

THE CRACKED SOUNDBOARD

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HISTORY OF THE FLUTE

by John Lampkin

The word "flute" derives from the Latin "flutus," which means breath. We at the *Cracked Soundboard* held our collective flutus when word arrived of a stone age bone flute unearthed during a dig at a Paleolithic site. We quickly rushed to the scene with our carbon dating equipment. (Archeologists carbon date when they can't get a human to go out with them.) Our sophisticated tests revealed that the flute was fashioned 2.0 million years ago on April 1, precisely. That makes it the oldest wind instrument yet found! So today, on April 1, we wish a happy two millionth anniversary to all you stone-aged flute players!

Greek myth speaks of Pan, the half-man, half-goat who pursued a fair naiad named Syrinx. Because of his alium diet, his flutus was stinky, and his flatulus even worse. Understandably, as any sensible naiad would do, Syrinx fled and transformed herself into a reed to hide. Pan found the reed, cut it into pieces and invented his eponymous panpipes. Thus, he became the first flutist to reed music. However, a Greek chorus of critics panned Pan's panpipes. Heartbroken, he turned to culinary pursuits, and invented the Pancake.

The early flutes, such as recorders, are played by blowing into the end of a wooden or metal tube which has a mouth piece with a fipple inside. Because "fipple" is such an adorable term and vaguely suggestive, everyone wanted to get their lips on one. Fipple flutes were invented and reinvented in a bewildering array of floormats for marches, like fifes and penny whistles which now cost \$12.63 at Amazon. Wow. If only we had stocked up.

Says the clarinet to the flute, "Who was that piccolo I saw you with last night?"

Replies the flute, "That was no piccolo, that was my fife."

The recorder, by the way, is the single greatest invention ever made to torture parents who are forced to sit through third grade public school recitals.

The invention of the transverse flute had to wait for the invention of the beer bottle. Someone then noticed what we all know, that if you blow across the bottle top you get a wonderfully fuzzy and warm tone, much like the wonderfully fuzzy and warm feeling you get from drinking the beer. Early attempts at a transverse beer-bottle flute were abysmal failures since the beer all poured out sideways, ruining tuxedos and gowns. Finally, some bright soul kept the cap on the end and made a blow hole on the side. Voila!

In Western music, Theobald Boehm is credited with the development of the modern transverse flute. If anyone says otherwise it's a Theobald-faced lie! Theo made flutes first out of base metal, then silver, then gold. George Barrere cranked it up a notch by having one made out of platinum. For his 1936 premiere concert, he commissioned Edgar Varese to compose what is now a mainstay of the flute literature, *Density 21.5*, named for the specific gravity of platinum. Audiences don't seem to like the piece much because it is too dense.

So, summarizing the evolution of materials used for flute construction we have bone, reed, wood, base metals, silver, gold, and platinum. Now it is time to once again advance both flute and literature. Always on the cutting edge, the *Cracked Soundboard* hereby commissions the construction of a PLUTONIUM FLUTE! I myself will compose *Density 19.8* for the world premiere. Being less dense than the Varese, it should get a warmer reception with a lasting impact. Now we need to balance the premiere program with other music suitable for a plutonium flute. At once we consider *Nearer My God to Thee* and *There'll Be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight*.

Do you, dear reader, have a title to add? Send it in! You will achieve lasting fame in the next issue! Punny twists are fair game, like *He Ain't Heavy Water, He's My Brother*.