

Ocarina History

Dec 09, 2012 Comment by Allen

The **history of the ocarina** goes far back in time. It illustrates nicely how individuals can make a difference in the world. If only one of the pieces in this story were out of place, the ocarina wouldn't be as famous as it is today.

Ocarinas are becoming more and more popular and have entered a new age. Let's take a close look at where all of this began and follow the trail of this amazing instrument through the ages!

A lot of research has been done on the history of ocarinas, which are more generally called **vessel-** or **globular flutes**. Although I will be using it, the name "ocarina" is actually the name given to modern vessel flutes with a fipple mouthpiece.

Archaeological findings have shown that ocarinas are over **12,000 years** old, with the oldest clay whistles found in Central Africa going back more than **30,000 years**. This makes the ocarina the oldest instrument of mankind. Perhaps one could even call it the father of all music!

Throughout the ages, the ocarina has permeated cultures all over the world, traveling from one continent to the next via trade, conquest and word of mouth. Over the millenia, the instrument has changed in shape, size, range, design and popularity.



Prehistoric Ocarinas

The picture above shows an animal effigy ocarina from the El Bosque Phase of the Central Atlantic Watershed, 100 B.C. – 500 A.D. The one on the right is from Tairona, Colombia, 1000 – 1500 A.D. and depicts a deity, wearing a feathered headdress and ceremonial clothing.

Early civilizations of pre-Columbian America, such as the Mayans, Aztecs and Incas, all had their own kind of music and engaged in rich musical traditions. For thousands of years, these ancient cultures made single or multi-chambered vessel flutes and whistles from a variety of materials – most notably clay. Depending on their design and the acoustic properties of the material, these early ocarinas were capable of harmonies that amaze ocarina makers to this day. It is comparable to a Stradivari violin, whose secret is the wood that was used to make it.



Pre-Columbian America wasn't the only home of the ocarina. Similar vessel flutes were found in **Egypt, India and Central Africa**, where the oldest findings were made.

The modern rise of the ocarina to world wide fame can be traced back to only two main sources, one of which were the flutes made in ancient China, starting as early as 7,000 B.C.

These instruments are known as the Chinese xun (pron.: "si-un" or "syun") and were rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century. They have no mouthpiece and are thus no ocarinas – but vessel flutes still. Ever since their rediscovery, vessel flutes have experienced a steady increase in popularity throughout East Asia, where they are now more popular than in any other part of the world.

Medieval German Ocarinas

In **15th to 16th century** Germany, at the end of the middle ages, one of the most unusual members of the ocarina family was the **gemshorn**. It was made from the horn of a chamois (*Gemse* in German), goat or other suitable horn, which means its design was long instead of globular. Again, this shows how different vessel flutes can be. It's one of the things that makes the ocarina special.

Gemshorns are similar to blowing horns, which don't have finger holes in them, but a big open hole at the end. You know these kinds of instruments from the movies – just think "Lord of The Rings" and a certain horn that was cloven in two.

Like all vessel flutes, a gemshorn doesn't produce harmonic overtones, showing it is indeed a member of the ocarina family. Unlike the Chinese xun, it has a fipple mouthpiece, which means it can be regarded as an early ocarina.



The Ocarina Comes To Europe

While the gemshorn saw no further development and died out by the time of the 16th century, the Chinese xun never made it to Europe at all. Ocarina-like vessel flutes thus remained unknown to early Europeans and played no role in European music. It makes you wonder

how Mozart might have used them, had they only been available!

In Europe, the ocarina developed **independently** from Asia. It was first introduced to Europeans by the Spanish conqueror Hernán Cortés. In **1527**, a few years after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec empire, Cortés sent a group of Aztec musicians and dancers to perform for Emperor Charles V. Due to their stellar performance, the group rose to fame overnight and was sent through Europe to perform in every corner of the land – eventually even for Celestine V of Rome. Being traditional instruments, vessel flutes were always an important part of these performances.



Legend has it that a Roman baker was so enchanted by the sound of the Aztec vessel flutes that he began to make simple copies of them in his oven. Although the new flutes were not on par with the Aztec original, they grew in popularity and were soon made by other bakers and craftsmen throughout Europe. They were mainly sold as novelty items and regarded as collectibles or children's toys rather than serious musical instruments. For over 340 years, vessel flutes remained popular this way.

Birth Of The Modern Ocarina

One day in **1853**, a seventeen year old Italian brick maker by the name of **Giuseppe Donati** had an idea. Improving upon the concept of Aztec vessel flutes, he completely redesigned and extended them from playing only a few notes to a full diatonic scale. Being a brick maker, he would simply burn his clay flutes in the same oven he normally used to make bricks.



Because the shape of his new instrument bore much resemblance to the body of a goose, he named it “*little goose*”, which translates into Italian as “*ocarina*”. It was only now that the modern ocarina was born and given its name.

Soon, Donati went on to design more ocarinas in many **different sizes**, allowing them to play higher and lower scales. For the first time, vessel flutes became versatile enough for ensemble playing and thus entered the realm of professional musical instruments.

Giuseppe Donati is not only the **father** of the modern ocarina, he also made it popular and built its reputation among musicians. He founded an ocarina group called “*Gruppo Ocarinistico Budriese*”, which went on to perform throughout Italy.

As people became increasingly aware of the ocarina and its growing reputation as a concert instrument, more craftsmen began to make them. To distinguish Donati's ocarinas from others, they were called “*Budrio ocarinas*”, after Donati's home town.

Now, word began to spread beyond the borders of Italy to the rest of Europe and eventually to America.

Thank you, Giuseppe.

Back To America

Around **1900**, the European ocarina found its way back to the continent it originally came from, this time as an adult. In the states, Donati's ocarina design became known as the “*Sweet Potato*” due to its shape and sweet sound. It was sold in Sears mail order catalog and soon became widely popular among people of all ages.



During **World War I**, American soldiers brought plastic and metal ocarinas with them to lift their moral whenever they had the opportunity to play. By the time of **World War II**, the army had recognized this development and issued plastic Sweet Potato ocarinas to soldiers throughout the war.

At the same time back home, Bing Crosby and Bob Hope played the ocarina in “Road to Singapore” while singing “When the Sweet Potato Piper plays”.

Japanese Improvements And Impact

In **1928**, on the other side of the world, Donati's ocarinas were being improved upon. Japanese craftsman **Takashi Aketagawa** began making ocarinas that were able to play three additional semitones, allowing them an even wider musical versatility.

However, these improved ocarinas remained mostly unknown until **1985**, when ocarinist **Nomura Sojiro** provided the documentary “The Great Yellow River” with outstanding ocarina music.

Because the documentary was a great success, awareness for the ocarina exploded almost over night. Sojiro became a sensation throughout Asia, inspiring millions of people to start playing the instrument.

Have a listen to Sojiro's music from the documentary – it's fantastic!

English Developments

In the **1960s**, people all over the world had a fascination for folk music of all kinds. Being an ancient human instrument, the ocarina was predestined to have another time in the sunlight during these years.

More importantly, the ocarina family was given a new member! In **1964**, English mathematician **John Taylor** developed a 4-hole ocarina that was capable of playing a whole eight-tone scale. Presumably, Taylor calculated the necessary hole sizes and fingering combinations in order to allow for 8 notes to be played on the small number of holes. This is known as the English fingering system and is now used for 4- to 6-hole ocarinas.



I have a clear insight into such a creation process, because I have developed a program that calculates ocarinas from the ground up. For example, if I wanted to make an ocarina with 16 holes that plays any 24 notes I want it to, my program would calculate the necessary hole sizes and best fingering combinations for the instrument. Nowadays, a computer does it all – but back in the 1960s? I can tell you, it would be a very tedious and time consuming thing to do by hand.

Well done, Mr. Taylor!



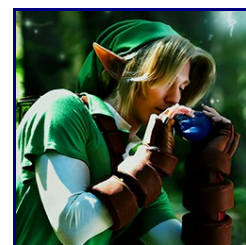
Taylor's ocarina is called the "*English Pendant*" and has received much love for its simple design and portability.

I highly recommend these 6 hole pendants, particularly as your first or second ocarina. **Zelda fans** should go with one of these pendant ocarinas instead.

The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time

To this day, the Japanese video game company **Nintendo** cultivates a small number of game series that have been extremely successful ever since their inception in the 1980s. One of them is **The Legend of Zelda**, which plays in a classical fantasy world and has a charm and feeling unlike anything I have ever seen.

In **1991**, Nintendo released "*Zelda: A Link To The Past*" for their SNES console, which was a blockbuster in its day and also my own introduction to the series. There was one particular item in this game, called "the magic flute". It enabled the hero, Link, to call a bird that would carry him around the kingdom. Interestingly, this flute was actually a blue ocarina, but few people ever knew it.



Many years went by and the SNES was replaced by the N64, which brought gaming into the realm of 3D. I vividly remember the excitement on the video game market because of the new technology. Meanwhile, word gets out that Nintendo is working on the successor of A Link To The Past. Its working title was "*Zelda 64*" – the first 3D game in the Zelda world.

Everybody was thrilled and hyped to the brink, because it was known even before the console itself was available. And people knew it would be a **blockbuster** like the gaming industry had never seen. Nintendo fans followed the news over months and even years, because that's how long it took for the game to reach completion.

Finally, in **1998**, it was released as "*Zelda: Ocarina of Time*". If you are a gamer and never played it: do so. It is the Citizen Kane of gaming, because it has held the throne of best video game of all time for 14 years, until it was replaced in the charts by Super Mario Galaxy in 2012.

Nothing could prepare the ocarina community for the massive impact the newest Zelda game had. Most gamers thought the instrument was an invention by Nintendo, and many still believe that today. Nonetheless, the ocarina suddenly found itself in the middle of a huge, thirty year old fandom that will never let it go.

Catapulted into the lights of pop culture, the ocarina has been thriving ever since. In particular, ocarina of time replicas are among the most sought after ocarinas of all.



The Bottom Line

This is how the ocarina reached world wide fame and recognition. Starting with the old tribes and civilizations that first made vessel flutes for traditional music, over Giuseppe Donati's revolutionary work and Nomura Sojiro's stellar performance all the way to Zelda into the hearts of a new generation. And finally, into the Internet. Right here. Hello, we have reached the present :)

May the music fill your heart,

~Allen