

An article on cheap plastic flutes?

Surely I jest! Actually, no. There are a whole host of reasons to familiarize yourself with these instruments — even if you never play them.

Perhaps the biggest one is simply that they've introduced tens of millions of American schoolchildren to music. You probably remember tooting one yourself.

These simple flutes are inexpensive, easy to clean, portable, and nearly indestructible. They fit small hands and make playing scales intuitive. They're often described as pre-band instruments. The idea is that kids start on an instrument that's as fun and approachable as a toy in grade school and then graduate to concert instruments as they mature. It's no surprise we view these cheap flutes as the perfect means to start youngsters in their musical education. 80 years of experience proves it's so.

Oh, and there's one more reason to discuss these flutes. You might actually enjoy playing them! They're not all just for kids. We'll listen to sound clips that show how even these simple instruments can act as vehicles for true musical expression.

History

The pre-band concept starts in the late 1930s with the inventions of the *tonette* and the *song flute*. These little black flutes quickly become familiar to a generation of schoolchildren as they establish themselves as ubiquitous in primary education. The U.S. government even produces tonettes for military personnel during World War II.

Trophy's *flutophone*® joins the competition in 1943. The company claims their flute has since been the introductory instrument for some [50 million](#) children. The flutophone's sales really take off several decades after its introduction. Talk to someone who grew up in the 40s, 50s or 60s, and they probably remember their tonette or song flute. Talk to someone who grew up in the decades since, and they're more likely to recall their flutophone.

Today, the tonette has fallen to the wayside and is no longer produced. Meanwhile, Suzuki introduced their *pre-corder*®, which to all appearances looks like an updated, modernized tonette. New competitors have emerged, too, such as low-end plastic recorders and ocarinas. In this article we'll leave these last two to others and keep the focus on traditional pre-band flutes. Let's take a detailed look at tonettes, song flutes, flutophones, and precorders.

Tonettes

The tonette was invented in the late 1930s by Ziegner Swanson. A variety of companies have manufactured them since including The Tonette Company, Chicago Musical Instrument Co., Swanson, Gibson, and Dimestore Dreams/Binary Arts Corp. On each instrument, a stamped imprint just below the mouthpiece identifies it as a tonette by the words "Tonette", "Swanson", or "Gibson".



[These photos](#) at Ebay show how a variety of tonettes look. Over the decades they've been made in every color of the rainbow, yet for some reason, black predominates. They measure 7.5 to 8.5 inches long and a bit over an inch at their widest point. Most have a tapered end, though some feature a bell reminiscent of a clarinet. It's important to note that **all** tonettes have closed ends. (Even those with the flared bell, which is purely decorative and serves no function.) Inspect the end of your plastic flute — if it has an open end, it is not a tonette.



Top to Bottom: 2 Song Flutes, white Flutophone, Gemshorn, Red and Black Tonettes

The closed end means that tonettes are [vessel flutes](#), instruments that rely on resonance within a closed air chamber for their voice. In fact, they're [inline ocarinas](#), or vessel flutes that extend straight out from the mouth with a row of fingering holes. This design is largely responsible for their unique timbre. Though they look like cylindrical bore flutes, tonettes sound more like the plastic ocarinas they are.

Many tonettes consist of a single piece of molded plastic and are not tunable. Others come with a removable mouthpiece. This permits tuning and easier cleaning, too. A few even sport a removable bell or tail.

As with the other three instruments in this article, you progressively lift your fingers to [play the scale](#). Finger holes are raised so they're easier for youngsters to fully cover than those of recorders with their flat, unadorned holes. They're close together for small hands. The goal is to make playing as easy and intuitive as possible.

The tonal range of the all instruments in this article is C5 through D6. That starts an octave higher than middle C on the piano (C4) and includes only 9 whole notes. With tonettes you can easily extend that range two notes higher. You'll notice the instrument includes molded position rests for your left hand pinky finger and your right hand thumb. Simply take a pen knife and carefully hollow out these two finger rests to transform them into holes. Now you've extended your range to C5 through F6.

Modification does not affect the instrument's sound beyond adding a couple extra notes. So why weren't they sold this way? My guess is that the designer believed the instrument was easier to learn without the two extra holes. The tonette's extended range compares favorably to the competitors I'll describe below.

Tonette sound quality varies. Tonettes were manufactured over many decades by different companies using different molds. The best-sounding ones consist of a hard, dense plastic. They have a shiny, smooth, reflective surface and project a clear, lively voice. Many poor ones are made from a lightweight, textured plastic with a black matte finish. These date from the instrument's later years. They're often too breathy or airy, more toy than musical instrument. Some have intonation issues.

My quality tonettes play whole tones accurately. They play all sharps and flats between C5 and F6 except for low C# and high D# (you must half-hole to play these). Chromatic fingering can vary across instruments due to slight differences in intonation. Like all ocarinas, tonettes require higher breath pressure to hit the highest notes in tune.

Let's listen to sound samples. Here's a short [swing riff](#) on a World War II army-issue tonette. [This soulful rendition](#) of "Amazing Grace" demonstrates the power of the instrument in the right hands. (Note the shiny high-quality tonette in the video.) These students performing [Scarborough Fair](#) and [The Shire Theme](#) show how typical players can enjoy themselves while making decent music.

You can hear tonettes in professionally produced music in the Gross Concerto by P.D.Q. Bach and [Pressed Rat and Warthog](#) by the rock group Cream. Don't you just love those little flutes singing in the background?

Song Flutes

The [song flute](#) was invented in the late 1930s by Elver J. Fitchhorn. With its similar size, black plastic body, molded fipple, and raised fingerholes, it looks so like the tonette that people often confuse the two.



Yet there are differences. First, this flute is still actively produced and marketed by Conn-Selmer. (Conn and Selmer merged in 2003). As you can see from [Ebay photos](#), it carries the stamped identifier "Song Flute" and/or the makers mark of Fitchhorn, Selmer, Conn-Selmer, or Conn.

Second, the instrument lacks the two dummy finger holes found on the tonette. You can't modify its pitch range. Like the flutophone and precorder, its range is limited to C5 through D6.

Third, the song flute features a long, gently flared tail. That's how you can distinguish it from a tonette. Fourth, that tail is open-ended.

Is it an ocarina? I'd say it's not a true vessel flute due to its open end. Others [point out](#) that the open end is so small that the instrument still produces sound as a [Helmholtz resonator](#). They claim the acoustical physics are more those of a chamber flute than a cylindrical bore flute.

Modern song flutes are black plastic and non-tunable. Conn-Selmer advertises the instrument as always in tune due to its one piece construction. Those I've tried are in tune with themselves on the whole notes but somewhat lacking on the sharps and flats. Like the tonette, you can play most but not all chromatic notes. You have to half-hole to get low C#, which is difficult unless you're practiced.

How does it sound? Look closely and you'll see that not all song flutes look exactly the same. Older ones with a smooth, shiny, hard surface sound best. Newer ones with a slightly textured surface or matte finish often sound inferior. Exactly as with tonettes, manufacturers altered the plastic at some point. My experience has been that the older material sounds better.

[Here's a professional musician](#) showing what a song flute can do. His performance proves that even simple instruments can express musical beauty. Here's a [Youtube clip](#) that demonstrates the instrument's educational uses.

If you'd like to try a song flute yourself, Amazon presently [offers them](#) at the rock-bottom price of \$4.99 USD. If quality sound is your goal, I recommend you seek a shiny-smooth older model on [Ebay](#).

Flutophones

The *flutophone*® is an attractive two-color plastic instrument with an ornamental bell. Since its introduction in 1943, it has sold to the tune of [35 million](#).

You can view various flutophones in [these Ebay photos](#). The catchy dual-color scheme is either a white body with red decoration or a black body with white trim. This appeals more to the eye than black tonettes or song flutes. The separate mouthpiece allows you to tune and clean the instrument.

Like some tonettes, the flutophone features a decorative bell at its base. The bell doesn't appear to project sound. Inside it is a small hole. Given that these products are designed with young children in mind, I'd speculate that the little hole is there more to drain moisture than determine timbre. (Although if you cover it the sound suffers.)



Makers marks for the flutophone include Trophy, Grover-Trophy, 1st Note, Thompson, and Music Treasures Co. You might also encounter this instrument bearing the name the *alto horn*.

Fingering is nearly identical for the four flutes we're discussing, as this [fingering chart](#) shows. Some differences show up among the sharps and flats. Here's a [fingering chart specifically for the flutophone](#) that includes its full chromatics. Just like the other flutes in this article, halftones require cross-fingering. The flutophone features a double-hole to help you play low C#, which neither the tonette or nor song flute provide. However it lacks the additional low D# hole of the precorder, so you must cross-finger that note.

And the sound? The one I toyed with years ago did not play in tune with itself as the lower notes were off-key. I see that several [reviewers](#) at Amazon mention this same concern. Yet many, many more reviewers [rave](#) about their flutophones.

Listen and decide for yourself. Here's a fun snippet of a speed flutist really [going to town](#) on his flutophone. [This dexterious performance](#) similarly demonstrates its utility in quick-fingered tunes. [This original composition](#) gives you a better idea of the flutophone's timbre and intonation.

Here's [one of several videos](#) that show how regular folks with everyday skills can employ the flutophone to create inventive, original music. That's the great benefit to humble folk instruments, isn't it? Access to creative tools at minimal cost. Fun for everyone!

Here's how [students sound](#) when they play the instrument. And here's [a robot playing the flutophone](#) at Carnegie Mellon University. You can buy a flutophone for [under \\$10 USD](#).

Flutophones

The newest competitor among pre-band flutes is the [Suzuki Precorder](#)®. The precorder looks like a modernized tonette. Its open end perhaps makes it more like a song flute acoustically.

Like the flutophone, the precorder has a removable mouthpiece for tuning and cleaning. The translucent red and blue versions allow you to see if moisture has built up inside, so you can easily open up the instrument to dry it.



The precorder has double-holes on both low notes to make it easier to finger low C# and D#. And it's fully chromatic. Its fingering chart is more clear than most because it includes both diatonic notes and chromatics but does not confuse beginners by interspersing them. The precorder and the flutophone beat the tonette and the song flute when it comes to playing all sharps and flats.

Suzuki's well-thought-out precorder package comes complete with a cloth storage bag, neck strap, fingering chart, and stickers. Quite a deal for [only \\$8.68 USD](#). It's my personal pick for young children from among the current pre-band flutes. You can learn more about it at [Suzuki's product webpage](#).

Unlike tonettes or song flutes or flutophones, which have evolved over the decades, all precorders are the same. Only Suzuki makes them and to my knowledge no variations exist. This is a big benefit to those who require product consistency, for example, in classroom teaching. It also means all precorders sound the same. Is that good?

The good news is that the instrument is tunable and includes all chromatics in its C5 to D6 range. It's easy to hit notes and stay in tune with proper intonation. The one challenging note is high D, which you must blow accurately to attain. Overall I'd characterize the precorder's sound as mediocre but well suited to its purpose. It compares favorably to the late-issue song flutes and tonettes I've played. Playing in a location with natural resonance greatly enhances its appeal. Here's a short [sound clip](#) and [another](#) with added reverb.

The precorder targets children and its limitations make perfect sense if you review Suzuki's line of instruments. For just a few dollars more, you can opt for either their [one-piece](#) or [three-piece](#) beginner recorders. As the entry-level product, the precorder does a fine job fulfilling its role as musical toy-instrument for kids.

Conclusion

These four plastic flutes make fun kids' toys and great first musical instruments. They're incredibly cheap, largely indestructible, kid-safe, portable, and about as easy to play as any instrument you can name. Their 80-year legacy proves their value.

For kids, I'd recommend Suzuki's precorder. For under \$10 USD you get a complete package including a cloth carrying-bag and a well-designed pre-band instrument.

For musicians, I recommend tonettes and song flutes made from the original glossy-smooth plastic. These project a uniquely appealing voice, especially when played in a hall or stairwell with natural resonance. They're no longer manufactured so you'll have to buy them from a website that deals in used items, such as eBay.

One thing for sure. Pre-band flutes all score high in nostalgia. Seeing one always brings a smile to those who recall them from their schooldays.

Summary Chart

	Tonette	Song Flute	Flutophone	Precorder
Closed End:	yes	no	no	no
Range:	C5-F6 *	C5-D6	C5-D6	C5-D6
Chromatics:	most	most	yes	yes
Low C# hole:	no	no	yes	yes
Low D# hole:	no	no	no	yes
Tunable:	varies **	no ***	yes	yes
Colors:	various with black common	black	attractive two-tone	red, blue, or gray
In Production:	no	yes	yes	yes
Manufacturer:	none	Conn-Selmer	Grover-Trophy	Suzuki

* Assuming modification and tunable.

** Some tonettes are one-piece and non-tunable, others are two-piece

*** Modern song flutes are black, one-piece, and not tunable, but I can't aver no historical variations exist

Images courtesy of [Amazon](#)

