

# Whistling

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**Whistling** without the use of an artificial whistle is achieved by creating a small opening with one's lips and then blowing or sucking air through the hole. The air is moderated by the lips, curled tongue,<sup>[1]</sup> teeth or fingers (placed over the mouth) to create turbulence, and the curled tongue acts as a resonant chamber to enhance the resulting sound by acting as a type of Helmholtz resonator.

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*The Whistling Boy*, Frank Duveneck (1872)

## Techniques

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Pucker whistling is the most common form in much Western music. Typically, the tongue tip is lowered, often placed behind the lower teeth, and pitch altered by varying the position of the tongue. Although varying the degree of pucker will change the pitch of a pucker whistle, expert pucker whistlers will generally only make small variations to the degree of pucker, due to its tendency to affect purity of tone. Pucker whistling can be done by either only blowing out or blowing in and out alternately. In the 'only blow out' method, a consistent tone is achieved, but a negligible pause has to be taken to breathe in. In the alternating method there is no problem of breathlessness or interruption as breath is taken when one whistles breathing in, but a disadvantage is that many times, the consistency of tone is not maintained, and it fluctuates.

Many expert musical palatal whistlers will substantially alter the position of the tongue to ensure a good quality tone. Venetian gondoliers are famous for moving the tongue while they whistle in a way that can look like singing. A good example of a palatal whistler is Luke Janssen, winner of the 2009 world whistling competition.<sup>[2]</sup>

Finger whistling is harder to control but achieves a piercing volume. In Boito's opera *Mefistofele* the title character uses it to express his defiance of the Almighty.

Whistling can also be produced by blowing air through enclosed, cupped hands or through an external instrument, such as a whistle or even a blade of grass or leaf.

## Competitions

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One of the most well known whistling competitions is the International Whistlers Convention (IWC). This annual event has taken place in Louisburg, North Carolina since 1973. The awards go to whistlers ranging from international male and female, teenage male and female, and even grandchildren. It has been customary for the Governor of the State of North Carolina to sign a declaration declaring the week of the IWC as "Happy Whistlers Week," for citizens and visitors to honor the art of whistling and to participate in the scheduled events.<sup>[3]</sup>

One of the most prolific whistling competitors is a Virginia-based communications expert, Christopher W. Ullman who has won the competition so many times he is listed in the International Whistling Hall of Fame.<sup>[4]</sup>

Ullman has won the Grand Championship of the International Whistling Contest three times, in 1996, 1999, and 2000. In 1994, he was the National Grand Champion in the National Whistling Contest. In 1999, he was given the Lillian Williams Achievement Award as Whistling Entertainer of the Year.

Ullman has performed in the Oval Office for President George W. Bush and has been featured on The Tonight Show, the Today Show, CBS This Morning as well as performing in front of 60,000 people on the National Mall with the National Symphony Orchestra in Washington DC. He has performed with the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra, the Indiana Symphony Orchestra, and many others.

Ullman's specialty is whistling "Happy Birthday" to friends and family and practically anyone who asks. The Washington Post reported in April 2017 he had whistled the tune 400 so far that year. "He's up to 5,000 renditions since he started back in the mid-1990s." The Post reported Ullman has done the math and "figures he'll hit an additional 12,000 if he lives to 80."<sup>[5]</sup>

Ullman has been a top communications aid at the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, chief spokesman for the Securities and Exchange Commission, and head of corporate communications for the international investment company the Carlyle Group. In 2017, Ullman published his memoirs, *Find Your Whistle*, that tells the remarkable story about how he found his whistle as child and how he has shared it with the world.<sup>[6]</sup>

According to Guinness World Records, the highest pitch human whistle ever recorded was measured at 10,599 Hz, which corresponds to a E9 musical note. This was done by Joshua Lockard in Southlake, Texas, on May 1, 2019.<sup>[7]</sup> The lowest pitch whistle ever recorded was measured at 174.6 Hz, which corresponds to a F3 musical note. This was accomplished by Jennifer Davies (Canada) at the Impossibility Challenger Games in Dachau, Germany, on 6 November 2006.<sup>[8]</sup> The most people whistling simultaneously was 853, which was organized at the Spring Harvest event at Minehead, UK on April 11, 2014.<sup>[9]</sup>

## As communication

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On La Gomera, one of Spain's Canary Islands, a traditional whistled language, *Silbo Gomero*, is still used. At least nine separate whistling sounds are used to produce usually four vowels and five consonants, allowing this language to convey unlimited words. The language allowed people (such as shepherds) to communicate over long distances in the island, when other communication means were not available. It is now taught in school so that it is not lost among the younger generation. Another group of whistlers were the Mazateco Indians of Oaxaca, Mexico. Their whistling aided in conveying messages over far distances but was used also in close quarters as a unique form of communication with a variety of tones.<sup>[10]</sup>

Whistling can be used to control trained animals such as dogs. A shepherd's whistle is often used instead.

Whistling has long been used as a specialized communication between laborers. For example, whistling in theatre, particularly on-stage, is used by flymen (members of a fly crew) to cue the lowering or raising of a batten pipe or flat. This method of communication became popular before the invention of electronic means of communication, and is still in use, primarily in older "hemp" houses during the set and strike of a show.<sup>[11][12]</sup>

## In music

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Différentes manières de siffler avec les doigts.

Various finger techniques (*Le Monde illustré* 14 January 1893)

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The range of pucker whistlers varies from about one to three octaves. Agnes Woodward <sup>[13]</sup> classifies by analogy to voice types: soprano (c"-c""), mezzo (a-g"" ) and alto (e or d-g"" )<sup>[14]</sup>

Many performers (also known as **siffleurs**) on the music hall and Vaudeville circuits were professional whistlers, the most famous of which were Ronnie Ronalde and Fred Lowery. The term *puccalo* or *puccolo* was coined by Ron McCroby to refer to highly skilled jazz whistling.<sup>[15]</sup>

Whistling is featured in a number of television themes, such as *Lassie*, *The Andy Griffith Show* and Mark Snow's title theme for *The X-Files*.<sup>[16]</sup> It also prominently features in the score of the movie *Twisted Nerve*, composed by Bernard Herrmann, which was later used in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill*.

Prominent in classic songs such as Bobby McFerrin's "Don't Worry, Be Happy", Otis Redding's "(Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay", and Scorpions' "Wind of Change", whistling has also been integrated in many contemporary pop hits such as Flo Rida's "Whistle", Selena Gomez's "Kill Em With Kindness", Florida Georgia Line's "Sun Daze", Foster the People's "Pumped Up Kicks", Sebalter's Hunter Of Stars, Joci Papai's Az Apam, Maroon 5's "Moves Like Jagger", Edward Sharpe and the Magnetic Zeros' "Home", OneRepublic's "Good Life", Adam Lambert's "Ghost Town", Kanye West's "All Day", Peter Bjorn and John's "Young Folks", The Seekers "Georgy Girl", Professor Longhair's "Go to the Mardi Gras", and Smash Mouth's "All Star".

There are good Whistlers in India who have started whistling on bollywood songs, there are various Whistling groups in India, who whistle on the well known bollywood songs



Whistling at the 29th Festival of Street Art in Suresnes, France in 2012

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## By spectators

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Whistling is often used by spectators at sporting events to express either enthusiasm or disapprobation. In the United States and Canada, whistling is used much like applause, to express approval or appreciation for the efforts of a team or a player, such as a starting pitcher in baseball who is taken out of the game after having pitched well. In much of the rest of the world, especially Europe and South America, whistling is used to express displeasure with the action or disagreement with an official's decision, like booing. This whistling is often loud and cacophonous, using finger whistling.

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## Cultural beliefs

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In many cultures, whistling or making whistling noises at night is thought to attract bad luck, bad things, or evil spirits.<sup>[17][18][19][20]</sup>

In the UK there is a superstitious belief in the "Seven Whistlers" which are seven mysterious birds or spirits who call out to foretell death or a great calamity. In the 19th century, large groups of coal miners were known to have refused to enter the mines for one day after hearing this spectral whistling. The Seven Whistlers have been mentioned in literature such as *The Faerie Queene* by Edmund Spenser, as bearing an omen of death. William Wordsworth included fear of the Seven Whistlers in his poem, "Though Narrow Be That Old Man's Cares". The superstition has been reported in the Midland Counties of England but also in Lancashire, Essex, Kent, and even in other places such as North Wales and Portugal.<sup>[21][22][23][24]</sup>

In Russian and other Slavic cultures, and also in Romania and the Baltic states, whistling indoors is superstitiously believed to bring poverty ("whistling money away"), whereas whistling outdoors is considered normal. In Estonia it is also widely believed that whistling indoors may bring bad luck and therefore set the house on fire.<sup>[25]</sup>

Whistling on board a sailing ship is thought to encourage the wind strength to increase.<sup>[26]</sup> This is regularly alluded to in the Aubrey-Maturin books by Patrick O'Brian.

Theater practice has plenty of superstitions: one of them is against whistling. A popular explanation is that traditionally sailors, skilled in rigging and accustomed to the boatswain's pipe, were often used as stage technicians, working with the complicated rope systems associated with flying. An errant whistle might cause a cue to come early or a "sailor's ghost" to drop a set-piece on top of an actor. An offstage whistle audible to the audience in the middle of a performance might also be considered bad luck.

Transcendental whistling (*chángxiào* 長嘯) was an ancient Chinese Daoist technique of resounding breath yoga, and skillful whistlers supposedly could summon supernatural beings, wild animals, and weather phenomena.

## Children's television cartoon shows

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- *Peppa Pig*: "Whistling"
- *Dora the Explorer*: "Dora the Talented Whistler"
- *The Justine Clarke Show*: "Whistle with Me"
- *Glenn Benzo*: "Whistling"
- *My Friends Tigger and Pooh*: You Ain't Just Whistlin' Tigger.

## See also

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- Alice J. Shaw, professional whistler
- Bird vocalization § Bird song and music
- Boatswain's call
- Hand flute
- Irish whistling champions
- Piedmont High School (California) § Bird Calling Contest
- Puirt à beul
- Silbo Gomero language
- Slide whistle
- Tin whistle
- Wolf-whistling
- Whistle Pops
- Whistle register
- Whistled language

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## External links

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- Indian Whistlers Association (<http://www.whistleindia.org/>) (IWA)
- Professional whistler Dave Santucci provides whistling performance videos and whistling tutorial videos (<https://www.youtube.com/WhistlersBrother>) (YouTube)
- "History of Musical Whistling" given by Linda Parker Hamilton at the 2012 International Whistlers Convention (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG0-aGQeQls>) (YouTube)
- Northern Nightingale site with whistling lessons and links to other whistlers' sites (<http://www.northernnightingale.com/>)
- Biography page of whistling performer Robert Stemmons with links to other whistlers' sites (<http://www.thewhistler.com/bio.htm>)

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