

The Six-Hole Pipe

An instrument for young children in Steiner schools

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Rudolf Steiner recommended that children start learning musical instruments from class one¹. The order in which these instruments were to be learnt was easily comprehensible: start with a simple wind instrument, progress to [bowed and plucked] string instruments and then finally to other instruments of the orchestra.

Many schools in Australia and New Zealand do just that. They start off with recorders, introduce violin teaching in class three and have flutes and other instruments by somewhere in the middle school.

Musical children thrive on this. Unmusical children have an experience they would not get at most other schools. As a result, in the upper school of Steiner Schools, there are many students who have a facility with one or more musical instruments. A health-giving, harmonising influence spreads over the school.

Learning to play in instrument is important for the developing child ... like learning to sing. The two complement each other. In singing the sound is made with the body. With an instrument, the sound making is external. Whereas singing is connected to something instinctive, the instrument requires mastery of the body through thinking. That is a paradigm for incarnation.

Some schools introduce pentatonic recorders for class one and two children. These are simpler to play than diatonic recorders² [recorders that can play a full scale].

At Queenswood [now Taikura Rudolf Steiner School in Hastings, NZ], we had a remarkable teacher, Katherine Laing, who was a member of the Pipe Makers' Guild, essentially an English

association founded in the UK. This pipe makers' guild supplied you with a kit and instructions. The sound was quite pretty, small and sweet and uncomplicated.

Tuning was achieved by boring holes at selected places in the body of the pipe. It was possible to bore the holes one by one - a new hole was bored once a student had mastered the first hole. Students acquired one hole at a time as their mastery of the instrument grew.

However, tuning was something that was seldom satisfactory. Bamboo is notoriously easy to split. Enlarging a hole was laborious. A new hole also affected the pitch of a previous hole. I witnessed this and said to myself, "There has to be a better way".

Five years ago I began the journey of searching for a better way. It led me to become a member of the Bamboo Society. I spent the best part of an inheritance from my mother on a workshop and tools. I made well over five hundred pipes before I felt I had some handle on how to make a fipple. After one thousand pipes, I was relatively certain I could tune them. I found out how to drill bamboo without splitting it. I discovered how to turn pipes out of wood. And, right from the outset, I modelled the six-hole pipe that the Irish called the "penny whistle".

It was not long before I realised that this instrument was very much easier than a recorder to play. It used very few split fingerings - that is a fingering where some holes are covered, a gap is left then more fingers are applied. It had no thumb hole. In teaching young students to play my pipes [at that stage still rather rough and ready], I found

1 Heydebrand, C. v. (1989). *The curriculum of the first Waldorf school*. Forest Row, United Kingdom: Steiner Schools Fellowship Publications.

2 Recorders which can play the full 12-semitone scale, allowing pieces in major and minor keys.

that the lack of a thumb hole made it much easier to teach them to play. The students could see everything you did. The light dawned. Rather than having a set of two-hole pipes for class one, four-hole pipes for class two and recorders for class three, Seiner School students could have one pipe, right from the start of class one.

The purpose of this article is to make the six-hole pipe known to class teachers in Steiner Schools in Australia and New Zealand, and to introduce myself as a maker of these instruments in bamboo and wood

I make wooden pipes in D for thirty dollars [the price is the same whether NZ or Australian dollars] bamboo pipes for twenty. When a school chooses a set for a class one come to the school to give the students the pipes individually, engraving the name of the student on the pipe as I hand it over. This pipe is then that student's for life.

Six-hole pipes are proper musical instruments and can be obtained from many sources. What happens in higher classes when you want to explore larger recorders? Switching instruments is generally no problem for 'musical' students so recorders such as treble, tenor and bass can be still part of the school. Deeper six-hole pipes up to DD [low D] are available. I have made a few, but I can't make them as easily as a smaller pipe. Therefore they are around NZ\$ 90-100, depending on the wood. Bigger pipes for professional and keen amateur players can cost between NZ\$ 150-\$ 600. There is a maker of professional quality wooden flutes [side-blown] that cost as much as \$ 1000. He does not have the school student in mind as customer.

I wish to encourage teachers to explore other options to the simple recorder with its many split fingerings, thumb hole and tricky top octave ... ♦



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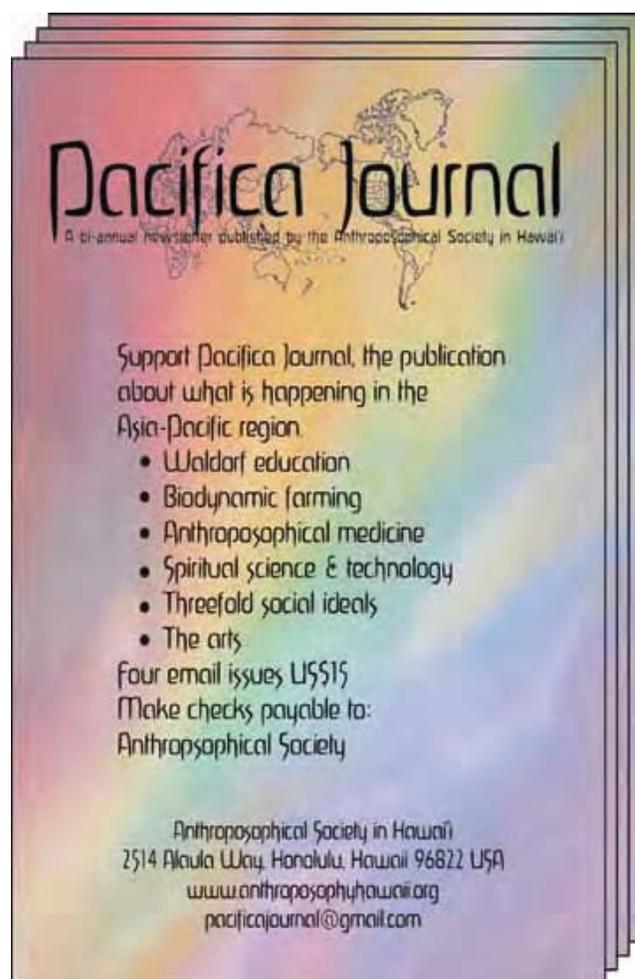
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