

## HOW TO BUY A PICCOLO

By Mark Thomas



The legendary American bandmaster, John Philip Sousa, may have had the greatest influence in introducing the piccolo to the masses through his foot-tapping march, "The Stars and Stripes Forever." What audience fails to be stirred and excited as a flute section, switching to piccolos, stands and plays the famous obbligato as the band or orchestra performs that familiar patriotic melody? Just the mention of

"The Stars and Stripes Forever" to a gathering of music lovers brings applause and shouts of approval. Not surprisingly, this composition is now, by an act of Congress, the official march of the United States.

The piccolo, the smallest member of the flute family, produces the highest notes in the band or orchestra. Other family members include the familiar concert flute in C, soprano flute in Eb, alto flute in G, and bass flute in C. The piccolo in C sounds one octave higher than the printed notes it plays. Although most piccolos today are made in the key of C, a few pitched in D flat can still be found. However, all music composed today for piccolo is written for the C instrument.

The word piccolo in Italian means small — flauto piccolo literally means "small flute." The Germans refer to it as kleine flöte and the French use petite flûte. Another Italian word, ottavino, or octave flute, is used as well. The piccolo is used primarily in concert bands, symphony orchestras, and flute choirs.

Most organizations use one piccolo unless the music specifically requires a second player. Since the piccolo is considered a "first chair" instrument, it should never be the responsibility of the first chair flutist to also be the first chair piccoloist. These positions should always be played by two musicians.

There are some compositions that feature the piccolo as a solo instrument, such as concerti by Vivaldi ("Concerto in C Major" and "Concerto in A minor"), "Piccolo Espagnol," by James Christensen (piccolo and piano), "Parable for Solo Piccolo," by Vincent Persichetti, "Concertino for Piccolo and Orchestra," by W.G. Bottje, and "Sonata for Piccolo and Piano," by Martin Amlin, to name a few. Generally speaking, however, the piccolo is used mainly within an ensemble.

## PICCOLO HISTORY

The earliest flutes discovered date to about 9,000 BC and are believed to be the earliest transverse or horizontally held instruments. They were of crude design and many were made from animal or human bones. The piccolo is generally related to the early six hole fife. This instrument can still be seen and heard today in such groups as "The Old Guard Fife and Drum Corps" (used in ceremonies with the President of the United States) and the historic drum and bugle corps in Colonial Williamsburg, Va. The Revolutionary War "Spirit of 1776" features a flag bearer, drummer, and fife player. Gradually, the instrument was modified with added keys and bore changes, until the instrument we know today was completed.



## IS THE PICCOLO DIFFICULT TO LEARN?

Almost no one starts on the piccolo. The flute is the preferred starting instrument, primarily because the piccolo presents challenges, such as embouchure formation, octave difficulties, and minute pitch adjustments. It is important to learn proper breathing techniques and breath support at the onset of playing so that a proper embouchure (lip formation) can be developed.

Once a player has a firm foundation and understanding of the flute and has played for a few years, the piccolo can be considered. Basic techniques learned in the study of the flute can be transformed to piccolo; however, basic understanding of the embouchure change is critical and should only be undertaken under the skillful tutoring of a professional flutist/piccoloist. Remember that you are not simply playing upon a small flute. Intonation can change drastically with even small embouchure adjustments. A good ear and keen sense of pitch are mandatory for successful piccolo playing.

## CHOOSING THE PROPER INSTRUMENT

There are two basic types of piccolos, cylindrical bore and conical bore. The cylindrical bore piccolo is similar to the concert flute in C, which features a tapered head joint and a cylindrical body (same diameter from top of barrel to foot joint). A conical bore piccolo uses a cylindrical bore head joint and tapered body. Many school bands and jazz doublers find that the cylindrical bore piccolo is somewhat



easier to play, but it does not offer the tonal finesse of the conical bore instrument. Further, the cylindrical bore piccolo is always made of nickel silver or sterling silver, whereas the conical bore piccolo is offered in the above metals as well as composition material (plastic) and grenadilla wood. Some players will order a metal head joint with a composition or grenadilla wood body. This combination adds a little more brilliance to the sound. Others prefer to have the entire instrument all composition or wood. This becomes a matter of personal choice. Young flutists desiring to purchase a piccolo should seek assistance from the band director or flute teacher.

### **PICCOLO FINANCES**

Like any other instrument, piccolos vary in price depending upon the model and material. It is important for the student to purchase a high quality, name brand instrument. Nothing will discourage a player more quickly than a piccolo a professional flutist struggles to play. Buying a used instrument or "bargain basement" piccolo without consulting a professional flutist is ill advised, as you may be wasting your money. There are numerous poorly made piccolos in the marketplace, so proceed with caution. Most good entry-level piccolos are priced in the \$750 range. Step-up instruments range from \$2,000 to \$2,500, while fine, handmade models can be priced at \$4,000 to \$5,400 and beyond. Although the piccolo is much smaller than the flute, entry-level piccolos are generally more expensive than the same type of flute.

### **WHERE TO BUY YOUR PICCOLO**

There are many options for purchasing a piccolo — your local music store, a mail-order company, a shop specializing in flutes and piccolos, or someone selling a used one. When making your decision, first consider the availability of service. Buying your piccolo from a local dealer that has a fine flute and piccolo repair department is important, as repairs and key/pad adjustments are needed from time to time. If you choose a mail-order company, inquire about their flute/piccolo repair operation and if any is available locally. Shipping an instrument back to a mail-order company for repair work can be costly and take a great deal of time. Have a qualified flute/repair person thoroughly check over any used instrument you may be considering. Do remember that the cheapest purchase price sometimes turns out to be the most expensive, so do not shop for price alone.

### **CARE AND MAINTENANCE**

All musical instruments require maintenance from time to time, regardless of the purchase price. Have your authorized piccolo repairperson thoroughly check your piccolo over at least once a year. Any slight pad leak on an instrument as small as a piccolo can cause major playing disruption, so pay close attention to pad seating. Key oiling should only be performed by an expert, as excess oil will cause keys to become sluggish.

Wipe the outside of your piccolo when you've finished playing for the day. A soft cloth, such as an old, lint-free cotton flannel (not polyester) or specifically designed piccolo cleaning cloth should be used. The inside of the bore should also be swabbed out by inserting a very small strip of cloth through the slotted end of the cleaning rod that is provided with the piccolo. Do not use abrasive chemicals when cleaning your instrument.

### **HAVE FUN**

Most young flutists can hardly wait to get their hands (and lips) on a piccolo and many do so too early in their flute learning period. Be patient, for you will be a better piccolo player if you have a good understanding of the flute first. When you get that first piccolo, remember that the sound can usually be heard above the band, orchestra, or flute choir, so you must be constantly aware of any intonation problems. Keep playing after high school graduation; do not relegate the piccolo to the attic! Join a community band, orchestra, or an adult flute choir, or simply serenade your cat in your condo (though the cat will surely howl and run for cover!). Just remember that the day may come for you when you put down your flute, pick up your piccolo and proudly play "The Stars and Stripes Forever!"

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