The Piccolo – A Short Instrument with a Long History
by
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Flutes of various materials and sizes have existed since former times. The first flutes were made of animal bones, and later of clay or various types of wood. In Peru, flutes of bronze and silver were discovered. Murals showed flutists holding their instruments on the left instead of the right, as customary nowadays.

During the Renaissance there were consorts of recorders of various sizes, from the soprano to the bass. At the time there was also an instrument called the Fife – a small, cylindrical flute, which was built in one unit. It had six holes and its ends were protected by metal rings. The fife was used mainly for military purposes, such as conveying various messages, and it was called "Swiss Flute", since it was used primarily in Switzerland, whose army was one of the strongest in Europe during that period. One of the prevailing sayings at the time was: "A good flutist is a brave man who can stand in face of any danger."

The piccolo first appeared in the orchestra around 1700. The earliest work with a piccolo part was Handel's "Rinaldo" (1711). There is also a piccolo part in Bach's Cantata 103 (1725). It is not certain which specific instrument was intended by the composers – a piccolo or a soprano recorder, which is also often called "flautino". The same uncertainty also applies to Vivaldi's three famous concerti, which are performed nowadays equally on the piccolo and the recorder.

Thanks to the efforts of Rameau, a position opened for piccolo player at the Paris Opera. During the Baroque era, the piccolo was built of two parts, with one E-flat key.

By the mid-18th century the piccolo was already well-established in the orchestra, but received parts mainly in works of a military nature and in rhythmical dances, such as the Tambourin.

Mozart did not use a piccolo in any of his symphonies, but used it in his German Dances, K. 104 and in the Overture to "The Abduction from the Seraglio".

Beethoven was the first composer to use the piccolo in his symphonic works. He wrote separate parts for it in the finales of his Fifth, Sixth and Ninth symphonies. The piccolo was also given significant parts in "Wellington's Victory", "Egmont", "King Stephen" and two of the Ten German Dances.

The piccolo was naturally prominent in military bands, from the orchestra of the National Guard, led by Francois Gossec, which was established in France immediately after the siege on the Bastille.

The piccolo followed the changes in the flute rather slowly. While the flute of the end of the 18th century was a relatively sophisticated instrument with several keys, the piccolo of the beginning of the 19th century was a
simple instrument with only one key.

The invention of the "multi-key" piccolo is attributed to the flute teacher from Prague, Michael Janusch, who developed the instrument in 1824. This instrument was equivalent to the flute with six keys customary at the time. In the course of the 19th century piccolos were built according to more than 40 sets of fingerings, in seven different keys and from various materials. There was also an abundance of study books for the piccolo. As opposed to the flute, there was no substantial difference in the quality of sound between the old and new piccolos, and therefore piccolo players did not hasten to get rid of their old instruments in favor of the new ones.

An additional instrument developed in the 19th century is the piccolo in D-flat. Since the pre-Boehm piccolos and flutes were tuned to a key with two sharps, playing in keys that had flats was difficult and complex. However, music for military bands was often written in these keys, in order to make it easier for the trumpeters and clarinetists. Hence the invention of the piccolo in D-flat, on which the famous solo from Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony and the solo from "Stars and St Forever" by John Philip Sousa were played.

Piccolo players continued to play the one-key instrument throughout the 19th century, but undoubtedly the most popular instrument of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was the piccolo with six keys.

Berlioz and Tchaikovsky were also piccolo players and wrote beautiful parts for it in their orchestral works. Berlioz, noticing the lovely qualities that the low notes of the piccolo can produce, wrote: "When I hear this instrument employed in doubling in triple octave the air of a baritone, or casting its squeaking voice into the midst of a religious harmony, or strengthening or sharpening (for the sake of noise only) the high part of an orchestra from beginning to end of an act of an opera, I cannot help feeling that the mode of instrumentation is one of platitudes and stupidity. The piccolo may, however, have a very happy effect in soft passages, and it is a mere prejudice to think that it should only be played loud."

The piccolo developed by Boehm was less successful than the flute. Boehm created several types of piccolos and did not achieve significant results. He therefore passed on the assignment to another German manufacturer called Mollenhauer, who reached satisfactory qualities, due to the fact that in contrast with the cylindrical-b flat flute, in the piccolo he combined a cylindrical head and a conical body.

Alongside the role of the piccolo in military bands, symphony orchestras and opera orchestras, the piccolo in the 19th century had an additional role – due to its loud notes it became a very popular instrument in balls and dance halls. Many players even wrote virtuoso waltzes and polkas for this purpose. One of the most prominent was the French composer and piccolo player Eugène Damaré.

In the 20th century the piccolo became an integral part of the orchestra. Composers such as Ravel, Stravinsky, Shostakovich and others wrote prominent solo parts for the piccolo. Nowadays the piccolo enjoys full partnership in chamber music ensembles and lately several concerti have been written especially for it.

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I stumbled upon the piccolo entirely by accident at the age of 9. There was a small band at the school I attended where it was suggested I play the piccolo. At that time, I already played the piano and was happy to be given the opportunity to play another instrument in a band with other children. We had a “man-for-all-seasons” kind of teacher who taught all the instruments. He was an older man, a good-natured Grampa-type, and I loved attending his classes in the afternoons at the school.

My dream, however, was to play the flute. My parents had a friend who in his youth played the flute, and every time we would visit him I would try it out to see if my arms had reached the necessary length to play it because I was an especially small child. No one was happier than I was when my parents bought me my first flute at the age of 10 and a half, and when I began taking lessons with Uri Shoham, former Principal flautist of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, with whom I studied for 13 years. Nevertheless, I didn’t abandon the piccolo but never imagined what a significant role it would come to play in my life. In the meantime, I played the piccolo in several youth bands, the Israel Defense Forces Band, the Academy of Music, and whenever I was asked to play it along with the flute, despite the fact that I never really studied the piccolo professionally.

The turning point of my professional life began while I played as the Principal flautist of the Israel Sinfonietta. One day I was called to replace the principal piccolo player of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra who became ill and was unable to continue playing with the orchestra. I played the difficult parts naturally and with ease as the instrument was no stranger to me. I was officially accepted into the orchestra in 1988. Since then, I have played numerous piccolo parts and began practicing the piccolo on a regular basis as opposed to when I was younger when I only practiced the flute. I also began to include short piccolo pieces at all my recitals.

In 1989, I performed Vivaldi’s concerto in C Major – perhaps the most well known piccolo piece - with the Philharmonic Orchestra. I played the same piece with the Orchestra during the concert tour in South America in
1993.

At a certain point, I became frustrated in the sparse repertoire that existed for the piccolo. I felt like I wasn’t moving forward and I wanted to discover new and interesting pieces for the piccolo and because there weren’t any, I decided to generate them myself. In addition to searching the music stores and catalogues, I turned to several Israeli composers and asked them to try and write for the piccolo. Of course, I made sure to be available to them for any question that may arise. Daniel Galay, an old friend of mine, was the first composer to be recruited for the job. He had written a solo flute piece for me in the past and in 1997 wrote “Seven Doubts” for solo piccolo. This piece will be published in the near future and was recorded by me for radio in November 1998. The name of the piece testifies to its composition process and to the many contractions that accompanied its birth, a new experience both for Daniel as a composer and for me as a piccolo player.

Immediately thereafter, Yoram Meyouhas’s piece “Four Bagatelles” for solo piccolo was born. Other pieces that were written since then are M. Zorman’s “Scenes of Marriage” for piccolo and bassoon, R. Mozes’ “Musical Moment” for piccolo and piano and A. Dorman’s Concerto for piccolo, string orchestra and piano.

In January 1999, I gave the world premier performance of the Quartet in d minor by Telemann which I adapted for piccolo and string orchestra last year, with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Zubin Mehta.

I am striving to expand the piccolo’s repertoire, to take it out of its hiding place in the orchestra and to showcase it as a solo instrument for all intents and purposes to music lovers in Israel and abroad. In order to do this, I am commissioning new Israeli pieces, discovering existing original works, and writing adaptations for pieces written originally for flute or for other instruments.

Another direction of my activity is teaching the instrument to young musicians. Flautists who play piccolo in the orchestra usually come across two major problems:

1. A sparse repertoire of exercises
2. Limited suitable instruction

As a result of this, most piccolo players tend to practice flute exercises whether they are suitable or not, or they try to prepare the material without the proper warm-up, something which can cause a lot of tension on the lips, and even pain.

Following are a few practical recommendations for flautists who wish to play the piccolo without suffering (and perhaps even enjoying it a little):
1. The natural tendency for piccolo players is to “shrivel” when they play or to contract over the instrument. In my opinion, attention must be paid to correct posture just as you would when playing the flute. Don't allow the size of the instrument to influence how you sit. It’s important to remember that relaxed posture leads to relaxed playing!

2. Due to its size, the piccolo is more sensitive to problems of intonation than the flute. It’s important to focus on playing ascending and descending exercises on intervals in order to catch intonation problems and to fix them. For example, I usually make up short melodies and repeat them sequentially every day for all the scales throughout the entire range of the piccolo. Every day I exercise one or two melodies in this way. It’s also important to get to know the specific instrument you are playing because each piccolo may have different intonation problems.

3. The opening in the mouthpiece is smaller than in the flute and it’s essential not to cover more than half of it, as in the flute. The feeling in the lips should be as though less than half of the opening is covered. The airflow should be thinner, however, it’s important not to forcefully tighten the lips. The air should be blown through a smaller opening while gently tightening the lips.

4. As with the flute, it’s recommended to begin the exercises with middle C slowly descending or ascending. Exercises of long tones, which are so popular with the flute, are not recommended for the piccolo because they are painful to the ear and tire the lips. It’s preferable to reach the high tones through the same sequential melodies outlined in paragraph 2.

5. It’s important to practice every day - even if only for 10 minutes – in order to maintain the level of playing. An exercise such as this one is much more beneficial than hours of concentrated work at once, which does more damage than good. In any case, it’s recommended to begin by practicing the flute a little before the piccolo. When we practice correctly and regularly no special effort is required to play even the highest notes on the piccolo – the condition being, of course, that the instrument is in good repair.

6. The tongue is positioned differently than in the flute when playing staccato, and therefore it’s necessary to exercise it while paying attention that the tongue is not “trapped” but remains
relaxed in the mouth. In general, playing staccato is complimentary to the piccolo.

7. When playing the piccolo, less air is “wasted” than on the flute, and in that respect, it is closer to the oboe. Therefore, very long phrases can be played on it. It’s also recommended to take this fact into account when choosing the repertoire.

8. An exercise book I recommended is “A Piccolo Practice Book” by Trevor Wye and Patricia Morris, published by “Novelo”. This book is especially for orchestra players. It’s divided into sections according to topics and at the end there is a list of piccolo pieces for different ensembles. It’s a rich and comprehensive book that is very highly recommended.

I have outlined here a few ideas and recommendations which I hope will help flautists who are also interested in getting to know the piccolo; and also for piccolo players who are interested in improving the quality of their playing of the instrument. Interest in the piccolo as a solo instrument will increase the more pieces are written and adapted for the instrument, and I hope that my efforts will bring about an increase in piccolo players.

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