flutes in the 1920s. The original Boehm design remained unchanged for two decades with slight modifications of bore size.

Since 1950 alto flute manufacturing increased significantly. Albert Cooper experimented in the 1960s with an alto based on a new scale and a bore of 25 mm. He produced eight exceptional instruments that are still in use. The Powell Company hired Friedrich von Huene to redesign the alto flute, but his models had unsatisfactory dynamic range and intonation. In 1976 Bickford Brannen, an employee of

Powell, designed a new alto based on Cooper's specifications. Powell made only ten of these before Brannen left Powell, as did tool-maker Solomon Ostroff, who later teamed with Eugene Sagerman in the 1970s to produce Ostroff-Sagerman altos, which were highly regarded.

There has been a dramatic increase in the selection, availability, and prices of alto flutes in the past 30 years. Japanese instrument makers entered the market, and some instruments offset the cost of solid silver alto flutes, with silver-plated nickel alto flutes and curved headjoints made of sterling silver or brass-alloy.

In the 1980s Dutch flutemaker Eva Kingma collaborated with flutist and composer Jos Zwaanenburg to create an open-hole alto, much desired by flutists who use extended techniques. Kingma based the design on Boehm's original alto flute, but used a bore of 24 millimeters and wider tone holes for a more stable scale and sonority in the third octave. Kingma has since collaborated with flutist Jon Fonville in designing a revolutionary mechanism that allows the performer to use slightly altered Boehm fingerings to play microtones.

The current market for alto flutes includes many flute choirs throughout the world, a steadily growing solo and chamber repertoire, and contemporary wind ensembles and symphony orchestras as the alto flute has become an established member of the modern flute family. □



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